

Question

Verses for context:

- Galatians 2:20
- Colossians 3:5
- Romans 6:5–11
- Romans 7:18–25
- Romans 8:1–4

In Romans 6, Paul says we are no longer slaves to sin (v. 6) and that we have died to sin (v. 2). In Romans 7, Paul says we are slaves to sin because of our sinful nature (v. 25). In Romans 8, Paul says that God has ended sin's control over us. In Romans 6, Paul says "But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it." How do all these things fit together? How can we crucify our old nature daily and practically? If God sees us as perfect in Christ, has removed our sins by Jesus' blood and made us fit to be called children of God, should we spend less time focusing on our sins and more on worshipping the Lord and glorifying Him? The Bible says we have been set free from sin. How do we live that out in our daily lives when we feel so burdened by it? I get discouraged sometimes when I look at all the choices I make every day (in how I talk to people, treat others, think about situations/people, spend my time, and so on) and realize that the root of a lot of them (okay, most of them) is sin (I call it other names usually--pride, worry, control, cruelty). Shouldn't it be more like 80-20 in making right decisions for the right reasons? It seems much harder to choose the right thing and have the right motivations than it is to live according to the flesh. It seems that putting the sinful desires of the flesh is an active, ongoing process (Col 3:5); however, being crucified with Christ and buried with him (Romans 6) also seems like it was a one-time event. If our old nature was crucified and we were set free from sin by Christ's one time, once for all sacrifice, then why does it continually have destructive power in our lives?

I obviously have pieced some Scripture together to come up with these questions. And apparently I was reading Romans when I started thinking about this topic. I know there are more books in the Bible that talk about this question as well and I by no means am limiting us to just using Romans to answer it. The big issue for me is practicality--I always want to know how I can apply it in my life. We all have very different lifestyles, personalities, choices, etc, but the word of God is universal (not like in a universalist unitarian sort of way, but in a God speaks to ALL through His word kind of way). So with that in mind, it obviously has to be somewhat broadly answered, but the more practical ideas that can be applied to each of our lives, the better (in my opinion, at least). Feel free to ask me any clarifying questions about my long string of questions and correct any faulty underlying theology behind any of these questions.

Answers

Sin and Sins

First, we should observe the difference between “sins” and “sin.” In Romans, the focus changes from “sins” to “sin” around Romans 5:10.

Romans deals with the guilt of all mankind starting with (v. 1:18). The history of the Gentiles is given in Romans 1:18–31, ending with God giving them up to a “reprobate mind” (vv. 1:28 ff). Of course not all the Gentiles fell into gross immorality, so Romans 2:1–16 addresses them. There were (and are) Gentile nations that insist on some form of morality (vv. 2:14–16). They, too, are guilty in God’s sight. It’s true they weren’t as debased as the nations in chapter 1, but they were just as guilty. Romans 2:16 promises judgment on all.

Next Romans takes up Israel, starting in (v. 2:17). Romans points out that Jews are no less guilty than the Gentiles (vv. 2:21–24). Romans concedes that being Jewish is better than being Gentile (vv. 3:1–2), but the sad conclusion is that everyone – Jew and Gentile alike – is guilty before God (v. 3:9–19). Notice the famous passage quoting Psalm 14 (Romans 3:10–19) is explicitly referring to Israel (although there’s no doubt that it’s equally true of the Gentiles). Romans 3:19 explicitly applies Psalm 14 to “those under the Law,” not to Gentiles, but to Israel.

And so we have the often-quoted verse in Romans 3:23, that **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Now, Romans 3:20 introduces us to another principle: **sin**. We are told the Law brings knowledge of “sin” (not “sins”). The idea is not that we know something is a sin by the Law, but we are made aware of the sin living in us by the Law. So it’s not that we know that lying is a sin because the Law forbids it – rather, we know that we have sin, because we find in ourselves the desire to lie once it’s forbidden. But sin (rather than “sins”) isn’t really in view here, and the thought of Romans 3:20 isn’t really developed until chapter 5.

