



# An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

## (6) A Natural Question Profoundly Answered

Romans 6

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This is sermon # 6 in our series of sermons on the letter of Paul to the Romans and since we are taking one chapter at a time, our text this evening is Romans 6. We have considered Paul's teaching about sin and the wrath of God against sinners from 1:18 – 3:20 and we have considered justification by faith from 3:21 – 4. This morning we considered chapter 5 which in which Paul is explaining further aspects of the good news of salvation. The first part of chapter 5 is celebratory, while it speaks about some of the subjective results of salvation – peace, joy and hope, the love of God poured into our hearts and it reflects on the fact that Jesus gave his life for the ungodly. The second part of chapter 5 gives some crucial background theology for our understanding of the gospel, namely how the effects of Adam's sin are passed to all his offspring and the effects of Jesus' righteousness are passed to many.

So, now we come to chapter 6 and I have given this sermon the title, "A Natural Question Profoundly Answered." That is one way of summarizing the content of this chapter. The fact that the saved are saved by grace and not by works naturally raises the question of the place of obedience to God's law. We cannot be made right with God through keeping the law – through doing good works. Being right with God is given to believers as a gift through faith in Jesus. Does that mean then that we can just carry on living as we please?

Back in chapter 5:20 Paul had written, “where sin increased grace abounded all the more.” This is wonderfully comforting. God’s grace is so great that as sin increases, his grace also increases. There is no sin that is too great for God to forgive. No matter what we have done – no matter how wicked and heinous our sins have been, God’s grace is sufficient. God’s grace is amazing grace. The greatest sinner can be saved if he but turns to God for mercy. No one can every say, “My sins are too terrible, God could never forgive me.”

That is not literally true because many people have said that, but they are mistaken when they say that. God’s grace is so great that no sin is too great to be pardoned.

But this does raise the question, why not just keep on sinning, since God’s grace is so great? This is the question with which Paul begins chapter 6. “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” That is a natural or obvious question. The Jews who taught that we could only become right with God through keeping the law insisted that this was the obvious implication of Paul’s doctrine of salvation by faith and not by works. Paul’s answer is very profound. And since Paul was just teaching a message that he had received from the Lord, it is the Lord’s answer that is very profound. And wonderful.

Paul writes in verse 2, “By no means!” Exclamation mark. Absolutely and positively not! Nothing could be further from the truth! Emphatically not! That is how Paul answers the question, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may about?” Being forgiven and accepted as righteous by God through faith in Jesus Christ does not mean that we can just go on living a life of sin. The very opposite is the case. Being forgiven and accepted as righteous by God through faith in Jesus Christ leads inevitably and invariably and unfailingly to obedience. Why that is so is what Paul will go on to explain and this is a huge part of what is good about the good news.

The good news is not only that we are forgiven and accepted as righteous by God through faith in Jesus Christ. The good news is **just as much** that the power of sin over us is broken. A huge part of what is good about the good news is that we are set free from the power of sin in our lives when we believe in Jesus. The problem with sin is not just

that it makes us liable to God's punishment. The problem with sin is also that sin is destructive and dehumanizing and devastating. Sin takes away from our joy and our happiness and our quality of life in the deepest sense. And so, it is a huge part of the good news that believers are released from the slavery to sin and to Satan.

Now Paul's explanation of this is not something that you can quickly read through and understand completely. This is not that sort of passage. This is one of those passages which takes some effort to understand. The language and the ideas are unfamiliar to our way of thinking in the 21st century West. We are not used to thinking along these lines. But once you get past that the ideas are not all that difficult. So, I'm going to summarize what Paul says in verses 2-14 and try to highlight the main concepts without getting into every detail.

The fundamental idea in this chapter is union with Christ. Once we understand that idea, the rest falls into place – although like many ideas in the Bible, we cannot understand union with Christ exhaustively. But we can grow in our understanding of it. Now if you look at verse 5 you will see the word "united" used couple of times. "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." When a person believes, that person is united to Christ. When a person believes that person becomes one with Christ in a very profound sense.

Now there are many different ways that we can think about being united in general. The idea of union is that two or more parts are joined together so that they become one in some sense. Think of the United States. You have 50 states and they are joined together to form one country. Or think of marriage. You have two people and they are united in marriage and the two become one. Clearly, they do not become one in every sense. There are still two people or in the case of the United States, millions of people. But they are one in a lot of very important and significant ways. So, when a husband racks up the debt, the wife is in debt. Or when a president declares war everyone in the country is at war.

These types of unions help us to understand the idea of union with Christ. When we believe, we are made one with Christ in a number of

different ways. There is a kind of legal union so that our sin becomes his and his righteousness becomes ours. But there is more than a legal union when we believe in Jesus. There is also a spiritual union so that we somehow share in Christ's death and we share in Christ's life. That is what Paul says in verse 5 which I just quoted. "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." So, when Christ died we were somehow in him and when Christ rose from the dead we were somehow in him. When Christ died, we died. And when Christ arise we arose from the dead.

