

Dead but Alive

An Exegesis of Romans 6:1-14

Course: MB737 – Romans

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Assignment 2: Study of a Passage from Romans – 6:1-14

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CONTENT

This central Pauline text addresses the question of whether or not grace encourages sin. Paul's prompt negative answer is supported by his explanation of the change of status of the believer who has been baptized into Christ's death (to sin) and resurrection (to life).

Apart from these relatively basic understandings, this text is host to many an interpretive issue. Is the opening question rhetorical or genuine? To what extent does this passage offer a Pauline 'theology of baptism'? What/who is the 'old man' and just how is it that it/he has been 'crucified'? Does Paul here evidence a low and/or dualistic view of the human body? What is the role of moral effort in living the Christian life? Is Paul antinomian? What are the relationships between sin, 'the law' and grace? These and other questions will be explored in the exegetical investigation below, after locating our passage within the immediate and broader context.

CONTEXT

These verses addressing are part of a majestic flow of argument of the entire book. The question throughout is: how is God being 'righteous' in the midst of troubled Jew-Gentile relations and near-wholesale Jewish rejection of Jesus as Messiah?

In chapters 1-3, Paul has categorized both Jew and Gentile as equally under sin and equally guilty before God, and as having equal and free access by faith to justification 'apart from law'.¹ Chapters 4-5 consist of Paul's scriptural argument supporting this equal Jew-or-Gentile access to justification; arguing from the timing of Abraham's faith (*before* his circumcision according to the Law) and the timing of the entry of sin (with Adam, *before* the giving of the Law through Moses).²

In our passage, God's righteousness is brought into question with an accusation that the super-abounding grace encourages people to stay in sin. Paul's dismantling of this complaint is repeated after our passage via the language of slavery and freedom in the rest of chapter 6, leading to the extended lament in chapter 7 about the experience of being 'married' to the law and thus being under the rule of sin.³

¹ 3:9, 19, 23-4, 28-31.

² 4:10, 12.

³ 6:18-20; 7:2-4.

In chapter 8, the Spirit is the One who rescues from sin, death and condemnation; confirming the true children of the Father and conforming them to be like the Son.⁴ Chapters 9-11 are an anguished response to the failure of the Jewish nation to believe, a defense of God's faithfulness to his purposes, and an expression of hope that the unbelieving and disconnected Jewish branches will be grafted back in as the Gentile branches have been.⁵ Chapters 12 & 13 are a vision of life for a renewed humanity – a life shaped by grace and love.⁶ Before the final greetings, requests and blessings, chapter 14 and some of 15 appeal for Jew and Gentile to live out the gospel by bearing with and welcoming one another.⁷

COMMENT

Our passage opens (6:1) with a rhetorical question, which (whether in Paul's mind or in that of the addressees) is raised by Paul's previous declaration (5:21) of the triumph of grace over the power of sin.⁸ Though the possibility of sinful actions themselves are in view, the surrounding context (i.e. 5:21, 6:14; cf. 7:1) suggests the sense of "continuing in the realm (or domain) of sin".⁹ If grace abounds over sin, should we not then remain 'in' sin for this to occur?¹⁰ The phrase '*mē genoitō*' ('May it never be!' – used 10 times in Romans) forcefully delivers the answer (6:2), followed by Paul's summary of the explanation (spelled out in 6:3-10): those who have died to sin cannot live in it.

A subsequent rhetorical question ("*do you not know...?*") opens the argument (6:3). The question of 6:1 can only come from someone ignorant of the fact that baptism into Christ equals baptism into his death. While baptism into (and in the name of Jesus Christ)

⁴ 8:1, 3, 14-5, 29.

⁵ 9:2-3, 6, 19ff; 10:1-3; 11:11-27.

⁶ 12:2-3; 13:8-10. To the popular notion that the letter can be neatly divided into 'theology' (i.e. chapters 1-11) and 'ethics' (i.e. chapters 12-16), the moral imperatives in our passage (among others) are evidence to the contrary. The 'therefore' of 12:1 (and of 5:1 and 8:1) is indeed a key transition in the structure of the letter; however, 'the obedience of faith' has been a concern throughout, from the opening until that point.