Romans 3:21–4:25 then introduces the doctrine of justification. Justification is God’s applying His own righteousness to us (vv. 3:21–26). God considers us **just** (i.e. righteous) on the basis of the death (“blood”) of Christ (vv. 3:24–25). He justifies us freely by His grace (v. 3:24), and it doesn’t matter if we are Jew or Gentile (v. 3:29).

Chapter 4 takes this idea and expands on it, showing that this is always how God has justified: it’s not a new thing. This is precisely how God justified Abraham (vv. 4:1–5) and David (vv. 4:6–8). In justifying Gentiles without requiring them to come under the Law, God is treating them exactly like He treated the Old Testament saints (vv. 4:13–15).

Romans 4:5 tells us clearly how a person can be just in God's sight: God justifies the person who does not **work**, but **believes**. This is the Gospel we need to preach: God doesn't want you to **do** anything, He just wants you to believe Him (see ["The Story of Captain G"](#)).

Romans 5:1 sums up the teaching of Romans 3:20–4:25. We are justified by faith, we have peace with God.

Romans 5:9–11 tells us justification isn't the end of the story: there is still salvation to come. We have been justified (it is a completed work), but there is more coming. Romans 5:12–14 reintroduces "sin", which we saw first in v. 3:20. Sin (not "sins") entered the world by Adam, and death passed upon all men (and women). Romans 5:19 tells us that one man's offense made the many sinners.

Let's pause here: Romans 3:23 tells us "all have sinned". Romans 5:12 tells us death has come upon all, because all have sinned. But Romans 5:19 tells us we became sinners when Adam sinned, not when we sinned. We are **guilty** because we have sinned, we are **sinners** because Adam sinned. This is the single most important point to understand about Romans 5:12–Romans 8:31.

"Sin" refers to our "sinner-ness". That came from Adam. "Sins" refers to the acts that we have committed. That's not Adam's fault, it's a result of our own choices.

The old preachers used to say, "We are sinners by nature, by practice, and by habit." We are sinners by nature, because we are children of Adam. We are sinners by practice, because we have all chosen to sin. We are sinners by habit, because we have all developed sinful habits. Romans 5 establishes that we are sinners by nature, Romans 3 establishes we are sinners by practice. Romans 6 will talk about being sinners by habit.

Dead to Sin

Now we come to Romans 6. Romans 6 asks the question, shall we continue in sin? Alan Gamble says, if you preach the Gospel, and no one asks, "then can I just continue to sin?", you haven't really preached the Gospel. The Gospel tells us **God justifies the one who believes without works** (Romans 4:5). So if our works don't affect our peace with God, why not just continue to sin?

In fact, if God's response to sin abounding is to over-abound in grace (vv. 5:20–21), then we'd assume that more sin is actually a **good thing**. If our sinning brings more grace, why not continue to sin?

The answer is in v. 6:2. We have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it?

Notice here it's not that we are dead to **sins**. We're dead to **sin**. And sin here is not an abstract, it's really the sin that lives in us (Romans 7:17).¹

How are we dead to sin? We have been baptized into Christ Jesus (v. 3), and have therefore been baptized into His death (v. 3). We have been buried with Him (v. 4), we shall also be raised with Him. (Notice that in Romans, our being raised with Christ is a future thing. Colossians 3 looks at it as a past thing.)

When Christ died, I died (Romans 6:5).

Romans 6:6 gives us a brief history of the death of Christ: "our **old man** has been crucified with Him, that the **body of sin** might be annulled, that **we** should no longer serve **sin**."

Christ has died, and I have died with Him. Our "old man" – the man we used to be – has been crucified with Him. The result is that the "body of sin" has been annulled. It's still there, but it's "brought to nothing." It's powerless. The result of that is, "we" no longer serve "sin".

