

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost; July 16, 2023

Romans 6:1-11

“What Shall We Say Then?”

What shall we say then? Shall we keep on sinning so that grace may increase? Absolutely not! We died to sin. How can we go on living in it any longer? Or do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried with him by this baptism into his death, so that just as he was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too would also walk in a new life.

For if we have been united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united with him in the likeness of his resurrection.

We know that our old self was crucified with him to make our sinful body powerless, so that we would not continue to serve sin. For the person who has died has been declared free from sin. And since we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that since Christ has been raised from the dead, he will never die again. Death no longer has control over him. For the death he died, he died to sin once and for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Have you ever been told, “I told you so”? You were warned that it was a bad idea, that it would never work. But you went ahead with it anyway. And after you failed, the person who warned you just couldn’t resist. Usually it starts with, “I hate to tell you I told you so,” which is a lie, of course. People love to say I told you so when their warning went unheeded.

During the Lutheran Reformation, Martin Luther and his allies preached the truth from Romans that Pastor Welch proclaimed to you a few weeks back: God’s righteousness – “alien righteousness” you remember -- comes to us sinners from the outside and becomes ours through faith in his Son Jesus. This is the beautiful teaching of the Holy Spirit, through Paul’s letter to the Romans. And it was the anchor of the Lutheran Reformation. They also taught people what you heard last week: that when you come to faith in Jesus, you are called to follow him with your works and your words. And in today’s Old Testament lesson and Gospel, we see especially our call to live in peace and harmony with our fellow believers.

Well, the Lutherans were warned. They were warned by their adversaries: if you tell people that they stand righteous and heaven-bound, at peace with God through faith alone in Christ alone, you will fail on that second part about following Christ and living at peace with each other. You will fail miserably, because when people hear that they are forgiven and saved by God freely, and it does not depend on their work or effort...they will turn into animals. They will get drunk constantly. They will get into every kind of sexual impurity and steal while they leave their fields to the weeds. They will not live in harmony. They will lie to each other and cheat each other and brawl with each other. If you tell people they don’t have to be good to get into heaven, they will act like the devil himself. They will tell themselves, “Hey, God forgives me in Jesus. So now I can do whatever I want.” And they will.

And you know what? They were right. Twenty years had passed since the Reformation started. For twenty years Luther and his allies had been preaching and teaching salvation in Christ through faith alone, spiritual peace and joy in Christ. They were also teaching people to follow Christ in works and words, and to live at peace with each other. And what happened? The people in Germany were using that precious gospel message as an excuse to sin. They drank more than ever (which was quite a feat), fought with each other more than ever, worked less than ever, attended worship services less than ever. The pure gospel had been turned loose, and the people turned that gospel of free forgiveness into a license to sin. "I'm forgiven, after all. Might as well live it up." And Luther's enemies said, "Told you so. The pure gospel is just too dangerous. Tell people they don't have to be good to get to heaven, and they'll be awful."

Apparently, this was not a new problem. In this sixth chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul transitions to a new line of thought. He has just finished, in the first five chapters, teaching the pure gospel of salvation through faith alone in Christ alone, and the wonderful joy and peace it brings between us and God. And Paul can now anticipate: these Roman Christians are going to think just what the German Christians thought 1500 years later during the Reformation: Sweet deal. I have free forgiveness. Now let's see how many of the Ten Commandments I can break in the next ten minutes!

People don't change a whole lot over time. The Roman Christians in 50AD wanted to use God's grace as an excuse to sin more and more. The German Christians in 1540AD wanted to use God's grace as an excuse to sin more and more. And Virginian Christians, 2023AD, can still think the same way. Have you ever faced a temptation and thought, "Oh, why not? God will forgive me. Yeah, I'm already over the line, but I might as well have one more beer. Yeah, it's not my Netflix password, but who will it hurt?" How many Christians have excused their prom night escapades, their thefts and lies by telling themselves, "It's no big deal." And that's how we like to excuse it. I'm just a bit drunk. It's just a minor theft, just a little immoral.

Do you ever tell yourself that about your sin? Think about your life carefully for a minute. Is there anything you're doing wrong on a regular basis? And when I say "anything," I mean anything, no matter what sin is. Even if it's just little lies; just a little laziness at work; just a little selfishness; just dirty thoughts or jokes; just a little laziness with God's Word and Supper; just a short fuse with your kids. Why do we feel comfortable repeating those same sins again and again, as if they don't matter? Because Jesus died for them anyway, right? Might as well.

When St. Paul was up against that attitude with the Roman Christians, he showed a different attitude toward sin. And he started with a question: **What shall we say then? Shall we keep on sinning so that grace may increase?** In other words: what shall we say to God's gospel? What shall we say to the good news of salvation in Christ through faith, eternal peace and joy with God? What answer should we give? Should we say, "Let's continue sinning! God's grace increases to forgive all our sins!" That is not Paul's answer to God's wonderful gospel.