⁷ 14:1-3; 15:1-2.

⁸ On sin as a 'power', see L. Morris, "Sin, Guilt", in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 878.

⁹ James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 38A, Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 306; and N.T. Wright, "The Book of Romans". In *The New Interpreter's Bible: Volume X* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 537, making the analogy that one speaks French if they stay in France.

¹⁰ A.B. Luter, Jr., "Grace", in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 373. The contrast between the form of the rhetorical questions in this chapter (6:1 – "Shall we continue *in sin* so that...?"; 6:15 – "Shall we *sin* because...?") suggests that location, status and/or identification characterises the former, and activity/behaviour the latter.

was known to all at this time, Paul may be lending emphasis to what should have been “an obvious corollary” of this.¹¹

The burial with Christ into death (6:4) is ‘through baptism’.¹² The rite itself is not to be seen as an “acting subject” (i.e. the rite *itself* acts), but as “a re-enactment of Jesus’ death, a making real for the individual the once-for-all event of Calvary.”¹³ We should note at this point that, as central as this passage may be to a theology of baptism, Paul has no such thing in mind. The theme here is “death to sin and life under grace” and not baptism as such.¹⁴

The *syn* (‘with’) terms of 6:4-8 *synetaphēmen* (‘co-buried’), *symphytoi* (‘co-united’), *synestaurōthē* (‘co-crucified’), *apethanōmen syn* (‘died with’), and *syzēthōmen* (‘co-live’) explain this further, establishing the theme of ‘union with Christ’; what is true of Christ is (or will be) true of the baptised community.¹⁵ That Christ’s resurrection is ‘through the glory of the Father’ links to the glorious quality of new life available.¹⁶ This Pauline theme of ‘dying and rising with Christ’ (i.e. 2 Cor. 5:14-21, Col. 2:12; cf. Rom 7:4) is clearly seen in the parallelisms of 6:5 and 6:8.¹⁷

The ‘old man’ (or ‘old self’) which is co-crucified (6:6) is “not some part of the human person, but rather the whole person... ‘in Adam.’”¹⁸ Wright is adamant that the Adamic sin-guilt is permanently left behind in Christ:

“The ‘old self,’ whole and entire, is put to death once and for all. This does not mean that the Christian cannot sin; but Paul’s sharp point should be felt before caveats and nuances are allowed to dull it. In baptism the whole person leaves the Adam-world for good, leaves it by death, a final one-way journey.”¹⁹

¹¹ Dunn, *Romans*, 308, 312; cf. Wright, *Romans*, 537.

¹² For a weighty treatment, see Hendrikus Boers, “The Structure and Meaning of Romans 6:1-14”, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63(4): (2001), 664-71.

¹³ Dunn, *Romans*, 313-4; Wright, *Romans*, 539. Agreeing are G.R. Beasley-Murray, “Baptism”, in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 60-6, and Robert Jewett, “Romans” in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, Ed. James D.G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2003), 96; describing baptism as “participation in Christ’s death and resurrection”. For baptism as constituting “a liminal order of being”, see Anders Klostergaard Petersen, “Shedding New Light on Paul’s Understanding of Baptism: a Ritual-Theoretical Approach to Romans 6”, *Studia Theologica* 52: (1998), 3-28.

¹⁴ Dunn, *Romans*, 308.

¹⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 313; Wright, *Romans*, 538.

¹⁶ Dunn, *Romans*, 316; Wright, *Romans*, 538.

¹⁷ G.R. Beasley-Murray, “Dying and Rising with Christ”, in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 218-22.

¹⁸ Wright, *Romans*, 539.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 539.

