

A Sermon by
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Chinese Christian Church
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The Sanctifying Power of Grace

ROMANS 6:1-14

Back in January of 1972 I began to understand the important truth that I can't work my own way to heaven. It became clear to my mind that I could never make myself righteous enough to please God. I intellectually agreed with the Biblical truth that it is the righteousness of Christ (and not my own righteousness) that allows me to enter into the status of being at peace with God. In my mind, I laid hold of the promise that Jesus had died for my sins and that I could receive eternal life by virtue of what God had done for me on the cross.

After I had done this, people around me who had also believed in the same promise began to assure me that I now had no reason to doubt my salvation. And if (for some reason) doubt did come into my mind, I had to reject the doubt based on the objective promise. In other words, I could now reject all doubt based on the decision I had made to intellectually take hold of a Biblical promise. "To all who receive Jesus, to all who believe in His name, He gives the right to become children of God" (JOHN 1:12). That is the Biblical promise, and it is the righteousness of Christ and not my own righteousness that allows me to embrace that promise.

At first, I had no problem accepting this teaching without question, until the day came when one of the people who had taught me the importance of being assured of my salvation sincerely asked a very disturbing question. He asked, "Is it possible to have Jesus as your Savior without having Him as Lord of your life?" There are other ways to ask the same question. For instance, is it possible for a certain person to intellectually take hold of the promise which guarantees that all who receive Jesus will become children of God while, at the same time, no change whatsoever takes place in the way that person thinks and talks and behaves? Or we can put the whole question in the context of water baptism and ask, what does water baptism symbolize? Does it only represent the intellectual decision to believe certain objective truths written in the Bible, or does it represent a change in our thoughts and words and deeds or does it represent both of these things?

Upon what do I base the assurance of my salvation? Do I base it on my decision to believe in a promise or do I base it on the on a subjective inner witness that the way I think and talk and act is now improving and will never stop improving for the good. Or do I base the assurance of my salvation on both the objective promise and the subjective, inner witness that change is taking place in my life?

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I believe the answers these questions can be found in today's scripture lesson, and I believe the answers must include both the objective promise and the subjective change. The position of peace with God that we claim we have attained through faith must have an everlasting positive impact on way we think and speak and behave; otherwise, we have never attained to that position in the first place (even if we think we have). The grace of God that saves a person must make a positive practical difference.

When we were discussing the topic of being of "justification by faith" recorded in ROMANS 4, I used the illustration of a ball where one side is totally black and the other side is totally white to emphasize that there is often two ways to look at an issue. And the issue of salvation can certainly be looked at from two points of view. ROMANS 4 clearly stated that works and circumcision (or water baptism) and legalism will never make us right before God. But now, in ROMANS 6, we are going to look at another side of salvation, one that is commonly referred to as sanctification. And, we are going to conclude that sanctification is just as much a part of our salvation experience as justification. In order to experience one, you must experience both. Some may attempt to separate these two great truths, by saying that justification must come first in time, followed then (in time) by sanctification. Others may try to separate the two by saying one is more important than the other. But, it is dangerous to make such separations. Justification and sanctification were never intended to be separated—neither in terms of chronology nor in terms of their importance.

ROMANS 6:1 begins with a rhetorical question, which simply means that the author asked a question that he fully intended to answer himself. He understood the mind-set of his readers. Over and over Paul had experienced two reactions to God's gospel of grace. One reaction came from those who clung to the teaching of rabbinical Judaism. Such teaching made entering into the Kingdom of God very cut-and-dried and very definable. In contrast, the gospel Paul preached placed all the emphasis on relationship. Grace was presented as a free gift from God. Thus, people criticized Paul for offering something cheap. The term "cheap grace" is still used today by people who take a legalistic approach to winning God's favor.

The other reaction that Paul faced went to the other extreme. Rather than criticizing the gospel message for making it too easy for people to get into heaven, some people gladly accepted a false teaching. They basically said, "Since we now have our ticket to heaven, we can do anything we want." This attitude is clearly revealed in the fourth verse of Jude's letter. "...certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord."

