

*Sin and the Believer*  
A Sermon on Romans 6:6–11

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{with permission}

We gather here to walk into a text that holds so much hope for the people of God in Jesus Christ. We are going to reencounter the gospel as we are brought into a text that affirms the stunning reality that is lived in Christ Jesus. It seems as though the world of shadows in the midst of which we live darkens our vision to the point where the realities of life in the Spirit of God and Christ are seen only very dimly. I invite us today to open ourselves to enter into the life offered us by the gospel, a life that is dead to sin and alive to God in Christ.

For some of us, this will be an altogether new encounter. If you have never thought of Christ as more than a “pretty nice guy” who lived long ago, who told nice stories and coined some maxims, I invite you to hear afresh the name of Jesus and enter into this text with us. I extend to you the same invitation given to the narrator of C. S. Lewis’ *Great Divorce*, “Reality is harsh to the feet of shadows. But will you come?”<sup>1</sup>

Paul invites us into the “harshness” of reality quite abruptly in the epistle to the Romans. Reality, we are told, consists in all of humankind being consigned to sin and death since the first man, Adam (3:9, 5:12). We, the collective descendants of Adam, have traded the reality of God for a lie (Rom 1:25). In doing so, we became darkened in our understanding, futile in our thoughts, and numb to the reality of God (Rom 1:21–23). We became mere shadows of the humans God created us to be, and we entered the only sphere in which shadows are capable of dwelling. This realm is reigned by death and its companion, sin (Rom 5:14).

The gospel stands boldly amidst a world of shadows and claims that there is life that is more vivid, more colourful, and *truly* real, that has been extended to all through the life, death,

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<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *5 Books in 1; The Best of C. S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 136.

and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our text deals with the implications of being in Christ with regards to the mandate placed upon us to resist sin (Rom 6:12).

In last week's teaching on Romans 6 we dealt with the question of *why* we as Christians should no longer sin. Once having realized our need to thwart the reign of sin in our lives, the question becomes "How do we do it." How do we repent? How do we *continuously* put to death the deeds of the flesh (8:13)? This question becomes especially pertinent when we are honest with ourselves about the sin we see as work in us. This can be observable sin: cursing, gossip, wickedness, deceit, murder, adultery. Or the so-called 'undetected' sins, which tend to fly under the radar: judgementalism, covetousness, pride, selfish ambition, hardness of heart, double-mindedness, lust.

In Romans, Paul lumps all these sins together, showing that the 'undetected' sins are just as sinful as observable ones. The example of the sin of covetousness in chapter 7:7 shows us that the place where sin primarily exercises its power is within ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

Things become more complicated when we factor in the effect that addiction has on our sin. Sin truly ensnares us and the more we feed it, the deeper we are drawn into the hopeless notion that we will never overcome. The notion that despair brings, that sin will never be overcome in our lives, is a lie designed to keep us ensnared and under the power of sin. This lie keeps us in the land of shadows and perpetuates the cycle of futile thought. This lie would have us view Paul's exhortation to put to death the deeds of the flesh as yet another taunting reminder of our shortcomings. In this darkened understanding God is seen as one who goads and heckles us but does not lift a finger to help.

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<sup>2</sup> Leander Keck, *Romans*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 182.

Yet the gospel is such that it calls us out of this lie and entreats us to turn our eyes to that which God has done in Christ. The lie causes us to look at ourselves and how we fail to measure up. The gospel calls us to see ourselves as *in* Christ and to live in a way that reflects our being in Him. In Romans 6, Paul speaks of our baptism into Christ as being a baptism into His death (6:1–5). What Paul has in mind when he speaks of the resulting new life is that we are brought into a new sphere which is characterized by life and peace.<sup>3</sup> This sphere is Christ. The only way into this sphere is death.

It is good news indeed to know that once we have co-died with Christ we can live in Him. But where does this leave us in the struggle against sin? Are we cured of our condition?

The answer is yes *and* no.

At this point I would like to turn to an illustration. In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean is released from prison after 19 years of hard labour. On paper, he is a free man, yet at every turn he is cast out of inns and villages once they learn where he has come from. He is free, yet he is an ex-convict. His years of incarceration are imprinted on his face and body. He eventually makes his way to the house of the bishop of Digne. His encounter with the bishop marks his conversion experience. He is shown hospitality and mercy as he has never been shown. Ungrateful, Valjean steals the bishop's silverware and makes off in the night. He does not get far, however, and the sheriff of the village brings him to the bishop's house. Valjean claims that the bishop gave him the silverware, a claim the bishop proceeds to confirm with the caveat, "But this time... you must not forget your candlesticks."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>4</sup> Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables* (U.S.A: Penguin, 1987), 111.

From this moment, we expect Valjean to be forever changed, yet the grace he has been shown throws him into turmoil. Valjean sets out frantically into the countryside. He is inwardly perplexed, trying to make sense of the bishop's mercy, oscillating between the desire to soften his heart or to harden it to stone. His life has been claimed for God, yet he has not reckoned it so. He meets a vagrant boy, Petit-Gervais, on the country path. While having a fortune of silver in his pack, he takes from Gervais a forty cent coin he dropped on the path. Valjean ignores the boy's cries for his money to be returned, his mind and heart clearly preoccupied in his internal struggle. The boy runs off. At this point Valjean breaks down at the thought of what he has done. His old self would not have thought twice about stealing from a vagrant, but this new man was thrown into turmoil. Valjean realized that in robbing the boy he had committed an act of which he was no longer capable."<sup>5</sup>

This story bears significantly on our text in two aspects. Firstly, it shows us that we must *know* ourselves to be dead to sin if we are going to change ourselves and be changed by the Spirit. Valjean had in fact been changed by the bishop, yet he did not *know* it. He could not make sense of what he was feeling. He knew something happened, but he did not know what it was. Similarly, we can fail to know the realities and implications of our being in Christ.

