

Can I Really Change? Dead to Sin, Alive in Christ

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[0:00] As you all know, please take your Bibles out to Romans chapter 6.! Romans chapter 6. If you're visiting with us this morning, a special welcome to you.

Please know that we do have a welcome desk, which we would be looking for some information, want to get to connect with us. That is the place to go. There will be somebody there at the end of the service.

And for those of you who do not know me, my name is B.K. Smith. I have the pleasure of serving as one of the pastors here. As David indicated in his introduction, this morning we step into probably one of the most exciting parts of Scripture.

I was thinking about this and I was thinking this is either going to be one of my best sermons that I have ever preached or could be the worst. So I'm going to let you guys decide. There's a lot of information in here.

I'm going to try to slow down. There is going to be some repetition. But I want without any doubt that you understand exactly what I am trying and going to be saying.

[1:16] So this morning I want to begin by asking you a very simple question. Can someone really change? Now let me ask it in a more personal way, perhaps a more honest way.

Can you really change? Now note what I'm not asking you.

I'm not asking you if you should change. I'm asking you, can you really change? Now if you've grown up around the church, you've been familiar with Christianity, you are aware that there's some rules, some commandments, some expectations to the Christian life.

That there is a way to be a Christian. And when you're not being the Christian that you want to be, you wonder, am I really changed?

Or maybe I'm just using a new vocabulary layered over my old patterns of life. Because when I look at my life, I still look at the person I used to be.

[2:43] Now I am aware that many of us have tried to change. We've tried self-discipline. We've tried accountability.

We've read many Christian books. We've listened to many Christian sermons. We've been to Christian conferences. We've tried cultivating Christian habits. We've tried praying harder, study more.

But yet if we're honest, we still find the same sins resurfacing in our life. We feel the same temptations that tug at our hearts.

And we feel the same discouragement weighing on our souls. And then we end up telling ourselves, maybe this is the person I am.

This is the way that I am. So when Paul reaches Romans 6, Paul is answering a question.

[3:46] And it's a question I believe he has heard thousands of times. He's heard it throughout his missionary journeys from Christians all over the ancient world.

But this morning, I want you to understand more than anything else. Paul is answering one of the deepest practical fears of the Christian life.

And it's this. If I am saved by grace alone, does that actually change anything? Now, in order to answer that question, we need to understand the context.

Romans 6 is obviously four chapters have preceded it. And if you've been here for any part of this sermon series, I've divided the book of Romans into these questions.

It's a question book. It's almost like a case before the courts. And Paul is anticipating questions, objections to what he's saying. And he asks them in certain ways.

[4 : 49] But the first question that he answers in Romans 1 to 3 is, what's wrong with the world and what's wrong with me? It goes in, why are we such a beaten down world and people?

And we all know this has caused a huge mess in the world. Romans 1 to 3 teaches us that mankind has suppressed the knowledge of the truth of God.

And it decided to follow man's wisdom over God's wisdom. Now, Romans 4 answers the second question.

That question is, if I am so messed up, can I get right with God? Is there any way that I can reconnect to the creator?

And, of course, Paul writes, yes, there is hope. And here's the thing. That hope isn't found in anything you can do. That hope is found in what Jesus Christ did for you.

[5 : 54] And that is where Jesus Christ gives you his righteousness by faith. In theology speak, that is called justification.

justification. Romans 5, it's kind of a sideline question. Now that I am justified, what does that mean? And if you've enjoyed Romans 5 as much as I have, we find out we are at peace with God.

We're no longer enemies. We now have assurance we are his. We have access to God. We're no longer outsiders, but insiders. When we battle suffering, we grow in endurance, character, and hope.

We also read that God himself has poured him into our lives. What Paul reminded us there, we're not just saved from hell as believers in Christ.

We're saved unto a relationship with Jesus Christ. See, this is where chapter 6 begins. It has to start with this understanding.

[6 : 59] And I want you to note that chapter 6 is subdivided into two sections. And each section begins with a question. Note in verse 1.

