March 20, 2022

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SAYING NO TO THE DARK SIDE

Romans 6

Rosalind Picard is a professor at MIT who has doctorates in both electrical engineering and computer science. In her younger years she was always smart, always the top student. Early on she decided she was an atheist. She decided smart people didn’t need religion and she dismissed people who believed in God, viewing them as uneducated. But she encountered some very smart people she really admired who were believers. Through their influence and that of another good friend she began to consider faith in Christ. It made more and more sense to her. One day it occurred to her that she could try an experiment. This appealed to her as a scientist. She could try putting faith in God and see what happened. She says, “After praying, ‘Jesus Christ, I take you to be the Lord of my life,’ my world changed dramatically. It was as if a flat black and white existence turned full color and three dimensional. I felt joy and freedom.” She found a whole new kind of life, one far better than she had before.

When Laurie and I got married we owned a 19 inch black and white television. Later came a big improvement when we got a color TV. Things got even better when we got a 25 inch color TV, then later a 32 inch one. Could there be anything better? It turned out there could be. We now have a 55 inch HD TV. Do you think I would ever be open to going back to watching a 19 inch black and white non-HD set? No way. Do you think Rosalind Picard would ever be interested in going back to her flat black and white life? Absolutely not. That is a crucial truth when we think about our motivation for living in obedience to God. We will find out about that as we study Romans 6. This is a passage that leaves many of us with a vague uneasiness that maybe we don’t fully understand it. After this morning you still won’t fully understand it, but maybe we can clear up some questions.

PAUL ASKS AN OBVIOUS QUESTION

In this chapter Paul asks an obvious question. In verse 1 he says, “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” That is a good question. The gospel of grace as Paul has laid it out in the previous chapters says by believing in Jesus Christ we are forgiven no matter what we do. We are declared righteous by God because we believe and for no other reason. Our good deeds and our bad deeds neither add to nor subtract from that rightness we have in Christ. So that seems to remove any threat of punishment or judgment. Why not just go with the flow of our fallen human nature and have a good time, because the more we fail, the more we get grace from God? The more he forgives us the more his grace is magnified. Whenever you talk about the gospel and you give people straight, undiluted grace, which is what the gospel of Christ is, you often get a “Yes, but” response to it.

Someone will object that God must want us to be holy like him. Surely he doesn’t say we just believe a promise and then live however we choose, does he? If just believing is all there is to it, then being a wild, horrible person doesn’t matter. How could God be holy and then set up a system where people just believe they get a gift from him but they have no motivation to actually live a good life? There has to be some requirement to live out at least some semblance of godliness, doesn’t there?

Back in 2010 the Chicago Bears NFL team posted a series of videos on their website that followed the team’s rookies from their arrival at training camp through the preseason. NFL teams usually have about 80 players invited to their training camp. After several weeks they must cut that number down to 65. They must pare that number down to 53 by the beginning of the season. That year 19 rookies were invited to camp, and the team ended up putting only 7 on the first game roster. At that time the Bears’ coach was a man named Lovie Smith. One of the videos showed part of his first orientation talk with the rookies. He brought up the reality of those numbers, knowing that was what was most on their minds. Then he gave them a challenge. He said, “Make us put you on the team.” He was challenging them to work so hard, to play so well in practice that the coaches couldn’t imagine cutting them. He told them to take the decision out of the coaches’ hands and let their performance make the decision.

Isn’t that how we think God must work with us? You have to work hard and perform, and if you don’t, the thing you fear will happen. You will be cut from the team. Make yourself so good that God has to accept you. This is how you can avoid punishment. It is the answer to divine FOMO, fear of missing out on God’s eternal kingdom. If you don’t live a godly life, if you don’t do the right things, then you will fail to make the most important cut that will ever be made.

