

Lesson 56 at StudyRomans.org

Chapter 6

To say that the next three chapters of Romans are theologically rich is quite the understatement! For those of us who enjoy digging deep into God's word for treasures, we have reached the gold mine! I am reminded of what the Psalmist said:

Psalm 119:162 — I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil.

And dig we will! But digging is hard work. Depth takes effort, and depth takes time. Yes, there is a place for survey studies, but if all we ever do is survey the Scriptures, we will never leave the shallows, and we will never find that great spoil. So let's dig!

Romans 6:1

Romans 6:1 — What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?

In verse 1, Paul is circling back to consider in much more detail an objection that he briefly mentioned back in chapter 3. In that earlier verse, Paul told us both the objection and the motive for the objection. And there we see that this objection to what Paul had been saying was not an honest question posed to Paul, but rather it was a slanderous allegation made against Paul.

Romans 3:8 — And why not do evil that good may come?
— as some people slanderously charge us with saying.
Their condemnation is just.

That verse asks “why not do evil that good may come?” And verse 1 right here asks “are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” That is the same question, and so we can see that Paul is now circling back to address it.

Paul was in the middle of something else when he mentioned this objection back in Romans 3, but now Paul is ready to respond to it, which he does very forcefully starting here in verse 1. And, again, Romans 3:8 describes that question as slander and tells us that those who made that false charge would be condemned.

But before we look at Paul’s response, let’s ask an important question about that response — where does it end? We know where Paul’s response starts — it starts right here in verse 1. But where does it end? Where does Paul quit responding to that false charge and start talking about something else instead?

First, why does it matter? Why does it matter where Paul quits responding to that false charge? It matters for the simple reason that it is easier to interpret something if we know its purpose. And that’s not just true about the Bible; that’s true about almost anything. If I know the purpose of a statement, it helps me understand that statement. Let’s look at an example.

Genesis 3:4 says that “you will not surely die.” What does that mean? Is it a promise of eternal life? Should we put Genesis 3:4 on a refrigerator magnet? What does that statement mean? “You will not surely

die.” Well, why was it said? What was its purpose? Of course, we know the answers to those questions. Satan said it to convince Eve that what God had said in Genesis 2:17 was a lie. So definitely no refrigerator magnet for that statement!

Likewise here in Romans 6, if we can figure out why Paul said something, then it might help us understand what he said. It can certainly help us rule out any theory that is unrelated to Paul’s stated purpose. If our view of what Paul is saying is unrelated to why Paul is saying it, then our view must be wrong.

So, back to our first question — where does Paul’s response to this slanderous allegation come to an end? How can we answer that question? How can we tell where Paul moves on to something else?

One way to do that is to look for clues in the text. For example, does Paul ever circle back to this same objection? Yes, he does. We find the same objection repeated in verse 15 of this same chapter.

Romans 6:15 — What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!

And we find closely related objections in the next chapter.

Romans 7:7 — What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!...

Romans 7:13 — Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means!...

We could also look for words and phrases that connect what Paul is about to say with what he has just said — statements like “therefore” or “because.” Those connecting phrases would suggest that Paul has

not changed the subject. Do we find such connecting phrases here? Yes, we do, along with other evidence:

- Paul asks a question in Romans 6:1 and then repeats that question in Romans 6:15, so I think we can say that Paul's response includes at least those first 15 verses.
- But then, in verse 16, Paul asks a question about what he just said in verse 15 — and that discussion continues through verse 18.
- And then, in verse 19, Paul again refers back to what he just said and explains why he is speaking the way that he is — "I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations." Again, it does not seem that Paul has changed the subject.
- And Romans 6 ends with three uses of the word "for" in verses 20, 21, and 23 — each of which points back to what Paul has just said.

So what can we say? Is the entirety of Romans 6 a response to the false allegation in verse 1? If not, where is the break?

Let's not answer those questions yet, but instead let's just put on the table the possibility that all of Romans 6 may be a response to the false allegation that we find in verse 1.