It says, what shall we say then? This is Paul responding to the natural questions that have flowed from the text. And in verse 15, the second half, it's what then?

What is the practical applications? I kind of hope this morning, not this morning, but this week, that I'd be able to get through 14 verses today, but it's not going to happen.

It is too rich and too dense. So the points that I have prepared for you, it's not perfect, but we're looking at 10 different questions that come up from the text.

And I believe it will help us understand what Paul is talking about. So let's just start with the text itself. Verse 1. It says, what shall we say then?

[7 : 58] Now this begins with Paul answering one of the most important questions. Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

Paul knows that this is a question that is on their mind. Paul knows that every single believer who grew up in the Jewish faith knows and are asking this question.

Now a couple of things about this question. It's actually not a rebellious question. It's a question that comes from logic. If you remember, Paul has said in Romans 5 that where sin increased, grace increased all the more.

So people argued, well, shouldn't I sin more so I can experience more grace? Wouldn't that be a wonderful thing? But if you remember from Romans 5, grace just doesn't keep pace with sin.

Grace overwhelms sin. It reigns. It triumphs. It overflows. Grace. So the question naturally follows. If grace always wins.

[9 : 11] If grace is never exhausted. If grace covers all my sin. This is the question. If grace saves me apart from my obedience.

Why does obedience matter at all? You with me on that one? That's the natural question that comes from this text. If grace saves me apart of obedience.

Because the Jews, look at all these laws we followed. Look at all these celebrations we did. Look at all the things that we did in rules. Doesn't that count for something?

Paul said no. There's nothing that you can add to your salvation. So if grace saves me apart from my obedience. Why do we need to obey?

Why do we obey? Why obey when I can just ask for forgiveness at the end of the day. And have everything squared away? Or to put it another way.

[10 : 15] What actually restrains sin in the Christian life? What actually restrains sin in the Christian life? Now if you've asked that question.

Don't feel ashamed. It is a natural question. And it's also a question that happens when someone finally understands grace. One author says if this question never has never crossed your mind.

It may because you have never fully grasped what Paul has been saying in Romans chapter 3. Romans chapter 3. That's where we learn. We are saved by faith in God.

And he gives us the righteousness of Jesus Christ. If Paul had been advocating for legalism.

Nobody would ask this question. If Paul advocated for works righteousness. This question would never be asked. The only time this question is asked is when the true gospel is preached.

[11 : 26] In fact Martin Lloyd-Jones the great Welsh preacher says. If you preach justification by faith alone clearly and correctly. You will inevitably be accused of antinomianism.

It's a big fancy word right? Antinomianism means the law is all dead. So it basically means because we're in the new covenant under Jesus Christ. All those laws in the Old Testament don't mean anything.

It's not what he's saying. So if there is an objection. Romans 6.1 is a sign. That the gospel has been preached clearly.

And to let you know this isn't abnormal. We even see this in the life of Jesus Christ. How many verses do we read.

That Jesus Christ was accused of being too strict. Never. They accused Jesus of being too gracious. How many verses in scripture do we read.

[12 : 30] Where Paul is making holiness too easy. They don't. They accused him of destroying holiness altogether.

Why? Because when salvation is proclaimed as entirely of grace. It exposes a terrifying possibility. What if nothing is left to restrain sin?

This is ultimately what this chapter answers. Here's my second question.

What is Paul's response? What is Paul's response? Notice he says by no means. That term by no means actually means may it never be. It's the strongest empathetic rejection of the Greek language that Paul could use.

It's like saying absolutely not. Not a chance. Not in a million years. No way Jose. If you and I have ever been asked that question. And I'm sure we have.

[13:35] We most likely responded this way. Absolutely not. Of course you shouldn't sin. You need to think of God's holiness. We might respond. We might say you need to think of Christ's sacrifice to keep you from sin. Or you need to think of the damage sin causes. Don't get me wrong. Those are all good things to say. But man's advice generally falls into four wrong categories. One is the legalism camp. Try harder. Work harder at this Christian life. The other camp is the quietism or the Quaker type way. Do nothing. It's all God. It's all grace. The perfectionist argues you shouldn't struggle. And then of course we have what's called psychological reductionism.

