

*All Roads Lead Here: Grace Takes All*  
*By Jason Huff*  
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*Isaiah 30:18-21; Mark 10:35-45; Romans 5:20-6:4*

Our final Scripture reading today is Romans 5:20-6:4. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or 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.”

Every pastor has trouble knowing how to deal with the subject of sin well. Our passage from Romans illustrates that even Paul had to deal with sin carefully. There was a pastor who was concerned about sin in his congregation. So one morning from the pulpit, he listed 65 different sins and spoke against each one of them. A few days later, he got a letter from one of his members. It said, “Dear Pastor, thank you so much for your helpful sermon on sin last Sunday. I hadn't even heard of a third of them and there's many more that I haven't yet tried.”

That's the problem with sin. Some things that anger God don't interest us at all. Others carry a strange fascination for us; they're hard for us to get out of our minds. And we have a sin nature – disobedience to God is part and parcel of who we are right now. Even as Christians, we are easily lured into it. So how do we understand God's grace and still keep an eye on sin? That's what we're going to talk about today, following Paul's lead.

The very first thing we discover is that *grace takes all*. Here's how Paul puts it: “The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Last week, we learned that sin is only taken into account when there is a law. Sin still exists; you can displease God without having it counted against you. It's dangerous to drive on the Autobahn in Germany at 150 miles an hour. But over 50% of the Autobahn has no speed limit; in the right places, you can drive that fast and not get a ticket. It's not against the law, but it's not wise. In the same way, before God gave the law to Israel, people were disobedient, but it wasn't counted against them in the same way.

God gave us the law for many reasons – to show us what it means to obey Him, to set a standard of righteousness, to give us a sense of His heart and desire, to teach us and train us. God gave it to us so we could know we can't completely adhere to God's ways, to show us we are disobedient; we need forgiveness. It also increases the trespass against God. You can't plead ignorance because the law is right there staring you in the face.

The law puts an immense burden on us. It spells out what God wants from us. It demands perfection; there is no “suggestion” about God’s law. It also demands action from us, not just avoidance. Most of our American laws are avoidance laws; there are very few things you have to do. You have to pay your taxes. If you’re a guy over 18, you have to register for the draft. But pretty much everything else depends on what you want to do – you only have to follow traffic laws if you want to drive. You only have to register to vote if you want to vote.

But God’s law is different. Two of the Ten Commandments required the Israelites to actively do something – to keep the Sabbath and to honor their parents. Israelites had to pay their tithe to the priests. They had to make sacrifices at the temple with the priests for their sins. They had to teach their children the Torah. They had to observe special holy days. They had to circumcise their male children the eighth day after they were born.

And the Jewish law doesn’t stop with actions to do and not do. It even gets into the realm of the heart and mind. They were commanded to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind and to love their neighbors as themselves. God commanded them to love the alien and stranger – the non-Jewish foreigner – in their midst. One of the Ten Commandments is a thought crime – to covet anything that belongs to your neighbor. No police force on earth could enforce those, but they’re part of the Jewish law. Jesus explained that even the straightforward laws were meant to change people’s hearts toward others.

The net result is that the trespass against God increases. If you don’t love God with all that you have, you’ve trespassed. If you wish you had your neighbor’s ox, you’ve trespassed. The more laws there are, the more ways we know we aren’t living as God wants us to live. And the more laws there are, the more ways we are tempted. Paul talks about this more in Romans 7.

But the awesome thing is, God’s grace always wildly exceeds our sin. Sin increased? Grace increased all the more! Sin raises the stakes; God matches it. Sin reigns in death, it’s true. We can’t defeat death; it always gets us. It’s a cruel king. When we lose important people in our lives, we realize just how unnatural death is. But sin and death’s reign is over. God’s grace through Jesus Christ reigns now. Even though we die, we have eternal life. The former king gets his due, he gets to destroy our earthly body, but our new Lord and King swoops in and saves us. We are assured of eternal life through Him. We pass from death into life. Death seemed to go on forever, that there was no overcoming it. But now death is just an instant, and eternal life does actually go on forever. Death seems to have the final word only to get cut off mid-sentence.