We can often live in such a way that gives no indication that we have died to sin. Indeed, perhaps there are some of us who have not done so, or resist doing so. If this is the case, know that death to sin through Christ results in life lived in His reality.

Knowing ourselves to be dead to sin is the necessary precondition for Paul's imperative in 6:11. He commands his readers, "Consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in

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<sup>5</sup> Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 117.

Christ Jesus.” The word for ‘consider’ used here refers to a fact that has already occurred. More specifically, it has to do with accounting. One could say “compute” or “calculate” yourself to be dead to sin and alive to God. Accounting is keeping track of facts, not fancies.<sup>6</sup> Paul is again driving home the fact that in Christ it is a fact that you have died to sin. You are not deceiving yourself by counting, or reckoning such a fact. The books are accurate. When you face sin, you know that you have died to it and can therefore act accordingly. Paul makes it clear that this counting is to be an ongoing action on our part.<sup>7</sup>

There are times that come when we *feel* so many things that seem to indicate the contrary. We experience temptation, weakness, hardness, crankiness, and defeat. As humans we undergo stress, hardships, and fatigue. In these times of weakness, we are vulnerable to the lie that says we are not in Christ, that we are alone. In our minds, we can believe that this is true and that what we feel proves it. We can doubt the accomplished fact of our death with Christ, and by extension our life in Him. In these times where we are overwhelmed by what we feel, see, and think, we are called to turn our eyes to the reality of Christ. We are to remember the fact of our death, and to count it again, placing ourselves within the death of Christ. In so doing, the power of the lie that says we are not in Christ is broken.

We *know* the fact of our death in Christ and life in Him (6:6), and we are to *calculate* accordingly (6:11). The *fact* includes our being in Christ. We are in the One who defeated sin and death and is bigger than the problems we face. We have our existence in Him. By virtue of the fact that we are in Christ, we have died to those things which are seducing us. We have died to the sphere in which they exist.

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<sup>6</sup> Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (London: Witness and Testimony Publishers, 1958), 61.

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 2.

Let's return to the story of Jean Valjean. His journey also shows us that in considering ourselves dead to sin and alive to God, we are made aware of the inherent contradiction that it is for the Christian to continue living in sin.<sup>8</sup> Valjean realized that, in robbing the boy's coin, he had committed an act of which he was no longer capable. This captures well the contradiction Paul highlights with his rhetoric in 6:2: "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" For us to continue on in sin is to deny our having died with Christ. If we fail to count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God, we contradict the accomplished fact of our death in Christ.

This manifests itself in the form of deep conviction when we are faced with tempting situations. When I encounter the choice to think certain ways, entertain certain thoughts, to let my eyes linger on the form of a woman—I feel within me the potential that I can choose to do something that contradicts my nature in Christ. I can choose to behave in a way that denies my death in Him. On such critical occasions, the Holy Spirit interjects and implores us to stop, do the math and act in accordance with who we are.

What Paul gives us in this text is a self-understanding that is rooted in our participation in Christ and the fact of our death in Him. It is a self-understanding that brings us, counter-intuitively, into the place of victory over sin by our death to it. Our responsibility is not diminished with regards to sin. It is rather increased. The Word here encourages us, saying, "You must, because now [in Christ] you can!"<sup>9</sup> This is good news for those of us who struggle with sin, which I think is all of us.<sup>10</sup>

But do we understand ourselves this way? Do we lay claim to the truth of what has been done in Christ and persevere in reckoning it accordingly? Are we seeking Him and his

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 3.

<sup>9</sup> Keck, *Romans*, 166.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 4.

enablement in our struggles, whatever they may be? I invite you to consider what habits keep you from entering fully into the reality of Christ. Ask Christ to speak to you about this, for He knows the depths of you.

Our being in Christ does not mean that we are out of sin's reach, especially where addictions and habits are concerned. What has been dealt with is the root problem of being alive to sin and dead to God. In Christ, by the unfathomable grace of God, this situation has been reversed. We have become dead to sin and alive to God. Karl Barth says of this grace: “[it] digs sin up by its roots, for it questions the validity of our present existence and status. It takes away our breath, ignores us as we are, and treats us as we are not – as a new man [person].”<sup>11</sup>

In Christ we are brought into a new reality where sin is seen for the darkness that it is. In retrospect, our life lived under the reign of sin indeed resembles a world of shadows – somehow less real than the world of Christ. Where we once saw pleasure and the promise of fulfillment, we see the darkness of sin and the death that it brings. In Christ we lay claim to our death to sin and we begin to see that sin is no longer an inevitability for us.<sup>12</sup> We are enabled to take a stand against it because the root of sin in us has been done away with. Paul tells us that we are able to prevent the reign of sin in our mortal bodies by the Holy Spirit of God and Christ (6:12–13). *We, ourselves, us*, by *His* Spirit are able to continuously be putting to death the deeds of the flesh (8:13). We are no longer helpless in sin. We trust Christ for the ongoing work of our transformation by the renewing of ourselves in the light of His reality, and our having been brought into Him (Rom 12:2).

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 191.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



