

## License to sin versus freedom from sin

Why is God's grace so misunderstood to the point of taking it as license to indulge in sin?

This is because on one hand, grace is one of the main expressions of the true nature and character of God in dealing with sinful humanity, and on the other hand, grace is so free, much greater than our sin and a gift of God, that we can easily take grace for granted. We easily take God's grace for granted because humanity is so poisoned by sin that even the sinfulness of sin is opaque to us.

One of the current expressions of a wayward understanding of God's grace is referred to as 'hyper-grace' or 'extreme grace'. It is marked by a 'to-whom-it-may-concern' lifestyle with a false consolation that God's greater grace will accommodate it after all.

This pervasion has encouraged a non-biblical redefinition of what sin really is, making it look less serious and unobjectionable to God's moral law. In this way, our vibrant Christianity is characterized by a disconcerting superficiality of commitment among people in church for worship, but hardly in Christ for life-change.

The consolation that God's grace warrants any and every preferred lifestyle including a deliberately sinful one can only give a false and dangerous comfort. This false teaching has increasingly become the underlying reason why the desire for worldly pleasures is ever-enduring among many who claim a Christian faith.

Let us ask ourselves: Could anyone compatibly live in sin and God's grace at the same time? How consistent can the grace of God that frees us from sin become the license for pursuing ungodly pleasures?

How fitting can it be, that the grace in which we stand (Rom. 5:2) becomes our warrant to the very wickedness that it should save us from? Those in Christ have died to sin. They cannot live in it or enjoy its pleasures any longer (Rom. 6:1-2).

The grace of God that frees us from is misunderstood and misapplied in life because of our desires. By God's sheer grace we get to have a desire for him on one hand, and by our sinful nature we maintain a desire or craving for sin, because we also find pleasure in it since Adam wired us for it.

So when the desire for sin is greater than our desire for God, we keep consoling ourselves that God's grace is enough until we step out of God's grace because of our stronger desire for sinful behavior.

The inconsistency of a sinful lifestyle and church life then breeds a new and false teaching on God's grace that can cater for both your consoling church life, and your greatly desired sinful pleasures. Usually, when belief will not change behavior, behavior will change belief. When doctrine does not influence duty, duty will alter doctrine.

When we know the truth, and because of our greater desire for sin, truth fails to influence our thinking and doing, then our doing causes adjustment in the truth to fit our ungodly desires. That is how you hear oxymoron such as gay-Christian, physical battles fought by Christians being called holy war, just you can say hot ice.

When the grace that saves us from sin is applied as license to sin, it becomes is an oxymoron, because sin is what God's grace removes. How can sin then be encouraged by the grace that only increases to blot it out?

God's grace is increasingly perceived as a loophole for licentiousness to ungodly but preferred lifestyles or an excuse for minimizing Jesus's commands for holy living. We have made less our God-given desire to please him. When the true grace of God in all its justifying, sanctifying, and glorifying power is embraced in a perverted way, then life loses touch with God.

Our greater desire for certain lifestyles, being greater than our desire for God has greatly altered and changed our perspective of God. The culture around us has its own concept of God, and it has little to do with the God of the Bible. Out in the fog of modern culture, God has been transformed into a concept, a therapist, a benign and indulgent patriarch, and a user-friendly deity.

We now turn to a God that we can use rather than a God we must obey; we have turned to a God who will fulfill our needs rather than to a God before whom we must surrender our rights to ourselves. He is a God for us, for our satisfaction, and we have come to assume that it must be so in the church as well. And so we transform the God of mercy into a God who is at our mercy. We imagine that he is caring, that he will acquiesce as we toy with his reality and co-opt him in the promotion of our ventures and careers.

The unbiblical tendencies of nominalism, liberalism, traditionalism, syncretism, materialism, individualism and many other 'isms' that our postmodern spiritual heroes propagate in church today have a way of keeping Christianity trendy and attractive by minimizing Gospel demands that seem to be humanly unattractive.