The 'old man' is crucified 'so that' the *sōma tēs hamartias* ('body of sin') might be destroyed (cf. 7:24).²⁰ The result of the crucifixion of the 'old man' (cf. Gal. 2:20) and the destruction of the 'body of sin' is that slavery to sin is ended, and slavery to righteousness (6:16) is enabled. Christians are now "free... from the bondage of sin" and now may "put [themselves] at the disposal of the Spirit".²¹

Paul then appeals (6:7) to a basic idea that death makes one 'justified' from sin. The use of *dedikaiōtai* could seem odd; however "Paul is able to keep the lawcourt metaphor... in his mind even while expounding baptism and ...solidarity in Christ."²² The principle being introduced or appealed to his is not that sin is expiated at death, but rather that sin can only rule people who *live* under it; "death marks the end of sin's rule."²³

The next three verses (6:8-10) continue to develop and sharpen the argument; co-dying with Christ is accompanied by trust concerning co-living with Christ (6:8).²⁴ The *past* death leads to a *present* life (cf. 6:4, 6) to be fulfilled in the *future* (cf. 6:5).²⁵ It is a given point (6:9) that Christ 'dies no more', having been raised from the dead, and being free of death's rule (cf. 5:17, 21). The following formulation (6:10) is simple and symmetric: his death was 'to sin' – his life *is* 'to God'.²⁶ His death was 'once for all' resulting in permanent freedom from the age of sin's reign; his life signals the inauguration of the new age of a deathless mode of life.²⁷ On behalf of humanity, he (himself sinless, but 'in the likeness of sinful flesh'; 8:3) has endured and conquered the reign of sin, and has fully and finally opened and proceeded through the door into risen, glorious, eternal (5:21) and free life.

²⁰ Ibid, 539; as opposed to 'rendered powerless' as the NIV has it. "[T]his 'body of sin' should be destroyed, not simply left to one side without power". On 'body of sin' as equivalent to *sarx* ('flesh'), see L.J. Kreitzer, "Body", in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 73.

²¹ Verlyn D. Verbrugge (Ed.), "ἁμαρτία" in *The NIV Theological Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Paternoster, 2000), 102.

²² Wright, *Romans*, 540.

²³ See conversations in Dunn, *Romans*, 320-1; and Wright, *Romans*, 540. We might say death is the *result* of sin which ends the *reign* of sin. Cf. David T. Ejenobo, "'Union with Christ': A Critique of Romans 6:1-11", *Asia Journal of Theology* 22(2): (2008), 321.

²⁴ Dunn, *Romans*, 321-2; Wright, *Romans*, 540.

²⁵ See Dunn, *Romans*, 322, with emphasis on future; and Wright, *Romans*, 540, with emphasis on present. This both/and of present experience and future fulfilment in resurrection is seen in 8:11. Cf. Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The "Lutheran" Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 394; Believers "are not simply freed from the *condemnation* of their sins", but "[t]heir baptism represents a death "of a life 'serving' sin and the opening up of a new life in God's service."

²⁶ Cf. Morris, "Sin, Guilt", 879; and J.J. Scott, Jr., "Life and Death", in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 554.

²⁷ Dunn, *Romans*, 323; Wright, *Romans*, 540-1.

The argument's conclusion (6:11) hits squarely: *now reckon all of this to be true of you as well*. As righteousness was 'reckoned' to Abraham by faith (4:3), those 'in Christ Jesus' by faith are to 'reckon' themselves to be as dead to sin and alive to God as he himself is.²⁸ The statement, which functions both as an indicative ('[you are] dead... but alive...') and an imperative ('[so then] *count yourselves...*'), is a hinge which joins the previous indicatives (6:3-10) with the following imperatives (6:12-13).

The turn to ethics (6:12-13) is not abrupt, but speaks to the moral concern implicit throughout. Those in Christ are to live according to the age proper to them, which means not obeying evil bodily desires, as though they were still in the age of sin's rule. Rather than this expressing a Gnostic/dualistic degradation of the body, the 'parts' of the body are seen as 'instruments' which are 'offered' to a master. The false reckoning of oneself as still in any way under sin's rule leads to the body being offered to a false master (i.e. 1:24, 26-7). As the permanent transition from the death-age to the life-age is more 'reckoned' (6:11), one progresses from offering 'any' part to wickedness toward offering 'every' part to righteousness (6:13).²⁹

