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## *A Change of Kingdoms*

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FOR WE KNOW THAT OUR OLD  
SELF WAS CRUCIFIED WITH  
HIM SO THAT THE BODY OF SIN  
MIGHT BE RENDERED  
POWERLESS, THAT WE  
SHOULD NO LONGER BE  
SLAVES TO SIN — BECAUSE  
ANYONE WHO HAS DIED HAS  
BEEN FREED FROM SIN.

*Romans 6:6-7*

Many Christians have a basic desire to live a holy life, but have come to believe they simply cannot do it. They have struggled for years with particular sins or deficiencies of character. While not living in gross sin, they have more or less given up ever attaining a life of holiness and have settled down to a life of moral mediocrity with which neither they nor God are pleased. The promise of Romans 6:6-7 seems impossibly beyond them. The strong commands of Scripture to live a consistently holy life only frustrate them.

Many have sought to live a holy life by their own will power; others have sought it solely by faith. Many have agonized in prayer over particular sins, seemingly without success. Scores of books

have been written to help us discover the "secret" of the "victorious life."

In our search for answers to our sin problems, a troublesome question arises: "What should I look to God for and what am I responsible for myself?" Many are confused at this point. When we first start to live the Christian life, we confidently assume we will simply discover from the Bible what God wants us to do and start doing it. We fail to reckon with our tendency to cling to our old sinful ways.

After experiencing a great deal of failure with our sinful nature, we are told that we have been trying to live the Christian life in the energy of the flesh. We need to "stop trying and start trusting," or to "let go and let God." We are told that if we just turn our sin problem over to Christ and rest in His finished work on Calvary, He will then live His life in us and we will experience a life of victory over sin.

Having experienced failure and frustration with our sin problem, we are delighted to be told that God has already done it all and that we only need to rest in Christ's finished work. After struggling with our sins to the point of despair, this new idea is like a life preserver to a drowning man, almost like hearing the Gospel for the first time.

But after a while, if we are truly honest with ourselves, we discover we are still experiencing defeat at the hand of our sinful natures. The victory seemingly promised us still eludes us. We still struggle with pride, jealousy, materialism, impatience, and lust. We still eat too much, waste our time, criticize each other, shade the truth just a

little, and indulge in a dozen other sins, all the time hating ourselves for doing them.

Then we wonder what is wrong. "Why can't I," we ask ourselves, "experience the victory described in all the books that others seem to have experienced?" We begin to feel that something is uniquely wrong with us, that somehow our sinful natures must be worse than others. Then we begin to despair.

Years ago a fellow Christian warned me that Satan would try to confuse us on the issue of what God has done for us and what we must do ourselves. I have come to see the insight he had in making that statement. Lack of understanding on that issue has led to great confusion in our pursuit of holiness. It is very important that we make this distinction; for God has indeed made provision for us to live a holy life, but He also has given us definite responsibilities.

Let us first look at God's provision for us.

In the Bible we read, "Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires" (Romans 6:12). The first thing we should notice in this passage is that the pursuit of holiness — this not allowing sin to reign in our mortal bodies — is something *we* have to do. Paul's statement is one of exhortation. He addressed himself to our wills. He said, "Do not let sin reign," implying that this is something for which we ourselves are responsible. The experience of holiness is not a gift we receive like justification, but something which we are clearly exhorted to work at.

The second thing to note from Paul's exhortation is that it is based on what he had just said. Note the connecting word *therefore*. Clearly he meant to say something like, "In view of what I have just said, do not let sin reign in your mortal body." To state it another way, we are to pursue holiness because certain facts are true.

What are these facts?

Let us take a look at Romans 6. In answer to the question "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" Paul said, "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (verses 1-2). Then Paul developed that idea (verses 3-11). It is evident that the word *therefore* (verse 12) refers back to this fact that we died to sin. Because we died to sin, we are not to let it reign in our mortal bodies.

If we are to obey the exhortation of verse 12, it is vital that we understand what Paul means by the expression *we died to sin*. As we read this passage, the first thing we observe is that our dying to sin is the result of our union with Christ (verses 2-11). Because He died to sin, we died to sin. Therefore, it is apparent that our dying to sin is not something we do, but something Christ has done, the value of which accrues to all who are united with Him.

The second observation we can make is that our dying to sin is a fact whether we realize it or not. Because Christ died to sin, all who are united with Him died to sin. Our dying to sin is not something we do, or something we make come true in our experience by reckoning it to be so. Some have misunderstood this point. We have gotten the idea that to have died to sin means to somehow be

removed from sin's ability to touch us. However, to experience this in our daily lives we are told we must *reckon* ourselves dead to sin (verse 11, KJV). We are further told that if we are not experiencing victory over our besetting sins, it is because we are not reckoning on the fact that we died to sin.

We are indeed to reckon — or to count or consider — ourselves dead to sin, but our reckoning does not make it true, even in our experience. Verses 11 and 12 must be taken together. Because we are dead to sin through our union with Christ, we are not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies. Our daily experience with regard to sin is determined — not by our reckoning, but by our will — by whether we allow sin to reign in our bodies. But our will must be influenced by the fact that we died to sin.

What then does Paul mean by his expression *died to sin*? He means we died to the dominion of sin, or to the reign of sin. Before we trusted in Jesus Christ for our salvation we were in the kingdom of Satan and sin. We "followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air [the devil]" (Ephesians 2:2). We were under the power of Satan (Acts 26:18) and the dominion of darkness (Colossians 1:13). Paul said we were slaves of sin (Romans 6:17). We were born into this kingdom of sin, slavery, and death. Every person who has ever lived since Adam, except for the incarnate Son of God, has been born a slave in the kingdom of sin and Satan.

