

Dead or Alive

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Text: Romans 6:1-14

There's this game that babies like to play. I think maybe they pass it along to one another on playdates or at daycare. The instructions go something like this: take a toy and throw it on the floor. If grown-up fails to pick it up, fuss and cry until the toy is back in your possession. Once you have the toy back, throw it onto the floor again. Repeat as often as necessary until grown-up loses patience.

I don't think they do it to be difficult. They're trying to learn the relationship between cause and effect. They're trying to figure out their relationship with the adults in their lives, to find out to what extent others will conform to their desires, and where the limits of cooperation lie.

At the beginning of our reading from Romans this morning, Paul sounds like he's talking to someone who wonders whether the dance of sin and forgiveness between people and God is like the game that babies play. Can you endlessly throw the toy on the floor, so to speak, and expect God to hand it back to you? If you force Paul to answer the question in those terms, he's going to say "yes." God will always forgive. Always. God will win any patience game we might try to play with God. But there's more to the story, Paul argues. There is a richer way of life, and a richer relationship available to us, than that of an infant testing an adult.

Last week we heard Paul's assurance that at precisely the time when we were the most unlovable, God showed us the greatest possible love. When we were stuck in our sins, alienated and estranged from God, "while we were enemies," Jesus laid down his life for us. No matter the height or the depth or the breadth of the wrongs we've done or the hurts we've suffered, nothing can separate us from God. This is the free gift of a God who loves us. It's not a gift we deserve, or one we could ever hope to pay back. And the name that Paul gives to that gift is "grace." "Where sin increased," Paul writes, "grace abounded all the more" (Romans 5:20). God's love, God's grace wins every time. If you persist in sin, if you cut yourself off from loving God and your neighbor, God will find you and will appear to you as more winsome, more beautiful, more lovable, more delicious than you could have imagined. In a contest between sin and grace, grace always wins.

But if our sin provokes God to show greater and greater grace toward us, then doesn't it make sense to keep sinning? We sin, and God forgives us. We sin some more, and God forgives us even more. If God's grace is as reliable and abounding as Paul claims, then what's the problem? There's a story about the German poet Heinrich Heine. As he lay on his deathbed, a priest told him, "God will forgive your sins." The poet replied, "Of course he will forgive me; that's his job." This makes sense if we think of our relationship with God like a credit card, with debits and credits. When we sin, our account shows a balance due. When God forgives us, the debits are paid for, and the account is back in balance. An account statement like this is *about* us, but it isn't *part of* us. It's like your salary or your Social Security number or your home address. It's

information, it's a description of something true about you, but it isn't you. You can overdraw your bank account. You can even declare bankruptcy, and there will be consequences to that action. But the next day, you're still the same person, with the same hopes and values and fears. It's external. It doesn't touch the deepest part of your soul. If you see your relationship with God in this way, then sure, it makes sense to say, "It's God's job to make the money, and mine to spend it. It's my job to sin, and God's to forgive."

But sin, for Paul, is not external. When he talks about sin, he's not talking about the bad choices we make. For Paul, Sin has a capital S, and it means something broken, right down to the very core of who we are. It's not just a credit card account statement. It's about what you allow to *rule* you, to govern your choices and direct your actions. When we are turned away from God, when we don't embrace God with the love of our whole heart, mind, and strength, when we don't love our neighbor as ourselves, that's an *orientation*, that's a *direction* of life that comes from deep inside us. And it leads to poor choices, sure. It means we hurt others and ourselves. If I go along with my friends in excluding and shaming another person, it shows that I value their judgment more than I value the image of God that this other person carries. And it's this failure to honor God that lies at the root of the brokenness in my life. That's what Paul means by sin. It's not something that exists outside of us, about us, but fundamentally apart from us. It is a part of who we are.

Sin leads to death. Not because God squashes people who break the rules. Imagine a child sitting at the dinner table who sulkily pushes away her plate and crosses her arms. Later she gets hungry. Is her hunger a punishment for breaking a rule, or is it a natural consequence of rejecting the nourishment that she was offered? And yet we need the nourishment of a relationship with God just as much as we need food. Moses reminds the Israelites in the desert that they don't live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from God's mouth (Deuteronomy 8:3). We were built for relationship with God, and if that relationship is disordered, we suffer. If I abuse alcohol, my body and my spirit are weakened. When I have the means and the responsibility to help someone who asks and I refuse, I'm diminished as a person—I become less human. And it doesn't just show up in the bad things we do, either—sin can become part of our life when others abuse or exploit or bully us, when we're hurt and diminished by what others do *to* us. Sin destroys life. That's not a punishment—it's a natural consequence.

And Paul sees it everywhere. He sees it in people with insight into the ways that the world works—the scientists and philosophers. He sees it in people of deep religious learning and spirituality—those who have God's teaching and struggle to keep it. Paul sees everyone afflicted, dragged down or held back by sin. I think the church does the world a huge disservice when we pretend that we're all good people, that we've basically got it figured out, because for me it's very good news that I'm not alone, that everyone is in the same boat, that, as Paul puts it, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

There is a way out, Paul says. "Whoever has died is freed from sin." Sin leads to death, but that's where it ends. Someone who's in the grave, not moving, not breathing, not in relationship, not making choices, not growing or becoming, doesn't struggle with sin, doesn't feel regret or pain. When we die, sin lets go of us, and we're free.

This sort of reminds me, though, of that exit interview I had in college, where they told me about the tens of thousands of dollars I had borrowed and how I'd have to pay them back over the next 20 years. That sounded like an awfully long time and an awful lot of money, so I asked if there were any circumstances where the loans could be

forgiven. "Sure," the interviewer told me. "For example, if you were to die, your obligation would be canceled." It occurred to me that in that case I might have bigger worries than a monthly payment.

But here is where Paul surprises us. "Don't you know," he says, "that you *have* died, already? Don't you know that when you were baptized, Jesus death on the cross became *your* death, too?" When people are taken into the water for baptism, the water closes over their heads, and it's like being buried. And that's no accident, Paul says. When we're baptized, we're joined to Christ. We offer up our sinful past, we offer up the little child that won't eat good food, the malicious classroom gossip who hurts his friend, and every part of us that bends away from God's love. And we die. Sin leads to death—that's not a punishment, it's a natural consequence. But it's not the end of the story. "If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ... If we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." Jesus died in solidarity with us, but he also rose, and we trust that through our baptism his resurrection becomes just as much a part of us as his death.

And that's what frees us. Paul tells us that just as Christ is free from death, free from the power that sin has to drag us away from God, "so you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." We're freed *from* a sinful past *for* life with God.

Maybe you've got baggage in your past too. Maybe you wonder whether a bad decision or a deep hurt has to be the defining marker in your life, whether you're always going to measure time in "before" and "after." Paul reminds us that whatever "befores" and "afters" might loom large for us, the real moment that defines our life with God is Jesus' death and resurrection, and the echo of this moment is our baptism. Before Jesus died and rose for us, we were captive to sin, and every step took us toward death, but now we're free for new life with God. And that's the tension of living as a follower of Jesus—because even if God doesn't define us by our past, we do, and it can take years of healing and growth for us to let it go. But the good news that Paul tells us today is that as we travel on that journey toward freedom, God already sees us as the bright and beautiful and beloved and good creatures that we were made to be, and that we will be, and that in the real-beyond-real of God's love in Jesus we already are.

So whatever seems to hold you captive, trust in the you that God already sees. Put to death the self that is captive to sin. Embrace the you that comes alive in God's grace. In Christ, you are dead to sin and alive to God. Thanks be to the one whose love has brought us from death to life. Amen.