

Rescued from the Powers of Sin and Death

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everybody. My name is Anthony. I get to serve as one of the pastors here at the table, and it's my joy to be here with you. We are in the middle of a series on the Book of Romans.

The Book of Romans is this big, hefty theological tome that St. Paul the Apostle wrote, and we've been exploring over the past couple weeks the ways that it's been misinterpreted or misused over the years, ways that we can reclaim it as a gospel of peace. So we've talked about, we've talked about Romans 12, we've talked about Romans 13 and submitting to government and what that actually means from Paul's perspective. Last week we talked about Romans chapter 5 and sort of changing our, the way that we use our imagination when we talk about sin and death and what Jesus is up to and what Jesus is doing in his life, death, resurrection, ascension. And we're going to continue that work today as we go into Romans chapter 6. So words out for the scripture are going to be on the screen, but we're going to bounce around the chapter, so it might be helpful to have Romans chapter 6 pulled up on your phones, your physical Bibles, if you have them, as we do that. So as you pull up scripture, let me remind you of a new story that happened here in D.C. recently, past year, raise your hand maybe if you've heard this story about the D.C. employee who was working two full-time jobs. Anybody remember this story? It was on Washingtonian props? Yes, yes, okay.

So there's a D.C. employee, they were working as the deputy D.C. director of buildings full-time and also full-time at Freddie Mac, okay? So this person would go into the office Mondays and Fridays and do her D.C. job and then work remote Tuesday through Thursday. But Tuesday through Thursday, she was going into the office at Freddie Mac, pulling six-figure incomes at both jobs and let this go on for some time until D.C. like changed their work-from-home rules and like, oh, you have to come in more often. And she's like, oh no. And she got caught, she got fined, she got fired. She was trying to do both at the same time. And to me, this is a decent metaphor for what Paul is talking about in Romans 5 and Romans 6, what we talked about last week, what we're talking about today, in terms of you were employed by this thing called sin. Jesus defeated the power of sin. And now you're employed, you're in the employment of a different power, a different thing, and hopefully God. And what you cannot do is try to be employed by both at the same time.

It may sound good for a while, but in the end, it will not work out for you. And one of the mindset shifts I want us to make when we come up against the topic of sin in the Bible is that oftentimes that word should have a capital S. Sin in the sort of imaginative world of the Bible is not just these accidents or mistakes that we do. It's not just the archery metaphor of missing the mark. Sin is a power or character itself that needs to be dealt with as if it's its own thing. It's a power or character.

[3 : 1 6] And sin is very exclusive. It's kind of like citizenship. It's, you know, some places do allow you to have dual citizenship, but it's troublesome if you try to have dual citizenship with like the U.S. and maybe Russia or, you know, powers that are opposed to each other. You can't be both part of the fraternal order of the police and a Black Panther at the same time. You can't work two full-time jobs and lie about it. So last week, we explored this idea in Romans 5 that sin and death have been defeated.

And the problem that's being solved is not just you are a sinner. You make mistakes. What's Jesus going to do about it? That's not the problem that Romans is trying to solve. Rather, the problem is sin is this despotic ruler, an exclusive club. It's like the mafia, and it won't let you go. It's like, you know, lots of movies where, you know, they pull the person back in.

You know, he got to do one more job. Oh, they'll never let me go. Okay? That's kind of the idea of sin. And Jesus is not just trying to make sin-free, mistake-free, perfect people. Rather, Jesus is trying to defeat a cosmic power. And if those powers are, in fact, defeated, then we got to quit our

job with Freddie Mac or quit our job with TC government, one of them. We got to exchange our allegiance out of them to Jesus. So take a look. Romans 6, verse 1 and 2.

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin? Sin the club, sin the exclusive mafia-like power that will not let you go so that grace may increase? Certainly not. We died to sin. How can we still live in it?

[5 : 04] Now, most of us, if you're likely, if you grew up hearing preaching about sin, you read continue in sin, and you assume all means continue to sin, continue sinning, continue missing the mark, continue making mistakes, but that's not what he needs. He's saying if you're continuing in sin, in the club, in the mafia of the cosmic power of the sin, of the master of the nation that you have allegiance to, why are you doing that? Now, the problem with sin is that it doesn't let you go very easily. You can't just up and decide to leave the mafia. It's a despotic club, and there's only one way out, and that's death.

Anybody hear of the idea of pseudocide? Pseudocide. So there's this interesting thing. One hand. Okay. It was just interesting correlation. Correlation is not causation, but you still see the chart of when consumer debt goes up. Pseudocide goes up, and pseudocide is faking your debt. Faking your debt.

Surprisingly common practice to get out of debt, to get out of like child payments, even to get out of marriages. Actually, when I finished this sermon, I put this away on like Thursday, picked up a different book about like pastoral ministry, and the first story was about a pastor who faked his death to get out of the church. Okay? Now, don't try this. It doesn't work most of the time. Most folks end up in jail, and they get caught, but there is one story I found.