And what about Romans 7? What about Romans 8? Does Paul's response possibly continue beyond Romans 6? Maybe. Let's leave that as an open question until we get to those chapters.

Let's now ask another question about this objection in verse 1 — whose objection is it? Had the Roman Christians made this objection, or did it come from someone else? I think we can say with certainty that this slanderous objection worthy of condemnation (Romans 3:8) came from someone else.

I think the most likely source of this slanderous objection is that it came from Paul's Jewish opponents. We know with certainty that some of the Jews were misrepresenting Paul's teachings.

Acts 21:27-28 — When the seven days were almost completed, the Jews from Asia, seeing him in the temple, stirred up the whole crowd and laid hands on him, crying out, "Men of Israel, help! This is the man who is teaching everyone everywhere against the people and the law and this place. Moreover, he even brought Greeks into the temple and has defiled this holy place."

I think Paul is correcting something that his Jewish opponents had been saying. And, of course, Paul's reason for doing so in this letter is to prevent the church in Rome from believing that slander if they were ever to hear it. In fact, I think a great deal of this letter has that same purpose — to be forewarned is to be forearmed!

Now that we know the likely source of the objection, let's look at the objection itself. "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" We know that charge is coming from Paul's opponents, but what are they saying?

In short, what they are saying is that if grace is such a great thing, then more grace must be an even greater thing. And the way to get more grace is to have more sin — so I guess we should sin more and more to get more and more grace.

And that argument certainly does seem logical, at least on the surface. If A gives you B, and if B is a good thing, then isn't more of A also a good thing? What's wrong with that argument? I mean it certainly holds true in other areas of life, right?

- We learn from our mistakes, and learning is a good thing — so shouldn't we try to make as many mistakes as we possibly can? Just think about how smart that would make us!
- We become a safer driver after we get a speeding ticket and take the required defensive driving course, so shouldn't we try to get as many tickets as possible? Just think about how safe that would make us!
- Our immune system gets stronger after we get the flu, so shouldn't we try to get the flu as often as possible? Just think about how healthy we would be if we had the flu all the time!

Okay, I guess maybe it doesn't hold in all areas of life! Yes, the argument does seem logical on the surface, but perhaps we need to remember the old saying that logic is just a way of reaching the wrong conclusion with confidence! If we start at the wrong place, our logic will likely lead us to the wrong conclusion.

And these opponents of Paul had most certainly started at the wrong place. And they would have known that fact had they opened their own Old Testament scriptures.

If they had done that, they would have seen many examples where God turned something bad into something good, and they could have

started with the example of Joseph and what Joseph said about the very bad things his brothers had done to him.

Genesis 45:5 — And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.

Genesis 50:20 — As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

And how did his brothers respond? “Wow! Who knew that throwing Joseph into a pit could accomplish so much good? We should throw Joseph into a pit more and more so that more and more good things may abound! Just think about how much life could be preserved if we threw Joseph into a pit every day!” That is how Paul’s Jewish opponents apparently would have responded.

And the worst thing about such an argument from Joseph’s brothers is that it would have hurt Joseph again! And that is the same problem with this argument in verse 1 — sinning more and more would hurt the one we claim to love. We hurt God when we sin.

We certainly saw that when we studied the book of Hosea. In fact, that entire book is describing God’s grief about the sins committed by his people.

Hosea 11:8 — How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

God was hurt by the sins of his people in Hosea, and the same thing is still true today. We hurt God when we sin. Paul tells us that elsewhere.

Ephesians 4:30 — And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

That fact alone is enough to demonstrate the logical error in this slanderous charge against Paul. Should we just sin more and more so that we can get more and more grace? Absolutely not! Our sin hurts God! Our sin grieves the Holy Spirit of God!

Joseph, we threw you in a pit, and you became a great leader in Egypt! Doesn't that mean we should throw you in a pit more and more? Absolutely not! That would hurt Joseph, the very one we claim to love.

God, we sinned against you, and your grace abounded! Doesn't that mean we should sin more and more? Absolutely not! That would hurt God, the very one we claim to love.