Our pulpit heroes and heroines on radio and TV are preaching Christ as a Savior but not so much as Lord; they preach a God with love but without wrath or judgment; they promise a crown of glory and leave out the cross of sacrifice; they extrapolate all privileges of being children of God but hardly on God's terms;

they promise freedom in Christ on ‘cheap grace’ by removing personal and collective responsibility from such a freedom, and generally dwarf down the transformation of lives through the Gospel of grace.

There are many who are genuinely seeking God and wondering how and why their keen search can only result in spiritual frustration and physical pain as evidenced among them right in the church of Christ today.

The common misunderstanding of God’s grace which prevails in our society today among several churches and sects has an underlying adjustment in this: They think that since God’s grace is greater than our sin (Rom 5:20), it should be a license for us to continue in sin (Rom. 6:1) - which they call "a preferred and desired lifestyle".

Our concern should remain that in this postmodern era where truth is relative, and where everyone’s opinion (never mind whether wrong or right) is of equal value, the church is drifting away from the high view of God and the high regard for His word, and thus losing focus on his holiness and the expressions of his grace.

They adjust practice along their new doctrines so that speaking the truth should be shunned as being ungracious. But according to the Bible, speaking the truth is gracious in itself, and no one can claim to be under grace without speaking the truth. John 1:14 says that Jesus came full of grace and truth, and we have been given this fullness as Paul alludes later in Colossians.

Could we still speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) as God’s will for us, and therefore find unity around what is right, than perish around what is preferred and desired along our sinful cravings? Without truth exposing sin, there is no diagnosis; and without grace covering sin there is no treatment.

As Christians, the message that made us is “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24), “the word of his grace” (Acts 20:32), “the grace of God in truth” (Colossians 1:6). And the life we live is within “this grace, in which we stand” (Romans 5:2), as we are “strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:1). It’s all undeserved, lavish favor from God.

God’s amazing grace has freed us to know ourselves as profoundly sinful, and we must take precautions to keep ourselves from distorting the grace of God. With both feet in Scripture, not leaning on our parroted formulations, we will want to be able to say with Peter, “This is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it” (1 Peter 5:12). Our only hope for the road ahead is God’s true grace.

So Shall We Sin So That Grace May Increase?

**What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?** <sup>2</sup>May it never be! .....<sup>14</sup> For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Paul came to the end of Romans 1-5 with the most radical emphasis possible on justification by grace through faith, apart from works of the law. He taught (in Romans 5:18) that **"as through one transgression [of Adam] there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness [of Christ] there resulted justification of life to all men."**

In other words, our union with Adam brought us condemnation because of his disobedience; and our union with Christ brings us justification because of his obedience. This is real grace: Christ's obedience, and not ours, is the ground of our justification. God reckons us righteous, and accepts us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness (Titus 3:5), but because of deeds done by Christ in righteousness (Romans 5:18).

The whole point of bringing Adam into the picture here at the end of Romans 1-5 is to make this radically gracious way of justification dangerously clear. We are condemned in Adam as his sin is credited to us; we are justified in Christ as his righteousness is credited to us.

Why do I say that this teaching about Adam and Christ makes justification by grace "dangerously" clear? Because of what people may do with it – the way they may distort it, the way they draw implications from it that seem right, but are dead wrong. Paul knows the way his radical teaching on justification by grace through faith apart from works (Romans 3:28) is most often distorted. So he brings it up.

He plays his own worst adversary in Romans 6:1. He has just said in Romans 5:20, **"Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."** Now he asks, **"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?"** Here is the great objection to justification by grace through faith apart from works of the law. It seems to open the door to rampant sinning.

In fact, it seems to invite more sinning because if grace is God's act to forgive and accept sinners on the basis of Christ's righteousness, not ours, then wouldn't that grace shine all the brighter if we kept on sinning? The more sin there is, the more forgiveness there is.

