

**Sermon for Sunday, February 7, 2010**  
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**LIFE**  
**Romans 6:5-14**

Theme: Our beliefs bring us life or bring us death.

Brian Myers, a scholar living in South Korea has written a compelling account of North Korea. The people are desperately poor. Korea was one nation, one race, with one language until 1950. Today, because of failed government policies, the average North Korean is six inches shorter than the average South Korean. Ten percent of North Koreans died of starvation in the 1990s. Meanwhile, South Koreans are prosperous and healthy. What went wrong?

Their beliefs, revealed in their internal literature, are killing them. North Korean leaders believe they are a superior race. If a North Korean woman goes to China and comes back pregnant, the pregnancy is forcibly terminated to prevent "mongrelization." Leaders believe outsiders, especially Americans and Japanese, are violent and inherently evil. A state of perpetual war is inevitable – and it's maintained by an army of slave-soldiers in the service of "our dear leader."

You may ask: "How do they explain the bags of grain, bearing the American flag, that keep many Koreans alive?" Humanitarian aid, from America or elsewhere, is explained as tribute to their superior state or as reparations for past misdeeds. If the New York Philharmonic visits North Korea, it is a gesture of respect for the regime. If an American official visits, he is showing deference and contrition. North Korea no longer calls itself a communist state. Their own literature shows they're a nation of racist, xenophobic, monarch-worshiping totalitarians. And it's killing them. Their problem: Evil foreign foes. Solution: Serve the dear leader.

Are your beliefs harming you, or do they give life and direction? The Bible and Romans is full of life-giving beliefs. When they assess the human predicament, they don't pin blame on outside enemies. Romans plainly says that humans rebel against God and sin against each other. It says our sins can be forgiven if we but ask. We can be right with the creator God. We can know Jesus, the true and faithful man. He died a real, physical death, then arose again, not as a dream or vision or apparition, but as a physical man. He walked, touched people, ate food. He offers that life to us: if we believe in Jesus, we live with him. It's a life-giving belief.

**1. We died with Christ (6:5-7)**

Last week we saw that some people see this grace as an excuse for sin. If grace abounds when I sin, why not sin more, so that grace can multiply? Paul is aghast and emphatic in his repudiation of that thought: "We died to sin; how shall we live in it any longer?" Or "We are the ones who died to sin." Now we're united to Christ "so we may live a new life." Why go back to the former life? Would a happily married man go back to the dating scene? It would be nonsense. Why return to a way of life that did not satisfy in the first place?

Romans 6:5-6 says we are united with Christ. When he died, there is a sense in which we died too. And when he rose, we rose too. Paul says we are united or conformed to Christ in his death and in his resurrection. What might that mean? At one level, it means our life is like his and we should live like it.

Most of us have had heroes. We think, "I want to be like him, like her." You see some sterling deed and realize, "I want to live like that!" When I was a college student, I admired a certain professor. He was good, but not brilliant as a lecturer or thinker. We most admired his character, dedication, compassion, and warmth.

One day he was scheduled to give a lecture and then lead a discussion on Greek philosophy. Everyone completed the readings and came to class ready to listen and interact. Sadly, our professor had reversed two class dates. He had prepared for a lecture that was due next week. He was embarrassed; he apologized. He thought a while, then said, "So, we can't have class today." I was dumbfounded. I treasured every hour of his class. We wanted to hear his lecture on the wrong topic, whether I was prepared to discuss it or not. We lamented, "We can't have class at all?"

He replied, "No, these topics are too important to do poorly. I'm not ready to lead today's topic properly and you haven't read the material for the lecture in my hand. We'll meet on Thursday." His decision whapped me like an elbow to the sternum. This was an astonishing idea to me: If we can't do it right, we'll wait until we can. It's too important to do poorly. I took his lesson to heart. Until then, I'd relied on a prehensile memory and a glib tongue. No more! For some tasks: Do it right or don't do it at all.

In this case, I was united to my professor morally. There are other forms of union. Two people can be united by affection and loyalty, so that what happens to one happens to the other. If you hurt my wife or child or friend, you hurt me. Take that principle further: God has determined that what happened to Jesus happened to us for he is our representative, the federal head of a new race. Thus we are united to him as our teacher, hero, model, friend and Lord.

