

July 11, 2010 – First Baptist Church, Vancouver

Text: Romans 6:1-11

Title: “Sin ... Don’t Have To (Anymore)”

I have good news for you. About sin! I have really good news about sin. Not just good advice. The authors of Holy Scripture never give us good advice ... about anything ! ... without first giving us good news. Any good advice is grounded in good news. Indeed, apart from the good news, the good advice simply could not be lived.

Here is the good news. We do not have to sin. We do not have to sin. We all do. And we all will in one way or another. But we do not have to sin. We do not have to sin. Why? Because Jesus Christ has done something to sin. Not just something about sin. He has done something to sin. And because of what He has done, we do not have to sin. We do not have to sin.

“Even so,” says the apostle Paul, who next to Jesus of Nazareth, is history’s greatest theologian; “even so, consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11).

Why can Paul say that? “Altered structures of reality.” As I tried to show last Sunday, the coming of Jesus into our world alters the structures of reality. The news spread like wild fire across the collapsing Roman Empire that something has happened in the coming of Jesus that changes the way the universe goes together. Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension alter the configuration of our existence. Forever. In the direction of setting captives free!

So Paul can tell the believers living in the capital city of the empire,

1. Romans 6, verse 2 – “You died to sin”
2. Romans 6, verse 6 – “You shall no longer be slaves to sin.”
3. Romans 6, verse 11 – “Even so, consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus”.

Before the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus reality was configured one way. After the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, reality is configured in another way. And configured in a way that sets captives free!

Before God gave Sharon and me our children, reality was configured for Sharon and me one way. After God gave us our children, reality became configured in another way! I tell couples who are getting married that on a scale of one to ten, marriage changes our lives at a five or six. Do I have any witnesses! I tell couples about to bring a baby into their lives, that on a scale of one to ten children change our lives at twenty! Before our children become teenagers, reality for our family was configured one way: relatively manageable. After our children became teenagers, reality for our family was configured yet another way: less manageable and a whole lot more adventurous!

We learned two weeks ago that the city is planning to re-zone our neighborhood. We live two blocks from the King Edward Station on the Canada line. The city wants to re-zone the area within four blocks of the station to allow for significant densification. We will likely now have

four storey apartments across the alley behind our house. Before we all heard the news, our neighborhood was configured one way ... many have worked hard to make it a kind of “village”. After we heard the news, our neighbors are anxious that it is now going to be configured in another way.

“In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things came into being by Him. ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:1-2,14). Or as the Message has it: “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” And when He did, He began to alter the way the neighborhood goes together. In the direction of setting captives free! Last Sunday, I suggested the picture of a web. Reality is like a giant web, a huge cobweb. We can give names to the threads and strands that make up the web. Names like water, air, fire, earth; names like gravity, electromagnetism, nuclear energy; names like justice, mercy light. And names like, sin, evil, and death – the enemies of life. Before Jesus moved into the neighborhood, before He lived our life, died on the cross, rose from the grave and was seated on the throne, sin, evil, and death were woven together one way. After Jesus died on the cross, rose from the grave and was seated on the throne, sin, evil, and death are woven together in another way.

In his letter to the Romans, and especially in chapter 6, the apostle Paul – whom many call “The Apostle of the Heart Set Free” – focuses on the place that sin has in this giant web. Before the cross, empty tomb and ascension of Jesus to the throne of the universe, sin was present and at work in human life one way. After the cross, empty tomb, and ascension, sin is present and at work in human life in another way! Sin is not gone. As we all know. But something has happened to sin. Its place in the universe has been altered. Forever. In the direction of setting captives free! Good news. Not just good advice.

You likely noticed as we read Romans 6, that Paul seems to almost personify sin. He speaks of sin, not as specific actions or attitudes, but as a power or force. To get at what Paul is getting at we can spell “sin” with capital letters: SIN. Before the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, sin had one place in reality. After the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of the Man of Galilee, sin has a very different place.

“Even so, consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

The good advice “consider yourselves”, is grounded in good news – “dead to sin ... alive to God”. At the cross and through the empty tomb, Jesus has done something to sin. Not just something about sin. An what He did alters the structures of reality in the direction of setting captives free.

We need to hear Paul’s good news in context. What he declares about sin in Romans 6 emerges out of his exposition of the Gospel in Romans 1-5. That exposition culminates in one of the most life-giving claims of the Bible, Romans chapter 5, verse 20: “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”! “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more”! The word “abounded” is literally “super-abounded”. Where sin increased, where human unbelief and rebellion and rejection of God increased ... the grace of God increased faster super-abounded. How about that for a banner over the city: “Where sin increases, grace super-

abounds”? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it: “God’s grace outruns the avalanche” of sin (in *Creation and Fall*).