That is how we think things work with human beings. Suppose that you are opening a new business. You hire employees to run your new company. You have a meeting and tell them that you appreciate them and are grateful for them, so much so that you want them to know that they are going to get paid no matter what they do. If they come to work late, if they don’t come at all, if they show up but don’t actually do any work, if they steal money from the company, they will still get paid, what do you think is going to happen? Oh, no doubt they will all be so grateful to you for your kind approach to them that they will work super hard and be extremely conscientious. Wrong. Your company will fall apart because you will never be able to count on employees showing up or actually doing their work.

It feels to some people like the gospel of grace removes the motivation to live with at least some semblance of righteousness. Why not continue to sin indeed? Way back in the 1990’s I read an article that brought this issue into focus. It was a long time ago, but I’ve never forgotten the article because it framed the issue Paul was addressing in very modern terms. The article was written because of the scandal that occurred when President Bill Clinton had his dalliance with an intern. This particular article wasn’t trying to argue about his guilt or innocence. It addressed the odd dissonance between President Clinton’s consistent claim to be an evangelical Christian and the fact that whether you liked him or not, you had to admit he had the sexual morality of an alley cat. How did those two things go together? The author pinpointed what he labeled Baptist theology so common in the South that Clinton grew up in. That theology said all that mattered was believing in Jesus, and that as long as you believed in him you were saved, no matter what you might do. In the writer’s mind that theology uncoupled morality from salvation. Doesn’t that sound like what Paul has done?

Yes, why not go on sinning if it doesn’t matter? Paul’s answer to that question is translated in verse 2, “By no means.” I would translate it, “No way!” Or maybe, “Absolutely not.” The message in this chapter is unequivocal. In verse 12 he said, “Do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies so that you obey its evil desires.” The word “evil” is actually not in the original text. It was added by the translators. Paul literally just said “so that you obey its desires.” In other words, so that you do what sin wants you to do.

Sin seems to many today like an archaic expression. They think it irrelevant to modern life. Some even think sin doesn’t even exist. But sin is something deeper than a list of no-no’s. It is a force that exists in every human being that is perverse, self-obsessed and dark. Paul refers to it here almost like it is an alien force that has taken up residence in us. It is the resident evil, and it has infected every part of our being. It is what causes all the ugliness, hurt, conflict, violence and wrong that humans do. It is that compulsion that causes us to have attitudes and make choices that hurt others and ourselves. We see it play out in our lives and the lives of others every single day. It is a blight on the human race that is persistent, resistant to all efforts to ameliorate it.

Paul says we absolutely should not let sin have its way. In verse 13 he said, “Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as instruments of wickedness.” I’m not a fan of that translation. Paul literally wrote, “Do not present your members to sin as weapons of wrong.” Sin is this force within us, and it wants to use our minds, our tongues, our abilities, our thoughts, for evil ends. He says we should absolutely not let it do that to us. We should see that it wants to turn us into tools of damage and destruction to us and to others, and we should refuse to let it do that to us.

Paul’s answer clearly is that we should not keep sinning. Don’t let sin have its way in our hearts and lives. But why not? The question remains, since the gospel removes that threat of punishment, what will motivate us to resist the pull of that evil force inside us?

PAUL’S ANSWER RAISES QUESTIONS

In verse 2 Paul says the reason is, “We are those who have died to sin.” If we are dead to sin it won’t affect us anymore. Go to the cemetery and try saying to the people buried there, “Hey, I have a yummy molten lava cake here that is to die for (if you’ll excuse the expression).” How many of those people will be jumping up to have some of that tempting stuff? None. They are dead. Offer $1 million to the first person that pops out of their grave. How many will take you up on your offer? Zero. The things of this world, including delicious desserts or money, don’t affect them. They’re dead to them. If I’m dead to sin, doesn’t that mean it doesn’t affect me anymore?

This is where I run into a problem. That is just plain not true of me. I’m not immune to sin’s influence on me. I wish I were, but I’m not. It gets even worse when you get to verse 7 and find that there Paul asserts that we are “set free from sin.” We are completely free of it. Yeah, so not true of me.

