

Overcoming Sin



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Romans 6; 1 John 1:8–2:1.*

Memory Text: “Sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace” (*Romans 6:14*).

If works can't save us, why bother with them at all? Why not just keep on sinning?

Chapter 6 is Paul's answer to this important question. Paul here is dealing with what commonly is understood as “sanctification,” the process by which we overcome sin and, more and more, reflect the character of Christ. The word *sanctification* appears only twice in Romans. It appears in Romans 6:19, 22 as the Greek word *hagiasmos*, which means “sanctification.” In English, it appears in these two texts as the word *holiness*.

Does this mean that Paul has nothing to say about what commonly is understood by sanctification? Not at all.

In the Bible “to sanctify” means “to dedicate,” usually to God. Thus, to be sanctified is often presented as a past completed act. For example, “all them which are sanctified” (*Acts 20:32*). The sanctified ones in this definition are the ones who are dedicated to God.

But this biblical usage of “sanctify” in no way denies the important doctrine of sanctification or the fact that sanctification is the work of a lifetime. The Bible strongly endorses this doctrine, but it generally uses other terms to describe it.

This week we'll look at another side of salvation by faith, one that easily can be misunderstood: the promises of victory over sin in the life of one saved by Jesus.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 18.

Where Sin Abounded

In Romans 5:20, Paul makes a powerful statement: “But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” His point is that no matter how much sin there is or how terrible the results of sin are, God’s grace is sufficient to deal with it. What hope that should bring for each of us, especially when we’re tempted to feel that our sins are too great to be forgiven! In Romans 5:21, Paul shows that although sin has led to death, God’s grace through Jesus has defeated death and can give us eternal life.

Read Romans 6:1. What logic is Paul dealing with here, and how, in Romans 6:2–11, does he respond to that kind of thinking?

Paul follows an interesting line of argument in chapter 6 as to why a justified person should not sin. To begin with, he says that we shouldn’t sin because we have died to sin. Then he explains what he means.

Immersion in the waters of baptism represents burial. What is buried? The “old man” of sin—that is, the body committing sin, the body dominated or ruled by sin. As a result, this “body of sin” is destroyed, so that we no longer serve sin. In Romans 6 sin is personified as a master who rules over his servants. Once the “body of sin” that served sin is destroyed, sin’s mastery over it ceases. The one who rises from the watery grave comes up a new person who no longer serves sin. He or she now walks in newness of life.

Christ, having died, died once and for all, but He is now alive forevermore. So the Christian who is baptized has died to sin once and for all and should never again come under its dominion. Of course, as any baptized Christian knows, sin doesn’t just automatically disappear from our lives once we come up out of the water. *Not being ruled by sin isn’t the same as not having to struggle with it.*

“From this we clearly see what the words of the Apostle mean. All such statements as: 1. ‘We are dead to sin,’ 2. ‘We live unto God,’ etc., signify that we do not yield to our sinful passions and sin, even though sin continues in us. Nevertheless, sin remains in us until the end of our life, as we read Galatians 5:17: ‘The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other.’ Therefore all apostles and saints confess that sin and the sinful passions remain in us till the body is turned into ashes, and a new (*glorified*) body is raised up which is free from passion and sin.”—Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 100.

When Sin Reigns

What admonition is given to us in Romans 6:12?

The word *reign* shows that “sin” is here represented as a king. The Greek word here translated as “reign” means literally “to be a king” or “to function as a king.” Sin is all too willing to assume the kingship of our mortal bodies and dictate our behavior.

When Paul says “let not sin . . . reign,” he implies that the justified person can choose to prevent sin’s setting itself up as king in his or her life. This is where the action of the will comes in.

“What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can *choose* to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 47.

The Greek word in Romans 6:12 translated as “lusts” means “desires.” These desires may be either for good things or for bad; when sin reigns, it will make us desire the bad. The desires will be strong, even irresistible if we fight against them on our own. Sin can be a cruel tyrant, one who never is satisfied but who always comes back for more. Only through faith, only through claiming the promises of victory, can we overthrow this unrelenting master.

The word *therefore* in Romans 6:12 is important. It goes back to that which has been said before, specifically to that which has been said in Romans 6:10, 11. The baptized person is now living “unto God.” That is, God is the center of his or her new life. The person is serving God, doing what pleases God, and, therefore, he or she cannot serve sin at the same time. He or she is “alive unto God through Jesus Christ.”

Go back over the quote from Ellen G. White in today’s study. Notice how crucial the concept of free will is. As moral creatures we must have a free will—the power to choose right and wrong, good and evil, and Christ or the world. Over the next 24 hours, try to keep track consciously of how you are using this moral free will. What can you learn about your use, or abuse, of this sacred gift?