[14:40] All you need to do is think differently. If you can think differently, you will be okay. Now listen, if you've said those things, there's no need to feel insulted. Because I know at different times in my life I have said those same things. But this is not what Paul is saying. Instead, Paul answers with a statement that sounds, dare I say, abrupt. Almost shocking in its simplicity. It almost carries a sense of outrage that an idea of this kind could ever be thought as true. You must stop sinning is not what he says. He does not say you should try harder. He does not say you ought to be ashamed. He says, how can we who died to sin still live in it? Another way to say it is, that question doesn't even make sense anymore. That question doesn't even make sense anymore. Why? [15:40] Because something decisive has happened. What happened? We died to sin. Paul is not using this as a metaphor. Paul is not saying that this is the goal of the Christian life. The goal of the Christian life is to die to sin. Paul is not teaching that there is a process that we follow to holiness. Paul's entire argument in Romans 6, 1, 14 hangs on this one statement. We died to sin. If we misunderstand this phrase, we will misunderstand everything about sanctification and what later happens in Romans chapter 8. So let me be clear. Paul is not saying that Christians are now immune to temptation. Paul is not saying that Christians, that sin has been eradicated. Paul doesn't say that believers never struggle. Nor is he saying that dying to sin is something you must achieve.

[16:49] I want you to hang on that one. Is dying to sin something that I must achieve? Or something that I must feel? Or something that gradually happens over time? Why am I saying this? Simple grammar. Grammar. Note. Christ has died. Or we have died to sin. Died past tense. In the Greek, it means that the act is completed and the action is decisive. It is done. So what Paul is doing when he says we died to sin, he's describing a fact. He's not issuing a command. So if you are a student of this book, you need to understand that this is where a lot of the debate about Romans 6 is all about. And I would take the side, if you are theologically astute of James Boyce and Martin Lloyd-Jones, who state the heart of Romans 6 is not about how to become holy.

We so want to evenly divide the book. But here, before we get to sanctification, there are certain truths we must understand.

[17:59] And one of those truths is we died to sin. What Paul is essentially saying is that continued slavery to sin is incompatible with who you are now that you are in Christ Jesus.

Another way, you died to sin. You're now in the domain of life. You with me on that one? There's a huge distinction that he's making here. So Paul's answer to is, can I really change?

It's not you must change. He says you already have. Boom, mic drop. Now why is this an unthinkable question?

It's my third point. Verse 2 says, How can we who died to sin still live in it? Now notice that Paul is not appealing to effort. Paul is appealing to identity.

He is simply saying, You cannot live in sin the way you once did because you are no longer the person you once were. You get that? Because you died to sin.

[19:12] You cannot live in sin the way you once did because you are no longer the person you once were. Once death has occurred, the old life cannot be resumed.

In fact, you may struggle. You may stumble. You may fight long battles. But here's the truth. You can't go back.

You can't go back to the reign of death where you have died to sin. See, Paul knows Romans 7 is coming.

It's the struggle. The frustration. The cry. Who will deliver me from this body of death? Who here has ever asked that question?

Right? We've struggled with this sin. Let's be honest. Everyone asks that question. We get frustrated with who we are. We get defeated and we ask, who will deliver me from this body of death?

[20:15] And before he talks about the difficulty of change, Paul is establishing the reality of change. So ultimately, Romans 6 answers the question, is transformation even real?

Romans 7 will answer, why does it feel so hard? And Romans 8 answers the question, where does the power come from?

It's Martin Lloyd-Jones who said, if you skip Romans 6, Romans 7 will lead you to despair. If you rush Romans 6, Romans 12 reduces Christianity to moralism.

And Paul will not let either of those things so happen. So when Paul hears, shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? He hears, has grace actually changed anything at all?

