

A Fresh Start

When you and I embraced the gospel message of Jesus Christ and became believers, a number of amazing things happened. In a legal sense, we were “justified” before God. That is, we received a pronouncement of “not guilty”, the penalty for our sin was erased, and we stand covered by the righteousness of Jesus Christ. This new legal standing was just the beginning however of something truly incredible involving our receiving a new heart, a new nature, a new Spirit, a whole new “spiritual insides.” This wasn’t some kind of moral makeover. This was an entire revolution inside.

One of the more amazing aspects of the revolution inside is the new relationship between the believer and the power of sin wrought by the finished work of Christ on the cross. We often emphasize His finished work as it applies to our right standing with God, but how often do we celebrate what Christ’s finished work provided regarding our ongoing experience in our conflict with sin? In short, sin’s dominion ended in the life of the believer at the new birth. Christ’s death delivered us from not only the penalty of sin, but the power of sin as well. Can this really be true?

No passage in Scripture more clearly explores and explains our new relationship with sin than Romans chapters 5 through 8. Follow through the passage with me. The text is in red. The running commentary is in black.

United with Christ – Romans 5:19 – Romans 8:17

¹⁹For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, (By the transgression of Adam we all received imputed sin and a sin nature.) even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. (By the obedience of Jesus Christ, we who believe received the imputed righteousness of God and a new righteous nature.) ²⁰And the law came in that the transgression might increase; (Without the law, our awareness of sin was limited. When the law arrived, our awareness and practice of sin took off.) but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, (As sin skyrocketed, the grace that delivered us from sin became even more spectacular than what we would have experienced apart from the law.) ²¹that, as sin reigned in death, (Sin produced death.) even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Grace through Jesus Christ produced righteousness and ultimately eternal life.)

Chapter 6

¹What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? (Or another way, “If skyrocketing sin made grace appear more spectacular than ever should we continue in sin to highlight grace all the more?”) ²May it never be! (Of course not. This kind of thinking shows a misunderstanding of what happened at our new birth.) How shall we who died to sin still live in it? (At our new birth, we died to sin. So how can we continue to live in it?) ³Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? ⁴Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Think of it this way. When you embraced the message of Jesus Christ you were joined with Christ. Whether baptism here is literal or figurative, the outcome is the same. Part of you joined Christ in His death. Which part? Your old man, your sin nature as we will see in the passage

ahead. Therefore our old man was buried with Christ in death and just like Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too were raised up as a new person. This is not just a positional new man [i.e. justification], but a practical new man [sanctification] since we now “walk in newness of life.” Walking is a picture of our ongoing sanctification, our transformation, our spiritual growth.)

⁵For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, (What happened when we were united with Christ in His death?...) certainly we shall be also in the likeness of His resurrection, ⁶knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, (...Our old self, our natural man was crucified with Christ...) that our body of sin might be done away with, (...our body of sin was sent to the sidelines...) that we should no longer be slaves to sin; (...and we are no longer slaves of sin...) ⁷for he who has died is freed from sin. (...having been freed from its power. At our new birth, sin’s dominion in our lives was put to an end. The old man is dead. The new man is set free by the resurrection power of God! Amen!)

⁸Now if (or since) we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, ⁹knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. (Christ appeared to be mastered by death following His crucifixion, but by His resurrection shows that death is no longer His master.) ¹⁰For the death that He died, He died to sin, once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. ¹¹Even so consider (act as if it is so) yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Just as Christ Himself died to sin and lives to God, so we should consider ourselves as dead to sin and alive to God. Because of Christ’s finished work on the cross, put yourself in the category of “dead to sin.”)

¹²Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, (Since sin has been removed from the throne in your life, don’t let it back in charge.) ¹³and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. (Instead present yourself to God as alive from the dead and the members of your body as instruments of righteousness to God.) ¹⁴For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under the law, but under grace. (Remember, sin is no longer your master.)

