

Does Grace make Obedience Optional?

In this series of articles we're asking—and seeking to answer—the question, “Does God’s grace in Jesus Christ given for sinners make our obedience to Scriptural teaching optional?” Last time we saw from Paul’s teaching in Romans 5:20 that, with the coming of the Mosaic Law (written on tablets of stone), sin increased in proportion to the written law. And when sin increased, grace increased all the more! In light of this truth, Paul enters into chapter 6 anticipating that someone may ask, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” Paul answers his own rhetorical question in this way, “By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

As we pick up Paul’s previous statement again today we’re brought face to face with the reality that those who have died to sin—all true Christians—cannot continue to live in unbroken patterns of sin because that would be a contradiction in terms. It needs to be stated that Paul is not speaking of some type of unbiblical concept of sinless perfection. Neither the Scriptures, nor our personal experience, teach us that we can attain sinless perfection in this life. But, it is true that Christians have a new nature and our lives have, necessarily, changed and are changing for the better.

Paul continues this line of teaching in verse 3: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” In speaking of being “baptized into Christ” Paul is referring to our union with Christ. Christians are united to Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. In fact, Paul speaks directly to the question of our obedience in verse 4: “We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, 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.” As those who have died to sin and rose again in Christ, we are called to “walk in newness of life.” Although Christians are far from perfect; and although we’re not yet what we will one day be, we’re not who we once were before our salvation!

I want to investigate Paul’s teaching further by asking the question, “In what way is Paul speaking of the Christian as having died?” Let’s look now at verse 6: “We know that our old self was crucified with him (Jesus) in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.” Admittedly there’s mystery here, but Paul is clearly speaking of the fact of Christians have, in some sense, “died” resulting in a radical break with our old life of sin. In verse 4 Paul proves our death by showing that we’ve also been “buried.” The “death” that Paul is speaking of is a real death to our old “self” i.e., our old nature and way of living. Theologian John Murray, commenting on this passage writes, “We cannot be partakers of Christ’s resurrection life unless we are partakers of his death, and death is certified and confirmed in burial.” We who were once “enslaved to sin” as our master now have a new Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. Before our union with Christ our enslavement to sin included the truth that we could make no choices that were

spiritually good or pleasing to God. But now, because of our new nature, we're able to serve and obey our new Master.

We've not only died and been buried, but our resurrection is to a new nature and that's exactly why Paul is teaching that sin no longer has dominion over a Christian. As sure as it's true that Christ rose from the dead on that Easter Sunday morning so long ago—if we're truly Christians—our desires and our lives will experience positive change. In summary, we're not only united to Christ in his death and burial, we're also united to him in his resurrection! Listen to Paul's words in verses 7-11: "For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to in, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Paul is clearly teaching us that God's grace does not make obedience optional!

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