So there was a time when sin was our master. It ordered us around, and we would obey it, using our physical bodies. As a result, those bodies were characteristically "bodies of sin." God has intervened by breaking the chain: He hasn't removed sin, He hasn't removed our physical bodies: He has removed the middle man, the person we once were. The person I was has been put to death, so that no matter how loudly sin orders and commands, the man who obeyed it in his physical body isn't there to obey.

There is a practical command here, the first command in the entire book of Romans. The command is to think of ourselves as being dead to sin and alive to God (v. 6:11). The word there is "reckon": it doesn't mean to aspire to, nor does it mean to wish after. It means to think of myself the way God thinks of me. It means that my self-image should be that I have died with Christ.

Now, I have spoken to many believers who like to add qualifiers to this statement. They say things like, "Well, that's true **positionally**." When they say that, what they really mean is, "that's not **really** true." Let's think about that for a moment... the command in Romans 6:11 is to think of ourselves that way. If we add caveats to it, we're not really obeying. Obedience is saying, "God says it, that settles it, I believe it." The only path of obedience is to accept that I have died with Christ.

So we have a practical exhortation: we are to reckon ourselves to be dead to sin.

¹ A friend pointed out that 1 Peter 2:24 talks about being "dead to **sins**."

Serving Sin

Romans 6:1–14 talks about living in sin, and the remedy for living in sin is to reckon ourselves to have died to it. Romans 6:15 addresses a similar topic: sinning. The question in Romans 6:1 is, “should we continue in sin?” The question in Romans 6:15 is, “should we sin?”

Notice it’s not here a continuous lifestyle: the topic in Romans 6:15ff is really what we might call “dabbling in sin.” It’s one thing to be trapped in a sinful lifestyle (that’s Romans 6:1–14); it’s another to make a conscious choice to sin “just this one time” (Romans 6:15ff).

Here’s where the question of habit is addressed. If, having been freed from sin by death, we decide to obey sin, we’ll find ourselves the servants of sin (v. 6:16). When you obey someone, you have taken the first step to being his slave.

Romans 6:19 gives us a practical exhortation. Don’t yield your members (i.e. your physical bodies) as tools to sin. Yield them as tools to righteousness.

Notice Romans 6:19 is predicated on our having died with Christ. Someone who hasn’t died with Christ can’t just yield his members to righteousness. You can’t just decide to stop being a slave: death is what frees us from slavery. In other words, you can’t obey v. 6:19 without obeying v. 6:11 first.

Sin Dwells in Me

Romans 7 then turns to the question of Law. Romans 6:14 assures us we’re not under Law, but under grace. Romans 7:1–4 tells us that we are dead to the Law, just like we’re dead to sin. This echoes Galatians 2:19–21. We are no less dead to the Law than we are dead to sin.

Romans 7:5–6 gives us a brief summary of the verses that follow. It describes a person who, having been born of God, yearns to please Him. But he finds that he can’t (v. 7:15). He can’t please God, because there is sin in him (v. 7:17), and the sin in him is stronger than he is (v. 7:18).

This is a huge lesson to us. It’s not merely that we are guilty (Romans 3:23), nor that we are sinners (Romans 5:19); we are powerless (Romans 7:21–24). Sin lives in us, and it’s stronger than we are. In fact, the more we want to please God, the more we find that sin is right there with us (v. 7:21).

What’s the solution to this problem? We need to look for a Deliverer outside of ourselves (v. 7:25). It’s Christ Jesus, our Lord, who can deliver us from our wretchedness.

Walking in the Spirit

Romans 8 opens with a brief summary of the last three chapters (vv. 8:1–3). We're justified by faith, freed from sin by condemnation, and delivered by Christ Jesus. But now Romans 8 brings us to a new thing: walking in the Spirit.

If we look back at Romans 7, we notice there's a whole lot of "I," not a whole lot of "Christ," and no mention at all of the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God comes in at Romans 8:2.

Not everyone is going to agree with me here, but I take the view that Romans 7:7–23 is the history of a man who has been born again, but has not been sealed with the Spirit of God. He attempts to please God in his own power and strength, and finds that it's just not enough.

