

CAN WE GO ON SINNING?

by Ray C. Stedman

Let me ask you a question. Now that you are a Christian -- now that you understand that the grace of God forgives your sins, past, present, and future, that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on your behalf settles the debt for sin, no matter when sins occur -- do you then have the privilege to go on sinning, living as you were, knowing that the grace of God will cover those sins?

That is a very relevant question, because a lot of people today are asking it, and a lot of people are saying that we can go on sinning:

Last week, after we studied Romans 5, I was told of an individual who claims that he has the right to go on living in a blatantly sinful way because, he says, his sins are forgiven.

Last week I heard of a man in this congregation who admitted that he was a homosexual and was living as one. He claimed that he did not need to make any change in his life because, as a Christian, his sins are forgiven.

I just quote these to show you that this is not an out-of-date question, but one we all wrestle with and one that we must confront. The Apostle Paul faces this question in the sixth chapter of Romans.

In the closing part of Chapter 5, the apostle began to describe to us the tremendous change that was introduced by Jesus Christ when he died on the cross and rose again from the dead -- the breakthrough in history that came when the second Adam came in to undo, by means of his death and resurrection, what the first Adam did to us the Garden of Eden. That great contrast runs all through the second part of Chapter 5.

In Chapters 6 and 7 he interrupts his argument temporarily to deal with two very practical questions:

1. In Chapter 6 Paul is dealing with the question, "What about the sins of believers?" This whole chapter is devoted to answering that question.
2. In Chapter 7 he takes up the very practical question, "What about the Ten Commandments and their demands upon us?"

Then, in Chapter 8, Paul picks up his argument again and begins to carry on with the description of the tremendous results that came in Jesus Christ, as opposed to Adam. Perhaps this outline will help us a bit as we deal with these passages.

We will study only two verses of Chapter 6 this morning. As we have seen, the Apostle Paul always states the truth first, in a kind of nutshell summary, a very pithy statement of what he wants to say -- then he logically takes his argument step by step and explains and expounds it until it is perfectly clear. That is what he does here. The whole truth that answers the question, "Can we go on sinning?" is dealt with in just the first two verses of Chapter 6. Paul says,

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? {Rom 6:1-2 NIV}

That is the whole argument, right there. Paul is dealing with the answer to that question, and he will deal with it very logically in the steps that follow. But for now he puts it in this one brief statement: "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

I want you to notice three things about this brief statement:

First, notice that the question is logical. "Shall we go on sinning in order that grace may increase?" That is a

very good question to ask. If your teaching or preaching of the gospel does not arouse this question in somebody's mind, there is likely something wrong with your teaching, for it is the kind of question that ought to be asked at this point. There is something about the grace of God and the glory of the good news that immediately raises this issue. If sin is so completely taken care of by the forgiveness of Christ, then we don't really need to worry about sins, do we? They are not going to separate us from Christ, so why not keep on doing them? It is a perfectly logical question. It was raised everywhere Paul went, and it is a question that ought to be faced.

But, second, notice that even our very nature would have us raise this question. It is not only logical, but it is also natural. That is because sin, basically, is fun, isn't it? Oh, come on -- you can admit it. Sin is fun. We like to do it. Otherwise we wouldn't keep on doing it, we would not get involved in it. We know sins are bad for us. Our mind tells us, our logic tells us, our experience tells us they are bad for us. But, nevertheless, we like to do them. Otherwise we would not. Therefore, any kind of a suggestion that tells us we can escape the penalty for our sin and still enjoy the action arouses a considerable degree of interest in us. It does in me, anyway. So it is quite natural that this question would come up.

We must clearly understand that the Apostle Paul is talking about a lifestyle of sin, not just a single act or two of failure. He is talking about Christians who go on absolutely unchanged in their lifestyle from what they were before they were Christians. The word for "go on sinning" is in the present continuous tense. It means the action keeps on happening. The question is, "Can we go on sinning?" Verse 15 of this chapter deals with the effects of a single act of sin in a believer's life and what happens when we fail even once. We will come to that in due course. But here Paul is talking about a habitual practice, or something that frequently occurs in a believer's experience, something that was there before he became a Christian. Can we go on living this way?