And the more sinning there is, the greater must be the righteousness of Christ to compensate for it. So doesn't Paul's radical teaching on justification open the door to careless living and indifference to holiness?

That is the question Romans 6 (indeed 6-8) is meant to answer. Here is his answer:  
Verse 2: "May it never be!" Why Not?

First his answer is, "No!" "May it never be!" We are not to continue in sin so that grace might increase. That is a wrong conclusion to draw from his radical teaching on justification by grace through faith alone. Justified people do not continue in sin that grace may abound. So what is Paul's answer to why those who are justified on the basis of Christ's righteousness, by grace, through faith alone do not continue in sin that grace might increase?

So then, what is Paul's answer to why people who are justified by grace through faith do not continue in sin? His answer is in verse 2. After he says, "Kikaffuwe!" he gives the basis of his answer in the form of a question: "**How shall we who died to sin still live in it?**" That is his answer in the briefest form. The rest of the chapter explains it.

Paul doesn't expect an answer. He expects us to see the answer already in the question, when he says, "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" The answer is, "we can't". In other words, rhetorical questions don't expect answers; they make statements.

For example, if your dad says, "How are you going to keep your room neat if you throw your clothes on the floor and never hang them up or put them in the drawers?," he is not looking for an answer.

He is making a statement that: You won't keep your room neat if you throw your clothes on the floor and don't hang them up. Or if your mom says, "How can you expect people to be your friend if you yourself are not friendly?," she is not looking for an answer. She is making a statement that in form of a plea, that: You won't have friends if you are not friendly.

Well, that is the way Paul is using the rhetorical question in Romans 6:2. He is not expecting an answer; he is making a statement: "**How shall we who died to sin still live in it?**" There is no answer to this "how" question, because there isn't a "how" that explains in practical detail how those who are dead to something, live in it.

Just the living are not dead, the dead are not living in this case. We can't live in sin if we died to it. That is his statement. That is his answer to the objection.

One way to see this is to jump to the end of the chapter and look at verse 22: "**But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification [or holiness], and the outcome, eternal life.**" Notice carefully: What is eternal life the outcome of?

It is the outcome of "sanctification" or "holiness" or "freedom from sin and slavery to God." In other words, Romans 6 deals with the kind of life that leads to eternal life: What eternal life is and how to live it.

### **There is a battle of desires: for righteousness and for sin**

Romans 6:12 says, **“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.”** In other words: Don't desire sin as much as you desire God. Don't desire sin's lie as much as you desire God's truth.

It means that when it comes down to the conflict between the desire for what sin offers and the desire for what God offers, prefer God. Which means that one great strategy of living the Christian life is to set God and his ways before us as our treasure – as preferable.

That is how Paul pulls it well from a mindset to a life style in Colossians 3:1-10, saying, **“Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup>Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things.** You change your mind because there is a lot of death involved here: Jesus died, you died with him, there put to death what he died for.

**<sup>3</sup>For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. <sup>4</sup> When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.**

**<sup>5</sup>Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. <sup>6</sup> Because of these, the wrath of God is coming.**

**<sup>7</sup>You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. <sup>8</sup>But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. <sup>9</sup>Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices <sup>10</sup> and have put on the new self, which is being**

Our church today and in general, is the lukewarm, worldly, half-hearted church. Our church today does not realize that the Christian life, the only life that leads to heaven, is a life of competing desires. In other words, we live the Christian life by not obeying the desires of the body that sin has captured and corrupted.

And if you choose not to obey a desire, it is because you desire something else more. Sometimes the best we have among believers is what they have learned, a kind of Christian life that is all willpower-duty and no desire for God. It is a deal with God based on what they have known but hardly what they feel in regard to desire.

They confuse their self-determinism to be faith in God. And this is where God's grace is most needed. They hardly invest any prayer or meditation or conversation in cultivating stronger desires for Christ than for sin. They only think of Christ as true, but don't desire him as your treasure.