Let’s ask, is pride sin? The Bible says God is opposed to the proud, so yes. Do I ever have an issue with pride? I don’t think I’m an especially proud or arrogant person, but I know if you can find and push the right button, pride rears its ugly head. When that happens I don’t immediately think, “Let’s sit around the campfire, make s’mores together and sing Kumbayah.” How about coveting? Is that a sin? Yes, in fact it’s one of the Big Ten. For quite some time Laurie and I used to watch a bunch of TV shows on the HGTV channel, like Fixer, Flipper Flop. We don’t so much anymore. Maybe that’s good. There was nothing like plopping down on the couch for a good covet fest. “But those shows are a good source of home decorating ideas.” Yes, and dissatisfaction with what I have and wanting something else, otherwise known as coveting. I still covet a beach house I saw on one of those shows probably 5 years ago. How about worry? Is it a sin? Jesus said bluntly, “Do not worry.” If I worry, I am directly disobeying him. I’d call that sin. Well, I’m not worrying. I’m just concerned. How about being self centered or failing to love someone? Are those sins? Indeed they are. Guilty as charged. Have you ever gossiped, or been envious of someone?

 Yes, but those sins aren’t all that bad. Maybe I’m mostly dead to sin. Wesley in *The Princess Bride* was mostly dead at one point. Maybe I have mostly died to sin. Paul said we’ve died, not mostly died. Pride, selfishness, coveting, and the rest reveal the presence of sin in me. It’s pretty hard to ignore the fact that if I’m dead to the dark side, I wouldn’t be feeling that. I’m supposed to be free of things like that. I’m not.

I’m sure all of you are thinking that since you are dead to sin, you are completely free of its pull, that you are appalled. Your pastor has just confessed that he’s not dead to sin. Doesn’t that mean he’s a phony, that he’s been faking it all these years? Paul says of believers in Jesus, “We are those who have died to sin.” If Myatt hasn’t died to sin, doesn’t that mean he’s not even a believer? Oh this is terrible. I am so disillusioned.

How many of us would say that we don’t feel the pull of sin? This statement is pivotal in this passage, and unfortunately it doesn’t ring true for us. What do we do with this? One option is to conclude that Paul was just wrong. We aren’t dead to sin and he didn’t know what he was talking about. Another option is to conclude that it is true, but not for me. It’s probably true for some people, but there must be something wrong with me. But I’m not going to admit that to anybody because then I’ll look bad. Of course, what I don’t realize is everybody else is thinking the same thing! We all have that spiritual problem and sin does continue to exert influence on us.

A common approach to this problem is to say that what this means is that we have died to and are freed from the *power* of sin. The idea is that before a person puts faith in Christ they are subject to the power of sin. Once they become a follower of Jesus, sin is still around, it still might exert a pull on them, but it doesn’t control them. They are able to choose not to sin, where before they knew Christ they did not have that ability. Sin owned them back then, but now they have, in Christ, been freed from the power of sin.

The most obvious problem with this interpretation is that Paul didn’t say we have died to the power of sin. There was a simple and obvious way for Paul to write that if that’s what he wanted to say. He didn’t do that, which suggests to me that’s not what he meant. But a second problem is that it ends up not really being much different than saying we have died to sin. It still doesn’t match up very well with reality. Do we really want to say that people who don’t have faith in Jesus are under sin’s control and they can’t choose to not obey it? It has power over them and they are helpless against it? I know people who are not followers of Jesus who clearly choose at times to resist the pull of sin. They are not helpless against it.

Verse 11 presents us with another conundrum. In verse 11 he said, “in the same way, count yourselves dead to sin.” The word “count” means to “consider” or “think of yourselves” as dead to sin. Here's my problem: if we have died to sin or to its power, why would we need to think of ourselves as being dead to it? If we are dead to it, we wouldn’t need to think about that at all. We’re dead to it, end of story.

