

Responsible Grace

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a two-part series

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Romans 6:1–2, 12–14 (CEB)

So what are we going to say? Should we continue sinning so grace will multiply?

² Absolutely not! All of us died to sin. How can we still live in it? . . .

¹² So then, don't let sin rule your body, so that you do what it wants. ¹³ Don't offer parts of your body to sin, to be used as weapons to do wrong. Instead, present yourselves to God as people who have been brought back to life from the dead, and offer all the parts of your body to God to be used as weapons to do right. ¹⁴ Sin will have no power over you, because you aren't under Law but under grace.

Ephesians 4:29–5:2 (NRSV)

²⁹ Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. ³¹ Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, ³² and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. 5 ¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, ² and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

Grace has been poured out on us. What's next?

Last week, we learned that those who have faith in Christ have been made right with God through the faithfulness of Jesus all the way to the cross. And, further, that this is 100% by the grace of God. It is purely God's gift or we'd all be boasting about our life-saving spirituality! So, yes, it is all about God's magnificent, wondrous outpouring of grace.

So what's next, we might ask. Because of the wonderfulness of grace, should we all simply go out and sin more so there will be more grace? That is Paul's rhetorical question in Romans 6:1. Of course, that is ridiculous. God hasn't saved us so we can wallow in envy and greed and hate, but so we can become ever more kind, helpful, and compassionate, so that we can reflect God's love in all that we do and say.

When we come to faith in Christ, none of us are instantly transformed into Christlike souls who love God and others without fail. Instead, when we are justified, i.e., made right with God, we are set apart for God's purposes (one sense of "sanctified" – an accomplished fact) and we begin the process of "sanctification" (the second sense of sanctification – growing in Christian virtue).¹ It is our transformation into ever holier people and it is both our work and God's work, in the person of the Holy Spirit. We are justified by God's grace alone but the work of sanctification is a cooperative project.

John Wesley spoke of "sanctifying grace," as set forth by the UMC in our Book of Discipline:

We hold that the wonder of God's acceptance and pardon does not end God's saving work, which continues to nurture our growth in grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor.

New birth is the first step in this process of sanctification. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart "habitually

¹ These two senses of sanctification are another example of the already/not yet reality of the God's kingdom. We are already sanctified *and* not yet sanctified. It is like a couple who have said their marriage vows but have not consummated their union. They are married already and not yet married.

filled with the love of God and neighbor” and as “having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked.”

This gracious gift of God’s power and love, the hope and expectation of the faithful, is neither warranted by our efforts nor limited by our frailties.

Minds that are habitually filled with the love of God and others is about as good a way to describe a virtuous person as I can imagine, so long as we remember that, in Christian parlance, love is what we do, not what we feel. Likewise, with Wesley’s image of walking as Jesus walked. We just have to remember that it is by God’s grace *and* by our own effort that we are transformed.

As you sometimes hear people say, God saves us as we are, but doesn’t leave us as we were. N. T. Wright elaborates on this in his commentary on Romans. His reflections are worth a careful reading:

This chapter [Romans 6] shines a bright spotlight on the dangerous half-truth, currently fashionable, that “God accepts us as we are.” Indeed, the question of 6:1 could be read as raising exactly this question: Will “God’s acceptance” do as a complete grounding of Christian ethics? Emphatically not. Grace reaches where humans are, and accepts them as they are, because anything less would result in nobody’s being saved. Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone. But grace is always *transformative*. God accepts us where we are, but God does not intend to leave us where we are. That would be precisely to “continue in sin, that grace might abound.” Unless we are simply to write Romans 6 out of the canon, the radical inclusivity of the gospel must be matched by the radical exclusivity of Christian holiness. There is such a thing as continuing to let sin reign in one’s mortal body, and it will require serious moral effort to combat this tendency. The idea that Christian holiness is to be attained by every person simply doing what comes naturally would actually be funny were it not so prevalent. True freedom is not simply the random, directionless life, but the genuine humanness that reflects the image of God. This is found under the lordship of Christ. And this lordship makes demands that are as testing and difficult as they are actually liberating.²

The accompanying textbox will walk you through a more detailed and thoroughly biblical understanding of sanctification. In it, you will see that most of the references are to Paul’s letters. Based on his own story, Paul went through a years-long period of intense transformation which continued through his many years of apostolic ministry. John Wesley knew that all believers are set apart by God [sanctified] for a purpose and there are few examples better than Paul.

Persecutor and apostle

Born in Tarsus, a city on the Southern coast of Asia Minor, Saul³ moved to Jerusalem while a young man. There, he pursued his education and excelled. Making his place among the Pharisees in Jerusalem, Saul’s intellect, energy, and zeal attracted the attention of Gamaliel, one of the most respected teachers in all Israel. Saul advanced fast, beyond what was achieved by most Jews of his age.

Thus, it is no surprise that Saul put his energies to work ridding Israel of Jesus-followers after the crucifixion of the blaspheming pretender from Nazareth. Saul would later acknowledge that he violently persecuted the Jesus-movement, seeking to destroy it – thoroughly and quickly. Saul was present at the stoning of the first Christian martyr, Stephen, holding the coats of those who threw the stones.

While on a trip to Damascus to round up some of the Jesus-followers, Saul was visited by Jesus. Saul saw a blinding light, fell to the ground, and was asked point-blank by

² N. T. Wright, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 1994–2004, 10, 548.

