



The Epistle to the Romans

Romans 6: New Lord, New Life

As we suggested, the theme of hope continues to permeate Paul's claims in chapter six. Oddly enough, though, what moves Paul toward hope, is his ongoing discussion of the nature and power of sin.

In this context, chapter 6 introduces Paul's very first prescriptive conversation about the lived moral life of Christians. It's worth noting that the apostle doesn't broach that subject until he is nearing the halfway point of his letter, and even now moral living is construed very broadly – as life lived to and under God.

Romans 6:1-4: Be Who You Are

As he has before Paul uses a question posted by an interlocutor he invents in order to make his point about the relationship between sin and the grace-filled life: "What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" All of us have heard enough lectures or sermons to know that we are supposed to answer "No!" to such a hypothetical question, and now Paul tells us why "No" is the correct answer.

(It is also possible that Paul has in mind some of the disputes he has had with the Corinthian churches as we see them reflected in 1 Corinthians. Some Corinthians seem to think that because they have been saved by grace they no longer need to worry about something as old-fashioned and impotent as sin.)

It seems almost plausible to think that if we are saved through grace by faith the more we sin the more grace will be available and the more our faith will be evident. But Paul insists that this involves us in a contradiction in terms. If believers were to try to continue in sin they would deny who they really are: People baptized into Christ Jesus.

When the Roman Christians were baptized, they went down into the water in imitation of Christ's descent into death and they were lifted up out of the water in imitation of Christ's resurrection. More than that, really, in baptism the faithful participate in Christ's death and resurrection. Some historians have suggested that in the ancient baptism ritual, the first breathless word out of the baptizand's mouth as she or he came up from the water was "Abba," the Aramaic word for father. The experience would make very vivid Paul's point that

the baptized are newly “alive to God (6:11).” What they die to is sin in all its power; what they are raised to is the new life of joy and obedience as a child of God. (Remember that this letter is written to encourage the obedience of faith, not the complacency of faith. (Rom 1:5)

Some years ago, two political commentators were on a panel discussing poverty in the United States. Though ideologically opposed to one another they were personally good friends. The first commentator said something to the effect that the poor people of Appalachia were poor because of their own moral failings and basically got what they deserved. His friend interrupted him: “Stop,” he said. “You’re a better person than that.”

To those who propose that Christians might as well enjoy the sinful life so that grace might grow apace Paul simply says: “Stop. That’s not who you are. You are a baptized person, and you have died to sin.”

The New Life: 6:5-11

Now Paul speaks more directly of the shape of Christian hope. If 6:1-4 featured the implications of resurrection for Christian life as lived in the 24-hour days of this life, Paul now turns to the future.

Like other Pharisees of his time Paul believes that God has promised to the faithful that God will bring a new age – an age beyond the powers of sin and death. However, unlike most of his fellow Jews Paul believes that that new age has begun in Jesus Christ. For Paul, God’s final reign is, as the catchword has it, “already and not yet.”

Now he reminds the Romans that their citizenship is not only in the present age but in the age to come. Again baptism is the crux of the matter, as an enactment of death and resurrection. The “already” of Christian faith is the claim that believers have already died to sin and are already living out Christ’s resurrection life. They are no longer in the clutches of radical disobedience. The “not yet” of Christian faith is the claim that the faithful will live with Christ in the fullness of God’s glory.

In the great final struggle against sin and death, Christ has conquered both sin and death. Christians live out the victory over sin and await the victory over death in their own lives. That is how the pattern of faithful life is lived – or almost how.

Paul nuances his claim a bit further. While it is true that the final victory over death is yet to come, it is also true that even in the present time, even in the already, the faithful taste what true life, eternal life is like. For Paul living toward God, before God’s presence, is in itself a purchase on the resurrected life. “So you must consider yourself dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” Already dead to sin; not yet living the resurrection life, but tasting it, foretasting it nonetheless.