And his answer is clear. It is forceful. It is unshakable. Yes, something has happened. Yes, something is irreversible. And it's something decisive. You have died to the old life.

[21:29] You are no longer in Adam. You are now in Christ. So that changes the meaning of the question.

The question isn't, can I keep living in sin? The question is, how could I possibly live there anymore? Leads me to my fourth question.

So what does death mean? And this is important. There's some nuance here. And I want us to understand. The key to understanding Romans 6 is recognizing that biblical death means separation, not extinction.

You with me on that? He's not saying death. That means it's no longer a part of our world. He's saying that death means separation, not extinction. So when a person dies physically, they do not cease to exist.

We understand the soul. They are separated from this realm. They are separated from this mode of life. They are separated from a sphere where they operate. And this is precisely how Paul is using the word here.

[22 : 38] To die to sin does not mean sin no longer exists. It means you no longer belong to its realm. Sin has no power over you. Sin is no longer the environment in which you live.

Sin is no longer the authority under which you operate. Sin is no longer the master who defines your identity. You have heard me preach multiple times.

Nowhere in the pages of scripture are we called sinners. We are as identified as saints. Amen? Amen? Montgomery Boyce says, Paul is not saying that sin is dead to the believer or sin shouldn't bother me anymore, but that the believer is dead to sin's domain.

Sin can no longer condemn you. Sin no longer can change your address. It cannot switch you to the other kingdom.

If you remember in Romans 5, we learned that we're moved from a kingdom where death reigned, where death was king, and we now live in a kingdom where grace reigns, life is king.

[24 : 01] And there's two different types of way to live in it. I was just trying to think of an analogy, and I thought about my friends Ryan and Heather Jackson. They have adopted six kids that came from siblings that were involved in drug addiction, and basically the authorities found these kids in squalor and misery.

That's where those kids lived. That was the only life that they learned. And when they were adopted, they moved to a home that had grace and love.

They no longer had to hide food for fear that no one would feed them the next day. They now had ample food. You with me on that?

If you've dealt with kids who've come from orphanages, that's largely what they have. They hoard things because they don't trust the goodness of today, well-lasting tomorrow. So like these kids, we lived in this life of death and hoard, and now we've been brought to a world of love and grace.

Before we were saved, we lived in sin. Not merely committing sin, but we lived under the rule of sin.

[25 : 27] And you sinned because that was the realm you belonged to. Now I want you to know that Paul is not saying you have moved on to a better moral program.

Paul is simply saying that you have transferred into an entirely new realm of existence. So when Paul says, how can we who died to sin still live it?

Notice his logic. He does not say, you must not live in sin. He says, how could you? Death has occurred. It's died. It has no power.

There's been a decisive break with the old order. And now as we see, the first two verses of this section are now statements. Look at the fifth question.

And this isn't really a question. This is Paul's first argument. Paul's first reason. Why is this true? Verse three. Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

[26 : 34] Now notice he's not talking about water or the baptism ritual that we talk about. Paul is describing something called union. To be baptized into Christ means to be placed into union with God.

It means to be united with him. It means to be identified with him. It means to be incorporated into his saving work. So when Christ died, he did not die as a private individual.

Jesus Christ died as our representative. Amen? Amen? Amen? If you remember Romans 5, Adam was our head that got us into this mess of life.

He added and functioned as that representative head. This is the same idea. It says, no, we were buried there with him by baptism into death.

What's interesting is we see Paul using certain language over and over. Died, buried, and raised.

[27 : 57] Martyn Lloyd-Jones repeatedly warned against turning Romans 6 into self-talk or positive thinking. Paul is not telling believers to pretend they are dead to sin.

He is telling them that they are dead to sin because something actually happened to them in Jesus Christ. So, Christian change doesn't begin with psychology.

Christian change begins with history. Now, let's go back to our root question. Can I change? This answer tells us why this makes change possible.

And this is why Paul gives us this implication. He says, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Notice the order. Death first. Resurrection second. New life follows. You do not walk into newness of life by effort.

