

The Amazing Work of Grace: Part 1

Romans 6:1-7

“For one who has died has been set free from sin”

Introduction: Can someone truly change? Can someone given over to a substance truly break free from the iron grip its had on one’s life? Can a narcissist truly become humble? Can a lying liar really begin to tell the truth? Can depression break, fear turn to confidence, and worry to trust? Can someone truly change morally and stop sinning? These questions are not new, but the answer will set a course for the rest of life, between freedom and bondage, transformation vs. mitigation, and grace vs. works.

Consider a man named John, a man whose work everyone in this room has enjoyed, or at least knows about. At 6 he lost his mom and travelled with his harsh and emotionally distant father until at 18 joined the Navy to become a self-proclaimed “debauched sailor”, where the fellow sailors he met completed the ‘ruin of his principles’. At this point, John declared, *“I was capable of anything; I had not the least fear of God before my eyes, nor (so far as I remember) the least sensibility of conscience.”* For the next handful of years, John lead a life of *unrestrained blasphemy, wild and careless living, in which he bore every mark of final impenitence and rejection*. A self-proclaimed ‘libertine’, which means a man without moral principles or a sense of responsibility, especially in sexual relationships, John plunged into infidelity with all his spirit. He was careless in all eternal and temporal things. He was a deserter from a ship, whipped and scored, tormented by a slave-holding woman, sick and almost unto death, and in constant danger at sea.

Can a man like this change? Is there a redeemable and forgivable path? When John was 23, a violent storm caused the ship John was working on to tilt and fill with water, and as he was working the pumps called out, *‘If this will not do, the Lord have mercy on us’*. After working the pumps for over 36 hours it looked like hope began to shine through, and though he could NOT utter a prayer of faith since the ‘comfortless principles of infidelity were deeply riveted’, he began to ask the question of how to obtain faith. This lead to his conversion through the gospel in the next year, although he continued to sail as a captain of a slave ship, a profession he would later look at with shame and which turned him to tirelessly work for the abolition of the slave trade with his friend William Cowper.

You may have figured out who this person is by now. John Newton became a pastor, preacher, hymn writer, and tender evangelist to lost people. Newton was fully aware of his condition BEFORE Christ and that which marked him AFTER his conversion, and marked it with a hymn we’ve all sung, written for a sermon he preached in 1773:

*“Amazing Grace ----- how sweet the sound --- that saved a wretch like me...
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see”*

The ‘wretch’ who has been saved by grace *“believes and feels his own weakness and unworthiness, and lives upon the grace and pardoning love of his Lord. This gives him a habitual tenderness and gentleness of spirit. Humble under a sense of much forgiveness to himself and finds it easy to forgive others.”*¹ Much like the Apostle Paul himself, Newton’s life illustrates a vital reality of the gospel: that the same **grace**

¹ <https://founders.org/articles/john-newton-a-brief-biography/>;
<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-saved-a-wretch-like-him>

that justifies is the same grace that sanctifies, or to say it another way, **the grace that saves is the grace that transforms**. Listen to Paul in **1 Timothy 1:12-14**:

*“I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, 13 though **formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent** (violent) **opponent**. But I received **mercy** because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, 14 and the **grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus**”*

To one degree or another, this is the testimony of EVERY believer who has moved from wrath because of sin to life because of faith in Christ. We can all look at what we **used to be** before Christ, but can now say **who we ARE in Christ**, the difference between the two identities being monumental. This is the crux of the next section of chapters in Paul’s letter to the Romans (ch. 6-8). Paul spilled much ink explaining that **justification** --- or being *declared righteous* ---- was a gift of faith from God, and that it was an act of **grace, NOT WORKS**. Now, Paul pivots the conversation from justification to sanctification, or the point of salvation to now living out the realities of that salvation. **Remember**, we are **SAVED** by faith alone, a gift of grace alone, by Christ alone, but these never stay alone. Salvation *PRODUCES* obedience and righteous living, and where there is none of the latter, there is evidence of a lack of the former.