¹⁵What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? (Back to our original question, “Should we continue in sin so grace will appear more spectacular?”) **May it never be!** (Same answer. We cannot continue in sin because it is no longer our master.) ¹⁶Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, (Prior to your new birth, you were slaves of sin.) or of obedience resulting in righteousness? ¹⁷But thanks be to God that though you were (past tense) slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Thanks be to God that you have been set free from the power of sin. Your freedom has not left you totally autonomous with no master at all. Rather, your freedom has allowed you to switch allegiance from your old master, sin, to your new master, the righteousness of God.)

¹⁹I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. (Just as the longer you continued in sin’s slavery you became worse and worse, presenting yourself as a slave of righteousness causes righteousness to grow and your sanctification continues on track.) ²⁰For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regards to righteousness. (When you were slaves

of sin, you didn't even know what righteousness was...) ²¹Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of these things is death (...or that you were on a beeline to spiritual death. After all the outcome of sin is death.) ²²But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, (But now, having been freed from sin's power and becoming enslaved to God,...) you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, (...your sanctification is moving forward) and the outcome, eternal life. (...and the outcome is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.) ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God (It's all by God's gift of grace) is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Chapter 7

(Let me put our union with Christ and newness of life another way by showing how our relationship with the Law changed at our new birth.) ¹Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? ²For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. ³So then if, while her husband is living, she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress, though she is joined to another man. (Just as a married person is committed to a relationship with their spouse while the spouse is alive, you were "married" to the Law until Christ's arrival on the scene put the law to death.) ⁴Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, (When Christ died, the law as it affects your relationship with God died as well and you were now free to marry a new groom, Christ Himself.) that you might be joined to another, to Him (Jesus Christ) who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God. (You are now joined to a new partner, Jesus Christ, to bear righteous fruit.)

⁵For while we were in the flesh, (Remember what it felt like to be under the law, prior to our conversion?) the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of your body to bear fruit for death. (Prior to your new birth in Christ, your sinful passions, aroused by the law, were working in your body to bear dead fruit, not righteous fruit.) ⁶But now we have been released from the Law, (How?) having died to that by which we were bound, (Through Christ's death, we died to the Law that bound us.) so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter. (We no longer live under the "Old Arrangement," i.e. Old Testament, law-keeping system. We now live under a "New Arrangement" and walk in the newness of the Spirit rather than the oldness of the letter of the Law. Does this "newness" sound familiar? [Romans 6:4, II Corinthians 5:13] Our new walk is carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells us.

In the upcoming section, Romans 7:7-25, Paul goes into a passionate discussion of the tension he (and by implication we) lived under during our pre-conversion days. The tension is based on knowing the Law and giving it mental assent as to its goodness, but at the same time being powerless to follow it due to the dominance of the sin nature that indwelt us. This life of contradiction is *clearly prior to the new birth in Christ* because of Paul's references to sin leading to spiritual death, the active role of the Law (which we subsequently died to), being of flesh and sold into the bondage of sin, the overwhelming power of sin, the *practice* of evil, and describing himself as a prisoner, or slave, to sin. The crescendo builds until Paul cries out, "Who will rescue us from this life of contradiction?"

Let's look in some detail at Paul's line of reasoning starting at chapter 7, verse 7:

(Before I leave the topic of the law, let me add this. ⁷What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? **May it never be!** (Even though at our conversion we died to sin and died to the law's influence, do not treat the law and sin as one and the same.) **On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law;** (The law had a noble purpose. The law's role was to point out our sin.) **for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet."** (For example, I would have not known about coveting if the law had not said, "Do not covet.") ⁸**But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind;** (But sin even took a good thing like the law and got things all twisted up to the point where the reminder of the law to not covet had me desiring to covet all the more.) **for apart from the Law sin is dead.**

⁹**And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive,** (Once the law made me aware of my sin, it seemed like sin just took over. **and I died;** (The result; spiritual death.) ¹⁰**And this commandment, which was to result in life,** (the noble purpose of the Law) **proved to result in death for me;** ¹¹**for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.** (This spiritual death was not the Law's fault. It was sin that caused my downfall. And, in a way, the sin became greater under the noble lens of the Law.)