Romans 6:12-14: Present Yourselves to God

Paul is not so opposed to bodily life as his critics sometimes think, but he is aware that our bodily desires can sometimes dash off after sin despite the red flags our faithful selves would like to raise. Legend has it that when those who had been “baptized into Christ’s death” continued to sin, Martin Luther said, “The old Adam is a strong swimmer!” Paul understands this. His words, “Do not let sin exercise dominion over your mortal bodies” are the call to active, energetic and brave faithfulness. One can slip into sin but one has to lay hold of righteousness (though of course in doing so one lays hold of a gift, not of an accomplishment.) God has given us the present of grace, now (the pun almost works) we present ourselves and our members to God – because sin no longer (really) has dominion over us.

Why can the faithful do this “presenting”? Because they have been brought from death to life – the echo of baptism again, the reminder of what they have left behind in the baptismal waters and of the faithful obedience they can now claim.

Romans 6:15-19: To Whom Do You Belong?

Paul presents another of his imagined debating questions: “What then, should we sin because we are not under the law but under grace?” By now we know what answer the teacher wants: “By no means!”

We tend to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals, deciding our own lives according to our own preferences. Paul – and most of his contemporaries – think we are defined not so much by who we are but by whose we are. We are all under the sway of one power or another. As Bob Dylan put it, “It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you gotta serve somebody.” Our identity is determined by the sphere in which we live: our deepest loyalties, the strongest claims upon us.

The way Paul talks about that is tricky for us because with good reason we find the notion of slavery incompatible with the shape of the Christian life. But if we can allow him his metaphor for the sake of his argument, he is saying what he will say again in Romans 14. None of us lives to himself and none of us dies to herself. We are who we are because of those to whom we belong.

Examples of this ultimate allegiance from everyday life are not easy to find. Patriotism is a kind of shadow of this sort of loyalty. Loyalty to family another. School Spirit – especially among aging alumni and alumnae – something of the same.

Now Paul is again making a contrast between the old and the new. Everybody belongs to something larger than the self, but in the old days the Roman Christians belonged to sin, but now God has bought sin out and the Romans belong to God.

Imagine yourself moving to a new country, expatriated from the territory of sin. Or a new family with a whole different set of expectations and obligations. That is how different the

Christian life is from the life that went before. God has bought us from the bondage of sin, a master who used us cruelly while persuading us that we were enjoying perfect freedom.

Romans 6:20-23: Two Big Contrasts

The NRSV is a little confusing in its rendering of Romans 6. What Paul means is that when the Romans were slaves to sin they could hang loose to righteousness. But hanging loose to righteousness is not such a good thing. It ends in death. And what's more, now that the Romans are alive in God, they can look back on those earlier righteousness-free days with considerable shame. (We are bound to recall the first two chapters of Romans where Paul gives pretty much everybody some recollection to be ashamed of – idolatry, hypocrisy – equal opportunity bondage to Sin.)

What Paul contrasts to this is being enslaved to God, and now Christians can (must) hang loose to sin. Hanging loose to sin (letting go of it altogether in fact) is a very good thing. It ends in eternal life. And the way believers get from the old realm of sin to the new realm of eternal life is what calls "sanctification". The root of the word is the same as the root of the word for "holy" or for "saints." And while some interpreters of Paul think that for him it's all sin or all grace, there is also this "sanctification" business that keeps us busy between this age and the age to come. (See John Wesley's classic little book, "Christian Perfection.")

The second contrast is again the contrast between death and life, but more interestingly, it's the contrast between "wages" and "gift." Those of us who live (and used to prosper!) in a capitalist society can understand the economics of sin: "You get what you pay for." If you pay for infidelity, dishonesty, corruption, by God you'll get your paycheck. Death.

Those of us who pray to be faithful Christians (many of us capitalists, too) have to struggle to understand the economics of grace, because the check God gives the faithful says: "Eternal Life." And you don't earn it; can't earn it; don't have to earn it. It is a gift.

So eternal life is a gift, but it is by no means an anonymous gift. It is given "In Jesus Christ our Lord." Romans 7 and 8 will help us understand the worth – and the price – of the gift.

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