The Challenge to the Gospel of Grace (v. 1)

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

“Does grace promote sin??!!? If the gospel is truly free by grace, does that mean sin and obedience don’t matter anymore? Paul was either anticipating or answering a real question that was lodged against his teaching of the gospel. The gospel is simple enough for a child to understand but complex enough to not only argue among intellectuals but marvel at for an eternity. To understand the challenge, let’s step back and review a bit from previous sections.

Paul had established that God’s wrath is revealed against the unrighteousness of mankind (1:18) and that every person has sinned, thus falling short of His glory and by definition, are unrighteous (3:23). No works or effort will bridge this gap, and all the Law can do is bring knowledge of sin (3:20). We stand guilty, condemned, and worthy of judgment before the God of the universe, anticipating a guilty verdict and eternal sentence of wrath. Our great dual enemies of **sin and death** seemingly won, as they continue to reign (5:12-13).

But...Paul reminded us that the righteousness of God came **APART** from the law and **through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe** (3:22). Jesus is both **JUST** ---- fulfilling all righteousness ---- and **JUSTIFIER** ---- the One who becomes the *propitiation* (satisfaction) for our sin on the cross (3:25-26). This means that though we ALL started as inheriting Adam’s sin and thus death, the **free gift of grace through the GREATER ADAM**, namely Jesus Christ, is super-abundantly **MORE** for us. Though our sin was great, grace in Jesus is greater (5:15-18). God’s gift of grace gives us the ability to believe, trusting and yielding ourselves completely to Christ, who conquered sin and death on the cross, and imputes His righteousness to us! This means that justification, or being declared righteous in salvation, is an **act of God on our behalf, a gift to us that we could not earn but simply receive by faith**.

Paul concluded chapter 5 with a fascinating statement: *“Now the Law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, **grace abounded** (super-abounded) **all the more** (5:20).”* What Paul’s accusers were implying by their question about sinning that grace would abound was that his gospel of grace **promoted lawlessness** and **promised sinners** the best of both worlds! This is not a new argument and

still goes on today. The proper name for what they were challenging Paul on is called **Antinomianism**, a word that simply means being against the moral law. It communicates that someone comes to Christ in faith by grace, receives forgiveness, and then the rest of life does not matter in terms of obedience and righteousness. We see this type of living already in Paul's era:

Jude 4: *"For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ"*

How does someone "pervert grace"? This is someone who says they believe in Jesus by faith but their life is marked by habitual, consistent sin rather than yielding to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. When God gives us grace to believe, it means that we surrender our life completely to Him, turning from our former life of control and fleshly desire and turn TO HIM as our Master and Lord (1 Cor. 12:3b). He rules, and since He demands righteous living, has given us His righteousness to actually live it out. The rest of this chapter and the next two after will unpack this most important reality. We are saved apart from ANY work we do or any contribution, yet true saving, justifying faith WILL PRODUCE fruit of salvation, since we are united with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11)

It is IMPERATIVE that we understand, fight for, and promote this beautiful and glorious tension. Offering anything short of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone promotes a false gospel. Yet people somehow thinking that they can make a decision or pray a prayer and then keep living with their girlfriend also promotes a false gospel. John Stott, the well regarded British pastor and theologian, made a fantastic observation concerning this reality.

*"If we are proclaiming Paul's gospel, with its emphasis on the freeness of grace and the impossibility of self-salvation, we are sure to provoke the charge of **antinomianism**. IF we do not arouse this criticism, the likelihood is that we are NOT preaching Paul's gospel. Paul's answer to his critics is that God's grace not only forgives sins, but also delivers us from sinning. For grace does more than justify: it also sanctifies."*²

The Answer to the Challenge (v. 2)

By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

Having a conversation or debate with Paul would certainly be lively! His answer to the proposed challenge that the gospel would somehow promote MORE sinfulness was met with one of his favorite phrases: **By no means!** This is the strongest idiom of its kind in NT Greek (*Me genioto*), and this is the fourth time he's used it in Romans (3:4, 6, 31), and will use another 6 times (6:15: 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11). In other words, his response to this kind of idea was overwhelming, certain, and immediate, leaving NO ROOM for the possibility it could be true.