Paul says it this way in Rom 6:6 (lit): "Our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be deprived of its strength, so that we no longer serve sin." Jesus is the believer's hero, deliverer and model.

Faith in Jesus and union with him has a goal: that we no longer serve sin. We may still commit sins, but we are no longer enslaved to sin. (More on that later).

Paul explains how we escape bondage to sin: "the body of sin must lose its power." The phrase "body of sin" is a metaphor. "Body of sin" may be another way to say "the sinful nature" in its concreteness. Paul doesn't mean the body is sinful. The body is God's good creation. But when sin governs us, it governs the whole person, body included. Sin shows itself in bodily acts. If someone is weary, discouraged and self-pitying, it can become sloth. We lie in bed far too long, neglecting our responsibilities, convinced we deserve a break. Likewise hunger becomes greed and gluttony and desire becomes lust. Paul is saying that this sort of sin *loses its power*.

That is, we still commit individual sins, but sin is no longer a life-dominating power. Sin isn't entirely eliminated, but it's disabled, deprived of force. The same term is used of Satan in Hebrews 2:14; he has some power, but he doesn't govern or control us. So for all who follow Jesus, sin still has some influence, but it's crippled (1 Corinthians 15:26).

When tempted, when you have failed, tell yourself the truth: Sin does not reign over you.

When you are hurt, angry, or lonely, when you're tempted to accuse others or to pity yourself, remind yourself: The power of sin is broken.

Sin has lost its power because "Our old man [self] has been crucified with Christ." This old man is "the whole of our fallen nature, the whole self in its fallenness". Or the "old man" is our former self, "the man we once were" before our conversion. It's the man who is like Adam. Are these two views or two ways to state one? So what was crucified with Christ is not an alien part of us, called our old or sinful nature, it is the whole person that we were.

The Bible says two things about this crucifixion. Romans 6:6 says, "The old man was crucified." God crucified that old life to death when he called us to himself. Therefore, we should crucify the old nature: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires" (Galatians 5:24).

Again: "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old man with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." (Colossians 3:9-10).

Compare: Romans 6:2 says, "We died to sin." Romans 6:11 says, "Count or reckon or think of yourselves as dead to sin." (This is the first imperative in Romans.) It's an objective reality and we must claim or fulfill by putting it into practice.

We have the status of God's beloved sons and daughters, but we can't bask in it. We live in tension, between the times. We have one foot one in this world, one in the world to come. We are citizens of heaven with a mailing address in St. Louis.

Hebrews expresses the tension this way: "By one sacrifice [Jesus] has perfected those who are being made holy" (10:14). Through Jesus' sacrifice, his substitutionary atonement, God definitively granted us perfection in Him. But we must appropriate it. Thus it says "We **are being made** holy."

We are no longer slaves to sin, says Romans 6:7, "because anyone who has died has been justified from sin." Our translation says "set free" from sin, but there is no doubt that the Greek word is rightly rendered "justified." Paul means that when we were justified by faith, this liberated us from liability to punishment for sin. So we're no longer "slaves to sin."

Actually sin may enslave us in two ways. First, sin makes us liable to punishment, so it holds us in a state of fear. We're waiting to get caught and punished. But there is a way to end our fear. Turn yourself in and accept the punishment, pay the debt. There is a saying: Death pays all debts. We do not, cannot punish people after they die. Now the Bible says Jesus paid our debt for us in full. We are justified, innocent and no longer liable to punishment. So if we trust in Jesus, the fear of punishment is gone. Our debt is paid.

But sin holds or enslaves us another way: Since we were born with an inclination to sin, we easily acquire habits, even skills, at sinning. Philanderers learn how to recognize each other. Con men and liars learn how to entice people to trust them. We also live in a society of sinners who model sin for us and recruit us to join them in drunkenness, gossip, or whatever. No wonder we struggle.

Yet Paul says we're free. We're free from the guilt and condemnation and free, in principle, from bad old habits. John Stott summarizes Romans 17:7: We deserved to die for our sins. And in fact we did die, though not in our person, but in the person of Jesus Christ, who died in our place... And by union with the same Christ we have risen again. So the old life of sin is finished, because we died to it, and the new life" has begun. Now it is "inconceivable" that we should go back. Think this way.

