

NOTES ON ROMANS 6-7

6:1-14

(1) Question: Does Paul's understanding of our relationship with God as being based upon the gifts of faith and obedience, gifts granted apart from the law, lead to immorality or to "cheap grace"? Paul has already indicated that his gospel has been radically misunderstood in 3:8: "And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just." And when Paul says "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20) his is open to being misunderstood to mean that what we do is not important because no matter how much we sin there is always grace. Chapter 6 sets out to clear away misconceptions: "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound. By no means!" (6:1). Misconceptions about faith and salvation usually stem from an insufficiently radical understanding of God's action in Jesus Christ.

(2) Note the radical thesis in 6:2: Christians are not simply people who have taken it upon themselves to avoid sin and to do good deeds. Nor are they simply people who feel especially bad when they sin and earnestly want to repent of it. Why is grace incompatible with sin? Because Christians have died to sin and so therefore no longer live in it. Paul has already had much to say about death. Christ's death (3:24-25; 4:24-25; 5:6-11) is dwelt upon then Paul focuses on Adam's death (5:12-21). The relationship between the two is complex but it is clear that the death of Christ reverses the death of Adam and changes the human situation fundamentally. It is important to notice when reading Romans 6 that Paul does not think of sin merely as discrete immoral acts; we do not sin but we are "under sin" (3:9) and "sin reigned in death" (5:21). Salvation and faith have to do not with a mere shift of opinion (from not believing to believing in God) but with a shift in sovereignties, from the reign of sin to the reign of grace (5:21). In Colossians 1:13-14 Paul can summarize God's saving work like this: "He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

(3) 6:2 makes it clear that the death to sin envisioned is an event in the definite past. There was a point at which each Christian died to sin and that point is baptism. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (6:3). This question reflects Paul's presupposition that this is a statement which the Roman Christians already believe. Paul is probably building here on an early Christian theology of baptism for which baptism was not simply the application of water to a body but was baptism "into Christ Jesus" (6:3; cf. Galatians 3:27). Baptism meant being transferred into the sphere of Christ's sovereignty and is connected with the events by which that sovereignty has come about—Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. 6:4 extends this by moving from the early Christian notion of baptism to the way in which it was practiced—immersion. Immersion in the water of baptism dramatically signifies being "buried therefore with him" (6:4). The whole meaning of baptism is for Paul tied to an eschatological reality, that Christ "was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father" (6:4); in

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Christ's death and resurrection God has ushered in the new age, the time of salvation, which now co-exists with the old age (now passing away); baptism ushers the baptized person into this age, the sphere of Christ's sovereignty. Baptism, therefore, is a kind of death, a death to the old age, a death to sin.

(4) While Christ's life "ended" on the cross he received an entirely new type of life in the resurrection; through baptism Christians also share in Jesus' resurrection and so also enter into a new type of life (6:5). For Christ, death and resurrection are completed realities (6:9-10) but for Christians only the death is complete; the new resurrected life will be consummated in the future (6:5): "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." While the fullness of the resurrected life is not present for us, something has radically changed for we now "walk in newness of life" (6:4).

(5) 6:6-7 returns to specify the meaning of baptismal death. The old self, the old man/woman (who we are in and with Adam as sinners) is "crucified" with Christ as so "brought to nothing" (6:6). Being a Christian does not simply mean "believing in Christ" but, rather, means being completely identified with him, sharing in his death so that "we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (3:6). Note that for Paul faith and baptism are not two separate things. Because faith means baptism "into Christ Jesus," it also means the beginning of the destruction of the sinful nature and its replacement by a new one. The Christian life is a life being freed from the deadly grip of sin and being turned over to the life-giving sovereignty of God: Immortality constitutes a denial of this type of life.

(6) Note that 6:8 returns to the pattern of 6:5 with the baptismal dying indicated as a completed fact and resurrection to new life indicated as a future reality. 6:9 provides us some insight into the nature of resurrection. Christ was not raised into ordinary life but into a life beyond death, a life beyond the sovereignty of sin/death. It appears that Paul is cautious here so as to reject any notion that we now share fully in the resurrected life. We have died to sin (it is no longer our master) and the resurrected life is now the determining reality of who we are but it is not present in its completeness.