Her name is Grace Oakeshott, and Grace Oakeshott was an active socialist. She was a civil rights activist in England in the early 1900s. She set up a trade school for girls, and decades later, like modern era, this writer becomes interested in her work and wants to track her down for the historical record and for a book she's writing. So this writer discovers Grace Oakeshott, tries to find historical records about her, and finds out that she died the age of 35.

That her family went for the beach, and the files flows left on the beach, and the people that she died. So that, years later, that staying journalist and wider comes across the one in the new TV with. Though all candidly mentioned to the place to a great long train about it, but it turned out that Grace had baked her own death to discontinue dealing with her lover. Now, the idea here in Rome instead of the idea, except he's not faking his own death, he actually goes through with it. To run to Kippur to verse 7. Verse 7 says this, To end the imaginative world that Paul is giving up, there is this cosmic power called sin, that all that have been forced to swear our allegiance to is this despotic ruler all over all of humankind, over all the world, and there's only one way out of this mafia-like club, and that's death.

[8 : 10] So Jesus hatches an idea, what if I die to sin? And using this logic, if I die to sin, I'm set free from sin. So Jesus becomes human, become God incarnate, the ultimate human, the human to stand in for all the ease, and then dies, and by his death is no longer under the power of sin. He's left the mafia, he's found his one way out. And in Jewish so, by dying, Jesus has been released from the power of sin.

Capital S. Sin no longer has any claim on Jesus because Jesus downed the evil. You didn't fake his death, he actually died. In the same way, look at verse 9. Verse 9, we know that the Messiah, Christ Jesus, having been raised from the dead, will never die again. Death no longer has any authority over him. So Jesus pulls this one-two punch. He dies, now sin no longer has any authority over him, and he's resurrected, so death no longer has any authority over him. So Jesus is performed like this ultimate jiu-jitsu move. He allows the entirety of the forces of sin and death and evil and oppression to overtake him on the cross, and then he uses all the forces of his own enemy to burst out of the grave and resurrection, defeating sin and death in the process. And in doing so, Jesus shows us that ultimately, sin, death, evil, oppression are self-defeating. They can put all of their force against Jesus, against God incarnate, and in the end, they just exhaust themselves because God will not be defeated. Because, you know, I'm a middle-aged white dude, I am obligated, it's my duty and my joy to be a huge, like, Lord of the Rings fan. You can. So there's this passage about the creator God figure in the Lord of the Rings world, putting together this orchestral song in order to create the cosmos, to create the world. And so you've got the creator God and all of his sort of archangels, all making this beautiful orchestral song. And as the different scenes and melodies play, the world takes shape.

But then there's this Satan-like figure, Melkor, who begins to play his own discordance, melody, and scene. And by bringing in this discord, begins to create the forces of evil. Now, the way that the creator God, Uluvatar, in this song and creation story of Middle-earth, responds is not with panic, not even with force. But Uluvatar says this, this is from the Simarillion, that long book that nobody leaves except me. You, Melkor, shall see that no theme may be played that has not an uttermost source in me, nor can you alter the music. For he that attempts this shall prove but my instrument. He is a divising of things near wonderful, which he himself did not imagine. In other words, Melkor, you can plot, you can try, you can try to play a different theme. But in the end, all you're going to do is end up just rejoining my orchestra. You shall prove but my instrument, which is this recurring theme, that the forces of evil in the world are only self-defeating, and that God's genius and joy is only ever able to take what is intended for evil and squeeze up some good from it, as Jericho's famous, we say as he genitive. And so, the character of sin, the character of death, of evil, throws their forces against Jiva from a cross, and ends up that they shall prove but God's instrument in bringing about something even more wonderful, the redemption of all humanity.

You know, in the story, sin is a character, a sadistic cult that all of humanity has been and swaved to. In order to break out, Jesus dies, and then through that death, his granted freedom from the stand and hang down. And then, the whole point of this, is that we get to participate in that freedom. So, this is verse 3, Roman 6 verse 3 and 4.

[12:33] Alright, don't you know that all of us who were baptized into the Messiah, Jesus, were baptized into his death? That means that we were buried with him through baptism into death, so that just as Messiah was raised from the dead through the Father's glory, we too might walk in a new life. So, we're getting a little mystical here, very mystical and poetic as we're entering into this different imaginative world. And I'll just remind all of us, like, before you get all poo-poo-y about poetic imaginative world, remember that you too, all of us, are also part of imaginative worry.