Paul had already dealt with the extreme teaching of legalism in ROMANS 4 and 5. Now, in ROMANS 6, he is going to attack the other extreme teaching. No way does God's grace give us a license to sin. Just the opposite is true. When we believe, something happens that affects the way we think and talk and behave. We have died to sin; therefore, it is impossible for us to continue to live in sin.

Our act of believing not only unites us with Christ's death, but it also unites us with His resurrection. The two cannot be separated. Unless our baptism with water symbolizes both of these unions, it is void of meaning. Going under the water should symbolize our union with Christ's death. It was a death that destroyed sin. By uniting with Christ in death, the penalty of sin is removed from our lives.

But, not only is the penalty of sin removed, so is its power. Rising up out of the water should symbolize our union with Christ's resurrection. "Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life."

Christ's death allows us to stand guiltless before the throne of God based on His righteousness. And, Christ's resurrection makes it possible for the believer to be controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and that guarantees a change in thought, word, and deed. During a ceremony where people are being baptized with water, it is extremely important (especially for the one being baptized) to understand that his faith has done two things that will have an immediate affect on his life. It has brought him

into a position of being made just in the eyes of God, and it has also freed him from the power of sin so that he can live a new life. It is extremely important that we know this to be true.

The repetition of the word “know” in this passage of scripture is not a coincidence. It is a deliberate effort to place emphasis on the intellect. It is just as important to intellectually claim the promise of sanctification as it is to intellectually claim the promise of justification. The phrase, “count yourself dead to sin” also places emphasis on embracing the precious truth of sanctification with the mind. “If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.” We must intellectually know this to be true.

Knowing is extremely important. Claiming the objective truths about justification and sanctification that are recorded in the Bible is absolutely essential to both our salvation and the assurance of our salvation. Being saved by faith means intellectually laying hold of both the truth of justification as well as the truth of sanctification.

But, being saved by faith also means something else. It not only means intellectually embracing the promises of God, it also means experiencing the promises of God. It is one thing to intellectually claim the promise that sin is now rendered powerless in my body, but it is another thing to face the reality that I am anything but a perfect person. The person who says he no longer sins is living in denial.

So how does the promise of who I am in Christ translate into real life experience? I want to be able to look at myself and be able to say, “I know this is true, not only because I intellectually believe it to be true, but also because I can experience that it is true.” How can I do that without slipping into a state of self-denial?

How can my intellectual expression of faith toward Christ (revealed in the words “Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.”) make its way through to my experience so that I will feel in my bones that its real? In other words, how do I get from ROMANS 6:11 to ROMANS 6:14?

The answer to this very difficult question is found in the words recorded in ROMANS 6:12-13. These two verses are all about commitment and surrender. Verse 12 begins with the word “therefore.” If Paul had begun with the word “but” it would have changed everything. It would have set up a contrast between our mental assent to facts and our practical living.

I have heard people say “Christianity is not a mental assent to truth, it is the practical living out of truth.” Such a statement sounds good, but it is misleading. It is proclaiming that Christianity is not that; rather, it is this. But, in reality it is both. Yes, Christian commitment is far, far more than mental assent to facts, but it is nothing until the revealed facts are intellectually embraced.

So the whole process of translating objective truth into experienced truth must begin with the mind. We lay hold of the promises with our minds, and we reckon ourselves dead to sin. That is the first step.

The second step is desire. Verse 12 is pure exhortation. If you are serious at all about reading the Bible, then you know that much of the New Testament is given over to this kind of exhortation. It has been estimated that this kind of exhortation takes up about one-third of everything written in the New Testament epistles. Words like “I entreat you” or “I beseech you” followed by instructions as how to think and talk and behave are found throughout the epistles. Much of this kind of exhortation is making an appeal to the will. We must desire or will to obey God.

Some people will argue that the desire factor is beyond our control. We either have it or we don’t have it depending on a sovereign decision made by God even before we were born. Others will argue that the whole matter of desire is entirely up to man. The debate between sovereignty and human will may never be settled in this life to everyone’s satisfaction.

But, the unsettled debate cannot cancel out the fact that an intellectual decision to take hold of a promise must be followed by a decision of the will. “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure (2 PETER 1:10).” These words come right after a lengthy exhortation to pursue godly character. Our calling and our election are truths that we have intellectually claimed. The thing that should naturally follow (and really must follow) is an eager desire to be good. Without the eager desire it is impossible to legitimately proceed on to the third step which is the offering of our bodies.