Yes, God very often turns something bad into something good, but that fact does not mean we should wish for more of those bad things. There is no logic in that argument, as Paul is about to demonstrate at great length.

And if we want a perfect example of how God can turn something bad into something good, then we don't need to leave Romans 6 because that is exactly what God is doing right here in this chapter.

What do I mean by that? Well, let me make a confession. I'm glad those people slandered Paul. I know it hurt Paul, and I know I'm being selfish, but I am glad that it happened.

Why? Because if those people had not slandered Paul, then we might not have Romans 6. We might not have the beautiful description of baptism that we are about to study. God gave us this wonderful chapter because of what those people slanderously said about Paul. God took that horrible allegation and turned it into Romans 6. God can take bad things and turn them into good things, and we see him doing that right here in Romans 6. And, of course, the greatest example is how God turned the cross of Christ into the gospel of Christ.

Romans 6:2

Romans 6:2 — By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

By no means! That is Paul's answer to the question in verse 1. It is a very strong negative response, and it could also be translated as "May it never be!" or "Absolutely not!" or "Certainly not!" or "Perish the thought!" or "God forbid!"

And perhaps the first thing we should note about this response is that we see it frequently from Paul. In fact, we see that exact phrase "by no means" ten times in this letter to the Romans.

- **Romans 3:3-4** — Does Jewish faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? **By no means!**
- **Romans 3:5-6** — Is God unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? **By no means!**
- **Romans 3:31** — Do we overthrow the law by faith? **By no means!**

- **Romans 6:1-2** — Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? **By no means!**
- **Romans 6:15** — Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? **By no means!**
- **Romans 7:7** — Is the law sin? **By no means!**
- **Romans 7:13** — Did that which is good bring death to me? **By no means!**
- **Romans 9:14** — Is there injustice on God's part? **By no means!**
- **Romans 11:1** — Has God rejected his people? **By no means!**
- **Romans 11:11** — Did Israel stumble in order that they might fall? **By no means!**

Why does Paul use that response so often in Romans? Paul uses it because of the way he has structured his arguments in this letter. It is almost as if Paul is debating with himself. Paul says something, and then he says what his opponent might have said in response, and then he responds to that objection. And Paul does that over and over again in this letter. Remember that Paul is dictating this letter (Romans 16:22). I picture Paul pacing back and forth as he does so.

Paul asked a question in verse 1. The beginning of verse 2 gives us his answer — “by no means!” But why is that his answer?

Paul is about to explain why that is his answer, and he will give us both a short explanation of his answer and a long explanation of his answer. Here in verse 2 we see the short explanation of his answer.

Should we continue in sin that grace may abound? Paul says absolutely not. And why does Paul say that? Because “how can we who died to sin still live in it?” That’s why. That is Paul’s short explanation of why his answer is “by no means!”

But what does that short explanation mean? What does Paul mean when he says that we have died to sin? And when did that happen?

As for **when** it happened, Paul is about to tell us that later in this same chapter, so let’s set that question aside for the moment. Instead, let’s focus now on what the explanation means. Paul says that we died to sin — what does that mean?

Does it mean that we no longer sin? No, we know that is not what it means. John tells us that.

1 John 1:7-10 — But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Yes, we walk in the light, and yes, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. But also, yes, we still sin. So whatever it means to have died to sin, it does not mean that we no longer sin.

Likewise, it doesn’t mean that sin somehow loses its allure, or that, as some say, we suddenly see sin the same way that a dead man sees the things of this world. Is that anyone’s experience? And, if it is, why do we all keep sinning if sin has lost its allure? Yes, we are to daily put

sin to death in our lives, but I don't think that is what we are seeing here with this death to sin in verse 2.

So what then does it mean to have died to sin? What it means is that our relationship with sin has changed. In fact, that is what the same phrase means today when the same phrase is used in other contexts.

"You are dead to me." I hope that none of us has ever used that phrase about anyone else or heard that phrase from anyone else, but many people have said that or have heard that. "You are dead to me."