His answer is: **Absolutely not! We died to sin. How can we go on living in it any longer? Or do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him by this baptism into his death, so that just as he was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too would also walk in a new life.** Paul heads straight for the waters of baptism.

Your baptism was not a symbolic exercise. It was an actual spiritual burial and resurrection with your Savior Jesus. In your baptism, God buried your sin. He killed it by giving you faith in Jesus and connecting you to his righteousness. At the very same time that he buried your sin with Christ, he raised you, just as he raised Christ on Easter, to live a new and holy life. As Paul says, the Christian walks in a new life, a righteous life that models Jesus.

The baptized child of God cannot say, "Sin doesn't matter. I'm forgiven, so now I can do whatever." The baptized child of God says, "My heavenly Father buried my sin and raised me to live for Jesus. God's forgiveness is not a reason to sin. By no means! It is my reason to sin no more, because my sin was buried in baptism."

When Paul asks the question, **What shall we say then?** first he looks back to our baptisms as he answers. Now he looks ahead to the life we will enjoy in Christ: **For if we have been united with him in the likeness of his death, we will certainly also be united with him in the likeness of his resurrection...And since we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that since Christ has been raised from the dead, he will never die again.**

Your faith in Jesus means that you can look forward to a resurrection like his on the last day, and eternal life with him in heaven. Anyone who believes that in Christ we will rise gloriously and live eternally in heaven will despise sin in all forms. Christ Jesus, who gives you these eternal gifts, suffered and died for those sins so that you will rise and live with him. Jesus gave up his life to rescue us from that sin. The heart that believes this wants nothing to do with sin ever again, no matter what the sin is. God hates it enough that his Son had to die for it. And he loves me enough that his Son did die for it. There's no way I ever want to touch it again.

What shall we say then? Shall we keep on sinning so that grace may increase? Absolutely not! Why? Well, Paul looks back to baptism and reminds us: your sin was buried in baptism, and you were raised to live like Christ. He looks ahead and says that because of what Christ did to take away your sins, you will rise and live forever. So now leave those sins behind! Finally, Paul also writes about our lives as Christians in the present. Right now, through faith in Christ, we are set free from the curse of sin. Right now, through faith in Christ our sinful nature – that part of us that wants to rebel against God and break his commands – that sinful nature has been crucified. We have been set free from slavery to sin to live freely for God. So don't go back to the taskmaster that Christ freed you from! Don't return to your sin! No, use that freedom from sin to serve your loving God: **We know that our old self [sinful nature] was crucified with him, to make our sinful body powerless, so that we would not continue to serve sin.**

After looking back to baptism, ahead to our resurrection and eternal life, and to our present freedom from sin, Paul concludes: **In the same way also consider yourselves dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.** There is a word in the original language that the translator, for some reason, left out: "must." We must be dead to sin and alive to God. So consider this: if you do have a sin in your life that you consider no big deal because, hey, Jesus already paid for it...you are in spiritual danger. The Christian will – must – die to sin and live for God. It has to be. It's the only thing that can be for a Christian who looks back to baptism, ahead to the resurrection, and here and now to our freedom from sin.

So, what do you do with Christians who are showing that attitude toward sin? What did Martin Luther do when he looked around and saw Christians using God's grace as an excuse to sin? First he did the wrong thing. He got mad. He started screeching and shrieking from the pulpit. He started name-calling, referring to the people as "heathen hoards" and "pigdogs." And finally, he just quit preaching. He couldn't take it anymore, seeing people abuse the good news of their forgiveness.

And then his wife Katie and some of his colleagues talked to him. We don't know exactly what they said. But they knew he was frustrated. And they told him not to give up. When Christians are using the gospel as a license to sin, they don't need to be called names or screamed at, as tempting as it might be.

They need God's law first: they need to see the reality of their sin by examining their lives in light of the Ten Commandments. They need to understand God's hatred for sin, and that he will punish it in anyone who is apart from Christ.

Once they understand the gravity of their sin, they need to hear the gospel: they need something like Romans chapter 6 to point them back to baptism, ahead to the glorious resurrection, and to our current freedom from sin's slavery.

Happily for the people of Germany, Luther listened to his wife and friends. He climbed back up into the pulpit, and started all over with law and gospel. It's a good idea for us to start all over day. Start with the law, and remember how much God detests sin: enough to kill his own Son for it. Remember his judgment for those apart from his Son. Your sin matters. It needs forgiveness. Then turn to God's gospel. Turn back to your baptism, and remember what he did for you there. Turn ahead to the resurrection and eternal life that God promises you in Christ. Remember the freedom from sin's slavery that you have right now in Jesus Christ. And then, the next time sin presents itself to you, and you ask yourself: **What shall [I] say then? Shall [I] keep on sinning so that grace may increase?** You will answer the right way: **Absolutely not!** Amen.