



Pursuing Holiness: Dead to Sin

Fr. William Klock

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This morning I talked about the fact that God doesn't just save us so that we can be saved. He saves us so that we can live a new life and be like Christ. And I think that for anyone who's a real Christian, that is our desire. The problem is that because we continue to struggle with sin, we often give up on that goal. We may not be living in gross sin, but we give up on ever really living a holy life, and so we settle into a sort of moral mediocrity. But we're not pleased with it and neither is God. We read the promise of Romans 6:6-7 that we are no longer slaves to sin, but it seems impossible and we just get frustrated with the commands of Scripture to lead a consistently holy life.

Some of us try to be holy by our own willpower; some by faith; some by agonising in prayer over particular sins, but we all seem to fail. As we struggle with sin, one of the questions we ask is: "What should I look to God for and what am I responsible for myself?" Often we get confused at this point, because when we first started out as Christians we assumed that the Bible would show us what God wants from us and that we'd just do it. We fail to consider our tendency to hold onto our old sinful ways.

After a lot of failure with our sinful nature, we might be told things like our problem is that we've 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 might be told that if we'd just hand the problem over to Jesus and rest in his finished work on the cross, he'll live his life in us and we'll be victorious over sin.

If we're frustrated with our struggles with sin, that sounds like good news that God has already done it all and that all we need to do is rest in Christ's finished work. The first time I heard this I felt like a drowning man who was just thrown a life preserver. But even still, I was struggling and being defeated by my sinful nature. I think we've all dealt with this. Victory just isn't ours. We still struggle with pride and jealousy, materialism and impatience and lust. We still eat too much, waste our time, judge each other, shade the truth here and there,

and fall into all sorts of other sins – all the time hating ourselves for it.

So you start to wonder what's wrong. "Why can't I find the victory described in the books that others seem to have found?" We start to feel like something is uniquely wrong with us and that somehow our sinful natures must be worse than everyone else's. That's when we start to despair.

I'm convinced that one of the ploys of Satan is to try to confuse us about the issue of what God has done for us and what he still has to do for ourselves. A lack of understanding on this issue is, I think, the reason for so much of our confusion when it comes to pursuing holiness. It's important that we make this distinction, because God *has* made provision for us to live a holy life, but he's also given us definite responsibilities.

First I want to look at God's provision for us. Look at Romans 6:12. St. Paul says:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.

Notice that pursuing holiness – that the part about not letting sin reign in our mortal bodies – is a command. It's something we *must* do. It's an exhortation from St. Paul. He addresses our wills, saying, "Do not let sin reign," and he implies that this is something that we're responsible for. The experience of holiness is not a gift we receive like our justification; it's something that we're exhorted to work at!

The second thing to notice is that Paul's exhortation is based on what he already said. Remember how I said that when you see a "therefore" you need to ask what it's there for? He's calling us to pursue holiness for a reason.

If we go back and look at Romans 6 we see him give the reason. Look at verse 1 and 2:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

He goes on to develop that, but verses 1 and 2 give us the reason for the "therefore" in verse 12. We are not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies, *because* we have died to sin.

So what does it mean that we've died to sin? Verses 2 to 11 tell us that our dying to sin is the result of our union with Christ. Because he died to sin, we died to sin. Now note that our dying to sin isn't something we do; it's something Christ has done for us *if* we are united with him.

We also need to realise from these verses that our dying to sin *is a fact* whether we realise it or not. Because Christ died to sin, everyone who is united to him has died to sin. Our dying to sin isn't something we do or something we make come true in our experience by reckoning that it's true. It's just plain true. But this is where some have misunderstood things. We've picked up the idea that to have died to sin means to somehow be removed from sin's ability to touch us. But to experience this in our daily lives we're told that we have to *reckon* ourselves dead to sin (verse 11 KJV). *And* we're told that if we're not experiencing victory over our besetting sins, it's because we're not reckoning on the fact that we died to sin.

Now we are to reckon – to count or to consider – ourselves dead to sin, *but our reckoning doesn't make it true*, even in our experience. Verses 11 and 12 have to 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 has to be influenced by the fact that we died to sin.

So what does St. Paul mean when he says "died to sin"? He means that we died to the dominion of sin – to the reign of sin. Before we trusted in Jesus Christ for our salvation we were living in the kingdom of Satan and sin. We "following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2). We were under the power of Satan (Acts 26:18) and the dominion of darkness (Colossians 1:13). Paul says we were slaves to sin (Romans 6:17). We were born into the kingdom of sin, slavery, and death. Every one of us who has lived since Adam, except for Jesus Christ, has been born a slave in the kingdom of sin and Satan.