Finally, notice that this question is put in such a way as to sound rightly motivated and even pious. "Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?" This suggests that our motivation for sinning is not just our own satisfaction -- we are doing it for the glory of God, so that grace may increase. God loves to show his grace. Therefore, if we go on sinning, he will have all the more opportunity. What a chance for God to show his grace! It is clear that this question is not asked by a complete pagan or by a worldlying, but by someone who seems intent on the glory of God. Having said that, we come now to the answer, the positive answer of Paul.

What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! {Rom 6:1-2a NIV}

Paul immediately reacts with a very positive statement, bluntly put: "By no means!" Or, as it is literally in the Greek, "May it never be!" Absolutely not! It is interesting to me to see how the other versions translate this phrase. The King James Version sounds horrified: "God forbid!" Phillips seems to catch this same note of horror: "What a ghastly thought!" The New English Bible puts it very simply, "No, no." So here is a no-no in the Christian experience. Can we sin? No-no. I gather from all this that the Apostle Paul simply does not agree with this philosophy that you can go on sinning and be forgiven. Why? In his inescapable logic, Paul answers in just four little words: We died to sin.

We died to sin. How can we live in it any longer? {Rom 6:2b NIV}

Here is the whole truth that Paul wants to confront us with in answer to this question. The rest of the chapter is but an exposition of what he means by that. We are going to take that exposition step by step because there is tremendous understanding involved in it. But Paul is not going to make any advance on his original statement. When we get to the end of the chapter, he has simply made clear what he means by, "We died to sin." There is the whole argument, and if we understand what he means, we will see why he asks this question, "How can we go on living in it any longer?"

Now let's look at this phrase.

First, it does not mean that sin is dead in me. It doesn't mean that, as a Christian, I have reached the place where I cannot sin, although many people take it to mean that.

Some years ago I was working in the city of Pasadena and I went to get a haircut. I soon found that the barber was a Christian. As we began to discuss some things, he started to tell me about his Christianity. He told me that seventeen years before, he had been 'sanctified,' as he put it, and he was no longer able to sin. For seventeen years he had lived without sin. He made it very clear that he had no sin at all. So I began to discuss this with him, and I brought in certain other passages, and we got into kind of an argument. The longer we went, the hotter he got -- all the while he was cutting my hair. He worked himself up into a lather, just as angry as he could be. I finally said to him, "Look, if you can get so upset, so angry, when you have no sin in you, what would you be like if you were a sinner like the rest of us?" It was two weeks before I dared to appear in public after that haircut!

This passage doesn't mean that sin is dead in us; nor does it mean, as some have taken it, that we should die to sin. There are movements and churches based upon this idea. They say that Paul is teaching us that we ought to die to sin. You can attend meetings, conferences, and camp meetings where you will be exhorted to die to sin. We are told that this is the way by which we come to a victorious life. We are told we ought to begin to crucify ourselves, and die to sin. Now I submit to you that Paul is not saying that we ought to do this; he is telling us it has been done. We died to sin.

Third, neither does Paul mean by this that we are dying to sin. There are some people who take it that way. They say this means that the Christian is gradually changing and growing, and the more he does so, the more he is dying to sin, and there will come a time when he will sort of outgrow all his evil. It doesn't mean that at all. Once again, we must face clearly the flat statement the apostle makes. He puts it in the Greek aorist tense, which means this is once for all: We died to sin.

That takes us back into Chapter 5, where we have that great contrast with what we were in Adam, and what we are now, as Christians, in Christ. "If in Adam," he says, "we will sin." There is no way we can escape it because Adam has passed on the taint of sin and death as his heritage. And therefore, in Adam we will sin. We all do. But then he says, "If we are in Christ (and the implication is clear that we are), we will not go on sinning." Look at Verse 21 of Chapter 5:

...so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. {Rom 5:21 NIV}

Now whatever else those words mean, it is clear that what happens in Christ is canceling out what happened in Adam. If death and sin come to us from Adam, then life and deliverance come from Christ. You can see already one reason why the apostle would add, "If this is true, how can we go on sinning?" We need to clearly understand his line of argument in Chapter 5: When you become a Christian, if you have by grace received the gift of God -- which is Jesus himself -- and the gift of righteousness which he brings, then you are no longer in Adam but in Christ.

I have to admit that I quarrel with a very commonly taught doctrine among evangelicals that there are two natures in the believer. I don't believe that. There are two natures, but only one of them is yours! There are two forces at work within us, and we feel the conflict that they arouse -- but only one of them belongs to us. We once were in Adam, but now we are no longer in Adam but are in Christ.

