

## New Country People

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ROMANS 6:1B-11

*1bShould we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?2By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?3Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?4Therefore 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 might walk in newness of life.*

*5For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.6We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.7For whoever has died is freed from sin.8But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.9We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.10The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.11So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

This may come as a surprise to you, but when I was a kid, I was not the easiest kid to have in a Sunday School class. I was the kid who asked all the hard questions. Sometimes I asked them to embarrass the teacher, like asking, “What is circumcism,” and sometimes I asked questions that I knew the teachers could not answer, like “So God made us. Who made God?”

And sometimes I asked question like I was looking for a loophole. For example, when the teacher was explaining sin and grace. We do bad things, but God loves us, and shows his love by forgiving us.

“So,’ I said, “if God shows his love by forgiving our sins, shouldn’t we do a lot of sinning, so that God can show even more love? The more we sin, the more we experience God’s love.”

I thought it was a pretty good question, and it did stump some of my teachers. It was not as original as I thought it was. I have been asked this question plenty of times when I worked with Junior Highs, and in fact, as I read the Bible, I found that Paul himself raised that very same question, albeit he poses the question, he does it in a rhetorical manner, because he already has the answer.



I turns out though to be a much more profound question than I first thought. At first blush it is a smart alecky question, but in fact it cuts much deeper than I could imagine as a seventh grader.

Now let me review a little on what Paul has written in his letter to Romans so far. In Chapter one, he is telling us that this is a sinful world, and it is a sinful world because, in his words, because people, “traded the true God for a fake god, and worshiped the god they made instead of the God who made them.”

Now I want you to bookmark that for a moment. Just keep in mind that for Paul, sin means we live as if there was no god.

In chapter two of Romans, Paul drives home the point that sin is not just a disease that other people have—we all are affected by it. It is easy to point fingers at a group of people OVER THERE and say, “Look at those miserable sinners,” but Paul makes the point that we are all sinners.

Now in chapter five, Paul says something that is kind of hard to take. He says we all sinners, and that sin came into the world through Adam. You know, the story of Adam and Eve. They eat the apple, commit the first sin, and before you know it, the whole human race is affected by it.

In other words, sin is not completely our fault. Now what Paul says is very true. And you really do not need to take the story of Adam and Eve literally to see the truth in it. We are all, in some way, affected by the past sins of others, whether the other person is Adam, or one of our parents, or grandparents. We are affected by the past sins of others.

When I worked with the hospitality house, I did groups for Adolescents. Now many of these kids were in our program because of something bad they had done in the past—usually something really bad. One kid stole a car. One kid broke into the house of another kid, beat him up, and stole some of his stuff. Some of the kids has sexually abused other children. These were, by most people’s definition, BAD KIDS.

And on the one hand, they had to take responsibility for their actions. They did what they did. They made some really bad choices.

On the other hand, it was also true of them that someone else had a hand in their sins.

When I did groups, I always opened with a check in question—how are doing this week. In one group one of the kids said, “Really bad, because Obama won the election yesterday.” Well, I did not want to pick a political fight with the kid—they are allowed their own opinions, but I did say, “So you don’t like Obama’s politics.” What he said was, “I don’t like black people.” Now, given the fact that we had African-American kids in our program, as well as Alaska Native kids, I figured I could not let that stand, so I asked, “Why don’t you

like Black people?”

“That’s what my daddy taught me,” he said.

And he went into all the bad things his daddy had taught him about black people. I think racism is a sin, and he was committing that sin, but he got it from someone else. Another kid got busted for smoking pot, which he got from his mom. Another kid watched his mom go through a series of boyfriends, all really bad characters themselves, and had the most screwed up ideas about relationships I have ever seen.

Call it Adam, call it original sin, call it the sins of our parents, whatever you call it, the disease we call share called sin is something we caught from someone else.

So Paul is saying that we are essentially powerless over sin. However the reason Paul brings up Adam, is that he wants to contrast Adam and Christ. “Adam,” however you define Adam, brought sin into the world. He was a carrier. We all got a little bit, or a lot infected by this idea that God was not such a big deal, and in the end we could just do what we wanted to do.

And that separates us from God. And the problem is, we lose who God really is.

I don’t know how many of you heard of or remember Jim and Tammy Bakker and the old PTL Club. It was located in one of the cities where I lived in North Carolina. I used to watch it occasionally, one day they had these people on who were preaching the health and wealth gospel. If you have enough faith, you will be healthy and wealthy. Well, this day, Jim Bakker was not the host; I don’t remember who was, but while the woman was going off on how Jesus wanted us to be to be healthy and wealthy, and if we weren’t it was because we didn’t have enough faith, and the host asked, “What about the sufferings of Jesus? He died a painful death, and he never had a lot of money.” And the woman drew herself up and said, “My Jesus never suffered! MY Jesus was never poor,” which I should say contradicts everything we know about Jesus. The problem was, she worshiped a Jesus of her own making; she did not really worship a real Jesus.