³ Paul was born with the name “Saul,” by which he is referred to in Acts until he begins his ministry to the Gentiles, when he becomes known by the Greek name, “Paulos.”

Jesus, “Why do you persecute me?” At Jesus’ instructions and though temporarily blinded, Saul made his way to Damascus where a Christian named Ananias laid hands on Saul, who was then filled with the Holy Spirit and restored to sight. Saul would soon learn what God had told Ananias; Saul was the one God had chosen to take the Good News of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

Paul was a perfect choice for the job. As a Pharisee trained under Gamaliel, his Jewish credentials were unassailable. But he was a product of the Greco-Roman world having been born and raised in Tarsus. He was knowledgeable about the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle. Paul was blessed with a powerful intellect and enormous energy. He had a trade, tent-making, that he could use to support himself.

The road called sanctification

From violent destroyer of God’s church to God’s apostle to the Gentiles. We’d be hard pressed to find a more dramatic conversion story than Paul’s or one with more far-ranging consequences. God worked powerfully in Paul, using him to shape the faith that has been passed on to us.

But this was not easy for Paul. He spent nearly fifteen years after his conversion learning and working among the Jewish followers of Jesus before undertaking his first missionary journey in the late 40’s AD. Throughout his ministry, Paul would

Sanctification – as growing in Christian virtue

(from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Ryken, Wilhoit, and Longman)

The essential pattern [of sanctification] is twofold - an avoiding of sin and a positive practice of virtue. One cluster of images accordingly pictures the action of separating oneself from evil. Sanctification is here a matter of casting off evil practices (Rom 13:12), shunning immorality (1 Cor 6:18), putting off the old nature (Eph 4:22), putting away immoral conduct (Eph 4:25; Jas 1:21), laying aside every weight of sin (Heb 12:1). A related motif uses the language of abstaining from evil (1 Thess 4:3; 5:22; 1 Pet 2:11), renouncing it (Tit 2:12) or keeping oneself unstained by it (Jas 1:27). In more intense imagery this becomes a putting to death of sin (Col 3:12, 14) or crucifying of it (Gal 5:24). The imagery of washing, cleansing and purifying from sin is of similar import (1 Cor 6:11; 2 Cor 7:1; Eph 5:26; 1 Jn 3:3). Also present is the imagery of not being conformed to a sinful lifestyle (Rom 12:1; 1 Pet 1:14).

The positive counterpart to putting off evil is putting on the good (Rom 13:12, 14; Eph 4:24; Col 3:12, 14). The sanctified life is something one builds on the foundation provided by Christ (1 Cor 3:10–15). Again, sanctification involves supplementing faith with virtue (2 Pet 1:5). Sanctification involves producing something that was not present before—a concept implicit in pictures of sanctified conduct as fruit that is produced by a renewed nature (Gal 5:22–23; Phil 1:11). Or sanctification can be an equipping with everything good (Heb 13:21).

The imagery of process is also important, with the implication that sanctification is incremental. Sanctification thus becomes a matter of maturing into adulthood and being no longer a child (Eph 4:13–14), of growing up (Eph 4:15), of growing in grace (2 Pet 3:18). The imagery of overflowing abundance is also present: people “abound more and more” in godliness (Phil 1:9 RSV), “increase and abound in love” (1 Thess 3:12 RSV), become “rich in good deeds” (1 Tim 6:18 RSV) and “abound” in godliness (2 Pet 1:8 RSV). The process of sanctification can also be slow and methodical, with one virtue producing another (Rom 5:3–5), perhaps through a process of imitating what is good (3 Jn 11). Process imagery is also implied when sanctification is pictured as pressing on toward a goal (Phil 3:12, 14), as something that is not yet perfect, with the implication that the progression is toward perfection (Phil 3:12), and as a process in which God will eventually sanctify a person wholly (1 Thess 5:23).

constantly have to defend himself against the charge that he was a second-class apostle because he had not been among Jesus' disciples before the crucifixion.

And like the rest of us, Paul struggled to live out his faith, to live as the person God had called him to be. Paul knew that God had made him into a new person, but he also knew that he had his own work to do in this. In his letter to the Romans (7:14-25), Paul writes dramatically and frankly about his own inner struggle and, by extension, the inner struggles of us all to live out our salvation. He delights in the law of God but knows that he is at war with himself.

Because God can and does work with such power in our lives, it is very tempting to say to someone one, "Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved." But sanctification is about what we do as well. Will we be givers of grace, growing in holiness?

Daily Bible Readings

More on sanctification as growing in Christian virtue

Monday, 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 Are you ready for solid food?

Tuesday, 1 Peter 2:1-3 Do you long for the pure, spiritual milk?

Wednesday, Romans 12:1-3 Are you being transformed by the renewing of your mind?

Thursday, Ephesians 4:14-16 Are you being tossed to and fro?

Friday, Romans 12:9-21 The marks of Christian virtue

Saturday, 2 Peter 3:14-18 Are you growing "in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"? (v. 18)

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

A study of the book of Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

A study of Paul's letter to the Romans

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Both classes are now recorded and are available each week in my new podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts. Search by my name, "Scott Engle."

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *Questions to All Your Answers*

Video of each week's class is posted here: vimeo.com/groups/scottsbiblestudy