Not Under the Law but Under Grace

Read Romans 6:14. How are we to understand this text? Does it mean that the Ten Commandments are no longer binding on us? If not, why not?

Romans 6:14 is one of the key statements in the book of Romans. And it's one we often hear quoted in the context of someone telling us Adventists that the Seventh-day Sabbath has been abrogated.

Yet, that's obviously not what the text means. As we asked before, how could the moral law be done away with and sin still be a reality? The moral law is what defines sin! If you were to read all that came before in Romans, even in just chapter 6, it would be hard to see how, in the midst of all this discussion about the reality of sin, Paul would suddenly say, "The moral law—the Ten Commandments, which define sin—has been abolished." That makes no sense.

Paul is saying to the Romans that the person living "under the law"—that is, under the Jewish economy as it was practiced in his day with all its man-made rules and regulations—will be ruled by sin. In contrast, a person living under grace will have victory over sin, because the law is written in his or her heart and God's spirit is allowed to guide his or her steps. Accepting Jesus Christ as the Messiah, being justified by Him, being baptized into His death, having the "old man" destroyed, rising to walk in newness of life—these are the things that will dethrone sin from our lives. Remember, that is the whole context in which Romans 6:14 appears—the context of the promise of victory over sin.

We should not define "under the law" too restrictively. The person who supposedly lives "under grace" but disobeys God's law will not find grace but condemnation. "Under grace" means that through the grace of God, as revealed in Jesus, the condemnation that the law inevitably brings to sinners has been removed. Thus, now free from this condemnation of death brought by the law, we live in "newness of life," a life characterized by and made manifest through the fact that, being dead to self, we are no longer slaves to sin.

How have you experienced the reality of a new life in Christ? What tangible evidence can you point to that reveals that which Christ has done in you? What areas are you refusing to let go, and why must you let them go?

Sin or Obedience?

Read Romans 6:16. What point is Paul making? Why is his argument very black and white here? It is either one or the other, with no middle ground. What lesson should we draw from this very clear contrast?

Paul comes back to the point again that the new life of faith does not grant liberty to sin. The life of faith makes victory over sin possible; in fact, only through faith can we have the victory that is promised us.

Having personified sin as a king ruling over his subjects, Paul now returns to the figure of sin as a master demanding obedience of his servants. Paul points out that a person has a choice of masters. He can serve sin, which leads to death, or he can serve righteousness, which leads to eternal life. Paul doesn't leave us any middle ground or room for compromise. It's one or the other, because in the end we face either eternal life or eternal death.

Read Romans 6:17. How does Paul expand here on what he said in Romans 6:16?

Notice how, interestingly enough, obedience is linked to correct doctrine. The Greek word for "doctrine" here means "teaching." The Roman Christians had been taught the principles of the Christian faith, which they now obeyed. Thus, for Paul, correct doctrine, correct teaching, when obeyed "from the heart," assisted in the Romans becoming "servants of righteousness" (*Rom. 6:18*). We sometimes hear that doctrine does not matter, just as long as we show love. That's a very simplistic expression of something that's not so simple. As stated in an earlier lesson, Paul was very concerned about the false doctrine to which the Galatian church had succumbed. Thus, we need to be careful about statements that somehow denigrate the importance of correct teaching.

Servants of sin, servants of righteousness: the contrast is very stark. If after baptism we sin, does this mean that we are not truly saved? Read 1 John 1:8–2:1. How does this passage help us to understand what it means to be a follower of Christ and yet still be subject to falling?

Free From Sin

Keeping in mind what we have studied so far in Romans 6, read Romans 6:19–23. Summarize on the lines below the gist of what Paul is saying. Most important, ask yourself how you can make real in your life the crucial truths that Paul is addressing. Ask yourself, what issues are at stake here?

Paul's words here show that he fully understands the fallen nature of humanity. He talks about the "infirmity of your flesh." The Greek word for "infirmity" means also "weakness." He knows what fallen human nature is capable of when left on its own. Thus, again, he appeals to the power of choice—the power we have to choose to surrender ourselves and our weak flesh to a new master, Jesus, who will enable us to live a righteous life.

Romans 6:23 often is quoted to show that the penalty for sin—that is, the transgression of the law—is death. Certainly sin's penalty is death. But in addition to seeing death as sin's penalty, we should see sin as Paul describes it in Romans 6—as a master dominating his servants, duping them by paying them off with the wages of death.