When Laurie was 18 years old she had surgery on her feet. She had bunions removed from both feet. She said it was exceedingly painful. It solved the problem of the bunions, but it left her with numbness in spots on the top of her feet. Apparently some nerves were damaged in the surgery, and they never came back. It’s been many years now, and those nerves are still dead. They don’t transmit any signals to her brain about sensations. Laurie does not have to consider those nerves dead to sensation. They are dead. She doesn’t have to tell herself if she touches those spots she won’t feel it. If we are dead to sin, or to the power of sin, we won’t feel it. We won’t need to consider ourselves dead to it, we would just be dead to it. So why would Paul feel the need to tell us to consider ourselves dead to sin?

Verse 12 also bothers me. Paul says, “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its desires.” Why would he feel the need to say that to us if we’re dead to sin? If we’re free of it, we’re free of the pull of its desires. We’re immune to it, so you don’t need to tell us not to obey it. We just won’t.

One more matter gives me heartburn. In verse 7 Paul wrote, “Anyone who has died has been set free from sin.” This comes on the heels of Paul saying that through baptism we are “united with him in a death like his.” So we have died with Jesus, thus are set free from sin. Verse 7 is actually the one that convinced me there is something else going on in these verses than we typically think. That’s because of the Greek word translated “Set free” or “freed.” The problem with this word is it doesn’t mean set free or freed. I did research on this word, digging into both its roots and its usage. I looked for some connection, even if remote, with the idea of being freed. I could find none at all. It never means “set free.” In one of the best commentaries on Romans the writer, a scholar I have great respect for, admitted the word does not mean “set free” or “freed,” then he gave a somewhat tortured explanation for why we should translate it that way nevertheless. It was unconvincing, to say the least.

At this point I need to caution you that I am going to take a different approach to this chapter than most Bible scholars. In fact, I doubt that you will find anyone who sees this chapter the way I do. That is a concern. When you study something that has been around for 2000 years and you come up with an interpretation that no one else adopts, it is likely because it is just plain wrong. Seeing something that no one else sees is how heresies get started. So I think it is entirely possible that you will think that I have waded into theological water that is over my head and have drowned in it. If you think I’m completely out in left field, that’s all right. But I do want to ask you to consider what I say. And in the end, even if you think my path through the passage is wrong, I promise we will end up with an answer to the main question that makes sense.

If the word didn’t mean “freed,” what did it mean? This word is central to all that Paul has been saying in this part of Romans. He has used forms of this word 30 times in the previous 3 chapters. It is at the heart of what the gospel is about. It is the word that is translated “justified” or “declared righteous.” That is what it means every time Paul uses it in Romans. To suddenly decide in this one instance it means “freed” when there is zero rationale for doing so makes no sense whatsoever.

So what Paul said in verse 7 is that we who have died in Christ have been justified, declared righteous from sin. I believe that Paul’s main point is the same one he is making all along. We are justified, declared righteous, by believing in Jesus. In being united with him in his death by faith we have died to sin in the sense of being freed of its punishment by being declared righteous by God in Christ.

PAUL GIVES REASONS TO LIVE A GODLY LIFE

It will help us grasp what Paul meant when we notice that Paul says in verse 3 that when we were baptized into Jesus’ death. Paul explains what he means by that in verse 5 when he says we “have been united with him in a death like his.” Literally Paul’s original said we “have been united in the likeness of his death.” What kind of death did Jesus die? Obviously he died by crucifixion, but in the context of this discussion how was that dying to sin? What kind of death did he die to sin? Jesus didn’t die to either the presence or the power of sin. He didn’t have to. Sin had no power over him, nor was it present in him. 1 Peter 2:22 says of Jesus, “he committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth.” 2 Corinthians 5:21 says of Jesus that God, “made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.” Hebrews 4:15 says Jesus, “has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” 1 John 3:5 says of Jesus, “in him there is no sin.” 1 Peter 1:19 says that Jesus was “unblemished, spotless.”