(7) 6:10 is crucial; the pattern of Christ defines the meaning of baptism and the meaning of the Christian life. The death Jesus died is a death "to sin" and a death "once for all" but his resurrection involves now lived exclusively to God. This is precisely what it means to be a Christian, to have died to sin and to be living into a pattern of life dedicated exclusively to God. In his death and resurrection Jesus was completely dependent upon and obedient to God. C.K. Barrett's comment on this section is helpful: "It is also of course clear that Christians do not live a sinless and immortal life in heaven with Christ. Faith and baptism do not in this life effect their own full meaning. In particular, they leave room for ethical effort, in which Christians endeavor actually to achieve (with the aid of the Spirit, given in baptism) the life to which baptism points." This is the note on which this section concludes: "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11).

6:15-23

(1) Having shown that sin and grace are opposites, Paul now returns to his question and poses it in a slightly different way: Does the fact that Christians do not live under the law mean that they are free to sin? Does living under grace simply mean that we have a license to do what we want? The answer, as in 6:1 is a very strong negative: Absolutely not! The purpose of this section is to show that grace has its own form of obedience—the “obedience of faith” (1:5).

(2) To make this point Paul draws on an analogy which has the dual advantage of being rooted in the everyday experience of the Roman Christians and fits the thesis of 3:9 that all people are “under sin,” that they live under obedience to sin which is a form of slavery.

(3) 6:16 refers to the common practice of people selling themselves into slavery, a practice which while depriving a person of his or her freedom guaranteed the individual a living. In Paul's analogy there are only two potential masters, sin and obedience (6:16). All of us have yielded to the “ownership” of one. Note how Paul's way of identifying himself in 1:1 as a “slave of Jesus Christ” has prepared the way for this analogy. As we have seen in 5:12-21 obedient service given to these two masters yields two very different kinds of “reward”.

(4) 6:17-19 describes the transition that Paul can assume that the Roman Christians have made. They were once “slaves of sin” but, through grace, have become “obedient from the heart” to “the standard of teaching” which is the Christian faith (note that Paul feels no need to specify what this is; he assumes that the Romans Christians already know it). They have “been set free from sin” and have become not free agents but “slaves of righteousness”. The Christian does live without the law but the Christian life is not a matter of living under one's own authority or being free to satisfy one's own desires (indeed, both these states are sin) but a matter of living under the mastery of righteousness. Paul acknowledges in 6:18 that this is an analogy for the sake of making a point;; faith is not a form of slavery.

(5) 6:19 provides us with some insight into the role of human effort in the life of grace. Such an exhortation presupposes at least one thing: that because of grace it can be put into practice. Paul does not think of grace as destroying responsibility either in terms of it working in us like a medicine (we are merely passive) or in terms of it working as an excuse for us not being obedient (since God is so forgiving we do not need to bother all that much about him). We can yield ourselves “as slaves to impurity” or we can yield ourselves “as slaves to righteousness”; the former is sin, the latter is the way of grace.

(6) To complete the analogy, Paul draws on the fact that people sold themselves into slavery to gain a living. The way of sin leads to death (meaning more than mere biological extinction) and the way of grace leads to sanctification and eternal life. Note the slight bending of the analogy in 6:23. Sin

pays wages (giving us what we have earned) and the wages paid come to death. But grace does not pay wages (because it involves us getting what we have not earned) and this is "eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Excursus: Baptism And the Christian Life

(1) For Paul, baptism and the Christian life are organically connected. We can see this in the fact that Paul never writes about baptism as an independent topic but he always brings it in to emphasize some dimension of the Christian life.

(2) I Corinthians 6:9-11: transformation

(3) 1 Corinthians 12:12-13: incorporation into Christ's body.

(4) Colossians 2:8-15: death and resurrection

(5) Galatians 3:26-29: the new humanity

7:1-6

(1) This section answers an important question: "Why are not Christians under the law?" Note that there are a variety of possible answers to this question, almost all of them disastrous from Paul's viewpoint. Christians could be free from the law simply because they want to be, because God has decided that the law was a bad idea after all, because God has changed his mind about how salvation is to occur or because the law is simply a defective thing. It is important to note that Paul strongly rejects all of these possibilities.

(2) To make his point, Paul makes use of another analogy, that of marriage. When a woman's husband dies, she is no longer that man's wife; her status with respect to the law of marriage has now changed. Her status changes not because she has decided to leave her husband or because she has taken a dislike to the institution of marriage or because marriage has somehow been abolished—her status changes because the thing that defined her relationship to the law of marriage is now absent (her husband). The death of the husband makes the wife "free from the law" (7:3).

(3) In the case of Christians a death has also changed our relationship to the law, "you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another...in order that you may bear fruit for God" (6:4). The "body of Christ" here probably refers to Christ's physical body on the cross (cf. Ephesians 2:16). Christ's death changes our relationship to the law and establishes our relationship with God on another basis. Notice that this changed status is not "being on our own" but that of belonging "to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that you may bear fruit for God". We are free from the law not because we determined a need to escape from it

but because God has changed our relationship to it through Christ; we do not serve “under the old written code” but we serve “in the new life of the Spirit” (7:6).

