

BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in Romans: A Gospel-Centered Worldview

Lesson Seven

Brought From Death to Life

Focal Text

Romans 6

Background

Romans 6

Main Idea

The gospel provides a path to life, not an excuse to sin.

Question to Explore

Do we use the grace provided by the gospel as an excuse to sin?

Quick Read

The term “cheap grace” has been used to describe a believer who professes faith in Jesus Christ but does not live a life in obedience to the Scriptures.

Introduction

Life is a delicate balance. I have found this to be true in the gym. I visit a trainer two times a week. I have been in this routine for six months. The reason I waited so many years is simple—I enjoyed running and felt that was all I needed to do. My family began nagging me about my lack of strength. Did I want to be able to pick up grandchildren in the years to come? Did I want to look like a pencil-neck geek for the rest of my life? With such positive, encouraging motivation, who wouldn’t want to get to the gym as fast as one could?

My trainer has always emphasized the necessity to maintain proper balance. When he hands me two dumbbells (that are too heavy), he watches my form carefully. The incline

presses must be equal on both arms. It's the same with every exercise. I found out the importance of this when I overdid it on one side. It sidelined me for several days.

Paul knew the danger of extreme positions, not in the gym, but in life. He preached, announced, asserted, and debated that salvation was by grace alone. No doubt, he knew some would take his position and turn it into an opposite extreme. He covered this issue in an earlier chapter: "And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), Let us do evil that good may come?" (3:8).

The apostle was always on guard when he made bold, biblical statements: "But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20). He could hear the naysayers as they jumped to the extreme. "Well great, the more we sin, the more we show the forgiving grace of God. So let's sin as much as we can, so God can give us more grace." Paul addressed the issue head on in Romans 6:1-23.

Commentary

Our outline of Romans¹

Salutation (1:1-17)

The Sinfulness of Men (1:18-3:20)

Pagan Lostness (1:18-32)

Jewish Lostness (2:1-3:20)

The Grace of God (3:21-8:39)

The Heart of the Gospel (3:21-4:25)

God's Way of Making Us Right with Himself (3:21-31)

Abraham: Old Testament Example of Justification by Faith (4:1-25)

Made Right with God (5:1-6:23)

The Benefits of Justification (5:1-11)

The New Humanity (5:12-21)

Changed Lives (6:1-23)

Freedom from Sin (6:1-14)

6:1-2. Paul did not ease into this discussion. He framed rhetorical questions that stated his position clearly: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" Paul allowed no room for the idea that grace encouraged sin. The phrase, "May it never be!" was the strongest negative Paul could employ without crossing the line into profanity.

6:3-4. Biblical interpreter, N. T. Wright, sees Paul's discussion of believer's baptism as a retelling of the Exodus event.² The Old Testament Book of Exodus described the children of Israel when they were enslaved in Egypt. God used Moses to set the people free. They

passed through the Red Sea, leaving behind four hundred years of slavery, and found new freedom in a promised land. God gave them the law. They squandered many opportunities to take the land of promise but finally, after years of wandering, they entered the land God promised to them.

In Romans 6, Paul compares the Christian life against the backdrop of the Exodus event. Followers of Jesus experience believer's baptism (the Christian's Red Sea), and come through that experience leaving behind a sinful past and then move toward a life of promise. In many ways, believers seek to return to slavery, just as the children of Israel did when they told Moses they were better off under Pharaoh's rule.

Paul employed this comparison for three reasons.³ First, he reminded us that Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of what God promised to Abraham. Paul discussed God's promise to Abraham in Romans 4. He drew his material from Genesis 15. In the giving of this promise, God revealed something else to Abraham. "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years" (Genesis 15:13). In Jesus, everything God promised to Abraham has come to pass.

Second, he emphasized a spiritual Exodus. Many first-century Jews longed for freedom from Roman domination. Ultimate freedom would not be political; it would be the freedom from sin for every person in the whole world who would accept it.

Third, Paul sought to draw attention to ethnic Israel. Salvation came from the Jews (John 4:22). How does Israel fit into God's plan? Has the nation been rejected? Paul will discuss these questions in great detail in chapters 9-11.

Illustration: Many people do not grasp the significance and importance of believer's baptism. Every Sunday, we offer an invitation at the close of our worship services, inviting people to walk down the aisle, profess their faith in Jesus, and to follow him in baptism. In the first century, there were no church buildings with aisles to walk. You made your statement of faith in Jesus at the time of your baptism. In some cultures today, you can talk all you want about loving and following Jesus. But if you are baptized, then persecution and suffering follows.

