

Romans 6:1-11 (NRSV)

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.

## Dead and Buried to Sin

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: June 22, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Romans 6:1-12

As a boy of five years old the lad who would become the renown nineteenth century French painter Gustave Doré was considered a prodigy. But he was a prodigy as a troublemaker, not an artist. Apparently the five year old boy played pranks well beyond his years.<sup>1</sup> It's safe to say that Doré never quite gave up gave up his wry sense of humor.

In 1868 he painted this canvas. [Slide 1] He called it "The Neophyte: First Experience of the Monastery." It has been described as a "witty portrait of a terrified young monk sitting with a row of grubby older monks, clearly wondering what possessed him to take orders."<sup>2</sup> Indeed! James Burns says of the painting, "The subject ... is the dismay of a young monk ... too soon awakened to the truth that the cloister is not the house of pious meditation and holy life he had pictured in his imagination.

He is seen at his duties in the choir. Two rows of Carthusian monks occupy the stalls." One cannot miss the "contrast between his fine, sensitive, young face, with eyes burning with spiritual enthusiasm, and the row of monks whose faces represent the effect of their vocation.

As he looks at them, dismay, disenchantment, even terror, seize his heart. Here they are with their weak ... hypocritical countenances. And these are to be his companions; this is what he is to become."<sup>3</sup>

Doré, of course, meant the painting as a comment on more than the monastic life. It was a parable, a cautionary tale, of the Christian life. What starts with such enthusiasm and promise, says the artist, over time may become dull and jaundiced.

Writing almost two millennia earlier the Apostle Paul seems to have similar concerns. Paul was perhaps more of a prankster, or at least more witty than he is sometimes given credit for. In the passage we heard this morning Paul has just finished telling his listeners, for his letters were meant to be read aloud; Paul has just finished telling his listeners that "where sin had increased, grace had abounded all the more." Paul was aware that if God's grace increased in the face of sin, someone might mischievously

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustave\\_Dor%C3%A9](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustave_Dor%C3%A9)

<sup>2</sup> <http://emsworth.wordpress.com/tag/gustave-dore/>

<sup>3</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), 1102.

suggest, “Well, let’s sin all the more so that God’s grace may abound all the more.” Paul preempts the silliness with wit, “Is that what we should do, sin so that grace may abound? No way,” he says.

While Paul is a little playful here, he is dead serious as well. What he knows all too well is that, as in Doré’s painting, enthusiastic converts to the new Christian faith will all too easily return to their old ways. Their commitment and enthusiasm may flag, the sparkle may leave their eyes, and like Doré’s tired old monks they may fall into a slump.

Paul sets out, then, to solve a puzzle, or better a set of interlocking puzzles. Paul believes that when one converted to Christianity one became dead to sin. They were made new. They entered a new life. And yet the pull of the old life did not go away. At this point, it all sounds like my New Year’s resolutions. With great enthusiasm I may commit to exercise and diet, but soon enough sitting on the couch eating ice cream sings a siren song. I’m sure nothing like this happen to most of you, so you’ll have to take my word for it. It can happen.

So, Paul has to tell us what this new life is and why it’s not like New Year’s resolutions. But also why it is like New Year’s resolutions, sort of, because the old ways don’t lose their pull and many Christians will fall back into them. But then he says we are really no longer enslaved to sin, even if we backslide. It’s all very confusing, isn’t it? It almost seems to be double-talk. You’re made new, but not really, but really you are.

Paul doesn’t seem to make it clearer even as he begins trying to enlighten us. “When you were baptized, you were baptized into Christ’s death,” he says. What in the world is that supposed to mean? Must be a metaphor. “We were baptized into Christ’s death metaphorically. We share Christ’s death metaphorically. We died to sin.” Wait a minute. We share Christ’s death, and we died to sin? Does that mean Christ died to sin? I didn’t think Christ had any sin. Paul seems to be adding to the puzzle, not solving it.

Well, I think he means something like this. And some pretty good Biblical scholars do, too, so you don’t have to worry that I just made it up. Christ died, why? According to the Gospels Jesus spends a lot of his ministry trying to tell people, including his own disciples, that seeking honor and privilege and status in life, that failing to see beyond ourselves, beyond our own self-interests is the great sin. It causes us to think too highly of ourselves. It causes us to take credit for too much. And it causes us to think too little of God and our neighbors. It leads to looking down our noses at others. It leads to trying to prove we are better than others. It leads to anger and envy and self-righteousness a bunch of other things mentioned in the commandments as things to avoid. And Jesus knows that telling people these things is dangerous. Ultimately, they will want to shut you up because what he’s preaching isn’t rocket science. Once you hear it, it makes perfect sense. And people who don’t want to give up honor and money and status and focusing on themselves. They don’t really want their world exposed. So, they demonize somebody like Jesus. They kill him. They hang on a cross as a double lesson. First, this is what happens to people who go around making waves. And second, as proof that he wasn’t worth listening to. Don’t you think if he was right, they say, wouldn’t he have won instead of getting crucified?