[29 : 07] You walk into it because resurrection has already occurred. Now, let me give you Paul's second reason.

Paul is saying that change is not something you manufacture. It is something that you live out. Verse 5. For if we have been united with him in his death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like this.

What Paul is saying, and this is perhaps one of the most strongest statements in the chapter, is that union with Christ is not partial. It is absolutely comprehensive.

It is all 100% that if you share in his death, you share in his life. You with me on that one? If you're in the death, you're in the life.

Why? Because Jesus Christ rose three days from the grave, right? Death was conquered. It is finished. So that question, can I really change, is no longer a question about your willpower.

[30 : 19] It's a question about whether Christ's resurrection is real. If you died with Christ, you live with Christ.

So what died? My seventh question. Verse 6 says, we know that our old self was crucified with him. Now, a few things to note. Now, the old self is not your personality.

Your old self is not your temperament. It's not your humanity. It's who you were in Adam. In Adam, you were defined by sin and enslaved to sin and it was, you were unable not to sin.

What Paul is communicating here is that that person was crucified. What that means is he wasn't improved. He wasn't restrained.

but he was crucified. He was crucified. And here's the thing about crucifixion. This is important.

[31 : 28] It took me a while to get this too. Crucifixion is not a process. Crucifixion is an execution. What that means is because it's an execution, it's not Christian life isn't something you mature into or you grow into.

It's a defined act. You were crucified. Boom. Chop. Dead. Which obviously leaves the question why does sin feel so strong?

Am I changed or not? And here we read Paul adds this clarification of verse 6.

He says, in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. Now what's interesting is brought to nothing does not mean destroyed.

It means it was rendered powerless. It was stripped of authority. We know sin still speaks. Sin still tempts.

[32 : 43] Sin still resists. But sin no longer has command over you. Here's a wonderful truth.

Dead men don't fight. Slaves don't resist. only free people struggle. What the author meant is your sin does not lead you to death.

The struggle in your life over sin reveals that you are alive and that you have been set free. That's immense to understand that.

Momentous. I'm using the wrong metaphors I'm sure. But it's very big. So what is the source of this new life?

Romans 6 3 5 at this point Paul knows exactly where confusion can creep in. He has said we died to sin. He has said the old self was crucified. He has said sin's dominion has been broken.

[33 : 50] and now the question naturally becomes how did that happen to me? Was it something I felt? Was it something that I decided?

Was it something I achieved? Paul's answer is unmistakable. Change happened because you were united to Christ. Everything in Romans 6 hangs on this one doctrine.

Make no mistake Christianity is not self improvement. Christianity is to be united in Jesus Christ. See Paul never describes the Christian life as a moral upgrade.

Paul never says that we are given new better principles to lead our lives. Paul never says that now we have a stronger motivation. Paul never says that we are now given clear instructions.

He tells us that we were joined to a person. Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

[34 : 57] Now notice that word into. Not baptized like Christ. Not baptized because of Christ. Not baptized in honor of Christ. But baptized into Christ.

Christ. What Paul is describing is incorporation being placed in a new reality, a new sphere, a new identity. And this is why sanctification cannot be reduced to behavior management.

You are not trying to imitate Christ from the outside. You are living out a life you now share with Christ from the inside. Amen? You see when a believer is baptized it's a visible declaration of an invisible reality.

Those that are being baptized essentially say I am no longer my own. I now belong to Christ. So when Christ died you died.

When Christ was buried your old life was buried. When Christ rose new life became your new normal. If you don't understand this union to Christ change is always going to feel frustrating and shallow for you.

[36 : 19] But here's the thing. Resurrection life is not an optional add-on to Christianity. Paul says in verse 4 in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the father we too might walk in newness of life.

He doesn't say you might occasionally experience newness. He doesn't say you might have moments of victory. He doesn't say you might grow if conditions are right. He says you will walk in newness of life.

life. That's ordinary daily habitual language. You see new life is not an advanced stage of Christianity. It is normal Christianity.