## **2. We will live with Christ (6:8-10)**

Romans 6:8: "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live in him." Since we're united to Christ, new life follows, both logically and chronologically. If my heart is united to beloved Professor Tweed, then I will logically take serious things seriously, as he did. I will change my ways, in time - chronologically.

We're able to do this because Jesus gives us his Spirit and wisdom, to discern and to desire a better way (Romans 8:10). Moral effort is important, but union with Christ is the essential. So Paul says it again in 6:9-10: "For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin [as a substitute for sin] once for all; but the life he lives he lives to God." That is, he died to sin once in Jerusalem, but he lives to God forever.

Jesus didn't rise the way Lazarus did, as a finite man. Jesus changed and had a renewed body, one that could not die. So Jesus says, "I am the Living One. I was dead and behold I am alive forever and ever" (Revelation 1:18).

Paul here sheds light on the character of our new life: It is absolutely secure because it rests on the completed work of Christ. His death is final. His life is eternal and we are united to him in both.

A word to the seeker: This part of Romans is especially for believers, but if you're investigating the Christian faith and life, this reveals the essentials of our faith. When the Bible assesses the human predicament it doesn't blame things on outside enemies as the North Koreans do. It delivers a hard but necessary diagnosis: We sin and we die. But it can lead to life

But it offers a distinct but hopeful cure. Not: Make up for it! Rather: Believe that Jesus loved you and made it up for you. If you trust him and admire him - as I admired my professor, but more - your life is united to his. He died to liberate you from death. He rose to grant you life. It's yours when you trust him.

### 3. See yourself: alive to God (6:11-14)

Oh, Christian, this is your life and you should claim it, really claim it. You are dead to sin and alive with Christ, therefore "count [reckon, consider] yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11).

A recent poll revealed that nearly four million Americans are vegetarians. The article described the various subcategories of vegetarians. Vegans refuse all animal products, including eggs, milk, cheese, yogurt, even ice cream (which seems rather sad). Fruititarians go further; they eat only fruits, refusing to even plant seeds. As we might expect, there aren't very many vegans or fruititarians. Another group, but still less than a million people, eats anything but animal flesh. If these groups are so modest, how can there be four million vegetarians? Then the poll revealed the great secret of the rising vegetarian movement: Over sixty percent of all vegetarians eat meat!

There are about a million "pollo-vegetarians." They eat poultry - chicken and other birds. Next, there are a million "pesce-vegetarians." They eat fish. Finally there are pollo-pesce vegetarians. They eat fish and fowl - and just the occasional reptile and amphibian. By these standards, we realize millions of people can say, "I am a vegetarian."

Seeing this, I've decided to create a new category so everyone can be a vegetarian with our very own label. Pollo and pesce vegetarians get their names from Latin: "pollo" and "pesce" are Latin words for fowl and fish (pullus, piscis). Clearly, to become a meat eating vegetarian, it's vital that we adapt a term from an ancient language. So let's go to the Greek word *thelo*, which means "I wish" or "I want." I invite you now to join me in the newest category, the thelo-vegetarian. Thelo-vegetarians eat meat only when they want to. On all other occasions, thelo-vegetarians do not eat meat.

We may laugh at the thought that **most** self-proclaimed vegetarians eat meat. But we have to ask: Are self-proclaimed Christians so different? People want a label that says, "I have strict principles; I discipline myself" without actually paying the price of that discipline. That's true of "vegetarians" and of Christians, too. Many vegetarians live by this principle: "I don't eat meat, except for the times when it doesn't really count as meat. I don't eat meat except when I really want to eat meat."

Sadly, many Christians are similar. They say, "I'm a disciple. I follow Jesus - except when I don't want to follow him." Easy one: Adults do this when they cohabit with boy friends or girl friends before they marry. Their friends do it; it saves money; it makes life easier.

Closer to home: Children do it when they follow the crowd in making fun of a classmate who is different, a teacher who is different, anyone who can be mocked.

