

Walking in New Life

Romans 6:1-4

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Real Audio (3 MB)

Our greatest fear in life is that we are stuck with ourselves. We would all love to make a few changes. How about you? What would you like to change? Do you want to look different, skinnier, younger? Do you want to get organized or get your finances under control? Do you want to live with more love and self-esteem, less fear and loneliness? Do you want to get rid of the pain in your body?

The marketing departments of every retailer in the world know you would like to make every one of these changes, and they have just the products to help you. Not only are we bombarded with advertisements on our TVs, newspapers, and billboards, but even our e-mail is filled with "spam" promising to make us different. Here are a few promises I received this week in the junk mail box of my e-mail. "Boost Your Portfolio Now" (This assumes I have a portfolio.) "Get Rich at Home." "Find Love in Prague." (Prague?) "Watch Unwanted Pounds Melt Away." "You Can Be Ordained this Week!"

Most of us have learned by now, that it is mythological thinking to assume another product has the ability to change our lives. The people who come to talk to me as their pastor aren't interested anymore in shedding a few pounds or wrinkles. Often, they want a completely different life. When you play Scrabble and you can't make anything of the letters you've got, you can use a turn to just dump all of them back in the box and draw new, more promising letters. That is what a lot of us would love to do. We want to toss all the pieces of life back in the box in hopes of getting some new ones with which we can spell out happiness.

The problem is that we don't know how to make even minor changes in our life, much less get a different life. We've tried a lot of the self-help books and videos. We've tried getting a different job and moving to a new town. We've tried going back to graduate school and yoga and a new health club. But it's still the same old self who keeps showing up in the mirror every morning.

Then we come to church to listen to some gospel. Maybe only subconsciously we are wondering, "What does the church have to offer me? Can Jesus Christ change my life?" The answer to that question is "Oh, yes. But not the way you may be thinking."

When the Apostle Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome, he was speaking to some of the most affluent, well educated people in the empire. They too had tried a lot of things to make their lives different, but to no avail. That is why Paul spends the first five chapters of his letter making the case that only the grace of God can really change us. It does that, he says, by forgiving our sins.

Sin is anything that separates you from God. It invades your soul like a disease that distorts the image of God within you, and thus, it also distorts the good creation God made of your life. So whether we realize it or not, the longing to make changes is rising out of our souls. Our souls know they were created for something more, and they are not content with the life we've created for ourselves. But, as Paul continues in the first five chapters, there is nothing we can do to make life right, or righteous, on our own. The only hope is for God to forgive our sins and heal the corrupted soul. By grace, that is what he did in the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. That is at the core of everything else the church has to say about how you discover change in life. But there are two ways that the church has always been tempted to distort its own message.

One way is to make this grace too easy to swallow. Deitrich Bonhoeffer, who was executed resisting the Third Reich, warned the church against preaching "cheap grace." His warning is still relevant. Cheap grace is grace without a cross and without the invitation to repent and change our lives. Cheap grace allows you to keep your soul corrupted by erroneously telling us that God doesn't mind that, and so this

message never invites people to transformation. This is what the Apostle Paul is also worried about in the opening verses of our text in chapter six when he writes, "Should we continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means. How can we who have died to sin go on living in it?" Cheap grace is not grace at all. It is only the illusion of a god telling us that we are okay when in our souls we know that we are not.

The second way the church has historically been tempted to distort the grace of God is to preach moralism. We do this when we say that on the cross Jesus paid the penalty for your sins, but now it is up to you to get it right. "You've got a second chance. Don't mess up again." But this message doesn't invite us to transformation either. It reduces Jesus to a moral exemplar and it reduces salvation into nothing but guilt for our failures in being able to imitate him with our corrupted souls. If you're like me, you need a whole lot more than a second chance. You need a whole new life.

And so Paul continues in verse three of chapter six. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life." Paul is telling us to claim, to embrace, the new life that is offered to us in baptism.