7:7-25

(1) Two issues dominate this section. One issue, as Paul makes clear in 7:7) is the question of the character of the law. From Paul has said thus far, some might conclude (and many did conclude) that the law is somehow evil or at least defective. Such a view is unthinkable for Paul and it may actually have been held by some Gentile Christians since such a view would reinforce their own status claims (the move from old covenant to new is the movement from a defective religion to a perfect one). Note that Paul's answer to this question is the same as his answer to the question of whether living under grace means that we are free to do what we please—“By no means!” (7:7; cf. 6:1-2, 15). The law of God defective or evil? Unthinkable! The second issue is that of whether this section is intended to be autobiographical, Paul reporting to us his own inner struggles. This seems unlikely. Based on what Paul tells us about himself in Philippians 3:6 where he says that he was “blameless” with respect to the law, it is difficult to see Paul as an example of the “tortured conscience”. Paul's religious life prior to his conversion seems to have been marked by absolute certainty about his beliefs and his mission. While Paul may be speaking from personal experience here, it is highly likely that he is speaking as “Everyman” not merely reporting about events in his inner life.

(2) The aim of 7:7-25 is to make the case that while the law is “holy and righteous and good” (7:12) there is a connection between sin and the law but this connection is due not to a defect in the law but to the power of sin and to our weakness. One way to see this section is as a compressed interpretation of Genesis 1-3. Note that when Paul begins to build his case he begins with the Tenth Commandment (Exodus 20:17) but only in part: “You shall not covet/desire” (7:7). Since only one commandment is mentioned, it is quite possible that Paul is thinking of the first commandment the primal commandment of Genesis 2:17: “but of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die”. Here commandment places limitations on human beings, revealing them to be creatures and not the Creator. And this commandment certainly “promised life” (7:10) in that it forbade an action which could only cause harm. But how was it that is “proved to be death” (7:10)? 7:11 provides the answer: Sin used the opportunity of the commandment to deceive. The great act of deception occurs in Genesis 3:4-5 where the serpent assures the woman that not only will the consequences spelled out by God not occur but also that God's motives for disallowing her access to the tree are far from pure. The serpent's suggestion is the essence of sin, the suggestion that there is finally no difference between us and God that eating a piece of fruit (or using some new technology!) can't resolve. If, as Paul suggests, the essence of commandment is “Don't desire, obey!” then the essence of sin is “Desire, you need not obey!”. In this light, note the woman's reason for finally eating of the forbidden fruit: “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit...” (Genesis 3:6). Sin is the

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victory of desire over obedience. In the case of Genesis 1-3 sin used God's commandment to insinuate itself into the life of the man and the woman so that the commandment is twisted to a very different use—instead of forbidding sin it now functions to suggest it.

(3) As it turns out, Paul's defense of the law is actually an argument for the coercive power of sin. Did the good law bring about that which was evil? By no means! (7:13). The problem lies not with the law but with the agents to whom the law was given. The law forbids sin and labels sin as sin (7:13) but the problem is that it is one thing to forbid sin and quite another to resist it. Put a different way, knowing the right does not mean doing it.

(4) 7:13-25 is not a confession of an agonized conscience or the report of a neurotic. It is, in fact, an honest description of the Christian life in this world, a life which involves continual struggle. On one hand, because of grace, Christians find their minds being renewed (12:1-2) and to this extent they "delight in the law of God" (7:21) yet, on the other hand, while we have died to sin its influence is still felt in our lives so that we see in our "members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making it captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members" (7:23). The whisper of sin "Desire, don't obey!" is something more than a whisper; it can become a compelling force.

(5) What Paul offers is a realistic picture of the Christian life. There is a part of us that has been renewed through grace, the part that Paul calls the "spiritual" part (7:14), though this does not mean something simply opposed to the physical. This part, the "inner being" (7:22) seeks to be obedient like Abraham and delights in the law of God (7:22). Another part of us, which Paul calls "the flesh" (7:14), by which he does not simply mean body, is still yielded to the law of sin. The conflict of these two is part of the life of every Christian, reminding us at once both that the work of God within us to renew and save us is in fact real (hence the resistance!) and that the reality of sin remains in our lives so we can not claim to be examples of redemption completed. This means that hope (5:1-5) is an essential virtue for Christians and we are continually turned away from ourselves to the sure source of our deliverance: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:25).