You see that Paul is still trying to help us who do not understand the essence of the Christian life rooted in justification by grace through faith alone. We listen to Paul's gospel of justification by grace through faith apart from works, and we say, "Well, if I have a right standing with God by faith, and if all my sins, past, present, and future are forgiven, then I may as well let sin reign in my body and enjoy doing its desires." That is the way a person talks whose Christianity is simply a group of ideas and not an experience of the preciousness of Christ.

The message that made us is "the gospel of God's grace" (Acts 20:24), "the word of his grace" (Acts 20:32), and "the grace of God in truth" (Col. 1:6). And the life we are called to live happens in "the grace in which we stand" (Rom. 5:2), as we are "strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:1). It's all undeserved, a lavish favor from God (Eph. 1:8), "in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus" (Eph. 4:21; John 1:14).

**"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age..." (Titus 2:11-12)**

So, in summary form:

**Objection:** If justification is on the basis of Christ's righteousness, not ours, by grace through faith alone, then shouldn't we continue in sin that grace might increase?

**Answer:** No!

**Reason:** Because if you died to sin, you can't go on living in it. Or to put it bluntly: Dead people don't sin.

The rest of Romans 6 is explanation. So let's just look at the structure of the explanation today, and then in two weeks dig into the practical teaching of how this really works in our daily lives.

Why Don't Dead People Sin?

Is it important that you know this? Look at verse 3 for Paul's answer. After giving his summary explanation—Dead men don't sin—he asks, **"Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?"** The explanation Paul gives for dead people not sinning can be summed up in three steps.

- When Christ died, believers in some crucial sense died in him and with him.
- When Christ rose, believers in some crucial sense were made alive in him.
- Therefore, believers are commanded to become in practice what we are in Christ: dead to sin and alive to God.

Let us look at some text for these three steps.

**1. When Christ died, believers in some crucial sense died in him and with him.**

Romans 6:5, "For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death . . ."

Romans 6:6, "Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with."

Romans 6:8, "Now if we have died with Christ . . ."

So there is a union with Christ that makes what happened to him valid for us in him. When he died, we died. That is the key to why the justified do not go on sinning. Dead people don't sin. Of course that raises the question of perfectionism and how free we actually are from sin. That could be dealt with in another session.

**2. When Christ rose, believers in some crucial sense were made alive in him.**

Romans 6:4b: ". . . so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."

Romans 6:5, "For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be [united with him] in the likeness of His resurrection."

The believer's union with Christ not only means that we died when he died, but that in his resurrection our new life to God was secured. In some sense we died with him and came alive to God with him. (Eph. 2:6)

**3. Therefore, believers are commanded to become in practice what we are in Christ: dead to sin and alive to God.**

Romans 6:11, "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Romans 6:13, "Do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead."

Notice carefully, Paul does not draw the conclusion of a mechanical or automatic obedience from our death and resurrection with Christ. He does not say, "Since you all died to sin in Christ and are alive to God in him, there is no need for me to command you to do anything, and there is no act of obedience involved. He does not say, You died to sin; so you automatically don't sin. You are alive to God; so you automatically serve God. No need for commands." No, that is not what he says. Instead he says, you died, so consider yourselves dead. You are alive, so consider yourselves alive to God. You are . . . so now become what you are.

We are justified by grace through faith alone because of our union with Christ whose righteousness is counted as ours. And now we see that this same union with Christ explains why we will not continue in sin. It is **Desire, not Just Decision**: The Christian life is the triumph of desire, not just decision. People whose Christianity is a group of ideas about Christ, not an experience of the preciousness of Christ, their Christianity is all truth and no treasure.

Theirs are all "choices" but there is no cherishing. Theirs is all logic about Christ but no love for Christ. Theirs are simply "decisions" but they lack delight. And many people who come to church are in this category – with knowledge and duty but hardly a desire and needed affection for Christ!