We just have modern versions of them. Social hierarchies, concepts like social plateaus and aristocracies are their constructs, their imaginative worry. Corporations don't exist in any sort of scientifically measurable way. They exist on paper, and we just all sort of agree that corporations have power. Degrees don't have inherent value. We just have an imaginative world that agrees that they do have value. Same thing with currency, stock market, and trade agreement. They're just based on collective belief. Now, I'm not saying that those things don't matter. They're powerful. They shape human behavior. They impact the world in scansable ways, even if they're fundamentally product of human imagination and greed. What I am saying is that when you read scripture like this, like Romans 6, you're just entering into an older, more ancient, imagined world that also can have real impact on you and through society. Like baptism. Baptism is this way, according to Paul, that we enter into the death that Jesus died. Baptism, as we are lowered into the water and brought back out again, is a way of reenacting and actually entering into the same reality that Jesus lived. Death to sin, a way out of the mafia, oppressive, cold, despotic ruler of sin, and resurrection, a way out of death. Paul says, don't you know that you who were baptized into the Messiah, you were baptized into death. Baptism is a powerful, not just symbolic, but sacramental act. Sacrament, meaning a grace that becomes evident and tangible in the world. Baptism, the act of being buried and raised. By being buried, we too get to escape from the mafia of sin. We too get to fake our own deaths, leave the mob, and no longer be part of the death cult called sin. Verse 5 says, if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, so Paul's sort of bringing this idea of like a seed being buried in the ground, we too shall be raised up in the likeness of Jesus's resurrection. If we've died to sin like Jesus has, we also get the benefits of resurrection like Jesus did. In other words, what's true of Jesus is true of us. If you can say it about Jesus, then you can say it about Jesus's people, you and me. In other words, in Paul's language, this is the idea of not substitution, but participation. Again, if you grew up in the church, you may have heard a version of the story that says that Jesus died instead of us, but that's not really how Paul frames it in Romans. It's not that Jesus died instead of us, it's that Jesus died ahead of us. Jesus didn't die so that we would avoid death. Jesus died so that we can join in his death and therefore be free from the powers of sin and death. And this makes sense of Jesus's call to take up your cross, or Paul's insistence that we died in Christ. It's good news because it means that Jesus did the tough work of actual dying to sin, and we get to enjoy the benefits of it. By being baptized into the Messiah, being brought into the family of God, by being brought into Jesus's life and his death and his resurrection, we get to participate in all the same things that Jesus participates in. So Paul continues, verse 6.

This is what we know. Our old humanity was crucified with the Messiah so that the bodily solidarity of sin might be abolished and that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. So this is basically Paul's sort of thick, heavy theological language for what we've been explaining. Our old humanity was crucified with the Messiah so that the bodily solidarity of sin might be abolished. All the things that were holding us into that cultic death mafia of sin is gone and we are no longer enslaved to it. Verse 7, in the same way too, you must reckon yourselves as being dead to sin and alive to God and Messiah Jesus.

Maybe some of our friends from the South or from the Midwest use language like, well, I reckon, right? And this is what Paul is saying. Some translations say, calculate, think of yourselves, imagine yourselves.

I reckon that I am dead to sin and alive to God and Jesus. Now this is much easier said than done. To reckon yourselves as dead to sin, as dead to this cosmic power and being alive to God. How do you count yourself, imagine yourself, imagine yourself, reckon or calculate yourself as being dead to the power of sin when the power of sin still seems to be so pervasive? So we're not going to go verse by verse through the next rest of the chapter. But Paul's basic answer to this is that the answer is not legalism. Because legalism is always the temptation. Oh, if I'm dead to sin and alive in Christ, then my one response to this is make sure I have a list of do's and do's not, do not's that I have to follow perfectly in order to calculate, reckon, think, imagine myself as dead to sin and alive to God. The temptation for every religious movement, and Paul knew this, was just do better and try harder. That's how you reckon yourselves. And every time, every time, every single time, do better, try harder religion will lead to exhaustion and bitterness and resentment and spiritual abuse. So Paul explains in the next chapter what happens when we try to do legalism as a way of reckoning ourselves as dead to sin. So this is Paul's famous passage in Romans 7, the last half of the chapter. I do the things I do not want to do, and this is

[19:30] Eugene Peterson's message translation of it. Paul says this, basically about doing the, trying to answer these questions legalistically, the do better, try harder approach. Yes, I'm full of myself. After all, I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, and then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. It's the difference between December 31st, New Year's Eve, Anthony, and January 2nd, after New Year's Anthony. I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself, and then do it. It becomes obvious that God's command is necessary, but I need something more. For if I know the law, but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help. Does anybody else have the desire that when you see a really nice car to just want to steer into it? Is that just me? I obviously need help.