Now nearly everywhere the apostle Paul announced this scandalously good, good news, a question arose. Paul quotes it at the beginning of Romans 6: “Are we to continue in sin so that grace might increase” (6:1)? Good question! if God’s grace outruns sin, why bother trying to stop sinning? If the Living God delights to shower mercy and grace on sinners – praise His name! why not give God even more opportunities for delight by continuing to sin? If we have been freely justified by the hugely merciful grace of God; if the more we sin the more God gets to manifest His amazing and praiseworthy work of grace by forgiving us; why not continue in sin that grace may abound?

It is not a merely theoretical question. Some people in Paul’s day actually reasoned in that way ... and acted on it. God’s free justification of sinners, was used to justify freely sinning. Philip Yancey, in his book, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?*, tells of a group of devout martyrs in the third century who devoted their last nights in prison to drunkenness, revelry and promiscuity. Yancey also tells us about an extremist group in England known as the Ranters, who developed a doctrine of “holiness of sin”, as they called it, and acted on it by sinning as wildly as possible to experience more grace! (185-186).

“Are we to sin that grace may abound?”

Paul’s response is a thunderous “No!” “By no means!” “May it never be!” It is his way of saying, “Are you out of your minds?”

And the reason for his thunderous “No!” is not just that sin has horrible consequences in our souls. The reason for his thunderous “No!” is the Gospel, the good news. Chapter 6, verse 2 – “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” The good news is that sin is not what it was before Jesus died and rose again. Oh, sin is still here ... and still bad, really bad. But although still here and bad, it is not what it used to be. Or, to be more precise, sin does not have the kind of relationship with us it once had! To be more precise, sin does not have the kind of claim on us it once had! “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?”

Focus on that news – “died to sin”. I died to sin? You died to sin? What is Paul getting at? Altered structures of reality.

Focus on the phrase “died to sin” by asking three questions. When? How? In what sense? When did I die to sin? How did I die to sin? In what sense – and to what degree – did I die to sin? Each question take us deeper into the good news. The third question is the most critical.

First question: When? When did I die to sin? When did you die to sin? Paul answers: When you were baptized. Romans 6, verse 3. When you were baptized into Christ Jesus. Note the preposition “into”. Through baptism we were immersed into a Person. Through baptism we were immersed into the Creator, Redeemer, Re-Creator. Through baptism we were transferred from the old humanity headed by the first Adam, into a new reality headed by the last Adam, Jesus of Nazareth.

Now, for Paul, baptism is not a magical rite that automatically actualizes what it symbolizes (see 1 Cor. 10). The issue is not the rite *per se*, but the reality the rite portrays; namely placing our lives into Christ Jesus. Baptism is placing our lives into the hands of Jesus.

In Paul's day, baptism ordinarily took place at the time a person came to faith. On the Day of Pentecost, for example, 3,000 people came to confess Jesus as Savior and Lord, and were immediately immersed in water (Acts 2:42; 8:34-38). For many people in our day the actual rite of baptism takes place sometime after placing our lives into Jesus. So I think we can rightly paraphrase Paul's answer to our question, "When did I die to sin?" "When you placed your life into Jesus Christ ... an act of faith symbolized and sealed by baptism".

Second question: How did I die to sin? Answer: by becoming attached to Jesus. I died to sin by becoming attached to Jesus. Other religions and philosophies of life call people to follow the great leader or to imitate the great leader. And so we are to do: follow Jesus and imitate Him. Tall order! But it goes much deeper. He calls us to go beyond following and imitating, to actually participating in ... being united with Him. We not only walk behind Him and live under Him; we live with Him and in Him (and He in us).

And get this: Paul tells us that our participation and union with Jesus is total! Total. We participate in and are united with Jesus in the totality of His life and work. Through baptism we are united with Him in His death. And through baptism we are united with Him in His resurrection. And through baptism we are united with Him in His ascension, in His present state of being.

And here is the good news about sin. Jesus' death was a death to sin (6:10). Jesus' resurrection was a resurrection to the newness of life (6:4). Jesus' present existence is a life lived to God (6:10).

How then did I, do I, die to sin? By being united through baptism, to Jesus in His death, which is a death to sin.

Paul drives home the objectivity of His death with two bold words. In Romans 6, verse 6 he says, "Our old self was crucified with Christ". And in Romans 6, verse 4 he says, "We have been buried with Christ". Crucified and buried. "Crucified". This is part of what Jesus is getting at when He calls us to take up our cross and follow Him daily. In the first century, the only people who carried crosses were on their way to crucifixion. The word "buried" makes the point more boldly. As NT scholar Charles Cranfield puts it: "... burial is the seal set to the fact of death – it is when a man's relatives and friends leave his body in the grave and return home without him that the fact he no longer shares their life is exposed with inescapable conclusion" (Romans, Vol. I, p. 304). In union with Christ Jesus we are, like Him, crucified and buried.

Baptism is, therefore, a kind of funeral: "Died with Christ". And a kind of resurrection: "Raised with Christ". "Alive in Christ".

News ... not just advice. Something has changed. You can see then where Paul is leading us. In light of being crucified and buried with Jesus, it is flat out inconsistent to continue to live in sin.

