19. Romans 6:1–11

So what shall we say? Shall we persist in sin that grace may increase? Certainly not. How can we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him through baptism into death that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so too let us also live a new life ourselves. For if we participated in a death similar to his, we also will participate in a similar resurrection. We know that our old personality was crucified with him that our sinful self might be destroyed so we would no longer be slaves to sin. Because anyone who has died has been delivered from sin. If we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him, since we know that because Christ has been raised from the dead, he is not going to die again. Death no longer has power over him. In his death he died to sin once for all time. In his life he lives for God. So also with you: Consider yourselves to be dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus. (6:1–11)

Paul returns to the crucial question of why Christians should not continue to sin. Paul has already stated that, in the past, human sinfulness gave God an opportunity to show how forgiving he was. Now Paul deals with the logical retort that if we continue to sin in the present we will glorify God by giving him new opportunities to show his infinite mercy.

Paul insists that thanks to the coming of Jesus there are two realms in history. There is, of course, the old, fallen realm of sin and death. That realm stretches back to Adam’s primordial misdeed which affected all his natural descendants. Then there is the realm of salvation.

By his death and resurrection Jesus himself escaped the realm of sin and death and established this new realm of righteousness. At his birth, Christ voluntarily entered the fallen
realm. Hence, he even experienced the suffering that sin causes, because it was sin that led the world to crucify him. Nevertheless, Jesus himself did not sin. To use the language of Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “Although Jesus knew no sin, he [God] made him to be sin for our sake.” Of course, Jesus also experienced death, and Paul has just reminded us that death ultimately resulted from Adam’s sin and is the primary sign of the fallen realm. After Jesus’ crucifixion, however, God raised him from the dead and, consequently, Jesus now lives in the realm where there is no sin or death and shares fully in God’s glory.

By his death and resurrection Jesus has revealed the path for others to follow. For Paul, one way Christ saves us is by showing to us the means to escape death and come to God. We know that Christ died and rose. Hence, we also know that if we suffer as Jesus did, we will also triumph as he did, or to use Paul’s own image, if we participate in his death, we will participate in his resurrection.

We cannot participate in his death and resurrection, however, without breaking our participation in sin, and, hence, sin is not an option for Christians. Sin killed Jesus, since it led the world to crucify him, and, although Jesus himself suffered because of other people’s sin, he never sinned himself. Then through his resurrection he forever left the realm where sin and death reign and returned to the Father. Consequently, anyone who follows the path blazed by Jesus must have nothing more to do with sin.

Of course, Christians mark their definitive break with sin by getting baptized. At baptism Christians make a public commitment to abandon the way of sin and conform their lives to the example of Jesus.

Hence, when people receive baptism, they symbolically share in Christ’s death. In Paul’s day baptism was probably by immersion. Consequently, going down into the water and coming up out of it readily symbolized participation in the death of Jesus and proleptic participation in his resurrection.

Baptism in Paul’s day also involved a real dying to one’s worldly family and rising to a new spiritual one. In Paul’s time,
life as an isolated individual was difficult in the extreme. People needed a web of family and community relationships to sustain themselves. Consequently, people defined who they were in terms of the communities to which they belonged. Indeed, often a person’s name specified either one’s town of origin or who one’s father was (e.g., Jesus of Nazareth, Simon, son of John). At baptism adults changed their primary community. By giving up their religion, they also often had to give up ties to people who practiced that religion. Of course, by entering the church, one acquired a new community that was committed to obeying Jesus. Hence, baptism often necessarily involved a social death and resurrection.

The new community facilitated the break with the realm of sin. Earlier in the letter Paul emphasizes that in the fallen world sinners encourage one another to practice vice (1:32). By contrast, in the church people encourage one another to imitate Christ and be receptive to Christ’s Spirit. Consequently, Paul regards the church as Christ’s body—i.e., the physical location where Christ’s Spirit is at work.

Nevertheless, I believe that when he talks about dying with Jesus, Paul is especially thinking of a spiritual experience in which we increasingly allow the Spirit of Jesus to control us. Later, we will discuss in some detail what Paul means by the Holy Spirit. Here we may merely note that in various places in his letters, when Paul talks about dying with Jesus, he goes on to talk about surrendering to a mighty spiritual force. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:14, Paul writes, “God’s love impels us . . . because one died for all, therefore, all died.” And in Galatians 2:20 we read, “I live no longer; Christ lives in me.”

Accordingly, the reason that Christians cannot continue to sin is that we have died to sin. We have made a fundamental decision to have no more to do with it. As part of that decision, we have left the realm where sin and death reign. By baptism we symbolically died, and we entered the Christian community which is committed to helping one another grow in righteousness, and we have received the Holy Spirit who transforms us. Jesus died because of sin, and we because of Jesus have died to sin.
Questions for reflection:

Does baptism today still mark a break with the realm of sin and death, or has baptism in practice merely become an affirmation of conventional social life? What can we do to restore baptism's original meaning? In the contemporary church do we really encourage one another to imitate Christ? Do we in our own lives ever have the experience of surrendering to a mighty spiritual force that comes from God?