6:5. In the present sense, baptism describes our death to sin. In the future sense, it gives us the promise of the resurrection.

6:6-7. Scholars differ over the meaning of the phrase, "body of sin" (6:6). Some interpreters view it as a reference to our old sinful self. Paul will deal with his struggle against his old sin nature in chapter 7. An interesting take on the phrase is that it refers to the opposite of the Body of Christ. The Body of Sin would refer to those who are lost and far from God. Every time a person is converted to Jesus, the Body of Sin loses one member, while the Body of Christ gains one.⁴

6:8-10. Paul focused on the future in this section. Because we have died with Christ, our future with him is secure. Christ died “once for all” (6:10). This phrase emphasized the finality of Christ’s death on the cross. His finished work in us makes it ludicrous to believe we should continue in sin because we are living under grace.

The logic of Paul’s argument is sound:

Christ died to sin (6:10).
We died with Christ (6:5, 6, 8).
Therefore, we have died to sin (6:2).

6:11. “Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.” One of the most important words in all of Romans is found here—“consider.” Paul used this word nineteen times in Romans, and one’s proper understanding of it is crucial to understanding the entire book. The term means “to calculate or to think clearly.” This word is easily misunderstood. Paul is not talking about wishful thinking here. He told his readers to do the calculation, which will reveal to them the truth.

Illustration: The task of adding up figures in a spreadsheet does not reveal something new. It does tell you what is— the sum total of the numbers.

At our Vacation Bible School this summer, our children’s minister challenged us to bring an offering each day for a special missions project. She turned this into a contest—boys against girls. She represented the girls and I represented the boys. The interesting twist in this effort was that we would not just count the money, but we would weigh the money. Whoever brought the most money in total weight won the contest. And the prize was the winner putting a pie in the face of the loser. I did my due diligence, urging boys to get their parents to take them to the bank to get as much money in pennies as they could. When the final day arrived, it was evident that the boys ruled. But by some strange coincidence, the scale was not operating, so the contest was declared a tie. On the count of three, we both put a pie in the face of our opponent. I was gentle. She was ruthless, smashing and twisting whipped cream in my eyes and nose. I will always know I took the high road. But don’t think for a moment that my Hatfield genes will not exact some type of revenge in the future.

It took almost a week to do the calculation. Our VBS brought in over \$1,700.00 for this mission project. The calculating did not change the amount of the money. It just revealed what was already there.

Paul urged his readers to calculate and see what they found. He did not ask for a display of wishful, blind faith. And what was the result? The reality was we were dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. True faith is not closing one’s eyes and stepping out into darkness, but opening one’s eyes to the truth that Jesus paid it all on the cross and we are free from sin.

Illustration: Imagine you are renting a house and your landlord is a big bully. He threatens you weekly to take you to court over things that didn't even happen. He demands rent early and then tries to charge you more than you owe. He barges in with his master key without even knocking. He is simply making your life miserable.

One day you find another place to live. And on top of this good fortune, you discover someone has paid your lease in full. You have the official receipt for funds paid in time and in full. All is going well until one day, the big bully landlord storms into your new house, demanding money and issuing all kinds of threats. You almost get out your checkbook because this is the way it always seems to go. But then you remember you don't owe him anything. You show him the official receipt and tell him you have paid him in full. He threatens again. Then you forcefully tell him to leave and to leave now.

Paul reminds us to look at the official paperwork of our spiritual journey. He tells us to do the calculation again and to think clearly. We are not serving the bully sin master any longer. We are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Illustration: Take it a step further. Imagine you are living in the Middle Ages and you are a tenant farmer. Your tract of land is between two huge estates, which are divided by a river. A ruthless tyrant owns the land where you live. He is just plain evil. He forces you to help him in the range wars that threaten his vast holdings. He makes you take your shovels, hoes, and rakes to the blacksmith, where they are turned into swords, shields, and spears. You find yourself fighting wars that are not your own when you should be taking care of your small farm.

One day you look across the river and wonder if you could possibly farm over there. You speak to the master of the estate and he gladly offers you more land at less rent. You move across the river and realize you now serve a gracious boss. You help him from time to time, but his endeavors are different from your former master. Your new landlord builds schools, hospitals, and helps widows and orphans. At times, it costs you to help out, but you don't mind because it's for a good cause and it's the right thing to do.