I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it. I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone deep wrong, deep within me, and gets the better of me every time. I have yet to actually crash into a car on purpose, okay? It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. Again, sin, not this thing that's inside wrong with us. Sin, the despotic ruler over all of humanity. Sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? So that's Paul's dilemma. What's Paul's answer? Go to the next chapter, Romans 8 verse 1. Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. It is one of the most surprising therefores in Scripture. You know, the old preacher sort of joke that you see a therefore in Scripture, you have to see what the therefore is there for, okay? So this is a surprising therefore, because Paul has just explained everything that's broken and wrong with him. I don't do the things I want to do, and I do the things I don't want to do. Therefore, there is no condemnation. It's a shock. It's a surprise. It's a non sequitur. The logic does not line up. Oh, you feel wracked with guilt and self-hatred that you can't do anything right?

[22:20] Therefore, there is no condemnation. Oh, you feel stuck and like you can't do anything? Therefore, there is no condemnation. Let me put it a couple other ways. This is some quotes from some other spiritual leaders and gurus. Lori Deshane, a Buddhist teacher, she says, we can't hate ourselves into a version of ourselves we can love. Amen.

Henry Nouwen, Catholic theologian and mystic, he says, self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us beloved. Carl Rogers, one of the founders of person-centered psychotherapy, one of the fathers of modern therapy, says, the curious paradox is when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change. Richard Rohr, another Catholic theologian and mystic, says this, you cannot accomplish or work up to union with God because you've already got it. You cannot ever become worthy or perfect by yourself. You can only reconnect to your infinite source. The biblical revelation is about awakening, not accomplishing. It's about realization, not performance. You cannot get there. You cannot get there. You can only be there. You can't work for DC government and Freddie Mac at the same time. Don't work for the devil and God at the same time. It's up to you who's who in that metaphor.

The devil, sin, death, evil has been defeated. They're a bad employer. It's time to quit. Legalism is a form of self-hatred and rejected, rejection. Legalism is being employed to the devil, but calling it holiness. It will not work. It's a distraction from the actual work of setting people free from oppression and harm. Paul is consistent in this. Colossians chapter 2 verse 20, if with Christ you died to the elemental principles of the world, another way of saying you have died to sin, why do you live as if you still belonged it to the world's principles?

Why do you submit to regulations? Do not handle and do not taste and do not touch. All those regulations refer to things that perish with use. They're simply human commands and teachings. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety and humility and severe treatment of the body, but they are no actual value in checking self-indulgence.

So, it's an awakening. It's a realization and not an accomplishment that the work that Jesus has done, dying to sin, raising to new life, is work that was done on our behalf and we wake up to it.

[25 : 04] Another way of saying this, which we have said many times here at the table, is you give grace to people and you give toughness to systems. That also means grace to yourself. It also means grace to your enemy.

Because your enemy is also being harmed by systems meant to hurt. Now, no, no, no. People may think that when you're tough on systems, you're being tough on them. And that makes sense.

Thomas Merton put it this way. When I criticize a system, they think I criticize them. And that is, of course, because they fully accept a system and identify themselves with it. It's like when you criticize racism and people saying you're not being patriotic. Like, wait, are you saying that racism is patriotic? Is that what you're saying? You really don't say that? So, yes, we give grace to people. We give grace to ourselves.

We even give grace to our enemy. And we are tough on system. And if somebody takes that as a, you know, rejection of them, that's because they're also so tied up in the system. The good news is that when Jesus arrived and said the kingdom of God has already shown up in Jesus, and that the kingdom of God lives within you, the way Paul puts it is that we have died to sin in Christ. We have raised to new life in Christ. That what's true of Jesus is true of us. That means there's no legalism involved. There's no list of do's and do's nots. It's about waking up to our belovedness, waking up to the belovedness of every person next to us, and then living like that's true, living like they actually are beloved. Now, that was a bunch of stuff, so I'm going to do my best to sum this up. It's actually me summarizing my online friend, Craig Uffman, who's a Episcopal priest.

We were talking about Paul online together, and he put it like this. He said, death is God's solution to defeating the power of sin, and resurrection is God's solution to defeating the power of death. Our participation in Jesus's life and resurrection is our means of embracing God's gift of life that transcends time and space. Participation is not merely intellectual ascent, but our embodied commitment to following Jesus's way as guiding by the gift of the Spirit, who meets each of us anew every day and every generation. Would you pray with me?

Spirit, Christ, Creator, we thank you that you have accomplished the work. We thank you that your solution for us is not self-hatred and self-rejection, but rather acceptance of the fact that you call us very good. You call us beloved.

[27 : 59] You call us your very image. God, may we reckon ourselves as dead to sin and alive to you. May we reckon ourselves as no longer under the hold of sin and death, as having escaped their power and their grip.

And God, may we reckon ourselves as fully beloved in your kingdom. God, we ask that your Spirit would energize us and anoint us and rejuvenate us each and every day, that we may accept that the work is done, that we may awaken to our belovedness, and that we may be fully at peace with

you and your creation. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen.