

*Baptized into Christ Jesus: Romans 6:1-4*

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Sunday, February 10, 2013

It's been an encouraging week. Andrew Hughes and I had the privilege of attending the Desiring God conference for pastors in Minneapolis from Monday to Wednesday, and the theme was reclaiming the centrality of the supernatural in ministry. Of course, it's ridiculous for anyone to think they can be involved in ministry without a focus on the supernatural. And yet we're so prone to doing just that. American churches easily fall into this. We think we can put together effective sermons in our own strength. We think we can design powerful worship services in our own strength. We think we can plan life-changing small groups and Sunday school lessons in our own strength. We think we can counsel and evangelize and minister and serve in all kinds of ways, and all too often we do so without giving much of a thought to the Holy Spirit who must be at work in our ministries if there's going to be any eternal impact.

And so this conference, and the conversations Andrew and I have had, and the discussion we had at men's breakfast yesterday morning about these things, have been a wonderful reminder that we are all totally reliant on God to work in us and through us to glorify His Name and build His church and gather His people to Himself.

One of the ways in which we acknowledge this fact, and an evidence that we really believe it, is prayer. And I'd like us pray together now.

Pray: God, we need You. Every hour, every minute. Apart from Your sustaining power, we would cease to exist this very moment. From the blinking of an eye to the movement of a hand and fingers to the coordination of walking and driving, we are dependent upon You. How much more so when it comes to spiritual movement, spiritual growth, miraculous conversions, bringing hope to the hopeless, bringing light into darkness, seeing new spiritual life where there has been spiritual death. God, we come to You and ask You to work these miracles by Your Spirit. We come to You because we know we cannot do this on our own. And anything we might do on our own is not worth doing. So, please, come and make Yourself known through our church, through the ministries of our lives, through our testimonies to Your grace in our lives. Please glorify Your Name and build Your church and draw Your people to Yourself. And we ask that You will do so now in the

study of Your Word and the preaching of Your Word. May Jesus be praised! Amen.

We start a new chapter in Romans this morning—Romans 6. And we're going to focus on the subject of baptism today, which is a powerful picture of the miracle that God works in a person's life in conversion. Baptism, itself, is not the main point of the passage. It is an illustration of the main point. But this is a good opportunity to talk about what the Bible teaches, and what we believe, about the significance of baptism. So we will talk about baptism, and we'll talk about what baptism points to, which is the main point of this passage—death to sin and newness of life in Christ, which is a miraculous and supernatural work of God in the lives of undeserving sinners like us.

In chapters 1-5 of Romans, Paul has explained the precious truth of justification by faith alone. He teaches very clearly that we are “justified by faith apart from works of the law” (3:28). In other words, a person is put into a right relationship with God by trusting, and not by doing. There's nothing we can do to earn God's favor. Our only hope is to trust in what Jesus Christ did.

And now this question arises: Well, if salvation is completely by grace through faith, and it's not based on works of the law, then I can live however I want, right?! I can keep on sinning, because grace will abound! Remember that statement at the end of chapter 5 in verse 20, where Paul writes, “Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” Now this is the question that comes to mind in response to everything that Paul has written so far in his letter: Since justification is by faith alone, and since grace abounds where sin abounds, then why don't we just continue to sin so that grace can continue to abound? The more we sin, the more God will be glorified in His gracious forgiveness of sin. That's the question that Paul was being asked, and he raises that objection here so that he can respond to it.

This is the question that he raises in verse 1 of chapter 6. “What shall we say then?” What should we conclude from the doctrine of justification by faith alone? How should we live in light of this doctrine? How will this truth impact our thoughts and actions? And then he identifies a critical objection that is raised against what he has been teaching. This is the second part of verse 1, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” Do you understand why someone would ask that question? This is so important because people today ask the same question, and some arrive at the very conclusion that Paul is condemning here.

People will study the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and then conclude, The way you live your life is completely irrelevant to salvation. If you made that commitment in your heart, if you professed faith, if you said the prayer, if you signed the card, if you walked down an aisle, if you were baptized, then your salvation is sure and there's nothing that can change that. That's how some people twist the truth of salvation by faith alone into easy-believism. Your life doesn't have to change, many would say. It's good if it does change, but it doesn't have to. You can continue living in sin, and as long as you said that prayer of repentance and professed faith in Christ, you will be saved. That is a tragic falsehood that deceives so many people by giving them a false assurance of salvation. It's also a way in which pragmatic religion bypasses the supernatural. Conversion is not just a mechanical thing whereby a person receives a "get-out-of-hell-free" card. No! Conversion is a supernatural work of God that radically changes a person from the inside out, to the core their being.

Paul's argument in these verses is designed to clarify how salvation, which is by faith alone, will necessarily change your life. It can't NOT change your life. If it doesn't change your life, then it's not salvation.

On the one hand, we can envision this objection being raised by those who want to turn grace into a license to sin. The libertine, who says we can continue to sin because grace will abound. On the other hand, this objection was raised by legalists who objected to Paul's teaching because they were afraid people would take advantage of it. There are two possible sides to this objection. On the one hand there's the libertine saying, "Yeah, justification by faith alone! We can continue in sin." And on the other hand there's the legalist saying, "It can't be justification by faith ALONE, because then people will continue in sin. There has to be law. There have to be rules to keep everyone in line."

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" That's the question. It was relevant in Paul's day, and it's relevant to us today. How should the truth that we're saved by faith alone work itself out in our lives? As Paul begins to answer this question, he directs our attention to the ordinance of baptism, since baptism is a vivid picture of the answer. What is the Gospel truth that is being portrayed in baptism? What is the meaning of baptism?

## The Mode of Baptism

As we consider baptism, the first thing I want to talk about is the *mode* of baptism, which you may not hear discussions of very often. It may seem that this is irrelevant, but hopefully you'll be able to see that it is, in fact, an important aspect of how we understand the significance of this ordinance. So I'll talk about the *mode* of baptism, and then this will lead us into our consideration of the *meaning* of baptism.

When we say the mode of baptism, we mean the way in which it is done. And it is done in different ways. In some churches, the water is sprinkled over the person. In other churches, water is poured over the person. But what I hope to convince you of this morning is that immersion is the proper and biblical mode of baptism. When we baptize individuals, we ought to get them in the water and immerse them (put them down under the water—not for very long, but they should go under the water and then up again). There are a few reasons for this.

First of all, the Greek word *baptizō* means “to plunge, dip, immerse.” This meaning is evident both in the Bible and in Greek literature outside of the Bible. In addition to this, immersion in water makes the most sense of the way the New Testament describes the baptism of various individuals. For instance, in Mark 1:5 it describes those who were going out to John the Baptist, and it says they “were being baptized by him IN the river Jordan, confessing their sins.” It doesn't say anything about sprinkling or pouring, but they were immersed IN the river Jordan. A few verses later we read of Jesus' baptism, and it says, “And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.” The point being, he came up OUT OF the water, implying that He had been IN the water.

Another example is when Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. In Acts 8:36, the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” Then the next verse says, “they both went DOWN into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came UP OUT of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away . . .” If they thought sprinkling or pouring would be sufficient, they wouldn't have needed to wait until they came upon a body of water. And the going down into the water and coming up out of the water strongly implies that Philip fully immersed this man in the water.

A final verse along these lines is John 3:23, which says, “John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was

plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized.” You don’t need a lot of water to sprinkle or pour. But you do need a lot of water to immerse. And apparently immersion was important enough to John that he went to a place where there was a lot of water.

Baptism by immersion is consistent with the meaning of the word, and it is also the mode which was practiced in the New Testament. A final reason for baptizing by immersion is the fact that it best symbolizes our death with Christ and our resurrection to new life, which is what Romans 6 explains to us. And this leads us to the question, What is the meaning of baptism?

### **The Meaning of Baptism**

In verses 3-4 we see the meaning of baptism, but we have to begin in verses 1-2 to understand Paul’s point here. He begins with these questions. “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” The question that Paul is raising is this: Do we just take this truth that we are saved by faith alone and use it like a free ticket to heaven and a license to continue in our sinful ways of life? Look at his answer in verse 2, “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” In this rhetorical question Paul is making an emphatic statement. He’s saying, “There is absolutely no way that we who died to sin can still live in it!”

Dead people cannot sin. That’s the answer to the question. Dead people cannot sin. That is, those who are dead to sin can’t continue living in sin. What does that mean? That’s a scary thing to say, because we all know that we continue to sin. We didn’t stop sinning when we were converted. We wish it were so, but it isn’t. So what does it mean that we are dead to sin? I don’t feel dead to sin! Does that mean I’m not a Christian?

### **Perfectionism?**

I don’t think Paul is saying that we have died to sin in the sense that we no longer commit any sins. It seems clear from the context that he does not mean that. Let me point out three things.<sup>1</sup> First of all, in verses 11-13 Paul gives some commands. Verse 11, “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Verse 12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.” Verse 13, “Do

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<sup>11</sup> See John Piper’s sermon, *United with Christ in Death and Life*, Part I: <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/united-with-christ-in-death-and-life-part-1>

not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness.” These commands clearly imply that sin is still a struggle in the life of Christians, and we must wage war against the sinful tendencies that are still very much present within us.

Secondly, he says in verse 6 that “our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be *enslaved* to sin.” He doesn’t say, “so that we would be sinless,” but “so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.” Also in verse 14, “sin will have no *dominion* over you.” Again, it’s not that sin will be totally absent from your life, but “sin will have no dominion over you.” It’s about who your master is, as the rest of the chapter goes on to talk about. Are we slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness?

And a third observation is the way Paul talks about sin in verses 1-2. He asks, “Are we to *continue* in sin . . .?” And in verse 2, “How can we who died to sin still *live* in it?” What he’s saying we *cannot* do is remain unchanged in our sinful lifestyle. We can’t continue living in sin. True believers, those who have really died with Christ, will not just continue living in all the same sinful patterns of the world. There will be a radical change. There’s a new master. There’s new life. And that doesn’t mean sinlessness. That doesn’t mean perfection. But it means we are no longer under the complete bondage of sin.

I think it’s the same thing that John is teaching in 1 John 3:6, “No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him.” Or a couple verses later where he says, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.” He’s not talking about being sinless. He’s talking about no longer living a life characterized by sin, enslaved to sin, under sin’s dominion.

### **Dead to Sin, Alive in Christ**

So in what sense have we died to sin? If it doesn’t mean being sinless, then what does it mean? The answer is: Christ died to sin, once for all, and we have been united to Christ in a death like his, and therefore we have died to sin. Let’s trace the logic through these verses briefly. We’ll be looking at this more fully next week. In verse 2 we see this truth that we have died to sin. “How can *we who died to sin* still live in it?” In verse 5, Paul speaks of our union with Christ. “For if we have been united with

him [that is, Christ] in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” And then verse 10 says that Christ’s death was a death to sin, once for all, meaning He destroyed the power of sin. He triumphed over sin through His death and resurrection. So by virtue of Christ’s death to sin, and our union to Christ, it can be said that we have died to sin.

If that feels very abstract to you, think of it this way: Sin is no longer our master. In Christ we have triumphed over sin, and sin no longer has dominion over us. The thrust of Paul’s argument in response to the question in verse 1 is that God’s grace will certainly not cause us or allow us to continue in sin, because the power of sin has been broken. Now we have a new ruler, a new master, new life, new desires. We will still sin, but now we will struggle against sin, because we have tasted and seen something much better than sin. Before, all we knew was sin. We were completely under the reign of sin, and we didn’t have a desire for anything else. But now, even though we will still sin, we are no longer under sin’s dominion. Sin is no longer our slave-master. We have died to sin and have new life in Christ.

And this is what baptism is all about. This is the reality that baptism symbolizes. This is the meaning of baptism. Look at verse 3, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death, which is an illustration of what this whole passage is talking about. We have died to sin, meaning Christ died to sin, and we have been united with Him in that death. And baptism is a symbol of that death, an illustration of that death.