See the Christian life is resurrection life lived in a fallen world. Let me just say a few things. This is my tenth point about what it means to be united with him both past present and guaranteed.

Verse 5 if we have been united with him in death like his we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. Now that word united means to be grown together to be fused to be joined as no longer be separated.

[37 : 38] So when we have died with Christ we are fully in. It's unbreakable. Notice the confidence that Paul uses here. If you have been united in his death and you have then resurrection life is not in certain it is certain.

So the idea of change is not wishful thinking. It's guaranteed by union. So this begs the question.

This answers the question. This is why change is possible. change is possible even when it feels impossible. Many believers look at their ongoing struggle and conclude maybe I haven't changed.

Paul says the opposite. Your struggle exists because you have changed. You are no longer fighting from defeat.

You are fighting from resurrection. And a resurrection life does not mean the absence of conflict. It means the presence of a power in the conflict. You are no longer trying to become something you are not.

[38 : 55] You are learning to live in line with what God has already made you. why this change and how does it help us fight sin.

If we think Christianity is about trying harder, every failure will crush us. But if you understand that you are united with Christ, failure means something different.

One, it drives you back to dependence on God. Two, it reminds you that your life flows from Christ, not self-effort.

And three, it forces you to reckon with reality not emotion. Emotion is the biggest trap in all of this. That's why I earlier stated you died to Christ is history.

You do not fight sin to earn life. You fight sin because you have life. So let's come back to the question we started with this morning.

[40 : 18] can I really change? Paul's answer is not something that we expect, right? We're used to hearing try harder, do better next time.

If you fail, maybe you were never changed at all. But Paul here says something far deeper and far more hopeful.

you already have. You already have. Christian change does not begin with effort. It begins with identity. It's knowing who you are in Christ, Jesus.

It begins with a staggering truth that something real has happened to you. You have died to Christ, you have buried with Christ, and you have raised to walk in newness of life.

And that means your fight with sin is not the fight of a slave trying to earn freedom. It is the fight of a free person learning how to live free. Why does this matter?

[41 : 28] Because I know some of you came into this morning discouraged. You love Christ, you want to obey, but let's be honest, sometimes that struggle feels relentless, right?

Am I ever going to overcome this sin? And the temptation is to assume, if I really were changed, this wouldn't still be so hard.

But Paul flips it on his head. It says, the struggle does not prove you're unchanged. The struggle proves you are alive. So when you fail, and you will, my pastoral instruction to you is do not retreat into shame.

Do not question whether grace worked. Do not try to manufacture a change by willpower. Instead, return to this text, return to this truth, return to reality.

Remember who you are, remember what has already happened, and remember whose life you now share. prayer. And if you do that, that's why John 15 talks about what does it mean to abide in Jesus.

[42:48] If you do that, you will never be the same. You will change. Let me pray. Let me pray. Father, there's just a lot of freeing truths in this text.

these truths cut to the core of who we are sometimes.

That it's so easy to identify ourselves as a sinner rather than one who's been united in Christ. So often we have retreated into shame we have asked the question, did grace work?

Am I even a Christian? But we see this command, this blank statement. You died to sin.

You died to that realm. You died to that kingdom. And listen, that kingdom launches arrows and throws bombs at us, but we're in the kingdom of life now.

[44:10] It's just a rebel with no authority. So, Father, as we continue our walk through this text, I pray that this initial truth of understanding death could help us in our walk, help us in our understanding.

That understanding death is separation, not extinction. salvation. Let us not be those Christians who think they are without sin because they happen to be so joyfully sublime.

They just take a Quaker aspect and just closet themselves from the things of the world that make them stumble without recognizing that the rebellion is still a part of our being.

and that struggle is a good thing because it helps us recognize that we belong to the King.

So, Father, I pray that you would use the words spoken today. I pray that just our commitment to your truths would be indeed life transforming. I ask these things in your most holy and precious name.

[45:28] Amen. Amen.