

# THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY – THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

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## Dead to Sin, Alive in Christ

### Romans 6:1-11 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? <sup>2</sup> By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? <sup>3</sup> Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? <sup>4</sup> We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. <sup>5</sup> For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. <sup>6</sup> For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—<sup>7</sup> because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. <sup>8</sup> Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. <sup>9</sup> For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. <sup>10</sup> The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. <sup>11</sup> In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

When I was training to be a pastor at our Seminary, I was asked to help coordinate and run worship services at two local nursing homes. At one facility, we would go door to door asking if people would like to come and worship with us, often bringing them to and from their rooms. This always allowed for more conversation to get to know the people.

One day, I was helping one of our attendees back to their room. As I got her safely there, we continued to talk. She pointed out her nativity scene. We talked about how great it was that God came down to us to take away our sins. Then, the conversation took a detour as she exclaimed in kind of an exasperated fashion, “What was God thinking by telling Adam and Eve not to eat the fruit? Didn't he know that when you tell a kid not to eat a cookie from a plate in the middle of the table that it's exactly what they're going to do?”

I'm sure a few of you are agreeing in your heads right now because you've seen that truth firsthand, lived that temptation of when someone tells us not to do something that we want to do it all that much more because it's forbidden. Other times we've been the parent who has told someone to resist for their own good. It's like temptation to sin is an unwinnable situation, that it's too strong and we can't resist. In other words, God set up Adam and Eve to fail, almost as if he fated them to sin.

But, hey, we are New Testament Christians and have Jesus. So, it's okay. It's okay to sin. In fact, if we sin more, then God will give us more grace to pay for those sins. Maybe we should stop fighting against sin, just give in, and get more of God's grace!

That was the mindset of some of the Roman Christians that Paul had to correct. “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!” (verses 1-2a) God is clear that no one is to give in to temptation and go on sinning in order to get more of his grace. We're supposed to keep up the fight against sin. But what tools, what resources, what help do we have in this fight? Well, we have baptism.

How often do you think about your baptism? Do you remember the day and place of your baptism? Do you still have the special baptismal gown, maybe something that has been handed down from generation to generation? Are there pictures in an album somewhere - physically or digitally? Is your baptismal certificate neatly tucked away in a fire safe box along with other important documents but out of your sight and gathering dust? Is your baptism more or less a relic of the past, a thing that happened but you don't hardly think about? Have we cast aside and neglected the meaning of baptism for our everyday lives?

This Sunday after the Epiphany of our Lord is always designated to celebrate baptism – both Jesus' and ours. This gives us an excellent opportunity to be reminded as we have started a new year what wondrous gift from God we have to use in our everyday life. Listen again to what Paul says our baptism does for us: “Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” (verses 3-4)

Through baptism, you and I were buried with Christ into his death. That sinful nature that we all have, that inner desire to disobey God and do whatever we want, that was buried. A picture often used with baptism is that our sinful nature was drown in those holy waters. It's a violent picture but it drives the point home: Your sinful nature is dead by virtue of your baptism! And so Paul continues: “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.” (verses 6-7)

Back in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were perfect. In a way we have never known, they had no natural inclination to sin as well as a perfect will that they could have said no to Satan's temptation. They were not fated to sin or set up to fail, like when you tell the kid not to eat one of the cookies on the plate on the kitchen table. As children of fallen and imperfect Adam and Eve, though, we no longer have that perfect will. Instead, from our nature, we're not able not to sin. We can't help but sin.

Baptism changes that. Our old self, that sinful nature that is always going to sin and will never resist temptation, that was crucified, put to death! We are no longer ruled by sin. We do not have to obey it. There is no temptation, no wrong deed or misdeed that you or I have to commit. Our old sinful nature is dead to us. Instead, we are alive in Christ. A new person has been brought to life. Temptation to sin is never a hopeless case.

Why, then, do we find it so hard not to sin? Depressingly, it's kind of like we resurrect our sinful natures and let them govern our actions instead of leaving them dead. It's almost like *Weekend at Bernie's* - if you have ever seen that comedy movie where two friends try to pretend that their murdered employer is really alive. They put on a show to make everyone think that Bernie's okay when he's really dead. It was done for laughs. It's not funny to let our sinful nature pretend to be alive. What we do is much more disturbing, like Norman Bates in Hitchcock's movie *Psycho*. (Spoiler for *Psycho*, but, seriously, it's been out for 60 years...) Norman's mother has been dead for some time, but he pretends that she is still alive, still telling him what to do, argues with her, imitates her voice, dresses up like her, even murdering a woman while pretending to be his mother. That's is how deeply disturbing and wrong it is when we live as if our sinful nature is alive and well and that it controls us and leads us into sin.

But God says: "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. 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 once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." (verses 8-11) By virtue of God's gift of baptism, we live a simple yet profound truth: we are dead to sin, but we are alive in Christ. We have a new life every single day. We are not controlled by sin. Instead, we are now living as children of God with Christ ruling in our hearts.

Sin still makes itself as alluring as possible for us, enticing us, telling us that this is the payoff that we've looking for, that this will make us happy, this will fulfill our dreams, this will improve our lives. But it's like playing in the mud. Sure, stomping around in it is fun for a bit, but, once you're done, you're cold, wet, dirty. You have grime all over you that you want to scrape off. Your clothes stick to you and make it uncomfortable to walk. You just want to get clean now that you're done playing in the mud – much like how we want the uncleanness of our sins to be immediately washed away after we've played in the mud of sin. It's gross. Get it off!

So, how do we live with our sinful nature being dead but us being alive in Christ? Since temptation will still come and want to overtake us and we will feel helpless against stopping it, we come back to our baptisms and remember the truth that we are dead to sin but alive in Christ. Instead of storing the pictures of your baptism and your certificate in some photo album or in some fireproof box, put it somewhere where you will see it every day, especially in places and situations where you're tempted the most. Put the picture and the certificate up in your house, maybe in your bedroom so that you can see it when you wake up and when you go to bed or near the front door so that you can see it when you leave and when you come home. Put it up as a wallpaper backdrop on your phone, laptop, tablet, whatever so that it's with you, in your pocket, always ready to be seen. I keep baptism pictures in my office and one right here on the pulpit. This will give you a regular and constant reminder that sin was drowned in that water. It's dead. It doesn't control you. By the grace of God, you arose as a new creation, one not bound to sin but alive in Christ.

Your baptism means not just that your sinful nature is killed, but that you are made new, covered in Jesus' perfect. As such, you're able not to sin. By baptism, we are dead to sin and alive in Christ. So, we fight temptation. We resist it. We pull out that picture of our baptism when we're tempted. We call or text the person who witnessed our baptism so that they can remind us that we are dead to sin and alive in Christ. We use that new life risen in Christ and do like what Martin Luther did and read the Psalms when we're tempted, remembering that our God is our Mighty Fortress who answers our prayers and helps us. By the new life given to us in our baptisms, we read God's Word until the temptation subsides, as our Lord delivers us from evil.

You and me, because we're baptized, we are dead to sin. Our sinful nature, sin itself, temptation – these do not control us. Leave them dead. Live instead the new life you have in Christ. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead and declared perfect to the world, so are we because of our baptisms. Help us, Lord, to live this new life in Christ, not bound to any sin because we are baptized. Amen.