God’s grace takes all. In a game of euchre, nothing beats the trump. You can have aces, but nothing beats trump. You can’t beat a lay-down loner in Euchre. In poker, you can’t beat a royal flush. No matter how good your hand looks, no matter how many poker games you might win with your hand, it isn’t going to top the top hand. That’s God’s grace. It’s the top hand.

No matter how many sins you've committed or how bad those sins were, no matter if they are so secret only you know about them or so awful they land you on Death Row, God's grace trumps them. And that's important because there are two barriers that come between us and trusting in Jesus. The first one is believing that God isn't there, or that He doesn't care what we do, or that we are actually fine in God's sight on our own. The "I'm OK, you're OK" view is disastrous because it doesn't acknowledge there might be a problem.

But the second one is just as bad, and that's the belief that we're beyond redemption. I still remember talking to an atheistic Jew during my days as a hospice chaplain, telling me that he wished he'd met me sooner, but that it was too late for him to believe. Others think that they should be punished for what they've done; they don't ask for forgiveness because they don't feel they deserve it. And while no one deserves God's grace, God gives it anyway out of His immeasurable love. The guilt you feel about your sin isn't there to make you feel unlovable or unforgiveable. Guilt's there to teach you that you need God's forgiveness, and it's there for the taking. Turn to Jesus, turn away from what you've done, and you'll learn God's grace far exceeds your sin.

With all that in mind, we move to Paul's second point: *the abundance of grace that removes our sin does not give us license to sin more*. Where sin abounds, grace abounds, right? So doesn't it make sense to dial up the grace by dialing up the sin? That's why Paul stops us right in our tracks. "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

Paul's response here is passionate and ***strong***. When he says, "By no means!," the Greek is so emphatic that we can't even exactly translate the force of it into English – we don't have a word as forceful that isn't a swear word. Paul isn't swearing in Greek, but he is telling us in no uncertain terms that we cannot, we must not, may it never be that we would go on sinning so that there might be more grace.

Imagine that you're out in the wilderness and you find a pool of water. Looks good, the water's warm, it's inviting, so you dive in. A few hours later, the park ranger comes by and is shocked. He asks, "Didn't you see all the warning signs?" You're in a toxic waste dump where all the filth and run-off from the whole area collects. It's deadly. Good news for you is, he's got a special spray, he can hose you down, he can get you clean, he can get you head to toe and you'll be all right. Do you hop right out and get the bath and get as far away as you can? Or do you say, "Hey, if you've got a bath that will take care of it, let me stay in a few more minutes?" Do you get away from this cesspool that's going to kill you, or do you go for another swim?

That's what Paul is saying. How could you choose to keep on sinning if you've experienced God's grace? Sin is your mortal enemy. Now that you love God, you want to stay as far away from it as possible. Even if there's grace to clean up whatever you've done, you don't want to stay in the muck. We will sin as Christians, to our sorrow. But to want to continue sinning, to assume that God will just take care of it, is a sign that we don't really understand what Jesus did or have faith in Him. To have faith in Jesus is to want to please God.

The free grace we received from God was not free to Him. It came at an incredible cost – the cost of His Son on the cross at Calvary. That grace is deep, rich, and expensive. Jesus, the One through Him and for Him the universe was made, made Himself nothing, became human, and then died among the most humiliating and torturous deaths possible. Why would you exploit that? If you love Him, you do not want to heap more sin on Him. You’re sorry that you ever had to put any sin on Him to start with.

And the problem is that massive sin, sin that binds us, sin that can wreck us, sin that makes us question our faith, usually starts as something simple. No one goes to their first keg party expecting to become an alcoholic. No young man takes a few glances at a friend’s Playboy expecting to get addicted to pornography. No one expects to become a habitual liar by telling a lie to get out of trouble. No one expects to have an affair because of mindless flirting on a girl’s night out. Powerful, enslaving sin starts small. We must never sin thinking that the grace of God will get us out of it. We don’t want to get to heaven and find out from God what more we could have been if we had determined to leave sin behind.

