

Romans, Part 29 1-22-23

To Sin or Not To Sin?

Let's start with a true story. Once upon a time there was a Christian doctor named Cliff who grew weary of the money-lust, the jealousy, dishonesty, and partying among his peers in the large practice in which he participated. He was delighted to learn about a group of physicians on the other side of the country that advertised itself as being a Christian group. He applied for a position with them and was quickly accepted. He relocated his family and began anew with some excitement about the new Christian team he would be working with. But a few weeks into the job he found himself to be totally disillusioned. The new set of physicians, advertised as "Christians," were hardly different from what he left. Sure, they did have a prayer time once a week, but the same old greed was evident, the ordering of unnecessary procedures, the cheating of insurance companies, and amazingly, even the parties, complete with lavish foods and lots of drink. One of the doctors was known to be having an affair. They all talked about it but nobody seemed bothered. Finally, our friend approached the Sr. Physician, his boss, and complained saying, "Hey, I came to work here because I thought this was a Christian group, but I don't see any difference here from where I came from. We don't do a thing to serve the Lord. Everybody's out for self, out to make money. I'm expected to bilk my patients, wink at the lies of my colleagues, and chuckle at the dirty jokes. How can you advertise this as a Christian practice?" To this, the older man just smiled and said, "Cliff, Cliff don't tell me you're some kind of legalist. When we call ourselves "Christian" we don't mean that we are bound by a bunch of rules. Jesus doesn't want us worrying about that. He wants us to enjoy his grace. Jesus is the friend of sinners. He wants us to be free, not uptight like you. Relax, God loves you like you are. He loves everybody like they are. The folks around here understand that." What do you think? Who, in that story do you relate to? Our study today should provide clarity on the very issues that story engages. Romans 6 continues the exposition of gospel grace that Paul began in chapter 3. It is all about grace.

As we read into chapter 6, it would be good to start a few verses before with Romans 5:19 which you will identify as our memory verse for the month. **5:19-21** *as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.* ²⁰*The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace*

abounded all the more, ²¹*so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. 6:1-2*
What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?
²²*May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?* To sin or not to sin. That is the question. Once again, the apostle, as he writes, rather envisions an imaginary adversary who argues with him over the gospel. And, on this occasion, the adversary responds to what Paul wrote in chapter 5 by suggesting that the gospel, as Paul is articulating it, actually encourages us to sin. Can you see how someone would come to that? There in chapter 5:20 he wrote that *where sin increased, grace abounded all the more*. So then, if we are in favor of grace, if we want to promote grace, what might we then do? Sin! How about that! The question asked in verse 1 reflects a terrible misunderstanding of gospel grace, but it is not a misunderstanding fabricated from whole cloth. A gospel of free grace, a gospel that teaches the vanity of human righteousness, can indeed lead to this question. In a sense, the doctrine of justification by faith alone is a dangerous idea. Certainly - when you put it in the hands of sinners, terribly prone to defending their own selfish behaviors. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes: *Someone listening to Paul may say "Ah, there is a man who does not encourage us to live a good life, he seems to say there is no value in our works, he says that 'all our righteousness is as filthy rags;' Therefore what he is saying is, that it does not matter what you do, sin as much as you like."* He has a point. A very basic, novice-level grasp of the gospel could lead to the verse one question. Have you ever heard the expression – *he knows just enough to be dangerous*? Think of surgery before 1900. Think of the frugal husband who decides to fix his own plumbing. Now, think of the Bible-student who has a grace awakening and wants so earnestly to avoid the errors of legalism. An uninformed zeal for the doctrines of grace could lead to this error Paul is rebutting. So too, could a hideous excusing of one's own carnality.

Sound thinking and theologizing often involves cutting a trail between two dangerous cliffs. With the gospel there is the danger of adding works to grace and faith – AND, on the other side, there is the danger of libertinism that manifests a disinterest in personal holiness or gospel obedience. The apostle is showing us the way. But the imaginary adversary, who thinks maybe we promote grace by continuing in a lifestyle of sin, is demonstrating the shallowness of his thinking and a corruption of the true gospel of Christ. Consider that the question in verse one demonstrates a misunderstanding of three things. The first of those is God's purpose in the gospel. God's purpose in the gospel. Chapter six will elaborate on it