And the point Paul is making in this chapter is that when we are united to Christ by faith, it affects more than just our legal standing before God. Union with Christ also changes us spiritually. It changes us at the very core of our being. Listen to what Paul writes in verses 6-7, "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. For one who has died has been set free from sin."

Do you see what Paul is saying here? When we are made one with Christ through faith, we are set free from sin. The reason that we are set free from sin is that Jesus has paid the penalty for our sin by dying in our place. It is because we are guilty in Adam that we are also dead in sin. Death in the Bible is not only physical death and eternal death, it is spiritual death. Apart from salvation we are dead in sin – that is we are dead towards God. Another way of expressing that is to say that we are enslaved to sin. Part of the penalty for sin, is spiritual death. But once that penalty is paid, we are set free from that spiritual death. The righteous status that we have before God in Christ will always and inevitably result in being released from the power of sin. All of this happens because we are united to Christ in his death.

The companion truth to this is that we are united to Christ in his resurrection which also means that we are made alive spiritually speaking. Now the language of this passage concerning our union is Christ in his resurrection is ambiguous about the timing of our union with Christ in his resurrection. Verse 5 says that "we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." That is one part of this

wonderful truth. At the end of the age, we will physically share in Christ's resurrection. So, Paul can speak of this in the future. But he also makes the connection between Christ's resurrection and new life in the here and now for Christians. In verse 4, Paul writes that "just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." And in verse 11 he says, "So you also must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." So, while Paul does say that we will be united with Christ in his resurrection in the future, he also makes the connection between Christ's resurrection and new life for us in the present because we are in Christ.

Now I know that it may be hard to keep focused on this. It seems far removed from life to be hearing about being united to Christ in his death and his resurrection. So, let me just remind you of how this connects to your life. We are inclined to be more interested in the here, and now and the joys and concerns of life on this earth. If I were talking about sex or relationships it would be easier to stay focused. But you must understand that this is about sex and relationships and everything else having to do with everyday life. What we are speaking about is what God accomplished through Jesus to enable us to have full and satisfying lives - whether that has to do with our sexuality or our relationships in general, or our jobs or how we spend our time and how we spend our money or whatever. What this chapter speaks about is relevant to all of those things.

We must always remember that sin is the cause of all that is wrong about your life and my life. Sin is the reason that we are empty and guilty and unfulfilled or worse. Living the best possible life involves what this passage is speaking about. Being dead in sin is a living death. Being alive in Christ is to truly be alive and to be moving towards a deeper and fuller life in relationship with God and with other people. I just want to emphasize the connection between this ideas and real life. Being dead **to** sin instead of dead **in** sin, is the best possible news. Being alive to God instead of dead to God is to be truly alive in the best possible sense. In this chapter, Paul is telling us how this happens in the lives of believers in Jesus.

Now to relate what we have covered so far to the flow of thought in this letter, remember that the question that this chapter answers is the place of obedience in salvation in light of the fact that we are made right with God through faith and not through works. If we don't need to obey in order to be made right with God, only believe in Jesus, can we just go on living in sin? And Paul is saying that that cannot be because when we believed we were united to Christ and being united to Christ frees us from the power of sin and gives us new life. Salvation is not just about avoiding punishment, it is about being delivered from sin itself along with its consequences. And so, the idea that we could be forgiven by faith and just continue living in sin is impossible according to the logic of the gospel. Those who are delivered from the guilt of sin are at the same time delivered from its power because both aspects of salvation flow from our union with Christ.

Now this does not mean that we are right away perfect as far as our obedience is concerned. When Paul says that we are dead to sin and alive to God through being united with Christ in his death and resurrection, he does not mean that we are instantly made perfect. The moment we believe we are united to Christ and so are made dead to sin and alive to God. That moment is a turning point and we now have a fundamentally different perspective on sin and on living for God. Being dead to sin and alive to God means that we now hate sin and love God and the way that he requires us to live. We begin to see that sin is destructive and dehumanizing and that obedience is real living and true blessedness. We begin to agree with the person who wrote Psalm 119 who sings in verse 47 "I find delight in your commandments, which I love." Or Psalm 40:8 which says, "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

The point that we are not made instantly perfect is clear from Romans 6 itself because once Paul has laid the foundation of union with Christ in his death and resurrection leading to being dead to sin and alive to God, he goes on to exhort the reader to fight against sin and pursue obedience. Listen to what he says in verses 12-13, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do 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 for righteousness.”

This is very important for our understanding of obedience in the New Testament. Obedience is rooted in the gospel. The exhortations to obey are given on the basis of the good news of our relationship to Christ by faith. Those who are united to Christ by faith are dead to sin and alive to God, and on that basis they are exhorted to obey. To tell an unbeliever to obey is futile, because an unbeliever is dead in sin.