20. Romans 6:12–14

May sin not reign in your mortal self to obey earthly cravings! And do not continue offering your parts to be wicked tools for sin. Instead, offer yourselves to God as though you had been brought to life from the dead and offer your parts to be virtuous tools for God. Because sin will not rule over you for you are not under law but under grace. (6:12–14)

For Paul, trusting in the salvation offered by Jesus and getting baptized make it possible to choose to serve God. Before we accept Jesus, sin conditions our lives, and we cannot even do what is right. Once we accept Jesus, however, we have access to a new spiritual power. Hence, now we can decide whether to obey this new summons or to fall back into obedience to the destructive powers of this age.

Hence, after Paul has explained why Christians have the freedom to choose following Jesus, he urges his readers to surrender to the divine summons. Precisely because his Christian readers have access to God’s grace, they must now use that grace to struggle against sin.

Paul stresses the need for us to offer up to God our various parts. Paul literally tells his readers to offer up their “members.” The Greek word is vague, but Paul probably means both the different aspects of our personalities and of our physical
being. Perhaps he also means the different individuals in the Christian community.

Underlying this exhortation is Paul’s conviction that sin fragments us and makes it impossible for us to control our own selves (e.g., our own desires). Later Paul will explore this insight more fully. Here he merely assumes that receiving God’s grace leads to personal integration and enables us to serve God with our whole being.

Questions for reflection:

What does it mean to offer to God our various parts? Do we sometimes willingly offer to God some parts of our personality while withholding others? If so, what determines which parts we present to God? What happens to the parts that we withhold? What happens to the parts that we offer him?

21. Romans 6:15-23

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not. Do you not know that to whomever you offer yourselves to be obedient slaves, you are slaves to the one you obey, either to sin which produces death or to the obedience which produces righteousness? But thank God that you were slaves to sin and became obedient from the heart to the summary of the teaching which was commended to you. After you were set free from sin, you became slaves to righteousness. (I am speaking simplistically because of your present limitations.) Just as you offered the parts of yourself to be enslaved to filth and lawlessness producing anarchy, so now offer the parts of yourself to be enslaved to righteousness for sanctification. When you were slaves to sin, you were not inhibited by righteousness. So what result did you have at that time from things of which you are now ashamed? The consequence of those things is death. But now
since you have been set free from sin and become enslaved to God, you have sanctification as your result, and the consequence is eternal life. For the wages of sin are death, but God's gift is eternal life by Christ Jesus our Lord. (6:15–23)

Paul reminds his readers that the only choice they have is whom they shall serve. Before they received God's grace, they had to obey sinful desires. Now that they have received God's grace through Christian teaching, they are free to choose. Nevertheless, the options are limited. Absolute autonomy is an illusion. The only choice lies between surrendering to the call of God or to the enticements of sin.

Of course, either choice leads both to freedom and slavery. If we choose to follow God, then we are his servants, but we are no longer dominated by the power of sin. Similarly, if we choose to follow Sin, then we are its servants, but we are not dominated by God. Paul freely admits that, consequently, sinners have a type of freedom that the righteous lack. In this translation I have chosen a modern psychological term to try to capture it, namely, "uninhibited." The sinful person who has no concern either for God or the law does not experience pressure to do good.

The dramatic difference between choosing to serve God or Sin is the ultimate result: life versus death. Serving sin leads to separation from God in this existence and condemnation at the final judgment. Serving God leads to being filled with the Holy Spirit and her gifts in this life, and, to eternal joy in the next.

Consequently, Paul insists yet again that we must not indulge in sin even though Christians are not subject to the law. Sin always leads to destruction.

Despite the fact that we gain salvation by choosing to serve God, salvation remains a gift. Choosing sin automatically results in death. Hence, Paul can write that the "wages [i.e., the inevitable consequences] of sin are death." By contrast, choosing to do what is right does not automatically give us the power to perform it. Instead, God must do something within us so that we can be "obedient from the heart." Later Paul will dwell
on this point in detail. Here he merely notes that eternal life remains “God’s gift.”

We may note in passing that Paul seems to imply that we cannot serve sin with our whole being. At several points in his argument Paul draws parallels between serving sin and serving God. Yet, he never says that we can serve sin with our “heart.” Here “heart” refers to the hidden core of who we are. Many of Paul’s readers were slaves and must have known from experience that they could not serve an abusive master with their hearts. At most they could render external obedience. So too Paul suggests we can serve God with all that we have and are because we know that God gives us life. We can be “obedient from the heart.” But we cannot serve sin in this way; at most we offer sin our “parts.”

Questions for reflection:

Do you agree that we must serve God or serve sin? Or do you believe people can lead their lives without doing either? Do some people serve God or serve sin without realizing what they are doing? What are the benefits of being uninhibited? What are the dangers? Do you feel that eternal life remains a gift even when we have made great sacrifices to serve God? Do you agree that we cannot serve sin with our whole being, whereas we can serve God in this way?

22. Romans 7:1–6

Or do you not know, brothers and sisters (I am addressing those who know the Law) that the Law regulates a person for as long as they are alive. For a married woman is bound by the Law to her husband while he is living. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law concerning a husband. So, therefore, while the husband is alive, she will be labeled an adulteress if she marries another man. But if the husband dies, she is free from