in places like verse 6:**11** *Consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.* When we get to Romans 8 we read this: 8:**3-4** *What the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, 4 so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.* Paul says, “so that” – he offers us here God’s purpose, God’s goal in sending Jesus. And that goal is that we might walk according to the Spirit and follow the wisdom of God’s law. So many others places Paul speaks to the aim of God’s grace in the gospel and most often it is to make us holy, to make us like Christ. In Ephesians 5 in a section on marriage, Paul writes this (and look out for the “so that” language): Ephesians 5:**25-27** *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, ²⁶so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.* Jesus gave Himself for the church **26a** *so that He might sanctify her, make her holy.* After saying he intends to sanctify the church, in verse 26 says Jesus will do what? Cleanse her. Verse 27 describes the ultimate goal. **27** *That He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless.* You follow that? If someone is glorious, and has no spot, not even a wrinkle or any such thing, we say that person is what? Perfect. This is the Savior’s goal for us. He doesn't just save us to get us out of hell. He saves us to make us a holy, blameless, beautiful people in His sight. This is one of the plainest teachings of the New Testament. In Ephesians 1:**4** it says that Christ chose us in order that we should be holy and blameless. The goal of God's choosing and the goal of Christ's death is a holy bride. Colossians 1:**22** *He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.* Titus 2:**13b,14** *our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, ¹⁴who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.* What does that say the work of Christ is intended to do for us? It frees us from our sin, our lawless deeds, it purifies us and it makes us zealous for good deeds. Ephesians 5 gives us the same thing represented by a physical image: washed, spotless, perfect. This is what Jesus is out to do for His bride. He is making us beautiful. You don't have to look long to see that He isn't done yet. Not by a long shot, but this is what He is about. He doesn't stop at forgiveness, He moves

on to sanctification. He moves on to prepare us for our inheritance. He doesn't give Himself for us because we are beautiful but He does so to make us that way. Isn't that neat? It's magnificent. But it certainly does not jive with the idea that we can continue to live in sin. No – no.

No-No – that is similar to Paul's language in Romans 6. Here is it variously translated: *May it never be*. Or *Of course not!* Or, *God forbid*. Or *by no means*. The apostle is emphatic. Why? As we have seen – the notion that Christians may continue in sin violates God's purpose for our redemption. The great Puritan, John Owen, wrote this: *Here then is where the deceit of sin intervenes. It separates the doctrine of grace from its purpose. It persuades us to dwell upon the notion of grace & diverts our attention from the influence that grace gives to achieve its proper application in holy lives. From the doctrine of assured pardon of sin, it insinuates a carelessness for sin*. End one quote and on to another - *Free from the law, oh happy condition, I can sin as I please and still have remission*. Such a claim arises from Satanic deception and is heretical nonsense. It misses the purpose behind what Christ did for us.

Now, secondly, see that it also overlooks God's means of salvation. How does one become a Christian after all? What has to happen to a person for that person to want Jesus, trust Jesus, turn from sin and make Him Lord? There is an essential work of the Holy Spirit. This work is variously described in Scripture. It is illumination. We go from darkness to light. It is calling. We leave a self-centered life and enter a Christ-centered life. It is quickening, regeneration. We go from death to life. We are Born Again, which Jesus says is being born by the Spirit of God. Now track with me here. Surely you know that becoming a Christian involves far more than just cutting a new path for yourself, embarking on some new disciplines. It is life from the dead. It is something wholly new and different so that Scripture says we are born anew, we are created again. Ephesians 2, we will look at more in a few minutes, but it says there that we are created in Christ. You may know II Corinthians 5:**17** (ESV) *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come*. And, it is the Spirit of God that brings to pass this new man who is united no longer with Adam, but with Jesus. This is what we saw in Romans 5. We were in Adam, united with him in sin and death. Now we are made new in Jesus, united with him in righteousness and life. How did we go from one to the other? That is the work of the Spirit of God who touches us, changes us, invades our souls and makes us new. I Corinthians 12:**13** *By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body*. The Spirit baptizes us into Christ. Joins us with

him. Plucks us out of Adam and joins us to the Savior. We are going to learn, in our studies in Romans 6 that union with Christ is the essence of gospel salvation and privilege. But, for now, notice that the union with Jesus that is our salvation comes to pass by the ministry of the Spirit, whom we know as being the ____ Spirit? The Holy Spirit. Does this seem perfectly consistent with God's purpose to make believers who are saved by grace holy men and women? Does this seem perfectly inconsistent with the teaching that says our lifestyle is of no relevance to our eternal well-being?

So, the question under consideration – shall we continue in sin to advance grace, is incompatible with a proper understanding of God's purpose in saving us and the means of salvation. But then too our question also misunderstands grace. It is 2023. I began teaching in the church 45 years ago. And far more than then, there are proponents of "grace" who speak about it constantly but don't seem to understand it, don't grasp what it does in a life. And, for all their many words, they diminish God's grace rather than magnify it. They do so by teaching that grace is so wonderful it allows you to continue in sin. This is a very popular false teaching nowadays, but it was obviously there in the early days of the church. Jude **4** (NLT) *Some ungodly people have wormed their way into your churches, saying that God's marvelous grace allows us to live immoral lives.* Remember that verse as you hear some discussion on contemporary teachings. For such as these there is Romans 6. Please read this. Study this. It speaks directly to the popular error. What error am I speaking of? Plenty of examples. Here is one from a popular book called, *What's So Amazing About Grace*. You see in the title that the author thinks he is bragging on grace, but just the opposite is the case. To quote: *Strangely, God is closer to sinners than to saints. God, in heaven, holds each person by a string. When you sin, you cut the string. Then God ties it up again, making a knot – and thereby bringing you a little closer to him. Again, and again your sins cut the string – and with each further knot God keeps drawing you closer and closer.* So then, how does one get close to God? Sin!! It is breath-taking to me that someone could say these things. But then I think – the author of that book goes to a church in Chicago where the pastor is a woman who came to faith in our youth ministry in the 70s, then divorced her husband without even a pretense of biblical justification. She told me directly that she knew God did not approve of her choice to break her marriage vows. But she did it. And I assume, like our author, wants to pretend that her choice to sin brought her closer to God. Now, does God often redeem and

draw us to himself through the context of our waywardness? He does, but that is in spite of our sin, not because of it.