When we transition from Romans 7:24 to Romans 8:2, we cross a boundary. Romans 8 is not just the story of someone who's learned the lessons of Romans 7 (there are many), but it's someone who lives within the power and presence of the Spirit of God.

Notice, it's not all clear sailing in Romans 8. There is the dire warning of vv. 8:12–13, it's possible to walk after the flesh, rather than walking after the Spirit: the consequence of that is death. It's possible for a man who is born again, dead with Christ, and empowered by the Spirit of God to fall back into a fleshly walk.

But Romans 8 really leads us into what J. N. Darby called the "Christian position." Justified by grace through faith, freed from sin by death, and empowered by the Spirit of God.

Romans doesn't end at chapter 8, but we'll stop here for now.

Risen with Christ

Colossians 3:1–5 takes us, in a sense, further than Romans 5–8. Romans takes us to being dead and buried with Christ, but Colossians takes us to having been raised with Him. The command here is not to reckon ourselves to be dead to sin, but to set our affections where Christ is: in Heaven with Him (Colossians 3:1–3).

Again, we notice that we can't just decide to set our affections where Christ is. This command is only for those who have died with Christ. *It's not possible for someone who hasn't obeyed Romans 6:11 to obey Colossians 3:1–5.*

But Colossians 3 takes the whole theme of death further than our dying with Christ. That's foundational, but it's not the end. The next step is given in Colossians 3:5 ff – we are called to put to death our members on the earth. Notice we don't put ourselves to death, we put our members to death. This is effectively the same command as Romans 8:13. Romans tells us to

put to death the deeds of the body, Colossians tells us to put to death our members on the earth. Colossians tells us what those things are: fornication, uncleanness, vile passions, etc.

Again, let's remind ourselves that we can't obey Colossians 3:5 if we haven't died with Christ. The command to put to death our members is only for those who have already died with Him.

Mortifying vs. Dying

If we look back at Romans 6:1–11, we find that our death with Christ is a past thing. It is, indeed, a one-time thing. We aren't called to die with Christ, we are told **we have died** with Christ. We are called, not to live as though we've died with Him, but to believe God when He tells us that it has already happened.

When we look at Colossians 3:5, we see not completed thing, but a responsibility laid on us. The responsibility in Romans 6:11 is to believe God. The responsibility in Colossians 3:5 is to put our members to death.

There are many people out there who tells us Scripture calls us to die to self. It does not. Scripture tells us, not to die to self, but to believe God that we have died with Christ. Having died with Him, we are called to put to death (not ourselves, but) our members on the earth.

Death works in Us

2 Corinthians 4:6–12 takes the idea of death further even than Romans 6 or Colossians 3. In Romans 6, we find that *we have died with Christ* – it's a done deal. Colossians 3 says, having died with Christ, put to death your members on the earth – there is human responsibility. 2 Corinthians 4 goes past even Colossians 3, and says, *death works in us*. In fact, 2 Corinthians 4:12 tells us that both life and death are tools God uses to reveal His Son in us.

We notice that there is a progression from Romans 6 to Colossians 3 to 2 Corinthians 4. Romans 6 is painless: we are called merely to believe God. Colossians 3 calls us to put something to death: there is pain there, as we put our own members to death. But 2 Corinthians 4 is extremely painful: it's not that we have died, nor that we put to death. Death is working in us, and we feel it keenly.

But in the end, the Christian life is summed up in 2 Corinthians 4:10. The pinnacle of the Christian life is when the life of Jesus is manifested (revealed) in our mortal bodies. There is a cost: the cost of Jesus' life revealed in our mortal bodies is death working in us.

In the Flesh, in the Spirit, in Christ

Romans 7:5–6 is a summary of the verses that follow (vv. 7–25). It starts out describing what it was like when we were “in the flesh”: we were ruled by the passions of our sins, empowered by law, which brought forth fruit in our members unto death (JND). This is contrasted with the “but now”, where we have died to the law and serving in the spirit. Vv. 7–24 describe being “in the flesh”, chapter 8 describes being “in Christ” and “in the Spirit,” which I take to be synonyms.