Every so often, your former landlord sends his minions to the edge of the river to demand you come back. They taunt you and ridicule you. But it's evident your old master fears your new master.⁵

The Christian life is simply a change of masters. Do the calculation and you will find you are dead to sin; you don't have to serve the old master anymore. You are free.

The old master will continue to haunt, tempt, and taunt you. He will demand you live as he insists. His demands will be familiar. You must abuse drugs and alcohol if you are under pressure. You must satisfy your sexual desires no matter who gets hurt. You must get ahead in business and this means you must cheat. If you are not thinking straight or if you refuse to do the math, then it will be easy to live the old life. But if you do the

calculation, you will see you are dead to sin and now alive and free to live as God intends.

6:12-14. When we do the calculations and believe we are truly dead to sin, then we can experience growth in our lives. When we choose to serve God, change becomes a daily project. When we begin living lives that reflect God's grace, then we find ourselves becoming more and more like Jesus.

A Slave of Righteousness (6:15-23)

6:15-16. Paul picked up his original topic (should we sin more so we can experience more grace?) with two rhetorical questions, followed by the strong negative he used in 6:1—may it never be!

Paul reminded his readers of what I call the “Doctrine of the Two Ways” (6:16). Through Scripture, we find the theme of two opposing ways of life. For example, light vs. dark, right vs. wrong, and good vs. evil. Paul focused on the idea of slavery vs. freedom. We are going to serve something or someone. Joshua reminded the nation of this truth when he challenged them just before they marched into the land of promise: “Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve” (Joshua 24:15).

6:17-19. The power of evil tempts us with a distorted view. Be free. Do what you want to do. So long as you don't hurt someone else, anything goes. In the end, we become a slave to our choices. Addictive actions don't set us free; they destroy any notion of freedom we hope to find.

Illustration: One freezing winter day, a bird of prey lit upon a floating carcass in the Niagara River below Buffalo. As the bird fed on the carcass, it was aware of the great falls near at hand, but planned to fly away before it reached the danger point. When the thunder of the falls grew nearer, the giant bird stretched its wings to fly away from the imminent danger. But it was too late. The bird's talons had frozen to the carcass it had been feeding on. The bird was swept over the rapids with the creature to which it was attached. How often we are destroyed by habits and sins, which we thought we could control or stop anytime we wanted. To commit one's self to the way of sin is to be carried along its path. When we yield ourselves to Christ, we are under his dominion and free from the slavery of sin.⁶

The voice of God lays out the truth. He wants us to know up front we will be enslaved to his divine will and purpose. We will give up personal rights, yielding control of our lives to his spirit. And in becoming servants of God, he will set us free. Any person who has entered into this relationship with God has discovered this truth: “Having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness” (6:18).

Sanctification (6:19) is a big church word that is hard to pronounce. Simply defined, it means “set apart.” This term is translated “holiness” as well. In one sense, sanctification

is an event that occurs at conversion. We are set apart to do God's work. In another sense, sanctification is a life-long process. We are growing into the likeness of Jesus as we live from day to day.

6:20-23. Paul closed out this section with a reminder of the "two ways." Sin and righteousness are the two masters. Slavery to sin and slavery to God are two ways to live. The one who is free from sin is enslaved to God. Likewise, the one who is enslaved to sin is free of righteousness. The two ultimate outcomes are death and eternal life.

One of the clearest statements in the Bible is found here. "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (6:23). This profound, yet simple statement has led countless people to faith in Christ.

Romans 6:23 is the third passage on what is called the Roman Road to salvation. The first passage is Romans 3:23. The second is Romans 5:8. Review these verses and pray for God to put someone along your path who needs to hear and experience these passages.

Conclusion

Paul soundly shut the door on any notion a believer should sin more so that grace could be seen and experienced more. Salvation by grace changes a person. It moves a person from one place (sin/death) to another (righteous deeds/life). The key to our freedom is found in total obedience to God.

MacGorman concludes: "There are people who turn to religion for some imagined immunity to the consequences of sin rather than a deliverance from its power. Such persons pervert the gospel of God's grace to encourage an ethic of license."⁷ In other words, keep things in balance. On one hand you have legalism. On the other hand you have license (anything goes). In the middle you have God's grace. Stay in the middle and you will see things clearly.

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¹J. W. MacGorman, “Romans” *The Layman’s Bible Book Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 9-10.

²N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone Romans: Part One* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2004), 99.

³Ibid., 100.

⁴MacGorman, 58.

⁵For an expansion on these illustrations see Wright, 105-08.

⁶James E. Hightower, Jr, Compiler, *Illustrating Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), 44.

⁷MacGorman, 59.