

[An article from The Quarryvillian, June 1, 1945, p. 2]

ROMANS SIX

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In the first five chapters of Romans, Paul has explained the doctrine of justification by faith. On the basis of Christ's righteousness imputed to us God justifies us – he acquits us and declares that we are not guilty of sin. He asserts that the law cannot impose its penalty on us, and further, he receives us as righteous. Toward the end of this explanation Paul says (Rom. 5:20) that where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

Such is the frailty of the human mind, infected as it is by the disease of sin, that it is frequently subject to false inferences. Nothing could better illustrate the truth of this than years of experience in the classroom. Each successive group of students in physics confuses the weight of water in a bucket with the pressure on the bottom. Year after year in logic the students make the same mistakes of conversion and contraposition. In the world at large the same types of mistakes are made, though the regularity of occurrence usually remains unnoticed.

When, therefore, Paul says that where sin abounds, grace much more abounds, the very human, though completely mistaken, inference is drawn that we should continue in sin that grace may continue to abound. Because of this human tendency to invalid inference, Paul must defend his doctrine of justification against the charge that it ministers to immorality. Hence the apostle proceeds with the doctrine of sanctification.

The connection between justification and sanctification is often misunderstood. These two phases of Christian experience are sometimes thought to be connected with the conjunction **but**. We are justified by faith, **but** we must now be holy so as not again to fall into condemnation. Other people would connect justification and sanctification with the conjunction **and**, as if they were two completely unrelated facts that for some mysterious reason were forced into a connection. In truth, these two conjunctions, the **but** and the **and**, are far from accurate. The connection is better expressed by a **therefore**. We are justified by faith, therefore we should not sin. Or, in view of Rom. 6:14 (For sin shall not have dominion over you), we may put it even more strongly and say, we are justified, therefore we do not sin. Of course these phrases are too short accurately to summarize all the material in Romans VI; but we could hit the truth with a fair degree of faithfulness by paraphrasing a Scriptural expression and saying, justification is the straight gate and sanctification is the narrow way that leads to glory. Or

to be less picturesque, it is the purpose of justification to produce holy lives.

Paul, then, faces the question, shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? The main point of the answer as it is given in the first fourteen verses is very plain. It is briefly this: No one who comes to Christ for salvation from both the guilt and the power of sin, can possibly want to continue sinning. Christ's suffering and death on the cross was an expiation of sin. When a man comes to Christ he so identifies himself with Christ in this purpose that he can truly say, I am crucified with Christ, or simply, as in Rom. 6:8, we are dead with Christ. If a man does not thus identify himself with Christ's purpose to destroy sin, if instead of grief and hatred of sin he cherishes the notion that he may continue in sin that grace may abound, that perhaps he can wait a few years after regeneration for a subsequent act of sanctification, the conclusion is inevitable that he knows nothing of Christ and has never truly applied to the Lord for salvation. To put the matter very bluntly, is a psychological impossibility to trust in Christ's shed blood and to want to continue in sin.

From this it follows that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even we also, who died with him, shall be in the likeness of his resurrection and walk in newness of life.

The significance of verses four and five is not grasped if we consider Christ's resurrection and our walking in newness of life as a mere analogy. Paul is not saying, as Christ dies and rises, so the believer dies and rises. The believer and Christ are more intimately united than such an interpretation would allow. Rather, we must take verses four and five to mean, because Christ dies and rises, the believer dies and rises also. If we are united with Christ in his death, then, as the branches derive their life from the vine, we receive our Christian life from the resurrection life of Christ.

Sanctification, therefore, is not some instantaneous crisis in our life which happens one year or years after our regeneration. Sanctification is just that process of becoming more and more like Christ which begins when we pass from death to life. Sanctification is nothing other than the Christian life itself with its tribulation, patience, experience, and hope. Accordingly, Paul exhorts us not to yield our members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin, but to yield ourselves unto God. Our members, then, become instruments of righteousness.

When we consider the omnipotence of God, we may wonder why he does not accomplish the work of purification and sanctification in us instantaneously. God could, no doubt, make us perfect all at once, but, none the less, he takes time. Some people chafe under the burden of becoming righteous slowly; they look for some short-cut. If God justifies by faith, they ask, why does he not also sanctify by faith? And because of impatience, a few Christians try to satisfy themselves with a perfection which, though not perfect, is at least apparently attainable all at once.

The Scriptures, however, teach something different. We have seen that our members must be

instruments of righteousness; in the verse following, (Rom. 6:16ff) we have the illustration of slavery and servitude, which obviously is not an instantaneous act, but a continuous condition of life. The point is stressed in other passages of Scripture. Phil. 2:12, 13 says, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling of course, God works in us; the point to be noted is that it is a work and not a single act. Or we may turn to Gal. 6:5, which says, every man shall bear his own burden. The Christian life, then, has burdens that take time to bear. Or again, in 1 Cor. 3:9, we are laborers together with God. Therefore we should not indulge ourselves in the hope of an easy, instantaneous sanctification, but rather run with patience the race that is set before us.

In the words of Isaac Watts:

“Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease?”

The Christian life, then, is not a life of sin, but of struggle against sin. We must reckon ourselves dead unto sin, but alive unto God. Such a conception not only answers the question in the first verse about continuing in sin, it also excludes the notion that we may live in a state, not of constant sinning, but rather merely of lazy indifference.

In fact, this is the distinction between the question in verse one and the question in verse fifteen. Verse one asks, should we remain in habitual sin. Verse fifteen narrows the question to a single sin asking simply, shall we sin? Not only do the two verses refer to a different amount of sinning, so to speak, but there is also a difference in the mental attitude. Verse one asks, should we **in order that** grace may abound. In other words, it examines a case of wicked calculation. Verse fifteen considers only lazy indifference: shall we sin **because** we are not under the law. We have escaped the penalty for sin, and of course we do not want to live in sin, but an occasional sin now and again does not matter much because we are not under law but under grace.

Lazy indifference may not be so heinous as wicked calculation, but it is equally excluded from the consistent Christian life. Paul answers the question by the illustration of slavery. The major premise, found in verse sixteen, repeats in substance the teaching of Christ that no man can serve two masters. The minor premise, found in verses seventeen and eighteen, points out with thanksgiving that Christians are no longer servants of sin, but have become the slaves of God. The conclusion is obvious. God is our master, and him alone ought we to serve.

And in this service we bring fruit unto holiness and the end everlasting life.

Thus there is no gap between justification and sanctification; they are not separated by a **but**;

they are not violently conjoined by an **and**; on the contrary they are related with a **therefore**.

Justification is the straight gate and sanctification is the narrow way that leads to glory.

What a difference it makes whether one enters that gate and walks that way, or whether one continues to be the slave of sin. To be sure, being a slave of sin has its advantages, for sin is a just master and will pay its wages; it will not cheat a person of what he deserves. But who can be content with the wages of sin? For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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