The man “in the flesh” (Romans 7:7–24) is struggling to have his own righteousness. He’s a man who sees the Law of God, realizes he doesn’t measure up, and attempts to change. Of course the result is exactly what v. 5 says: rather than producing fruit to righteousness, he produces fruit unto death. It’s not that he sets out to sin, but he finds the harder he tries to be good, the more he is overpowered by the sin living in him (v. 21).

In a sense, the problem is not that he doesn’t want to be righteous, the problem is that he keeps trying. When we come to v. 25, we see a change: he no longer attempts to keep the Law, he realizes that he doesn’t need to improve, he needs a Deliverer.

The key difference between the Romans 7:24 and Romans 8:1 is the expression “in Christ Jesus”.

In practical terms, what does it mean to be “in Christ”? The answer lies in Philippians 3:9 – being “in Him” means “having no righteousness of my own.” Philippians 3:9 contrasts being “in Him” with having my own righteousness, and immediately brings in the principle of law. If we have a righteousness that is actually ours – righteousness that we have actually earned – we must necessarily refer to some law. But in Philippians 3:9, we have a person who says, “I don’t need righteousness of my own, I am content to be in Christ, and have Him for my righteousness.”² This is the key that unlocks Romans 8.

So Romans 8 describes a life that’s characterized by accepting Christ as my own goodness before God. When it comes to the question of eternal salvation, I am content for Christ to be my righteousness. When it comes to the question of my practical walk, I am content for Christ to be my righteousness.

John 15 parallels Romans 8. Where Romans 8 talks about walking in the Spirit, John 15:1–8 talks about abiding in Christ. The challenge to abiding in Christ is being *content* to abide in

² This is exactly the same principle as Romans 4:5. When it comes to justification before God, we must come to God realizing we have nothing to offer Him, but accepting His free gift. In exactly the same way, when it comes to Christian living, we must come to God realizing we have nothing to offer Him, but accepting His free gift. Practical righteousness works on exactly the same principle as judicial righteousness.

Christ. The challenge in Romans 8 and Philippians 3 is being content to have no righteousness of our own.

Let's understand that God accepts us **only** as "in Christ" (Ephesians 1:6). Our acceptance with God doesn't change as we behave better or worse. We are no more accepted when we have finished a Bible-reading marathon, or when we've memorized a huge chunk of Scripture, or when we're on our knees praying. I am sure that God is pleased to see us do those things, but we are no more accepted in His sight when we do those things than when we're doing something worldly or even something sinful.

"What is it to be in the flesh? It is to be in relationship with God on the ground of our natural responsibility as men, as children of fallen Adam"³. This is exactly what Romans 7:7–24 describes. It describes someone who recognizes he is responsible to act a certain way, but when he tries to do so, he finds he cannot. He takes the responsibility for a godly life on himself, and finds he cannot do it.

So in practical terms... being "in the flesh" means viewing God as accepting me based on how I behave. Being "in Christ" means accepting that God accepts me based Christ, regardless of how I behave. It means being content to have Christ as my acceptance before God. It means allowing God to love and accept me, no matter how unworthy I may know myself to be.

It is an act of faith. It is no less faith to say, "God accepts me in Christ and only in Christ, with no thought to my own performance" than it is to say, "Christ died for my sins."

Confession and Repentance

So what is the appropriate response when we sin? We can all quote 1 John 1:9, perhaps we don't really understand what it says.

We understand that our own sins (no matter how awful) can't and don't affect our acceptance with God. When we think that we have jeopardized our acceptance with God by our sins, we have practically taken ourselves out of Philippians 3:9 and put ourselves into Romans 7:7–24. It is in Christ and **only** in Christ that God sees any good in me.