Not impossible to continue to live in sin, as Paul makes clear in his letter, in Romans 7, where he struggles with this tension: “The good I wish, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not wish” (7:19). Paul’s point ... his good news ... is not that it is now impossible for us to sin. His point is that in union with Jesus – His death and resurrection, it is now illogical to go on in sin.

So we come to the third question, the critical question: “In what sense did I die to sin?” To what degree? Here we need to listen to Paul even more carefully.

Paul uses the phrase “died to sin” three times in the text: twice in reference to believers, and once in reference to Jesus. The key to understanding in what sense we have died to sin is to understand the sense in which He, Christ Jesus died for us. Jesus died to sin in that he paid the penalty for sin. The penalty for sin is death. Jesus paid that penalty; He died to death. And here is Paul’s major point, his good news. Since the penalty, or debt, has been paid, sin no longer has any claim on Jesus ... or on anyone united with Him.

Say you owe Royal Bank Visa \$3,000. As long as you owe that 3,000 you are alive to Royal Bank. Royal Bank has a claim on you ... it has its clutches in you. Right? But ... once the debt is paid, Royal Bank has no more claim on you. You are dead to Royal Bank. Hallelujah! Or say I owe Canada Revenue \$8,000. As long as I owe that debt, I am alive to Canada Revenue. I am its slave, so to speak. It has its clutches in me. Right? But ... Imagine Jesus coming along and paying the \$8,000! Because the debt is paid, Canada Revenue has no more claim on me. I am dead to Canada Revenue. Hallelujah!

That’s the good news about sin. The debt of sin has been paid by Jesus, on the cross. He, therefore, is dead to sin. Sin has no claim on Him. In union with Him we are dead to sin. In union with Him sin has no more claim on us either. We are no longer beholding to sin!

Paul is not saying that we are now insensitive to sin. In the 1960’s J.B. Phillips published a paraphrase of the NT. I think it is still the best paraphrase in the English language. His work on Romans 8 is brilliant. But he made a mistake in his paraphrase of Romans 6, which, I think he then suffered for in his own life. He paraphrased “dead to sin” as “dead to the appeal and power of sin.” So he rendered Romans 6, verse 11, “dead to the appeal and power of sin”. Phillips suffered from depression, and I think it was partly because he misunderstood Paul, taking Paul in a perfectionist direction. Paul is not saying we are immune to sin. I wish that were the case! Sin is still operative, still powerful, appealing, alluring, looks to get its clutches in us. What Paul is declaring is that we no longer have to respond to sin’s appeal ... for we are no longer beholding to sin! The debt has been paid. the claim has been nullified. In Jesus’ name, sin has to let us go!

Grapple just a bit longer. Romans 6, verse 7: “the one who has died is freed from sin”. The word “freed” is literally, “justified”. “The one who has died is justified from sin”. No longer obligated. Romans 6, verse 6: “Our old self was crucified with Christ, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin”. “Done away with” seems to imply there is no way a true disciple of Jesus can sin. The verb is used in the book of Hebrews, Chapter 2, verse 14, with reference to the devil. And there it is translated “rendered powerless”. The word means, quoting John Stott, “Not to become extinct, but to be defeated; not to be annihilated, but

to be deprived of power. Our old nature is no more extinct than the devil; but God's will is that the dominion of both be broken" (Man Made New, 44).

Now we are going to land the plane. Through the death of Jesus, sin's hold on the world has been broken. And the body of sin deprived of its ultimate power. We no longer have to respond to sin. We do ... and will. But the good news is we do not have to. Sin is no longer the master; we are no longer its slave. The NT does not simply entreat us to "stop sinning". The NT entreats us to throw ourselves on the Gospel. In the death and resurrection of Jesus, something has happened to sin. And in union with Jesus we get in on that something. Right in the middle of life in this world, we get in on what Jesus has done to sin.

I can now look sin in the face, and say "I do not have to give in to you." Bitterness, deceit, lust, gluttony ... "I do not have to give in to you". To which sin says to me, "Oh yes you do. And besides you know you want to give in to me". To which I can now say, "You are right ... I do want to give in to you. But you are wrong ... you are forgetting the Gospel .. I do not have to give in. Jesus Christ is dead to you. I have been baptized into Him. I am united to Him in His death and resurrection and ascension life. You have no claim on Him. And because I am His, you have no claim on me either.

Therefore, sin, I am going to present the members of my body to Jesus ... not to you. I present my hands to Him ... not to you. I present my feet to Him ... not to you. I present my eyes to Him ... not to you. I present my ears to Him ... not to you. I present my mouth to Him ... not to you. I present my brain to Him ... not to you. I present my needs and drives and longings and glands to Jesus ... not to you.

Good news. Not just good advice. The structures of reality have been altered. Jesus calls us to lean into the new configuration. Before He died and rose again sin was master. After He died and rose again, sin is mastered by Jesus. "Even so, consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus". "In Christ Jesus". In Him who died and rose again... and lives to set captives free.