What is meant by that statement? Isn't it just another way of saying, "You no longer have any power over me? I used to care about you and worry about you, but no more. You can do whatever you want to do. It matters not to me. You are dead to me."

"You are dead to me," or "I am dead to you." If those phrases are used today between two people, what they mean is that there has been a dramatic change in the relationship between those two people. They once had a relationship, but that relationship has been broken.

I think the same thing is true of our relationship with sin. When you became a Christian, that relationship was turned upside down. That relationship was completely changed. What was once true about you and sin was no longer true about you and sin. Sin was now dead to you, and you were now dead to sin. The relationship had been ruptured.

Sin was once your puppet master, and you danced on its strings. Sin once had power and dominion over you. You were once in sin's clutches. Sin had you in chains. That was your relationship to sin absent the gospel.

But now? Now everything about that relationship has changed. Jesus has cut those strings! Jesus has broken those chains! You no longer ask “how high” when sin tells you to jump. You are dead to sin.

Let’s consider another example — the example of human slavery. The slave-master has complete dominion over the slave. The slave does whatever the slave-master commands him to do. The slave is kept in bondage and chains. But what happens after that slave physically dies?

- Does the slave continue to obey his slave-master? No, he does not; the slave is dead.
- Does the slave-master still tell the slave what to do? No, he does not; the slave is dead.
- Does the slave-master still keep the slave in chains? No, he does not; the slave is dead.

That slave has died to his old slave-master. That old slave-master no longer has any power or dominion over that slave. He once held the threat of death over the head of that slave, but no more. Now that the slave is dead, everything is different. The slave-master can’t kill the slave for the simple reason that the slave is already dead! That threat of death has lost all of its power.

That is precisely what happened to us when it comes to sin. In fact, Paul will use this same analogy later in Romans 6:17 when he says that we “were once slaves of sin.” We have died to sin in the same way that slave has died to his old slave-master. The dominion is over. The chains have been removed. The strings have been cut. The threat of

death is no longer hanging over our heads. As Paul will tell us later in verse 7, we have been set free from sin!

So, back to the big question: shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? How ridiculous! How absurd! How foolish!

We have finally escaped the bondage and dominion of sin, and yet we want to go back and keep doing sin's bidding? The chains are finally off, and we want to put them back on? The strings have finally been cut, and we want to tie them back together? The threat of death is no longer hanging over our heads, but we want to keep acting as if it is? How ridiculous! How absurd! How foolish!

Paul is going to tell us a great deal more about all of this as he proceeds in his response, but that in a nutshell is Paul's explanation. And that is the explanation that we find here in verse 2. "How can we who died to sin still live in it?"

If you look at the Handout for Lesson 56, you can find many more verses that describe our death **to** sin. We are dead to sin. Sin no longer has dominion over us. Sin no longer has power over us. Sin no longer tells us what to do. Sin no longer holds us in bondage.

And, okay, that all sounds great, but I have a question — why do I continue to sin?

If the strings have been cut, why do I so often act as if those strings are still there? That dead human slave never does anything for his old slave-master, but I can't say the same thing about me because I continue to sin. Why? What is going on?

As for the analogy with human slavery, we have reached the point where that analogy breaks down. And that is true of every analogy. Eventually any analogy breaks down because otherwise it would not be just an analogy.

As for why the analogy breaks down at this point, I think the answer is straightforward. I continue to sin because I do not have the power to live a sinless life. If I had that power, then there would have been no reason for Jesus to come and die. If I had that power, then I could have been saved under a system of law. If I had that power, then I could have been saved based on what I did rather than on what Jesus did. There would have been no need for a system of faith. That I continue to sin after I am saved is just further evidence for why I needed a savior in the first place.

But, even though I still sin, my relationship with sin has changed completely. Now that I know what sin caused and what sin does and what sin means, I will, as a follower of Jesus, certainly try to sin less and less as I try to become more and more like Jesus. That is the goal of every Christian.