What he will go on to describe and argue in detail is the reality of **sanctification**. *Sanctification is a work of God's grace in our life of progressing in holiness, cleansing our minds and hearts of sin, and becoming transformed into the likeness of Jesus*. It is a work began by God in Christ and will be completed by Him in us (Phil. 1:6). This means it is a lifelong, ongoing, progressive, and sometimes uneven process. For Paul it involved *knowing Christ* (Phil. 3:8), *becoming like Him* (Phil. 3:10), and both *pressing on and straining forward* toward the upward prize of God in Christ (Phil. 3:12-14). Far too many have made the

² John Stott, "Romans: God's Good News for the World", p. 167

mistake of *separating out justification and sanctification*, focusing on “BECOMING a Christian” and making “MATURING as a Christian” a secondary hope. In other words, when we separate **evangelism from discipleship** in ways the Bible NEVER does, we have a multitude of people who think they are saved but have never truly been justified.

“Justification and sanctification are not separate stages of salvation; rather, they are different aspects of the unbroken continuum of God’s divine work of redemption in a believer’s life by which He not only declares a person righteous but recreates him to become righteous.”³

Now, there are two key observations about “How can we who have died to sin still live in it”:

1. **The type of death is both spiritual & legal** – We are not physically dead to sin, since we still deal with sin in this world and in our flesh and must actively “put it to death” (Col. 3:5). But it is a *legal idea* where the **power of sin has been broken** because the **penalty** of sin has been paid for. Sin reigned over us and we had no way to overpower it, so we faced death in every realm, physical, spiritual and eternal. The fact that we have died to sin does not mean we have no impossibility to sin, but rather sinning now is morally absurd and does not fit our new self.
2. **Notice that the statement is one of fact, where later on there is a commandment** – In linguistic terms, this means that the *imperative of Romans 6:12-13* ---- “Do not let sin reign” ---- is built on the indicative of verse 2. An indicative is a statement of fact, reality and certainty. Here, Paul is stating that IF you have been declared righteous by God in Christ through faith as a gift of grace, you ARE dead to sin and it no longer reigns in you! This means that though believers can and WILL still sin, it no longer has a lock or stranglehold on us, but now we have legitimate choice in the battle of sin. This also means that NO TRUE, BORN AGAIN believer can play the victim in terms of sin, saying “I can’t help it” or “I can’t stop”, since the power has been broken, but the presence still remains, and our enemy would love us to THINK sin still reigns.

The fact that believers have DIED TO SIN is the foundational thesis that Paul now lays out the logical argument for that fact and the implications of it.

The Argument to Explain the Challenge (3-7)

Do you not **know** that all of us who have been **baptized** into Christ Jesus were **baptized into his death**?

⁴ 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.

⁵ For if we have been **united with him in a death** like his, we shall certainly be **united with him** in a resurrection like his. ⁶ We know 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**. ⁷ For one who has died has **been set free from sin**

The cross was where sin and death were dealt a fatal blow. On the cross Jesus was treated by God as if He had committed the sin of every believer, and poured out His wrath until every last drop was wrung out, totally satisfying perfect righteousness. It was through **death** that Jesus defeated death, and His resurrection that conquered sin forever. So Paul gives three analogies of how believers are connected to Christ in His victorious death so that we know that we too have been free from the power and penalty of sin.

³ John MacArthur, “Romans” p. 318

1. **Identified** with Christ in Baptism (3-4) – Paul starts with the analogy of **baptism** to build out the idea of our identification or identity in Christ. Identity and identification are important. Marriage is an important identity, and we identify ourselves with a ring --- signaling we are off the market. The physical sign of baptism (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38, 10:48) is commanded for all who believe, and gives us a symbol of identification with Christ. We say it is a public proclamation of a new identity, and an outward symbol of an inward reality. So Paul draws on the **knowledge** of this practice from Jesus' command to the beginning of the church in the book of Acts to explain our identify in Christ (much like Israel being baptized into Moses in 1 Cor. 10:2)

The picture is clear. Just as in physical baptism, believers are **identified** with Christ in His death, burial and being raised from the dead by the glory of the Father. These are all acts that God did in Christ and by extension in us. When we died WITH Christ, sin was put to death, so we could **walk the newness of life**. The word for newness is not just a point of time but rather a *quality and character*. Old has been made new. Old and busted transformed into the new hotness. We receive a **new heart** (Ezek. 36:26), a **new spirit** (Ezek. 18:31), a **new song** (Psalm 96:1; Rev. 5:9), a **new name** (Rev. 2:17), and are called a **new creation** (2 Cor. 5:17), a **new creature** (Gal. 6:15), and a **new self** (Eph. 4:24). This newness is complete, meaning we do not HAVE to go back to the old, even though we are tempted to do so.