One more set of indicatives is necessary (6:14). Dying to sin means one is 'mastered' by it 'no longer' (6:7). The mention of not being *hupō nōmon* ('under law') can seem like a *non sequitur*, but the theme of the law has been central to Paul's argument for several chapters, and will be until chapter 8.³⁰ The point is that "if one did live under the law, sin *would* indeed have dominion."³¹ The law makes a master out of sin because it is the means by which sin (un-reckoned before the giving of the law) can be 'reckoned' (4:15; 5:13, 20; 7:7-13).³² Therefore, the law itself (though holy, just and good; 7:12) is seen as 'ruling' over those who are under it (7:1). This is, of course, anything but antinomian.³³ Paul positively respects the law as that which accurately does what it does (account for sin); though Paul

²⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, 323-4; Wright, *Romans*, 541.

²⁹ See Mark Strom, *Reframing Paul: Conversations in Grace and Community* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 90.

³⁰ Wright, *Romans*, 535-6.

³¹ *Ibid*, 543.

³² See discussion in E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 70-86.

³³ Two thorough treatments of Paul's view of the Mosaic Code are James D.G. Dunn, "The New Perspective on Paul: Paul and the Law", in *The Romans Debate, Rev. edition*, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, Massachusetts: Handrickson, 1991), 299-308, and F. Thielman, "Law", in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 529-42; particularly 540-1 on law in Romans. See also recent article on the difference between Jewish and Christian relationship to the law in Brian S. Rosner, "Paul and the Law: What He Does Not Say", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32(4): (2010), 405-419.

also sees that God has done what the law could not do (8:3). Death to the law (and therefore to sin) is necessary to come out from under its rule and take place under the rule of grace.

CONCLUSIONS

Summary

The triumph of super-abounding grace over law-abounding sin (5:20) has raised the question of remaining in the domain of sin in order for grace to abound. This couldn't be a more absurd notion, precisely because the means by which grace has triumphed is also the means by which the age of sin's reign has been left behind: the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' death was 'to sin' and his life is 'to God', therefore, to be baptised into Him is to be, like Him, dead to sin but alive to God.

Believers must also 'reckon' themselves as being united with Christ in His dead-ness to sin and alive-ness to God, having permanently followed Him out of the age of the rule of sin and death and into the age of the rule of grace and eternal life (5:17). Ethically, one's bodily 'instruments' are thus to be offered not to sin, the dead ruler of the old age (as 'under law'), but to God, the living ruler of the new age (as 'under grace').

Contemporary Church Application

The first contemporary application to avoid is squeezing/stretching this passage into a 'theology of baptism', as essential as this passage would be to such a thing. The central area of application would be framed with regard to the problem of continued acts of sin in our lives as believers, with some absolutising the 'how can we' of 6:2, and others underplaying the urgency of the imperatives in 6:12-13.

First, *we must know which age we belong to*. In Christ, we are dead to the present age of sin, and alive to the coming age of eternal life.³⁴ This is not a "schizophrenic" 50/50 arrangement.³⁵ We do not, as it were, have "one foot in the grave and the other by the

³⁴ For pastoral reflections on living the life of the 'not yet' in the 'now' reality, see Elsa Tamez, "The Challenge to Live as Resurrected: Reflections on Romans Six and Eight", Trans. Kinsler, *Gloria, Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 3(1): (2003), 90-1, 94.

³⁵ Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 160.

empty tomb”, but rather we live in an age that we don’t belong to.³⁶ Any acts of sin that we commit are not ‘reckoned’ against us, as they would be if we still belonged to the age of the rule of sin. We must ‘reckon’ that this is the case, not allow the present age (cf. Gal 1:4) to rule us or offer our bodies to this ages’ ruler as if we were still alive to or under sin.

Second, *we must know whom we belong to*. In Christ, the identity we have (and must live out of) is based on union with Him and not to any other thing, power or person. The Christian ethical life flows out of this union (cf. 1 Cor. 6:15-20), and is only diluted and distorted by other unions. Any and all identities, unions or dependencies (whether legal, national, ethnic, racial or otherwise) betray an ignorance (cf. ‘knowing’ in 6:3, 6, 9) of our belonging to Him; and will therefore hinder us in offering every part of ourselves as instruments of righteousness to God.

³⁶ Wright, *Romans*, 541.

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