ROMANS 6:13 uses very interesting imagery to talk about this step. It is the imagery of an arsenal. The Greek word translated as “instruments” in the NIV version of the Bible would be more accurately translated as “weapons.” It is a military word. The Romans lived in a powerful military state. No subject of Rome in his right mind would even think of challenging the military might of Rome. If they did, the response would be swift and effective. Every corner of the Empire had its military outpost where “instruments” of battle were stored and available. Rome had the reputation that she was ready at short notice to stamp out rebellion anywhere in the Empire.

Paul adapted this graphic analogy to help his readers understand the pressures they faced. Our bodies are like arsenals. We have a lot of resources that can be used for either good or for evil. The eyes can be used to lust or they can be used to see God. The ears can be tuned to hear lies or they can be tuned to hear truth. The mouth can speak evil or it can speak good. The hands and feet can be offered up to do acts of unrighteousness or acts of righteousness. God has given us a whole arsenal of instruments, and He has also given us time.

The whole point of verse 13 is that we must not offer our arsenal to the enemy; instead, we must offer our instruments to God. Do not *offer...* but rather *offer...* What we are talking about here is a bold and deliberate decision to offer every member of our body into the hands of the eternal God. It is a decision of total commitment. It doesn't work to offer part of your arsenal to God and the other part to Satan. This does not mean that you can't purchase a house or a new computer. But, it does mean that the motivation behind your decisions will be to help people know God. It will be to help build God's kingdom on this earth rather than to satisfy your own worldly desires. Such a decision of commitment and surrender involves all of our time and money and abilities. It's truly a total commitment. And, it is a permanent commitment. If you decide to offer your body today and take back the offer tomorrow, then you have made no decision at all. The decision is total and it is permanent. And it is unmistakable. It is inconceivable that a person could make such a decision without being aware that he has done so. If we are not sure if we have done it, then chances are we have never done it.

The last verse of our scripture reading, ROMANS 6:14, declares the certainty of triumph when all these factors come together in the life of the believer. “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law but under grace.” A person “under grace” is sure to have victory because all three factors that we have talked about today are present in his life. He knows and he desires and he surrenders. He intellectually acknowledges the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He claims the righteousness of Christ as his justification. This knowledge leads to desire, and the desire leads to surrender. Take any one of these three factors out of the equation and you end up with religion driven by law rather than relationship driven by grace.

You can't tell a corpse to breathe. All you can do is hook a respirator to the dead man and watch his chest go up and down. Such is the nature of religion driven by law. But when life has been restored to a person, that person will breathe. It is a certainty. Such is the nature of a relationship driven by grace.

The sanctifying power of grace does not guarantee instant perfection. As long as we have mortal bodies and live in a world influenced by evil...and as long as Satan remains active on this earth, we will not experience perfection. But, the sanctifying power of grace does guarantee an ongoing and lasting change in the ways we think and talk and behave. The speed of the change and the quantity of the change will depend on many factors, but the fact of the change is certain.

I will never have the ability or authority to judge where other people stand in their relationship with God. Only God can do that. But, the Holy Spirit of God is able to witness to my spirit that the salvation I have is genuine. And, the witness is based on more than just my intellectual claim to a promise. It is also based on a desire that I can feel and a surrender that I have experienced. The witness of the sanctifying power of God's grace is not based on one particular thing I have done. It is far more subjective than that. It is a voice speaking to my heart, a voice telling me that the truth I have laid hold of with my mind is now coming through at the most practical level. Truth has had its victory.

I once talked to a person who had been baptized. She sincerely believed she would go to heaven, because Jesus had died for her sins. She was less certain about her desire to live for Christ. And, she was very certain that she did not want to totally surrender her body to do the will of God. I cannot stand judge over that person, but such a testimony just doesn't make sense in light of the truth revealed in today's scripture lesson. Salvation is a mouth confession and a heart belief ([Romans 10:9-10](#)), but without a body that behaves, the lips may be expressing a lie and the heart may be believing a half-truth ([1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-11](#)).