Baptism is not just a symbol for us. It is a sacrament, which is a means of receiving grace. Be clear that this grace is not cheap! It wasn't cheap for God to give it to you because it cost the life of his son. And it isn't cheap for you to receive it because it will cost the life you're vainly trying to get right.

Embracing your baptism begins, according to Paul, by being buried with Christ. You know that you are ready to do that when you find yourself saying, "I give up. I quit. I'm done with self-improvement programs. No matter how many changes I make I just make life more corrupted. I'm just going to the tomb where they laid Jesus." Only then, when Jesus leaves the tomb, can he take you with him into a new life.

When the Early Church baptized converts, they did not have sanctuaries with baptismal fonts. So they brought the new believers down to a river or lake. As the individual walked up to the water, they took off their old clothes and walked down into the water as if it were their tomb. The priest who was waiting for them would say these very words: "Buried with Christ in baptism," and the person would go under the water. Then, as the priest pulled them out of the water, he would say, "And risen to walk with Christ in newness of life." As the new believer emerged out of the water, out of the tomb, they would put on new clothes that had never been worn as a symbol of putting on Christ.

What you have to remember is that the Early Church was often persecuted. The new converts knew that they could be killed for joining this church, but they came out of that water eager to talk about their new life in Christ. Why? Because they had already died to this life, and you can't scare dead people. According to the Book of Acts they would also baptize their children and the whole household, giving their kids the gift of growing up into a new life unafraid. Maybe like those children you were baptized a long time ago. Maybe you have no memory of it. But the new identity is there waiting for you to claim it so that you too can be changed to live unafraid.

So if you have been baptized, Paul asks us, what are you worried about? Are you worried about losing your job? You've already died to the need for a stellar career. Are you worried about your health? You've already laid this body in the grave. Are you worried about your children? If you have baptized them, they too are already dead and alive to Christ, to whom they belong. The society around us says you have to grab all the life you can before you die. The church says just the opposite: You have to die, before you will ever start to really live. Because only then has fear been defeated and nothing will prevent you from being fully alive like fear. Obviously, I am not talking about physical death. I'm talking about dying to your right to live, your need to live, and your illusions about getting the life of your dreams. Only after that is gone are you free to finally receive the gift of life.

Baptism claims we begin our eternal life today. In baptism, the sacred breaks into the finite and makes it radically new. In baptism, the Holy Spirit gave you the same relationship the Son enjoys with the Father so that you are now the beloved of the Father also. Nothing on earth, not even the gates of hell, can prevail

against that.

So Paul concludes, don't keep acting like someone who is a slave to sin. Here he is invoking the great image of the Hebrews who crossed the Red Sea. Having passed through the waters, it was pointless to keep acting like slaves. God didn't bust you out of slavery so you could keep trying to be a better slave. He didn't raise you to new life so you could make so home improvements on your tomb. You are free! Come out from the tombs, to live like the beloved daughter or son of God that you are.

Now we can talk about change because you are a different person. Now you look an awful lot Jesus Christ. When you don't, that is only because you're pretending to be a slave. You can keep talking about your problems with things like cynicism, temper, and despair. But if you have been baptized, you are not really angry and hopeless. You're just pretending.

It is fascinating that while living in an age in which we have more freedom than any people in the recorded history of civilization, what has become most in vogue today is to say that we can't make changes in life. "You've got the wrong chromosome," people say today. "You've got the wrong parents." "You grew up in the wrong part of town." "You are just a victim." But no one who has been baptized can ever claim to be victims of their circumstances. I am not saying you have not been victimized in life -- some of you have. I'm saying that anyone who has passed through the baptismal waters doesn't have to settle for being a victim.

You don't have to settle for dragging around the hurts of the past. You don't have to settle for the advice industry or illusions about more money, the loneliness, or poor self-esteem. And you don't have to settle for working so hard you're too tired to think about any of this. You don't have to settle at all, because God doesn't settle for that.

In Christ, with Christ, through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, God gave you a new life. But it is up to you to claim it.

O God, give us the courage to come home to ourselves, where we pass through the baptismal waters to walk in new life as your forgiven, beloved sons and daughters. Amen.