1 John 2:3-6 — And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says “I know him” but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

If that is not my constant goal in this life, then I am not a Christian but instead I am a liar. That is what John just told us. Does that mean

I will be sinless? No, John told us that in the previous chapter, as we read earlier from 1 John 1:7-10.

I think we all understand that, but there is one person who definitely did not seem to understand that — John Calvin. In fact, Calvinism has a big problem with the fact that we continue to sin after we have been saved. Why? Because Calvin teaches that the Holy Spirit supernaturally empowers people to live the Christian life. Don't believe me? Well, as usual, let's just let them do the talking when it comes to what they believe.

One well-known commentator (Wuest) says that Romans 6 is describing “the inner spiritual and **mechanical** set-up of a Christian which prevents him from habitually obeying the behests of the sinful nature.” He claims that Paul is describing “the **mechanical** impossibility of a Christian continuing to live a life of habitual sin.” He argues that Paul is explaining “the result of **a major surgical operation** which God performs in the inner being of every sinner He saves.”

But is that right? Are we “mechanically” prevented from sinning? Has whatever it is that causes us to sin been surgically removed by God? No, and I think that commentator would agree that the answer is no. I mean who could possibly argue otherwise? Who could possibly claim that we no longer sin after we are saved? Not even the most die-hard Calvinist would ever make that claim.

So what then does that commentator mean? Well, let's read it again — and this time let's note a particularly crucial adverb that he uses: Paul is describing “the inner spiritual and mechanical set-up of a Christian which prevents him from **habitually** obeying the behests of the sinful nature.”

Habitually? Now that is interesting. Most English teachers will tell you that adverbs are usually fluff, but not that one. That adverb “habitually” is carrying a lot of weight in his argument.

God opens us up to perform spiritual surgery, and (as I am sure we would all agree) God could completely remove whatever causes us to sin if God wanted to do that. But, according to this commentator, God does not do that. Instead, God just surgically removes whatever causes us to sin **habitually**. Habitual sin becomes mechanically **impossible**, but non-habitual sin remains mechanically **possible**. That is what he is saying.

But does that make any sense? No, it does not, but the Calvinists must stick with it because, absent such a strange surgical operation by God, another one of Calvin’s ungodly tulip petals would hit the ground — the “P” for “perseverance of the saints” (which is also known as “Once Saved, Always Saved”).

If it is **not** mechanically **impossible** for me to **habitually** sin after I am saved, then that means I could lose my salvation. That means I could be saved, but then later decide to return to my old life of sin, thereby losing my salvation. Calvin can’t have that, so Calvin says that it must be mechanically impossible for me to habitually sin. Why? Because God has supernaturally removed my ability to ever do that. Part of my free will has been surgically removed by God. That is what Calvinism teaches.

But here Calvin has really backed himself into a corner. Why in the world would God remove my free will ability to **habitually** sin while leaving my free will ability to **occasionally** sin?

And if it is mechanically impossible for me to habitually sin, then why does the Bible warn us against habitual sin? Why warn us against something we have been surgically prevented from doing?

Hebrews 10:26-27 — For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

We will have more to say on this subject as we work through the text, but for now let's just put a big question out on the table for us all to consider: Are we supernaturally **empowered** to live the Christian life or are we **obligated** to live the Christian life? Do we follow Jesus because we **can** do nothing else, or do we follow Jesus because we **should** do nothing else?

We sometimes sing a song that says, "I have decided to follow Jesus." Is that right? Did I decide to do that? Or did someone else decide that for me? Do I follow Jesus because I want to follow Jesus, or do I follow Jesus because it is mechanically impossible for me to do anything else? Do I follow Jesus because, as a Christian, I am obligated by Christ's sacrifice to do so? Or do I follow Jesus because I have been surgically transformed by the Holy Spirit to do so?

I think I know how you answer those questions, and I suspect that you all know how I answer those questions, but that is not what we need to ask. Instead, we need to ask how Paul answers those questions, and to discover Paul's answer let's keep reading.