Verse 4 explains further, “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Verse 3 was about death. The first half of verse 4 is about death and burial. It’s interesting to note that outside of the Gospels, Paul is the only one who specifically mentions the burial of Jesus Christ (Acts 13:29; 1 Corinthians 15:4; Colossians 2:12). Four times we find him referring to Jesus’ burial, and two are in the context of baptism—here and in Colossians 2:12, “having been buried with him in baptism.” It seems that Paul wants to stress the finality of Jesus’ death. He was really dead. He was buried in a tomb. And a key component of baptism is how it signifies this death and burial. Being plunged under the water is a symbol of our death and burial with Christ Jesus. We have died to sin.

We see, though, in verse 4 that the death and burial is only half of the picture. The other half is the resurrection to new life. This is the purpose of the death and burial, “in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Christ was raised from the dead in a miraculous and glorious way, and in the same way we are raised to walk in newness of life. We are new creatures in Christ. We have a new set of desires. And therefore, inevitably, necessarily, our lives are going to be different.

### **Instrument of Symbol?<sup>2</sup>**

I’ve been talking about baptism as a symbol of these spiritual realities, but we have to ask whether that interpretation squares with this text. The way verse 4 is worded, many think that baptism is actually the *instrument* by which we died with Christ. In other words, many people think that baptism actually saves. And if you read verse 4 all by itself, without the rest of Paul’s writings to inform you, then you might very well come to that same conclusion. But when we look at the rest of Paul’s writings, and the teaching of the New Testament as a whole, we have to think further about what Paul is getting at here.

Look at Romans 5:1, just one chapter back, where Paul writes, “Therefore, since we have been justified *by faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” It’s not by baptism that we are justified, or by faith plus baptism. The instrument by which we are justified is faith, and faith alone. Another example is Colossians 2:12, which also speaks of baptism: “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him *through faith* in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” Again, faith is the instrument.

The conclusion I believe we must reach is that when Paul says in Romans 6:4 that “We were buried therefore with him *by baptism* into death,” he’s referring to the inner spiritual reality that baptism represents.

The wedding ring is a great illustration of this. When Stacy and I were married we said, “I give you this ring as a sign of my vow.” But we could have said, as many do, “With this ring, I thee wed.” And nobody means by those words that the physical ring establishes the marriage. The ring, rather, is a symbol of what establishes the marriage, namely, the love and commitment

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<sup>2</sup> See John Piper, *United to Christ in Death and Life, Part II*:  
<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/united-with-christ-in-death-and-life-part-2>

expressed in the vows. The ring is an abiding symbol of our love for each other and our commitment to forsake all others and remain passionately committed to one another. In and of itself it does not create a marriage. It's a symbol. A picture. It's an outward sign that represents a profound inner reality.

Baptism is the same. In and of itself, it does not save. But it is a wonderful tangible symbol of the amazing truth that Christians *by faith* have died with Christ and have been raised to walk in newness of life.

It is tragic that so many people think they're saved simply because they were sprinkled with some water when they were a baby, or dunked under water at some point in their childhood or as an adult. Baptism, itself, does not save anyone. Rather, it is a symbol of what happens in a person's heart when they are truly saved, when they die to sin and are raised to walk in newness of life. Baptism is a symbol of conversion. It's a powerful drama of these inner realities.

I close by asking you if you have died to sin. Have you been united to Christ by faith so that you are now dead to sin and have been raised to walk in newness of life? Don't continue in rebellion against God. Don't continue to turn your back on Him and live for the things of this world. I promise you: if you continue down that road you will never find any lasting joy. Instead you will come to the end of your life and face the terrifying wrath of God. Repent of your sin, and turn to Jesus Christ. He will forgive you. He will release you from your bondage to sin and cause you to walk in newness of life. Do not doubt. Do not despair. Come to Him today. Trust Him. Rejoice in Him.

For those of you who are already in Christ, but have not been baptized as a believer, I encourage you to do so. Let us, as a congregation, rejoice with you in this wonderful ordinance. Be immersed in water to symbolize the radical change that has taken place in your life, and to proclaim to the world that you are in Christ—dead to sin and resurrected to walk in newness of life.