Such is the spiritual terrain that marks the slippery slope of Church-Marketing. The world is sold on worldliness, and any attraction to godliness tends to be worldly as well. Moreover, godliness cannot be marketed.

When Jesus multiplied loaves to feed the multitude, many concluded he was just the pastor they needed. As a result, they went to great lengths to relocate to his "church." Some got into boats and crossed over from the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum in order to see him.

But these people were not hungry for God. They came because they wanted bread. They came bringing their own five loaves and two fishes as offering in order that they might be multiplied.

He told them he is the bread of life and insisted they must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to obtain eternal life. When he said this, he lost the church. Virtually the whole congregation left. Even many of his disciples concluded he was no longer the type of pastor they were looking for: **"From that time many of his disciples went back and walked with him no more."** (John 6:66).

In regard to attracting the crowd: How different Jesus' position is from that of many pastors today. Rather than discourage those who only see godliness as a means of worldly gain, many pastors are determined to attract such people by even claiming they have a special calling or anointing to make people rich financially.

Jesus adamantly refused to sugar-coat the gospel. It might sometimes be a bitter pill to swallow; nevertheless it has to be swallowed because it is the only way to spiritual healing. The gospel is inevitably offensive to the world. Jesus himself is described by Isaiah as a "rock of offence." (Isaiah 8:14).

But pastors repackage the gospel to make it attractive to the world. They see Jesus himself as a commodity to be marketed. As a result, they end up with a self-serving gospel in which grace is turned into license for sin rather than restraint to sin.

Churches now do telemarketing surveys, asking: "What would you like in a church?" In effect, many churches are made to measure, according to the greatest demand and not according to God's prescriptions. They even have surveys now asking church-members what kind of messages they would like to hear.

This is standard operating procedure in the world of business marketing where you find out what your potential customers want and give it to them. But it is totally inappropriate with regard to the kingdom of God which is based on the will of our Father in heaven.

Now we see the next logical step in the process of marketing the church to the world: offer a free inducement to get them into your establishment. Put on a show, offer a free trial, give away something of value, and entice them with things to get them in the door. Today it is a regular practice for churches to offer some sort of inducement for newcomers.

In one American church, they offered to pay for a portion of the visitor's petrol in exchange for visiting the church. Another preacher offered non-members a certain amount of money for just sitting through a Sunday morning service. I suppose you might call this "avant-garde evangelism."

The worldly church: The modern-day pastor is determined to change man's perception of God and to make him more desirable and appealing; all in the interest of expeditious church growth. The flesh hates holiness therefore many pastors do all they can to make the church more like the world. Frankly, holiness is hard on the numbers and it has a way of offending the profane.

The choice is now towards promoting a casual, even cavalier, atmosphere in churches so as to make people feel more comfortable and relaxed. The truth, however, is that we cannot entertain men into the kingdom: but we can convict them.

In this regard, the "purpose-driven churches" are true to their names. They are purpose-driven but their purpose is neither Christ nor the gospel. Their purpose is to fill the pews. Their purpose is to collect as much money as possible. Therefore they sacrifice the gospel on the altar of pragmatic purpose. Since they are keen to attract the world, inevitably they become worldly.

As a result, we have today "church for people who don't like church." A lady spelt out the evangelistic objectives of her church. She said: "We want to attract the world but in an unworldly way." This is a contradiction in terms.

Once we try to market a church, we go off the rails. Therefore, even true evangelism should not be embarked upon in order to bring people to church but to Christ. Many who are brought to church are ending up without Christ; but all who are brought to Christ find great value in church as well.

Churches have been more effective in misleading people by showing them the highway leading to destruction instead of the narrow way leading to salvation. Today, pastors are the blind leaders that Jesus railed against. All they do is lead people into the ditch. (Matthew 15:14).

Set your mind on the things of Christ. Fast and pray, "**Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad in you all our days**" (Psalm 90:14).