And that moves us to Paul’s final thought: *because of Jesus, we are dead to sin and alive to righteousness*. He writes, “Or 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.”

Many of us don’t have dramatic conversions to Christianity. It used to be very popular to have speakers who went around to churches talking about how they came to believe in Christ. They would tell how they were hooked on drugs or their lives were falling apart and then they had a moment when they believed in Christ and everything got better. Those are rare stories, and I don’t know that they help us much, because most of us don’t have something that dramatic in our lives. Some of us have always believed, at least as far back as we remember. Others went through real difficulties and came back. Still others believed as adults, but it was a long process, not a moment in time. And many of us experience hardship because of our faith – not everything on earth gets put right because of it.

But every Christian has a baptism experience, or should have it. Baptism is the point at which we can turn and say, “God claimed me.” Because it’s God who does the claiming and not us claiming God, it’s OK if it happens when we’re infants or adults. But I’ve brought out our baptismal today to remind us of that. We should keep our baptism in mind on a regular basis. Baptism was one of only two actions Jesus directed us to take as sacraments, as sacred parts of our life together as His followers.

Baptism is not just an initiation rite that says, “You’re in.” It’s not just a symbolic cleansing away of sin, though it is. Baptism is a baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection. We go under the water as people under Adam and we come back up as people under Christ. The old nature is washed away and the new nature is embedded in us. There’s a symbolic drowning of the old self and a resurrection that brings the new self. Whenever Martin Luther was tempted to sin, he would go around saying, “I am baptized!” It reminded him who he was.

We are dead to sin and alive to righteousness. Long story short – you aren't bound to sin any more. As our song today said, "Who breaks the power of sin and darkness? Whose love is mighty and so much stronger? The King of Glory, the King above all kings." Did sin have power over us? Yes. Does it now? No. As strong as temptation seems sometimes, God gives us the power through the Holy Spirit by our faith in Christ to overcome. We are declared right with God through Jesus' blood, and we can start living rightly with God right now. Our baptism symbolizes that new start.

And you know what? You don't do it alone. You don't fight sin alone; you didn't die to sin alone. You may have been the only person baptized the day you were baptized, but you were not baptized alone. Throughout Romans, Paul talks about "us" and "we," not "you" and "I." When he discusses being baptized into the death of Christ, he says, "*all of us* who were baptized." *We* are baptized into Jesus' death; *we* are buried with Him; *we* will be raised to new life.

Christianity is a team sport, not a solo event. It is never supposed to be just me and Jesus. When it seems that sin is overwhelming you, tell somebody in the church! And if you're that somebody, don't condemn that person – listen and pray for them! Tell me – I'm here for you. If there's someone closer to you spiritually, tell them. But don't do this alone. So much of our struggle is not just with sin itself but struggling alone, in silence.

I've recently asked Jim Rizer, our friend from Living Hope in Grosse Pointe, to be my accountability partner, somebody I can turn to when things aren't going as I'd hoped or when sin seems to be lurking. There is no shame in it. James, the half-brother of Jesus, commands us in James 5, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed." The best way we can kill off sin is to do it together.

And we're not looking to find out gossip on somebody else. We want to grow together in righteousness, to encourage one another. I am glad to hear when someone was cut off by a driver and decided to be friendly rather than rude. I am glad to hear when someone buys the guy on the street a meal rather than passing him by. Those stories encourage me to do the same. We are dead to sin and alive to righteousness, and we are in this together. We aren't that big; we all know each other. Let's work more and more to encourage one another to live like Jesus matters in our lives.

Friends, sin has had its day...but no more. We are out of the toxic soup of sin. Let's listen to the Spirit and work together, encouraging one another, to be more like our loving God, whose grace is more than enough to forgive us, protect us, and claim us forevermore.