Now the problem is, we ALL do that, to some extent. And what Paul says in Romans five is that Jesus sets us free, and gives us real life: Romans 5:19 ...just as all people were made sinners as the result of the disobedience of one man, in the same way they will all be put right with God as the result of the obedience of the one man.

What we cannot do, which is worship the true God in the right way, Jesus does for us. Only Jesus can do that, because Jesus is God. And Jesus does it because of the love of God.

So this is where the Junior High question comes in. Well if God makes it all right, because of the Love of God, then why should we bother? Why should we worry about whether or not the God we worship is the One Real God, or fake copy of God that we have invented for our

own purposes? If God really loves us, then it does not matter.

And here is Paul's answer—outside of Christ, we are left to our own devices. You want to worship money—by all means, make the acquisition of wealth your god. You want to worship power? Then by all means, make power your goal.

Except here is what really happens for most people. If you worship wealth, you rarely end up wealthy; but you do end up bowing down to those who are. If you worship power, you will rarely gain real power, but you will end up bowing down to those who have it. That is why many poor people consistently defend the very rich people who are often the reason they are poor. They worship wealth, which means in the end, they worship the wealthy.

Now if we think of sin as merely doing something wrong, then all Paul is saying is that Jesus brings forgiveness. Our sins are not going to cause God to judge us. We are, in the eyes of God, officially Not Guilty. But remember I asked you to bookmark something about sin? Sin is when we worship the wrong God, and that gets us all twisted around. We exchange the truth of God for a lie and we worship that lie. And that messes us up.

There was a man who wanted to buy a suit, and he happened to run into the world's best suit salesman. The man was trying on the suit, and said, "Looks like one leg is shorter than the other."

"Oh, you are just standing funny," said the salesman. "Here hitch your hip up, now it looks fine."

"But one of the arms is longer than the other."

"It's not the suit, you are still standing funny. Hitch your shoulder up, like this."

So the man does, he buys the suit. As he is walking down the road, his body all crumpled up from trying to conform to the suit. Two women see him. "Look at the poor cripple man," says one of the women. "Yes, but doesn't that suit fit him nicely," says the other.

If all sin is, is just forgiveness for actions we do, then all forgiveness really is, is God saying, "You know, I think you look fine in that suit. I say that you are well dressed for this party we call heaven, so come on in."

But in fact, what Paul is saying is that God says, "Take that misfit suit off! You were not made to live like that! Get rid of that suit. Burn it. It does not fit you. But I have one that does. And you are going to look great in the suit I have for you."

The old suit—now that is a mess—evil, grabbing and grasping, vicious backstabbing, envy, wanton killing, bickering, and cheating, mean-spirited, venomous, fork-tongued God-bashers. Bullies, swaggerers, insufferable windbags... Stupid, slimy, cruel, cold-blooded. That is how Paul describes in In Romans one.

In Romans six, he talks about a new way of living, a new country we live in. He uses the metaphor that in Baptism, the old self died, the old suit is taken off.

Eugene Peterson in his translation the message, says, If we've left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn't you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism. When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace—a new life in a new land!

When Angelee and I first moved down here, it was November. And for the first month or so, every time we opened the door, we braced ourselves for the cold. But it was not cold down here. This is not Alaska any more. This is Medford, Oregon—SOUTHERN Oregon. We were thinking of the old country. Now we live in a new country.

In the old country, you had to look out for yourself. In the new country of grace, we look out for one another. In the old country, winning was everything. In the new country, working together with your brothers and sisters is everything. In the Old Country it was important to be right; in the new country it is important to live in right relationships. In the old country, the currency of the realm is wealth, power, and fame. In the New Country, the currency is sacrificial giving, service, and a humility that engenders loving relationships.

In the old country we have no higher values than our own passions and desires. In the new country, we worship a God who loves us, who cares for us, and who takes the divine spark that lies within us, and nurtures it until it grows into a glowing fire of grace and love.

So why would we continue to live in the old country? Why would we continue to wear that suit that makes us conform to its deformities rather than the new clothes that God offers to us?

As Paul writes in Colossians 3:12-14 So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense.

Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it.

Going back to the original question; why don't we keep on living a life a sin, so that we might experience more of God's love? Because a life of sin is a deformed life. It is a stunted life. We can live for the unholy trinity—me, myself and I—or we can live a life given to God's love and grace.

Remember the kid I told you about who got racist ideas from his daddy? He had been in our program for a while, and I was noticing some real changes in him. He did not seem as angry. When he first came, in groups he would pull his hoodie over his head and ignore everyone in the group. After about six months, he started talking. I ran into one of his teachers, and the teacher told me that that this kid was getting it; he started doing his

school work, and he had a goal to graduate.

So one day we were cleaning out an old barn on our property, and I asked him how he was doing. “When I first came here,” he said, “all I could think about was myself. I hurt a lot of people. Here I learned what it means to care about others. And I am a lot happier.” The anger of the old country was disappearing. The self-centeredness of the Old Country was disappearing. He was starting to be happy.

Why continuing living in the Old Country, when Jesus offers us a new land, a land of grace and peace and love?

Sermon from June 22, 2014