

Newness of Life

Romans 6:1b-11

What does law, sin, and grace have to do in the lives of Christians? Are the Ten Commandments to be my guide or does grace give me freedom from such rules? Now that I have grace, do I need to concern myself with sin? Don't I walk in the newness of life now that I have been baptized? Isn't it true that the sin sickness has been cured by grace? In order to answer these questions we turn to Paul and begin with his writings just before our scripture.

Romans 5 culminates in an overwhelming praise of grace. Paul tells the history of creation from the perspective of its end. One man's trespass led to condemnation for all. God gave the law, but the powers of sin and death turned this good gift to their own ends. Then, Paul writes, "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20). Now one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all (5:18). In chapter 5 Paul tells the story of a relentless, resourceful God who is determined to speak the last word. That last word is "eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:21).

Then, after that last word comes a next word, a question whose very utterance reveals the ways in which the fullness of redemption is not yet fully realized: if an increase in sin sparks an even greater abundance of grace, why not remain in sin? "What then are we to say?" Paul asks. "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" (6:1)

Paul's answer is —"By no means!" (v. 2). Shawnthea Monroe explains it this way: when her son was in preschool, he accidentally spilled an entire carton of milk on the floor. He was devastated by his mistake. So as she mopped the floor, she reassured him that everything was going to be just fine. Shawnthea said, "Look! Now the whole floor is nice and clean!" Her son turned to her and said brightly, "Hey! Maybe I should spill

on the floor more often!" By no means! Just because God in Christ Jesus has the power to make things right is not an invitation to do wrong.

Paul reminded Christians in Rome of their baptism. Baptism unites Christians to Christ so completely that we share in his death and resurrection. Our old self is crucified with Christ on the cross, and that death breaks the power of sin over our lives. We die with Christ, we are buried with Christ, and, Paul writes, we will surely rise with Christ to "walk in newness of life" (v. 4).

Paul understood baptism as a type of exodus. As Israel once labored under Pharaoh, so humanity labored in bondage to sin. As Pharaoh's power was broken once when Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea, so sin's power over us was broken when we passed through the waters of baptism. Israel came through the water into the wilderness—a place where Pharaoh no longer held power over them and where God traveled with them, but still not the promised land. Even so, we move through the waters of baptism into a place where sin no longer has dominion, where God is with us, and where the fullness of resurrection life is still to come. Paul makes clear that baptism is not only an event between the individual and God, but also a union with Christ that connects the baptized one with all the faithful in every time and place. Therefore, baptism is not a family celebration; it is incorporation into the body of Christ, and thus into a set of commitments that may call family ties into question (see Matt. 10:34-38; Luke 14:26).

Paul's remarks to the church in Rome remind us that baptism is more than simply a rite of passage. It is a radical change in identity, one that opens up new possibilities. There is a "before" and an "after." Before, we were slaves to sin, without even the hope that we could do what is right. After, we have the opportunity truly to live and be "alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11).

Baptism is not a magic spell that protects a person from peril in this world and the next. On the contrary, in binding us to Christ, baptism places us on the way of the cross. Baptism is not a celebration of the waters of life; it is a drowning, an act that renders us "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11). Dead to sin and alive to God, the baptized one *cannot* remain in sin without betraying who she or he has become. It is not that acts of sin have become impossible for baptized Christians—our own lives make that clear enough. Even after the exodus, the children of Israel longed for the fleshpots of Egypt. However, something has happened; a page has turned, not only in individual lives, but also in the world; and, by the grace of God, there is no going back. **Ted A. Smith**

Another key element of Paul's message is the matter of identity. Through baptism, we are given a new identity in Christ Jesus. Our day-to-day lives will not change, though, unless we embrace this new identity. Paul believed right identity precedes right actions. Shawnthea gives us another example to help us understand. She says when her cousin entered medical school, students were instructed to call each other "doctor" from day one. They were not really doctors, but people who were living, learning, and growing into this new identity as doctors. Using the title was a way to remind them of the goal toward which they were striving.

In the same way, we use the terms "saints of God." Few of us consider ourselves saints in the popular sense of that word, just hearing ourselves called saints makes us feel ennobled and reminds us of who we are. Like those medical students, we are living, learning, and growing into our new identity. Some would say there is a "fake it 'til you make it" element in both cases, but it underscores the role self-understanding plays in shaping human behavior. Through baptism, we have been given a new identity; embracing that new identity has the power to shape our behavior and move us to action.

This leads us to the necessity of connecting faith with action. To many of us modern Christians are masters of compartmentalization. What we believe does not always shape how we live. David Bartlett says it well: "We think that because our hearts belong to Jesus, our bodies, our checkbooks, our votes, and our property values belong to us." From Paul's point of view, this is impossible and the logic is simple: "we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (v. 4). Notice Paul says "walk," not "think" or "believe." Baptism brings about a radical change in our identity, a change that has implications for every aspect of our lives. It is not a demand, but a glorious possibility—to be alive to God. **Shawnthea Monroe**

Paul's message still bears good news today. Paul's argument remind us of impossibility, possibility, and responsibility. *Impossibility*. Paul argues throughout Romans that it is impossible for us to escape the dominion of sin by our own efforts. But Paul is not seeking to beat us up because of our failing, but to inspire us and energize us to walk in the newness of live that Christ has given us with gratitude and love.

Paul said that all of humanity had turn from being God-centeredness to self-centeredness and sin. This has resulted in a universal distortion of the self's very being. Since "being" precedes "doing," better "being" must precede better "doing" Yet, as the self is now "futile" in its thinking, it can neither heal its distorted being, nor change its sinful doing. The self is enslaved to sin (v. 6).

Most of us are so pleased with our presumed autonomy that we don't understand this claim that we are enslaved. Our stories change from pew to pew, but regret and estrangement are common enough: because we cannot conquer old compulsions and addictions, because we have betrayed someone we love, or because we are just plain tired of falling short of the marks we set for ourselves. Like so many AA members, we

have all confronted behavioral flaws over which we are powerless. We have all found it impossible fully to live up to the ideals we associate with human flourishing. These are grim shackles indeed, until we realize that God has already acted to free us. God has already intervened to break the dynamic of self-centeredness and re-center the self back to God-centeredness.

Possibility: The main thrust of Paul's argument is that what was impossible in the old age, under the domain of sin and death, is now possible in the new age, under the domain of grace and life. Paul argued that the Christian experiences something of what Christ experienced through our baptism. When we were baptismal candidates, we were lowered into the water, we were baptized into Christ's death (v. 3), personally undergoing the crucifixion of our old selves (v. 6). As we rose from the water, we emerged engrafted, in solidarity with the risen Christ. We were newly liberated to "walk in newness of life" (vv. 4, 11). When we were given the "right hand of fellowship" we were instructed that we had a new right to participation, a new union with Christ and all the members of the church, and a new identity with the risen Lord. "For Paul, baptism 'into Christ' makes one a participant in an *event*, not an ideal or a myth. Basic for this understanding is the conviction that a religious ritual *does* what it symbolizes."

Responsibility. Paul tells us that we are "already but not yet," so he is under no illusion that temptation and sin no longer beckon. However, as it is now possible to walk with Christ in the "newness of life," it seems only natural to Paul that we should do so: "So you must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (v. 11); given our new identity, status, and solidarity with Christ. However, it is still left to Christians, you and me, to exercise our newfound freedom by consciously enacting their new identity. Since being precedes doing, better being may now naturally issue forth in better doing. 'Be who you are.' **Harold E. Masback III** Who you are is a child of God who walks in the newness of life.

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