But through our union with Christ we have died to this realm of sin. We have been set free from sin (Romans 6:18), rescued from the dominion of

darkness (Colossians 1:13), and turned from the power of Satan to God (Acts 26:18). Before our salvation we were in bondage to sin, under the reign and rule of sin. Regardless of how decent and moral we were, we lived in the kingdom of sin. But now through our union with Christ in His death to sin, we have been delivered out of the realm of sin and placed in the kingdom and realm of righteousness.<sup>1</sup>

Professor John Murray, in commenting on the clause *we died to sin*, said, "If we view sin as a realm or sphere, then the believer no longer lives in that realm or sphere. And just as it is true with reference to life in the sphere of this world that the person who has died 'passed away, and lo, he was not; yea, I sought him, but he could not be found' (Psalm 37:36), so it is with the sphere of sin; the believer is no longer there because he has died to sin . . . The believer died to sin once and he has been translated to another realm."<sup>2</sup>

It is because we were in this realm of sin, under its reign and rule, that we began to sin from infancy. Because we were slaves we acted like slaves. We developed sinful habits and a sinful character. Even if we were what the world considers "good," we lived for ourselves, not for God. Our attitude toward Christ was expressed by the words of His enemies: "We don't want this man to be our king" (Luke 19:14).

But if we have been delivered from this realm, why do we still sin? Though God has delivered us from the reign of sin, our sinful natures still reside within us. Even though sin's dominion and rule are broken, the remaining sin that dwells in believers

exerts a tremendous power, constantly working toward evil.

An illustration from warfare can help us see how this is true. In a particular nation two competing factions were fighting for control of the country. Eventually, with the help of an outside army, one faction won the war and assumed control of the nation's government. But the losing side did not stop fighting. They simply changed their tactics to guerrilla warfare and continued to fight. In fact, they were so successful that the country supplying the outside help could not withdraw its troops.

So it is with the Christian. Satan has been defeated and the reign of sin overthrown. But our sinful natures resort to a sort of guerrilla warfare to lead us into sin. This results in the struggle between the Spirit and our sinful natures which Paul wrote about: "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want" (Galatians 5:17).

Further, because we are born as sinners, we have from birth developed habits of sin. As Jay Adams says, "We were born sinners, but it took practice to develop our particular styles of sinning. The old life was disciplined [trained] toward ungodliness."<sup>3</sup> We all tend to act according to these sinful habits that have been engraved in us from long practice.

Suppose, for example, I had a lame leg and as a result developed a limp. If through surgery my lameness is cured, I would still tend to limp out of

habit. Or do you suppose that when slaves were freed by President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, they immediately began to think as free men? Undoubtedly they still tended to act as slaves because they had developed habit patterns of slavery.

In a similar manner, Christians tend to sin out of habit. It is our habit to look out for ourselves instead of others, to retaliate when injured in some way, and to indulge the appetites of our bodies. It is our habit to live for ourselves and not for God. When we become Christians, we do not drop all this overnight. In fact, we will spend the rest of our lives putting off these habits and putting on habits of holiness.

Not only have we been slaves to sin, but we still live in a world populated by slaves of sin. The conventional values around us reflect this slavery, and the world tries to conform us to its own sinful mold.

Therefore, though sin no longer reigns in us, it will constantly try to get at us. Though we have been delivered from the kingdom of sin and its rule, we have not been delivered from its attacks. As Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones says in his exposition of Romans 6, though sin cannot reign in us, that is, in our essential personality, it can, if left unchecked, reign in our mortal bodies.<sup>4</sup> It will turn the natural instincts of our bodies into lust. It will turn our natural appetites into indulgence, our need for clothing and shelter into materialism, and our normal sexual interest into immorality.

That is why Paul exhorted us to be on our

guard so that we will not let sin reign in our bodies. Before our salvation, before our death to the reign of sin, such an exhortation would have been futile. You cannot say to a slave, "Live as a free man," but you can say that to someone delivered from slavery. Now that we are in fact dead to sin — to its rule and reign — we are to count on that as being true. We are to keep before us this fact that we are no longer slaves. We can now stand up to sin and say no to it. Before we had no choice; now we have one. When we sin as Christians, we do not sin as slaves, but as individuals with the freedom of choice. We sin because we choose to sin.

To summarize then, we have been set free from the reign and rule of sin, the kingdom of unrighteousness. Our deliverance is through our union with Christ in His death. When Christ entered this world He voluntarily entered the realm of sin, though He never sinned. When He died, He died to this realm of sin (Romans 6:10), and through our union with Him we died to this realm also. We are to count on this fact that we are dead to sin's rule, that we can stand up to it and say no. Therefore we are to guard our bodies so that sin does not reign in us.

So we see that God has made provision for our holiness. Through Christ He has delivered us from sin's reign so that we now can resist sin. But the responsibility for resisting is ours. God does not do that for us. To confuse the *potential* for resisting (which God provided) with the *responsibility* for resisting (which is ours) is to court disaster in our pursuit of holiness.

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- NOTES: 1. I am indebted to Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones for his helpful exposition of the term "died to sin" in chapter 2 of his book *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 6 — The New Man* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972).
2. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1968), page 213. Used by permission.
3. From *Godliness Through Discipline* by Jay E. Adams, page 6. Reprinted 1973 by Baker Book House and used by permission.
4. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 6*, pages 152-153.