Whole families do it when they spend all their time and money on themselves and have nothing left to give others, nothing left to serve their friends and neighbors.

We can see this in the gospels. Great crowds followed Jesus when it was easy. But when Jesus said hard things many so-called disciples said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" Who can tolerate this? Then many of them "turned back and no longer followed [literally walked with] him. There is a better way.

Jesus' final sentence in Matthew says: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (28:19-20). There is one command, one imperative: "Make disciples." Not "Tell people about Jesus" or "Make converts."

He even tells us how to do it: by "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (28:20). The term "everything" is actually from two Greek words. One means "all things," the other "as much as." This intensifies the command. We must teach disciples to obey every last thing Jesus says.

We're not like vegetarians who eat meat when we wish. We obey everything. On Friday, I went running with my dog in the slush and the snow. My dog can be so smart and obedient – and she was this day. I say, "Whoa" or "Heel" and she stops. I say, "This way" and she gets closer to me. I say, "Let's go" and she shifts from a lope to a dash as she leads me on our little wind sprints – sprint being defined quite loosely for men my age. I let her off the chain in an open field and command her to stay with me and she stays. Always? No! She can and does rebel at times. But fundamentally, she obeys, because I am her master. Her old doggish nature no longer governs her as it once did. I do. She doesn't resent this, she loves it because there is a union of will and affection between us.

You see the analogy. Animals and masters. More profoundly, a student and a professor. Our relationship with the Lord is deeper. We sin, but we must not and "do not let sin reign in your mortal body" so that you obey its evil desires." Instead "offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness" (6:12-13).

A few weeks ago, I listed the disciplines of grace: Reading the Bible, prayer, worship, self-examination, self-denial and service. Today, a word on service. The form is almost poetic in 6:12-13, as Paul calls us to service

- Don't let sin reign in your mortal body to obey its desires [And]
- Don't present the members of body as weapons of wickedness, to sin
- But do present yourselves to God as alive from the dead. And
- [*present*] the members of your body as weapons of righteousness, to God

The New International Version translation says "instruments," not "weapons." Fair enough: an instrument is a tool; we should be tools, implements, weapons in God's hands – hammers, plows, swords to do His work. The Greek term can mean implements or weapons. Either way, our bodies should be useful, strong tools in God's hands.

Paul has talked about the body before. In Romans 1, Pagans dishonor God with bodies as they serve their desires (1:24). Sin once reigned in our mortal bodies (6:12). The body is dead due to sin, but the Spirit gives our bodies life (8:10-11). Clearly, God takes interest in our bodies.

He redeems our bodies and expects us to use them in a new way. He will redeem our bodies eternally. When He restores all things, at the end of time, He will raise and perfect our bodies (8:13, 23). Therefore, present your bodies to God.

Present is a formal term, like our word *presentation*. "Present" implies a deliberate or formal act. In the temple, Israelites presented gifts to God. Now we present our bodies to Him. The body stands for the

whole person, in concrete daily life: hands and feet, belly and back. If we give our body, we give the whole.

Indeed, we are wholly God's. With the body we give ourselves to God in mundane acts. Our hands represent our strength. Whether poorly or well, our mouth declares what is in our heart and mind. A poet said,

"I am the words I say... Words I say out/ Are the only known link with my thinking. They alone connect my breathing/ To that essential passion/ Without which life itself would be a fatuous gesture." <sup>1</sup>

Right. I must say out my words. My fingers or mouth bring my essential passion to life. This same holds for our deeds. That's why Paul didn't go for pious jargon: "Serve God with your 'heart.'" He made it concrete: serve with your body. "Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded."

The Bible says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." If a sinner comes near to the holy God, he will repent and be forgiven and have a new life – thoughts, words, deeds, standards, goals, all showing his or her unity with Christ.

So: When tempted, when you have failed, know that sin does not reign over you and you are dead to sin and alive to Christ:

When you are hurt, angry, or lonely, when you're tempted to accuse others or to pity yourself, remind yourself the power of sin is broken. You're alive to God.

When you thrive and prosper and all praise you, remind yourself that you are dead to sin and alive to God. These are truths that give life.

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<sup>1</sup> Brodsky, *Keeper of the Word Hoard*, p. 35