Nevertheless, when we sin, we have to deal with that somehow. 1 John 1:9 provides us assurance of forgiveness. We don't earn forgiveness by confession, that's not what the verse is saying. But having confessed our sins, we have the assurance from the Word of God that He has forgiven them.⁴

³ J. N. Darby, ["On Sealing with the Holy Ghost"](#), *Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, Volume 31, p. 260

⁴ I've come to the conclusion that the real point of 1 John 1:9 isn't forgiveness of sins, but *assurance* of forgiveness of sins. God forgives us unconditionally (see Colossians 3:13). We don't earn His forgiveness

That being said, we realize in light of Colossians 3, Romans 6, and Romans 8 that our sinning is really a big deal. When we sin (even in small ways), we reveal that we have “members on the earth” (Colossians 3:5) that clearly we have not put to death. We reveal that we have been willing to “walk after the flesh” (Romans 8:12).

1 Corinthians 11:31 tells us, if we would judge ourselves, we would avoid God’s judgment. Notice here it’s not “confessing sins,” but “judging ourselves.” This is real repentance: it’s getting to the actual root of the problem, rather than just the symptoms. It’s being honest with God about the sin that dwells in me, not just whatever sinful acts I’ve committed. It’s confessing to Him the heart that lies behind those acts.

Job said, “I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6). This is real repentance. It goes far deeper than remorse. It’s not that Job recognizes his actions or his words were sinful: he abhorred *himself*. He recognized the problem was far deeper than whatever he did, he recognized the problem was what he was.⁵

See Also

- J. N. Darby’s writings are incredibly helpful on the subject of Christian living. They aren’t the easiest to read... There are several noteworthy articles, all available online:
 - ["A new State"](#) (J. N. Darby, *Notes and Comments*, Volume 4, p. 78)
 - ["Cleansing by Water: and what it is to walk in the light."](#) (*Collected Writings of J. N. Darby*, Volume 23, pp. 278–294)
 - ["Connection of the cross with the entire development of God's ways with man."](#) (*Collected Writings*, Volume 22, pp. 365–372)
 - ["Dead and Risen with Christ"](#) (*Collected Writings*, Volume 16, pp. 147–158)
 - ["Deliverance"](#) (*Collected Writings*, Volume 31, pp. 153–160)
 - ["Deliverance from the Law of Sin"](#) (*Collected Writings*, Volume 32, pp. 323–331)
 - ["Deliverance from under the Law, as stated in the Holy Scriptures"](#) (*Collected Writings*, Volume 7, pp. 127–138)
 - ["On Sealing with the Holy Ghost"](#) (*Collected Writings*, Volume 31, pp. 254–280)
- R. A. Huebner’s [From New Birth to New Creation](#) (Present Truth Publishers) is probably the most complete book I’ve read on Deliverance and the Christian life. It’s really more of a scrapbook than an actual book, but it’s very carefully written, and should be read the same way. It’s available online as [PDF](#).

by confession. But confession allows us to say with absolute certainty that God has forgiven. It doesn’t change anything except our confidence with Him.

⁵ A friend points out, John’s ministry began with “the axe is applied to the root of the trees” (Matthew 3:10). We are slow to accept that God has judged not merely the *fruit*, but also the *root* of tree itself.

- Watchman Nee's *The Normal Christian Life* (Tyndale House, 1977) is worth several readings. There's nothing here you can't find in Darby, but it's a great deal easier to read. Available [on Amazon](#), or online in [PDF](#) and [HTML](#).
- William R. Newell's *Romans, Verse-by-verse* (Kregel, Grand Rapids) is excellent on Romans 6–8. Well worth the price for the footnotes alone, it's available [on Amazon](#), or online as a [PDF](#), or online as [HTML](#).
- Francis A. Schaeffer's *True Spirituality* (Tyndale House, Carol Stream, 1971) is worth reading, at least in part because Schaeffer comes from a different theological background, but arrives at the same conclusions. Available on [Amazon](#).
- H. F. Witherby's [*The Gospel of Our Salvation*](#) (Bible Truth Publishers) is worth reading. Also available at [STEM Publishing](#).