And yet, having said that, we have to face the fact that Christians, who are no longer in Adam but are now in Christ, do sin, and they do die. Chapter 5 told us that sin and death are the results of Adam's transgression. How can we be free from Adam and still suffer the results of Adam's transgression? That, I think, brings us to what we clearly need to understand -- the nature of our humanity. More than anything else that I have found in Scripture, I have been helped by what Scripture reveals about who we are as human beings. When we see that, I think we'll understand what Paul is saying.

The first thing the Scriptures tell us about ourselves is that the most important part of us is our spirit. We are spirit; we have bodies and souls, but we are spirit. That may sound a bit spooky to you. The reason we struggle with this is because we can see our bodies, and feel our souls. We have been brainwashed by the world, which says only those things that can be seen and felt are real -- and who can see or feel a spirit? So we have a struggle at this point. But the Scriptures clearly tell us that basically, down deep, the very nature of our

being is spirit, and God is Spirit. You can't see it, nor can you feel it, but that is who you are.

The Scriptures explain and help us to understand the nature of that spirit by a beautiful little symbol. Since we can't see our spirit, we have to view it through a symbol, a visual aid. The most common visual aid in Scripture to describe our human spirit is to call it a vessel. You can think of your spirit as a little cup inside of you, made to hold something.

The Scriptures tell us that, in the beginning, this cup was made to hold none other than God himself. All the greatness and glory of God could be poured into that tiny human cup. That is what Adam was, as he came fresh from the hand of God. But in the fall, that cup was emptied, and filled again with a kind of poison. This satanic twist began to poison all our humanity.

I realize I'm speaking in symbols, but this is what we must do in order to understand the nature of spirit. We find in our experience that when the poison that Adam brought in fills our spirit, it spreads into the soul. Now the soul is the realm of soul experience: It is the functioning of the mind (the reason), the will (the power to choose), and emotion (the power to feel). Scripture tells us that this poison has touched us in all those areas, so that we don't think rightly, we don't feel rightly, we don't choose rightly. That is why things go wrong wherever human beings are involved.

You can see this even in a little tiny baby. A baby grows and begins to develop, and sin shows up in his reactions, in his attitudes, in his feelings. Chapter 5 told us about that. What the spirit and the soul feel will be expressed finally in the body's action. That is the way we are made. What the body does is always the reflection of what the spirit and soul are doing. That is, if we have fear (one of the forms of evil and death within us) it will express itself in several ways. Shyness or timidity may be one way; anxiety and worry, another; bluster and boasting, still another way. All these reflect the fear inside.

If we feel angry and hostile, it comes out in sharp words, or even violent actions. We poke someone in the jaw, or we yell at the top of our voice, or storm out of the house and slam a door. All this is revealing what is inside, what is filling the cup of the spirit. If it is self-love that is there, as it certainly is, it comes out in terms of greed and possessiveness and selfishness, or in terms of sexual promiscuity, satisfying self despite the exploitation of another person. Or it may be ambition, power -- hunger, whatever. All of this comes out from within. Remember, this is saying nothing more than what Jesus himself told us in Mark 7,

"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts [that is the word for spirit], come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, [Ho, you say, you haven't got me yet! Well, hang on!] greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'" {Mark 7:21-23 NIV}

Paul is saying the same thing that Jesus said. It all depends, you see, on what is filling the cup of the spirit. If it is Adam's life, then that is what is going to come out. There is nothing we can do to stop it. All we can do is to try to pretend that it is something else. We are all adept at giving the things we do different names than we do when we see others doing the same things.

But what happens when that spirit fully and truly turns to Christ, when it receives the gift of God's grace, the gift of worth? Then, according to this argument in Romans 5, the tie with Adam is broken. The spirit is emptied of its satanic content -- sin -- and it is filled again with the Holy Spirit, who releases to it the life of Jesus. That is what the Holy Spirit has come to do. Our human spirit, our essential nature, is no longer in Adam, in any sense at all. It is now in Christ. We are tied to Christ.

Now that is the teaching of Scripture from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation.

But, you see, the problem comes by the fact that our souls and bodies, which have been functioning for years under the control of sin in the cup of our spirit, are still going on in the same old way, functioning according to those patterns built up under the control of sin. Our habits, thoughts, and actions, already are established along wrong lines. That is where the evil and sin in a believer's life is coming from.