So, yes, there are many today who teach this very thing. Go ahead and sin. Grace is so great, God will draw nearer to you as a result. This is a deadly distortion of Biblical teaching on what grace is and grace does. I think of another man – a famous pastor – noted for his focus on grace. Constantly bashing preachers who talk about holiness of life and disciplined living. He proudly represented himself as setting people FREE!! Calling them to a grace awakening, he started an organization called, get this, “Liberate.” But, after a while it was discovered that he had been cheating on his wife for quite some time. When found out, he blamed his wife and said he should be forgiven and allowed to continue pastoring. His church said, “no.” But then another church hired him and set him up to continue promoting grace and liberty. Until, six months into that, he was discovered to have had additional adulterous affairs. But guess what he is doing today? Pastoring yet another church and promoting his brand of the gospel that says to everyone: *Don't let yourself be bound up with expectations and rules. Jesus set you free from all that stuff.* Free from the law, oh happy condition, I can sin as I please and still have remission. Walter Marshall writes: *what a strange kind of salvation do they desire that care not for holiness. They would be saved by Christ & yet be out of Christ in a fleshly state. They would have their sins forgiven, not that they may walk with God in love, in time to come, but that they may practice their enmity vs Him, w/out any fear of punishment.* But the apostle says to us, **1-2** *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? ²May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?* Later he will go on to argue that you can't be saved from sin and still live as a slave to sin. That is no salvation at all. Indeed, the reign of grace which we spoke of last time is hostile to the reign of sin. Grace and sin are not friends, but deadly enemies. Indeed, it is sin that grace saves us from. Consider Titus 2:**11-12** *the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, ¹²instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age.*

It is in Ephesians 2 where we read about being saved by grace apart from works, but then what does it say right after that? Ephesians 2:**10** *We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.* God, grace, is working on us for this purpose, to this end, for this goal. Interesting isn't it? He just told us in Ephesians 2:9 that our salvation is not a result of works, but now he says it does result in

works. You catch that? Not resulting from works, but resulting in works. Again, please don't reverse the order of causality. Salvation is by grace, through faith, unto works. We are passive at the beginning of the process. Very active at the end because God has made us alive, and called us to serve Him. We are His workmanship, and he doesn't fashion us as decorations but as workers. So, if those whom God re-creates and fashions are built for good works, and you aren't living accordingly, what does that say? Does it speak poorly of God? Or is an indicator that you may not be God's work? You might have reason to wonder, not if you lost salvation, but if you ever had it. John Stott says, "Holiness is the very purpose of our election and the only sure evidence of it." When God does a good work in us, then good works will come out of us. As a result, these good works of which we speak, a lifestyle of obedience and worship and service is the signature of the master artist on our lives.

So, there you go. The question Paul offers to begin our chapter reveals a misunderstanding of God's purpose in salvation, of God's means of salvation and of God's transforming grace. How do we apply all this teaching from the apostle? The simple question is, *shall we continue in sin?* The clear and emphatic answer is NO! And so, the application would be what? Stop sinning. Stop sinning. Easier said than done. That includes sins of omission and commission. Sins of word and thought as well as deed. When I got serious about my discipleship there was plenty for the Lord to clean up. As I grew convicted, I sought the Lord to relinquish the hold a number of sins had on my life. Bad thought-life habits. Bad language – vulgarities to repent of and forsake. There was the usual laziness and self-indulgence that had to go. When I married I discovered a whole new set of sins to put away. Still doing that. But this is what we are called to be about – growing our obedience, our conformity to the image of our Lord. Instead of pursuing sin, pursue righteousness, holiness, purity of life, good works. We pursue these things while trusting in Christ as Savior. We pursue these things dependent on His Spirit for help and power. We pursue these things, knowing we will never get beyond our need for pardon, our need for fresh grace and mercy. Yet, we make the purpose of God our purpose and we extol the power and beauty of grace, not just to give us pardon, but to make us new, to make us clean, to make us lovers of Jesus more than lovers of sin or lovers of this world. The enemy of our souls wants us to give up, give in and succumb to the forces of sin within us and around us. But our Lord calls us to walk as super-conquerors through Him who loves us. I conclude with Romans 5:21, which I offer this time from the ESV. Here is what is set before us, that we walk in

newness of life so that 5:**21** *as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* And all God's people said, Amen.