¹²**So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.** (Again, the law was a good thing with a noble purpose) ¹³**Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me?** (Was the law the cause of my spiritual death?) **May is never be!** (No) **Rather it was sin,** (Sin caused my spiritual death) **in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, and through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.** (The power of sin was so strong that it could use a noble thing like the law as a weapon against me.) ¹⁴**For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.** (Again, the law had a noble purpose, but *prior to Christ*, I was controlled by a sin nature and a slave to sin.) ¹⁵**For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.** (Prior to the new birth, the combination of the noble purpose of the law and my overpowering sin nature put me in an incredible internal civil war. Here is what it looked like. With my mind and in some ways even in my heart-of-hearts I know the law is good and want to follow its precepts.) ¹⁶**But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good.** ¹⁷**So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me.** (But the overpowering nature of the sin that dwells in me prevents me from following what I know is right.)

¹⁸**For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.** ¹⁹**For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.** (Let me say it again. In my natural man, pre-conversion state, no righteousness dwells within me leaving me powerless to follow what my mind agrees with regarding the law.) ²⁰**But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.** (In fact, in some ways, it is not even me hurling headlong down the wrong path, but the sin that dwells in me and controls me.) ²¹**I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good.** ²²**For I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man,** (Let me say it one more time. The law is not the problem. My mind actually concurs with the law deep inside...) ²³**But I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind,** (...but it is constantly at war with the evil that dwells in me...) **and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.** (...and makes me a prisoner of sin.) ²⁴**Wretched man that I am!** (In the end, without Christ, I am a wretched slave to sin.)

Who will set me free from this body of death? (Is there anyone who can set me free from this life of contradiction? Who can set me free from my slavery to sin?) ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (I can't hold it in any longer but must shout with thanksgiving. "Jesus is my Deliverer!") So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. (So in summary, my pre-conversion life was marked by this dilemma of knowing the right thing to do but lacking the power to carry it out.)

Chapter 8

¹There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. (This back and forth between wanting to do what's right and condemning myself for practicing what is evil was finally resolved once and for all in the arrival of Jesus Christ. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. (Returning now to where I left off in chapter 7, verse 6, about how we died to sin and the law, our new life in Christ sets us free from that whole law / sin dilemma. ³For what the Law could not do, (Even with its noble purpose, the law had no power to solve our sin problem.) weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, (Only Jesus Christ, sent from God Himself, could solve our sin problem through His death offering for our sin.) He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴in order that the requirement of the Law might be filled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. (Those of us who have embraced the sin offering of Jesus Christ, do not walk according to the flesh and its slavery to sin any more. We now walk in the newness of the Holy Spirit.)

⁵For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, (those who are still in their natural, unconverted state follow the flesh...) but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. (...but those who have experienced the new birth follow the Spirit) ⁶For the mind set on the flesh is death, (Following the flesh leads to death) but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, (Following the Spirit leads to life and peace.) ⁷because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; (The mind of the unconverted is hostile to God...) for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (...and is unable, due to its sin nature, to follow God's law or please God.)

⁹However you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if (since) indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. (But to you who have placed your faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells in you.) But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. (In contrast, the unconverted do not have the indwelling Holy Spirit.) ¹⁰And if (since) Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, (Your old body of sin has been put to death...) yet the Spirit is alive because of righteousness. (...and your new man is alive and well.) ¹¹But if (since) the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you. (Even your mortal members who gave you so much trouble in the past are redeemed and given new life.)

¹²So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh- (We owe the flesh nothing because we have a new master.) ¹³for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, (God is not only our new master...) these are sons of God. (...but also our Father and we have literally become the children of God.)

We have, in essence, become “little Christs.” At the new birth, God’s “seed”, the Holy Spirit took up residence in our lives. We now carry in our being a moral resemblance to Christ. Why? Because the “seed” of God literally dwells in us since we have been “born of God.” That moral resemblance is so strong that the Apostle John has the boldness to say, “**No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.**” I John 3:9.