It's through our union with Christ that we have died to that realm and 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 however decent and moral we thought 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.

Think of it this way. When someone dies in this world, they "pass away" – they're no longer a part of it and no longer under its

influence. That's what St. Paul is saying about us and the kingdom of sin and death. With Christ, we died to that kingdom and have been transferred to the kingdom of righteousness. The old kingdom has no power over us.

Here's our problem, though. Because we were in the realm of sin and under its rule and reign, we started sinning from the day we were born. Because we were slaves, we acted like slaves. We developed sinful habits and character. Even if we were what that world considers "good," we were still living for ourselves, not for God. We were enemies of Christ. We were just like the Jews who said of Christ, "We do not want this man to reign over us" (Luke 19:14).

This is why we continue to sin, even though we've been delivered from the realm of sin and Satan. Our well-trained sinful nature is still with us. Even though sin's dominion and rule are broken, the remaining sin that dwells in believers still exerts huge pressure power that constantly works toward evil.

It's like a nation with a civil war going on inside it – two competing factions. An outside army comes in to help one of the factions win and take control of the government, but instead of disappearing, the losing faction goes underground and starts fighting a guerrilla war. In fact those guerrillas fight so well that the country supplying the outside help can't withdraw its troops.

This is what's going on in us. Satan has been defeated and the reign of sin overthrown, but our sinful natures start a guerrilla war in the hopes of leading us back to sin. The result is a struggle between the Spirit and our sinful natures. St. Paul wrote about this in Galatians 5:17:

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

To add to that, because we were born sinners, from our birth we've developed habits of sin. One of my favourite writers, Jay Adams, likes to say that "We were born sinners, but it took practice to develop our particular styles of sinning. The old life was disciplined toward ungodliness." And so we tend to act according to our sinful habits that we've worked so long and hard to refine.

Think about what happens in countries where the people have never known freedom, and are suddenly liberated and

encouraged to establish democracy. It doesn't usually take. Look at Russia. For centuries the common people lived as virtual slaves to the nobility. When there was finally a revolution in 1917 the people had an opportunity for freedom, but they were so used to living as slaves that they allowed a Communist government to form. Even now, with the fall of that government, many of the people struggle to live as free people. It's hard to for slaves to stop living like slaves. Being a slave has become part of their very nature – it's a habit in a lot of ways.

And so with Christians: we tend to sin out of habit. It's our habit to look out for ourselves instead of others, to retaliate when injured, and to indulge the appetites of our bodies. It's our habit to live for ourselves and not for God. When we become Christians, we don't drop all of those habits overnight. In fact, we spend the rest of our lives putting off these habits and putting on habits of holiness.

To make it even more difficult, we've not only been slaves to sin, but we still live in a world full of slaves to sin. The values of the world around us reflect that slavery, and the world does its best to drag us back and conform us to that sinful mould.

So even though sin no longer reigns in us, it will constantly try to get at us. Even though we've been delivered from the kingdom of sin and its rule, we haven't been delivered from its attacks. In his commentary on Romans 6, Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes that though sin cannot reign in us, that is, in our essential personality, it can, if left unchecked, reign in our mortal bodies. 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.

This is why St. Paul exhorts us to be on our guard so that we will not let sin reign in our bodies. Before our redemption, before our death to the reign of sin, an exhortation like that would have been useless. You can't say to a slave, "Live as a free man," but you can say that to someone who has been delivered from slavery. Now that we're, in fact, dead to sin we are to count that as being true. We're to keep in front of us this fact that we're no longer slaves. We can now stand up to sin and say not 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.

Let me close by summing all of this up. We've been set free from the reign and rule of sin and 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, even though he had never sinned. When he died, he died to that realm of sin (Romans 6:10), and through our union with him we died to that same realm of sin too. 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. And so we're to guard our bodies so that sin does not reign in us.

You see, God *has* made provision for our holiness. Through Christ he has delivered us from sin's reign so that we can now resist sin. What we need to remember is that it's *our* responsibility to resist. God doesn't do that for us. To confuse the *potential* for resisting (which God does provide) with the *responsibility* for resisting (which is our part) is to set ourselves up for failure in the pursuit of holiness.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we give you thanks for sending your Son to die to sin, that as we are united with him in faith and baptism we might die to sin too. We ask you to remind us daily of the fact that Jesus has already freed us from sin, and give us your grace and work in us by your Spirit to help us set aside the habits and patterns of sin that we continue to let rule our mortal bodies. We ask this in the name of Christ. Amen.