Jesus didn’t need to die to sin’s presence or its power, because he was completely without sin. So in relation to sin, what kind of death did he endure? He died for the *penalty* of sin. In verse 23 in this chapter Paul is going to say “the wages of sin is death.” Jesus paid that price for us. He died that death for us. When we put our faith in Jesus we are united with him in that death, meaning our penalty is paid by him. We are forgiven because the punishment has been paid by Jesus.

There is a noteworthy grammatical fact in these verses. When Paul wrote in verse 2 that we have died to sin, the word, “to” is not actually in the text. Most of the time the Greek language was very specific, but in this case there is some ambiguity. Paul wrote in such a way that we have to supply a preposition here. The case of the words Paul used limits our range of possibilities. We could use the word “to,” but we could also use “in,” “with,” “by,” “regarding” or “for.” I think that last is best. In our being united with Christ in his death we died “for” sin.

In other words, it doesn’t mean that we are immune to sin, that sin is no longer present in us or we don’t feel the power of its pull. The death we are talking about is for the penalty of sin. Because of that death we are now justified from sin. We no longer need fear its penalty, because in Jesus’ death the penalty has been paid.

You might ask why I am belaboring this point. I am doing so because I do not want us to be put into a situation where we assert things that are not true. God is not a fan of pretending or of living in denial. It erodes our faith if we have to say, “Well, the Scripture says I’m dead to sin so I guess it must be true,” even though we know that it isn’t so. If we have to affirm something in the Bible that we know in our hearts is not true of us, that sets us up to wonder what else the Bible claims is true, but it really isn’t.

Many years ago there was a guy in our church at the time who was a really good guy and a rock solid follower of Jesus. He was extremely knowledgeable about the Bible. He was a good man, and a friend. I liked this guy. He lived his faith and was a great example of a godly husband and father. All would agree to that. But there was one small quirk about this guy. He believed that he did not sin. He did not deny that there had been sin in his life. He knew that he had failed at times and that’s why Jesus died for him. But he honestly thought that now he was dead to sin, and in his daily experience he did not sin, and really, he wasn’t even especially tempted by it.

Was he the example of a follower of Jesus who was truly dead to sin? He kind of looked like it. There was a problem with that idea. I knew of things he did that were sins. Oh, they weren’t shameful, depraved sins. But they were still sins. Though he couldn’t see it, he was proud. In his pride, he asserted some things that I and everyone else knew were patently false, but he couldn’t see it because his pride wouldn’t let him. Pride doesn’t seem that awful, but remember that C. S. Lewis said it is the worst of all sins. It is in fact, the root of all other sins! I saw some other things in this guy, in situations where he did some things that were not loving to other people, but he had a rationale for why were not actually unloving.

This was not a bad man. Like I said, he was a friend, and he was a person almost everyone in a church would respect. He was earnest in his faith. He tried to do the best he could. But believing he was dead to sin landed him in a place where he believed things that simply were not true.

I think Paul emphasized this point about being declared righteous through Christ’s death so heavily here because it is key to how we live. Remember the foundation of a new life is believing that we have peace with God and that God loves us. If we do not understand these truths and are not totally certain they are true of us, we will never live a truly godly life. Our entire ability to obey God is utterly grounded in our belief that God loves us and we are at peace with him. Those two truths, in turn, are totally dependent on the fact that we are united with Christ in his death so that the penalty for our wrong, our sinfulness has been paid in full. It is no longer a problem between us and God. It has been dealt with in Christ, and so because of that we are now freed to live a new kind of life.

I’m going to let you in on a little secret that’s not actually a secret it all, but it feels like a secret because people often don’t seem to know it. The secret is that the system we think is necessary to get people to live in obedience to God has never worked! That system is, list the rules, offer rewards for keeping them, but warn of consequences if you don’t. It’s back to, make God put you on his team or you’ll be cut from the squad. If that system had worked, Jesus would never have had to die for us. At best, that system can make it look like people are doing what God says, but it’s only on the surface. Paul has already said in 3:10 that there was no one righteous before God, not even one. In other words, when people lived by that system they all failed. In Galatians 3:21 says, “If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.” Yes, it would, but there is no such law that can do that.