2. **United** with Christ in Death and Resurrection (5) – Not only are we identified with Christ, but we are UNITED in Him. We are joined with, bonded to, and intertwined with Him. This is the 50+ year married couple whom you cannot think about one spouse without the other, who possesses such a depth of relationship that they think and even feel alike. But we are not only united with Christ on the negative side of the lever (death), but on the positive (resurrection). Just as Christ could not be held by death but rose again and will always be alive, so we too will be united with Him in life. Listen to how Paul speaks to the power of this reality in terms of everyday life:

Philippians 3:10-11 *“that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead”*

Being united in the death AND resurrection of Jesus meant that Paul could overcome suffering, press forward, and strive toward his upward calling since his future resurrection was secure IN CHRIST. The life lived with this kind of security sees sin no longer as a goal to be savored or desired, but to be put off and killed.

3. **Crucified** with Christ to Bring Freedom from Slavery (6-7) – Sin is slavery, bonding us to it, deceiving us to believe that IT brings freedom but it only brings shackles. When Christ was nailed to the cross, Paul drew the analogy that our OLD SELF, along with all of its sin, shame, and guilt, all that we've done, thought, and that which has been done to us, is nailed to the cross. What was once enslaved to sin is left on the cross, and what comes off the cross is something NEW, with newfound freedom. The shackles are unlocked, the weights released, and what used to control us is gone. This is why we DO NOT identify ourselves with a sin we commit or struggle with, but only identify ourselves with Christ (no such thing as a “_____ Christian”, only a CHRISTIAN). It's what Paul said in Galatians:

Galatians 2:20 *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*

There are two massive implications to consider as we close:

- 1) Though the **power and penalty of sin have been broken**, it does not mean we will not struggle with sin. Sin is deceptive, powerful, and knows how to call out our desires. Sin does not fight fair, but our enemy will do anything he can to get us to believe that we cannot stop or that we need it. If you are struggling with active and ongoing sin this morning, it does not mean you are not a believer, but it does mean you need to **remember who you are**. Sin does not reign over you, even though it may feel that way. The struggle is real, but the struggle is important. A believer must not let sin become habitual or comfortable, even though the battle of sin and our pursuit of Christ will be a lifelong venture.
- 2) **Struggle itself is not enough**. We should be growing in maturity and purity. We should lay aside the sin that entangles us (Heb. 12:1), and cast off the works of darkness (Rom. 13:12), and put off the old self with its desires (Eph. 4:22-23). We should be growing morally and spiritually as the Spirit brings conviction and the light of Scripture to our minds. We must not become like the *"Man in the Iron Mask"*, who after being freed up from the cruel and barbarous mask, could not imagine life without it, and secretly would put it back on. Christ has given us the ability and identity in Him to put sin to death!

*During his final days in **December 1807**, John Newton said, "What a thing it is to live under the shadow of the wings of the Almighty! I am going the way of all flesh." A friend replied, "The Lord is gracious." Newton responded, "If it were not so, how could I dare to stand before him?" Newton's indebtedness to the amazing grace of God in saving and preserving rebels flooded his consciousness from new birth till death. His Hymn has reminded generations of God's pervasive grace for two and one-half centuries.*

Newton's epitaph inscribed on a memorial tablet at St. Mary Woolnoth celebrated **the truly surprising grace of God** in his conversion as well as in his **long and effective ministry**.

JOHN NEWTON, CLERK
ONCE AN INFIDEL AND LIBERTINE,
A SERVANT OF SLAVES IN AFRICA,
WAS, BY THE RICH MERCY
OF OUR LORD AND SAVIOUR
JESUS CHRIST,
PRESERVED, RESTORED, PARDONED,
AND APPOINTED TO PREACH THE FAITH
HE HAD LONG LABOURED TO DESTROY.