It is a struggle to re-educate the soul and the body, and we experience many failures until we allow the Holy Spirit to bring it under the control of the new life in Jesus Christ in the cup of our spirit. But it will happen, **and it must happen**, Paul argues. If Christ is in the cup of the spirit, then just as we could not evade sin because we were in Adam, so in Christ we cannot evade righteousness. Isn't that clear?

The life of Jesus is more powerful, more persistent, more insistent than the life of Adam ever was. That is the meaning of all the "much mores" in this section {i.e., in Rom 5:9-10, 5:15, 5:17}. If we had to sin in Adam, then for the very same reason, we have to begin to practice righteousness in Christ. It is not something we can help; it just will happen. That is why Paul asked the question, "Having died to sin, how can we live any longer in it? Why, it's impossible. It's not a question of should we; it's a question of **can we**?" His answer is, "No, it can never be."

In our neighborhood, right next door to us, is a home that was built a number of years ago and has been inhabited now by several different families. The first was a rather difficult family, the kind of people who would never keep a yard or house in order. Soon after they moved in, the brand new home began to show the effects of their style of life. The yard was littered with trash and garbage, the lawn was dead for lack of care. When it was replanted, it died out again. To enter their house was to enter a shambles. It never was clean or in order, never. These neighbors moved out, and new neighbors moved in. It wasn't very long until it became evident that a different kind of people lived there. They cleaned up the house and painted it. The yard was cleaned up, the lawn was dug up and replanted, and it has been cared for adequately ever since. Things are completely different -- what happened? It is impossible that there would not be a change, because there was a change in those who dwelt therein. This is what Paul is telling us here. There has to be a change!

Now someone asks, "What if a Christian does go on sinning, living in sin, claiming forgiveness, but goes on without any change in his life whatever?" What about that? There are people who are doing that. The answer, in light of this Scripture is very simple: These people simply are revealing that they never truly have been justified by faith; they are not Christians. Let's put it as bluntly as the apostle himself put it. They are deceiving themselves and deceiving others. Though they may do so with good intent, and with utter sincerity as far as they know -- nevertheless the case is clear.

It is impossible for your lifestyle to continue unchanged when you become a Christian. It is simply impossible, because a change has occurred deep in the human spirit. And those who protest, and say they can go on living this way, are simply revealing that there has been no change in their spirit, there has been no break with Adam. They are still in the same condition. The Apostle Paul makes that very plain in a couple of places, and I want to share them with you so that we may clearly understand what he is saying:

The first is in Ephesians 5:5:

For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person -- such a man is an idolator -- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. [He is not a Christian yet. He is claiming to be, but he is not. And lest we be fooled by his claims, the apostle goes on to say,] Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. {Eph 5:5 NIV}

In very much the same terms, Paul puts it again in First Corinthians 6:9:

Don't you know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived [there it is again]: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolators nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. [They were; they are no longer. Some of them are still struggling, and some of them do occasionally fail and go back to some of these things. But there's a vast difference. They no longer are that way -- there has been a break, a change in their lifestyle.] But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God [and therefore there cannot be the same style of life]. {1 Cor 6:9-11 NIV}

I think that is clear and fully answers the question, doesn't it?

Paul is saying that there is great hope for those who are caught up in any of these things. There is a way of deliverance. It is not a way that involves going on with the same style of life. Jesus Christ came to free us from sin, and not to allow us to continue in it.

The question we must face about ourselves is, "Have you really begun to hate sin deep inside of you -- your own sin, the things you do wrong and, for the moment, choose to do? Have you begun to hate it? Do you want to be free from it, want to be delivered, want the power of it broken in your life?" You can only want that because there has come into your heart a new Spirit, there has come into the cup of your spirit the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And from that vantage point, he is beginning to assert the control of his purity throughout your whole life. You can't settle for sin any longer.

In Chapter 6 Paul helps us to understand more about how this works, but here he makes it unquestionably clear. Can we go on sinning? May it never be!

Prayer

We thank you, Father, for the honesty of your Word. How clearly it deals with us, always tenderly, always in love, but very plainly, never deceiving us or handing us a line, softening things that we need to face, but truly telling us where we are. We thank you for the grace of our Lord Jesus, who has the power to break the grip of death upon our lives. Thank you that it begins in our spirit, and grows to control our souls, and ultimately will redeem our bodies in resurrection. For this we give grateful thanks, in Jesus our Lord, Amen.

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