But this thing of being declared righteous by God through faith in Jesus Christ, this new covenant, can give life, life that motivates us to not let the evil force of sin rule over us. Why should we choose not to let sin dominate us? It is because it is a matter of life and death. Look at the end of the chapter. In a most familiar verse Paul says, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ.” In verse 21 Paul asked, “What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death.” Letting sin win always results in death.

Consider the case of those Roman Christians. Some of them were Jewish, but most of them were Gentile. The Jewish people had tried to live by the Law of Moses, but it left them painfully aware of falling short. It left them wanting to know they were righteous in God’s eyes and were certain of eternity in his kingdom. The Gentile people had lived believing in a bunch of phony gods that left them longing for something real, something meaningful, something with hope. Those people had all put their faith in Christ. Paul asked an obvious question. Why would you want to go back to the life you used to have when you left it because you needed something better?

Not long ago Laurie and I got dinner from a Del Taco. I can’t remember the last time we had a Del Taco meal, but I have always had fond memories of the place. When I was in my 20’s I loved going there. Laurie and I had some happy times there together before we got married. But I must admit that my reaction to my recent meal there was, “Why did I like this place?” The food just wasn’t very good. It was disappointing for us both. Is the problem that that restaurant is not as good as it used to be? Or is it that our tastes have changed? I suspect it’s the latter. We’ve gotten used to eating better food, so now we find the prospect of going back to something not as good as what we are used to quite unappealing. We have a plethora of taco shops here that are much better, like Rico’s, Rudy’s, Rubio’s, Roberto’s, Filiberto’s, Adalberto’s, Rickaberto’s, Laurieberto’s. Hmm, think I got carried away there. Why go back to Del Taco when you have much better options? Paul is saying something like that. Why would you go back to that old life that only produced death when you have a whole new kind of life? My apologies if you are a fan of Del Taco.

Underlying all of this is the picture of the death of Jesus Christ. This is what it took to declare us righteous before God and obtain eternal life for us. This is what sin, that dark force in us, produced. That should be a graphic reminder that this is what the dark side always produces. It put the Son of God on an instrument of torture and death. It inevitably causes guilt, distance from God, absence of peace, loss of joy, damage to relationships, emptiness, hopelessness, frustration, bitterness and finally condemnation. That’s what it produces every time we give ourselves to it. In Christ we have been justified, freed from the penalty of sin that we deserve. Why would we ever choose to go back to that which always ends in death for us?

CONCLUSION

There are some crucial ideas in this chapter for us to live by.

SPIRITUAL FOMO IS NO LONGER OUR MOTIVATION

Every religion, every “law” system is driven by spiritual FOMO, meaning the fear that we are going to miss out with God. We are going to be cut from his squad. That would be the worst case of missing out one could ever experience.

In Christ, by faith, we have been justified from the penalty of sin. That is the guarantee that we will not miss out. Spiritual FOMO is off the table. That means that we no longer must seek to say no to the dark side in order to make sure we don’t miss out. That issue has been forever decided in our favor in Christ.

THE DARK SIDE ALWAYS PRODUCES DEATH

Though loss of relationship with God, loss of his acceptance and love, is no longer a concern for us, this principle still applies. The dark side never gives life, it always drains it away. Life, real life, is full of peace, joy, hope, love, unity, meaning, patience and kindness. When we give in to the dark side we get the opposite of those things. We get lack of peace, hopelessness, loss of joy, loss of love, dissension, emptiness, impatience, anger. Why would anyone choose that?

IN CHRIST WE HAVE NEW LIFE

We have this new life, an eternal life, through faith in Christ. It only makes sense to live that new life rather than to go back to the old life that we left to find life in Christ in the first place. This is a big reason why we choose a godly life, why we say no to the dark side. The wages of sin, what comes from giving in to the dark side is death, but the gift of God is eternal life. Which would you rather have? El Indio or Del Taco. As for me and my house, we choose El Indio. Let’s choose life.