Now unbelievers are commanded to repent, but that command to repent comes together with the command to believe in Jesus. No one can turn from sin apart from Jesus. Apart from Jesus we are dead in sin. Apart from Jesus we are enslaved to sin. It is only through believing and being united to Christ that we have the desire and the power to turn from sin and pursue obedience because it is only through believing and being united to Christ that we die to sin and are made alive to God. And that is why Paul speaks as he does in verse 12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.” To believers he says, “So you must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Therefore, fight against sin and pursue obedience.

Now verses 15 through the end of the chapter are basically application. It is an elaboration and reinforcement of the main take-a-way of this chapter – namely that salvation from sin includes the obedience. Paul is stressing the fact that obedience to God is a good thing and that salvation by grace results in serving God through righteous living. So, verse 15 is a restatement of the question that has already asked in verse 1. “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means” Those who are under grace are not under the law, but that does not mean that they are free to sin.

Now the whole idea of not being under the law is an important one, but since that is what the whole of chapter 7 is about, we will wait until we cover that chapter to dwell on it. In this section Paul makes a very important point about slavery and freedom.

That is very relevant for us because the idea of freedom is a very big deal in our society. One of the main concepts that has shaped Western

society and the contemporary world is the idea of freedom. But freedom is more complicated than it appears on the surface. And it turns out that from a biblical perspective, the people of the world who think they are the most free are in fact slaves to their lusts and their passions.

One of the reasons that human beings are so obsessed with freedom is that we are so full of ourselves. We think that we are so independent of anything outside of ourselves that it is possible for us to be free from external constraints. Nobody is going to tell me what to do. And while it is obvious that we can be free in some ways, what is perhaps not so obvious, but fundamentally important, is the fact that we are essentially slaves. We are either slaves of sin or we are slaves of righteousness. We are not masters. We are servants of forces or persons that are our masters. In this sense freedom is an illusion.

So Paul says in verse 16, “Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedience slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience which leads to righteousness.” He continues in verses 17-18, “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedience from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed and having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”

This one of the ways that the Bible describes the human race. We are slaves. We are not free in the sense of autonomous. There are only two options. We can be slaves of sin or we can be slaves of righteousness. There are no other options. Either we are under the control of sin. Or we are under the control of righteousness. What we are not is under control of ourselves. And failure to recognize that is nothing more than blind pride.

Now what Paul emphasizes in this section is the end result of each kind of slavery. Verses 21-23, “But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its



end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This puts the whole matter of sin and obedience in its true light. What most feels like freedom – doing and living as we please – is actually slavery to sin. We are slaves to passions which are self-destructive, and which lead to death. Sin is bad. Sin is toxic. Sin will destroy us. And apart from salvation we are slaves to sin. We cannot escape its power. We are bent in an anti-God direction and we are powerless to change that and unless we are delivered from it, it will eventually destroy us. The world is made up of slaves heading for destruction singing of their freedom. Such is the blindness of human beings apart from salvation.

Salvation is about setting us free from the slavery to sin. So, salvation is about freedom, but as human beings we are never absolutely free. True freedom is slavery to God. But that is a good thing because God is good and slavery to him is how we were designed to flourish and thrive. And that is where salvation in Jesus Christ brings us.

So, in this chapter, Paul has begun his discussion of the role of obedience in salvation. The overall theme of the letter is the good news – the gospel – salvation. An important part of the good news is being made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ. But another important part of the good news is that believers are changed through their union with Christ so that they die to sin and are made alive to God. Another way of looking at this is in terms of what we are slaves to. Either we are slaves of sin leading to death or we are slaves of God and righteousness which is life and which leads to life.

So that gives the gospel perspective on obedience to the law of God. It is good. It is the result of salvation. It is the way of life and blessing. It is good to be a slave to God and to righteousness and that is a real incentive to seek to grow in obedience and righteousness.

This is our life’s project as those who have been delivered from sin to become slaves of God – to grow in being the kind of people that God calls us and enables us to be. This gets worked out in the details of life – nurturing our relationship with God through deliberate attention to God and fellowship with him in reflecting on God’s word and prayer and

thinking about God and his goals and his priorities and his values. It gets worked out in the details of life in our relationships with others – in nurturing selflessness rather than selfishness – in giving rather than always taking – in self-discipline and self-control – in striving for purity of thought and purity of action – in pursuing contentment and submission to God's will – and so on.

This is hard because our sinful nature is not yet completely gone – it is still an inner enemy along with Satan the arch-enemy of our souls. Striving for obedience is hard – but it is not a burden. Paul in this chapter is helping us to see it in its true positive light. This is an integral part of the good news. It belongs to salvation. Sin is bad and leads to death. Obedience is good and is what we are saved to do. So, let's give it the attention and effort that it warrants.