Of course, the irony is that he did win. The truth would not die so easily. His resurrection trumped the worst they could do. In Matthew it says they put guards at the tomb because they knew that if he were raised from the dead, it would make things even worse. And they were right about that much, of course. The truth he preached was clear. His resurrection shone a sunburst of light on the lies the world so glibly peddles.

This is what the new converts to the church understood, according to Paul. Christ died because of the lies of the world. To follow him was to die to those lies, too. To follow Christ was to put aside seeking prominence. It was to put aside strife and envy. It was to put aside thinking one was better than others. In short, it was to die to that selfish, self-centered self that causes such havoc in the world. Christ died at the hands of these things proving their ugliness, and rose above them proving their ultimate weakness. As the scholar Robert Jewett says so well, “Converts acknowledge that the universally human quest for honor led to Jesus’ death, that his death was for their sake, and that by his death their own former lives distorted by such a quest are now dead and a new life based on unconditional grace has begun.”<sup>4</sup> They have died to sin. [Slide 2]

In terms that Paul uses, dying to sin is what makes one right with God. Sometimes it’s called justification or righteousness, but it simply means that in the moment that one truly dies to the old self and opts out of the destructive and self-destructive ways of being that so typify human existence, one becomes right with God. [Slide 3]

But Paul is not naïve. He is not a fool. Paul knows that one day a person can die to sin, and then before long look like an old monk in Doré’s painting. These things to which we die do not just go away. The cravings of sin do not go away. Sin continues in force in its attempt to dominate the life and conduct of the believer.<sup>5</sup> The question is whether we fall under the spell of its siren song. As the early church theologian Origen said it, “To obey the cravings of sin is to be alive to sin; but not to obey the cravings of sin or succumb to its will, this is to die to sin.”<sup>6</sup>

O dear. Are we back to my problem with New Year’s resolutions? I want the ice cream. If I resist my cravings, I am dead to sin. But if I fall to my cravings, I am alive to sin.

Paul says, well no, that’s not exactly it. New converts died to sin because they understood that the lies by which the world lives kill the soul. But Paul knows those lies still have their pull, like ice cream. But once my doctor has convinced me of the dangers of poor eating and exercise habits, every time I sit on the couch with one of those single-serving quarts, I know it’s not a good idea. Paul believes that once one has died to sin,

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Jewett and Roy David Kotansky, *Romans: A Commentary*, ed. Eldon Jay Epp, Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 401.

<sup>5</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 149.

<sup>6</sup> Cited by J. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 433.

even if one backslides, one will always know in their hearts of hearts that they are making a mistake. Paul says that when one becomes a Christian, one sees the truth, and one cannot un-know the truth one has seen.

So, in Paul's eyes, it goes like this. The Christian life is a life lived in the awareness of a new life in Christ. But even in this new life the old ways are present and tug at us. Temptation does not leave. Falling into sin surely does happen. But we can no longer do it innocently. At some level we know what we are doing. In that sense we have died to sin.

So, justification is being right with God as a result of dying to sin. But justification is not simple or complete. We still want the ice cream. Paul gives us another term, sanctification. To live a sanctified life is not to live a perfect life. It is to work on living a better life. It's trying to live dead to sin and getting better at it. It's making a commitment to exercise and diet, even though we fall off the wagon from time to time. Sanctification is a life growing in spiritual maturity. [Slide 4] We can grow in spiritual maturity, we can put up a fight against the temptation of the old ways, even if we're too often unsuccessful, we can put up a fight against the pull of the old ways because we have seen their flaws, justification, and we have seen a new and better life. Robert Mounce says it this way, sanctification is "the lifelong process of transformation into the likeness of Christ."<sup>6</sup>

And so we find ourselves in this middle space. Once the truth of Christ gets by the world's defenses, once the truth of Christ cuts through the hard shell the lies of the world use to keep that truth at bay, once the truth of Christ gets hold of us, we can never be the same. Will we fall to the wiles of the world ever again? Yes. Yes we will. But if the truth of Christ has gotten in, we can never again fall to the wiles of the world without a catch in our throat, without at some level recoiling from the ugliness. Said another way, don't ever let the truth of Christ in your heart if you want to revel unreservedly in the wrong. Never again will the wrong seem so right. For the truth of Christ will keep beckoning you to home of truth. You can hear it calling even now.

As the great old hymn says it, Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me. Come home, come home, all who are weary, come home. Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 147.