We have come full circle to answering the question posed at the beginning of Romans 6, “Should we continue in sin? Of course not,” replies the apostle. To continue in the practice of sin as a believer is an abnormality, an anomaly, not the expected course for one born of God? Why? Because we have died to sin and sin has lost its mastery over us. Sin is no longer the Great Dane that bowls us over when we walk in the door. Sin is the annoying Chihuahua that nips at our heels. To quote Paul again, “**How shall we who died to sin still live in it?**”

(Returning to Romans chapter 8, as believers, born of God, we have a moral resemblance to Christ that is ours to display. Just as a father and son entering a room often causes onlookers to comment on their family resemblance so we too have a resemblance to Christ that should be apparent to the community around us. After all...) ¹⁵**For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, ‘Abba! Father!’** ¹⁶**The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,** ¹⁷**and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow-heirs with Christ, if (since) indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him.**

Why does this matter?

When we incorrectly view the believer’s conflict with sin through the lens of Romans 7:7-25, our preaching takes on not only a negative air, but also contradicts nearly all of the remaining New Testament epistles including the neighboring passages of Romans 6 and 8 as outlined above. The idea that the believer is dead to sin, sin has lost its mastery, sin is no longer our normal course is at the heart of the New Testament message. The revolution wrought by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is minimized, ignored, or simply misunderstood by preaching that elevates the believer’s struggle with sin to the Romans 7 level. When we focus on Romans 7 as the norm for the believers struggle with sin, two unintended consequences occur.

First, in our effort to motivate people by elevating the power of sin as some equal force to the Holy Spirit inside, we are actually giving people an excuse for their sinful behavior. Hey, if Paul, the greatest of all missionaries, could not overcome this contradiction, what hope do I have? Because I basically have no chance at overcoming this besetting sin, I am giving up. Which approach is going to give believers power in their conflict with sin? Your struggle with sin is basically unwinnable this side of heaven (Romans 7) *or* your struggle with sin is governed by your new purity, new identity, new disposition, and new power to overcome your past behavior patterns and to live into the new man you became at your conversion?

Do new identity believers struggle in the conflict with sin? Of course. The Bible teaches that the new man still faces the enemies of the world, the flesh, and the devil. The Chihuahua can have a nasty bite. The tarnish on the silver can get pretty thick. What the Bible teaches is that the continual practice of sin is not the norm for the believer who carries the very “seed” of God inside.

The second consequence of treating Romans 7 as the norm for Christians is the judgmental attitude that accompanies this focus. The Desert Fathers (circa 400 A.D.) in their pursuit of loving as God loves viewed a judgmental spirit as the greatest roadblock to love. If God in His essence is love and we as His children are to imitate him, love must be the aura we carry. Our ministry must carry the tone of II Corinthians 5. **“For the love of Christ controls us (vs 14a)...Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him in this way no longer. Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.”** (vs 16-17). In other words, any man or woman who has experienced the new birth in Jesus Christ is a *new* person.

How do we motivate fellow believers without a judgmental spirit? By reminding them of who they are in Christ. Paul, Peter, and John, in their epistles, all take this motivational approach of reminding their hearers of who they already are regarding improving their behavior, not who they may become if they just try harder. You are already a saint by the death of your Savior. To a saint, sin tastes funny. Spit it out. To a saint, the clothes of sin don't fit. Throw them away. To a saint, sin has already been removed from the throne in your life. Don't let it back in charge.

I wonder if our falling back into a Romans 7 mindset doesn't sometimes spring from the disconnect between the promises of God and our own experience with sin. Are we living the victorious life God advertised under the New Covenant? If not, is God's advertisement false, do we just not understand the advertisement correctly, or is there something missing in our experience?

I am a stickler for truth in advertising. Misleading advertising drives me crazy. I have to know, “What kind of life is God advertising for those who have embraced His gospel message?” Taking the New Testament as a whole from Matthew to Revelation it appears to me the advertisement is a life set free from the dominion and power of sin. Let's not “water down” the advertisement due to our lack of experience. Rather than looking for a way to diminish the promise of the new birth, let us, by faith, embrace the promises and ask God to lift our experience to who He says we are. Will you join me?

Your friend,

Jay

References:

Bondi, Roberta. [To Love as God Loves.](#)

Edwards, Dwight. [Revolution Within: A Fresh Look at Supernatural Living.](#)

Ferguson, Sinclair. [The Christian Life: A Doctrinal Introduction.](#)

Owens, John. [The Mortification of Sin.](#)

Schaffer, Francis. [The Finished Work of Christ.](#)