Notice, too, that in his development of the figure of the two masters, Paul calls attention to the fact that the service of one master means freedom from the service of the other. Again we see the clear choice: one or the other. There is no middle ground. At the same time, as we all know, being free from the dominion of sin doesn't mean sinlessness, doesn't mean we don't struggle and at times even fall. It means instead that we are no longer *dominated* by sin, however much a reality it remains in our lives and however much we must claim daily the promises of victory over it.

Thus, this passage becomes a powerful appeal to anyone who is serving sin. This tyrant offers nothing but death as payment for doing shameful things; therefore, a reasonable person should desire emancipation from this tyrant. In contrast, those who serve righteousness do things that are upright and praiseworthy, not with the idea of thus earning their salvation, but as a fruit of their new experience. If they are acting in an attempt to earn salvation, they are missing the whole point of the gospel, the whole point of what salvation is, and the whole point of why they need Jesus.

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “Victory Appropriated,” pp. 105, 106, in *Messages to Young People*; “The True Motive in Service,” pp. 93–95, in *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*; “Appeal to the Young,” p. 365, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 3; pp. 1074, 1075, in *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6.

“He [Jesus] did not consent to sin. Not even by a thought did He yield to temptation. So it may be with us. Christ’s humanity was united with divinity; He was fitted for the conflict by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And He came to make us partakers of the divine nature. So long as we are united to Him by faith, sin has no more dominion over us. God reaches for the hand of faith in us to direct it to lay fast hold upon the divinity of Christ, that we may attain to perfection of character.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 123.

“At our baptism we pledged ourselves to break all connection with Satan and his agencies, and to put heart and mind and soul into the work of extending the kingdom of God. . . . The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are pledged to cooperate with sanctified human instrumentalities.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1075.

“A profession of Christianity without corresponding faith and works will avail nothing. No man can serve two masters. The children of the wicked one are their own master’s servants; to whom they yield themselves servants to obey, his servants they are, and they cannot be the servants of God until they renounce the devil and all his works. It cannot be harmless for servants of the heavenly King to engage in the pleasures and amusements which Satan’s servants engage in, even though they often repeat that such amusements are harmless. God has revealed sacred and holy truths to separate His people from the ungodly and purify them unto Himself. Seventh-day Adventists should live out their faith.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 404.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Although we have all these wonderful promises of victory over sin, the fact is that we all—even as born-again Christians—are aware of just how fallen we are, of just how sinful we are, and of just how corrupt our hearts can be. Is there a contradiction here? Explain your answer.
- 2 In class, give a testimony as to what Christ has done in you, as to the changes you have experienced, and as to the new life you have in Him.
- 3 However important it is that we always remember that our salvation rests only in that which Christ has done for us, what dangers arise if we overemphasize that wonderful truth to the exclusion of the other part of the salvation: that which Jesus does in us to transform us into His image? Why do we need to understand and emphasize both these aspects of salvation?

From Mafia Men to God's Messengers: Part 3

One day, while walking in the forest, Vasily saw one of the men who had tried to kill him. Glancing at his potential killer, Vasily quietly breathed, "OK, I will forgive him."

Six months later, Vasily learned that the man died of a drug overdose. The second person who tried to kill him became permanently disabled and the third was shot and killed.

As the new year drew near, Vasily geared up for the big parties that would take place—two weeks of drinking vodka and smoking.

But this year, it wasn't the same. Vasily no longer enjoyed the partying. At the end of two weeks, he had had enough. *Was I born for such a dirty life?* he asked himself. The answer was a decided, *No! I need a new life!*

Falling to his knees, he prayed that God would help him. Somehow he was able to obtain a Bible, and with the Bible in hand, he went to each of his friends, inviting them to come with him to the forest for three days. Two friends decided to join him.

"We went to the forest, where we were quiet for three days, just reading the Bible," Vasily said. He prayed, asking God to "give me one month to live this new life." And He did. Then Vasily asked God for a second month of clean living, and it was given to him. He asked his wife for forgiveness, and by God's grace, he is continuing to live a clean life.

When Vasily and Igor met, they realized that they had much in common. "In every place there are some people who like the truth," Vasily said.

Vasily and Igor are now close friends who work together spreading truth through a special newspaper that is delivered throughout the region of Kazan. The newspaper is filled with information about how to obtain better health and offers spiritual insights. It is one of the most popular newspapers in Russia. The two former mafia men also work together finding sponsors so that thousands of Seventh-day Adventist books can be ordered and distributed around Kazan. "Our stories seem to be terrible," Vasily said. "But actually it is our world. Igor and I just want to help people find a better way."

The two former mafia men are delighted to have a new church and center of influence in the center of Kazan, made possible in part through your generous Thirteenth Sabbath Offering in 2014. Thank you for supporting this important offering.

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