

Alive to God

Romans 6:1-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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June 21, 2026/Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

I want to begin with a bit of a road map for the first part of summer as we creep closer to July.

Next Sunday, we're beginning a five-week series called "God's Shalom for our Common Home" which focuses on creation and will take us to the end of July.

Two of the people involved in the creation of the worship resources we're going to be using are from Mennonite Church Alberta including our very own Marie Moyer!

What better time of year to focus on creation than summer, right? And we're glad to have our very own resource person right here in Marie.

One of the unique features of these five Sundays is that we will have the opportunity to do some weekly homework. The idea is to experience creation not just as a theme during a Sunday morning service, but also to get out into the world and to pay attention to what God has made.

So, each Sunday, we'll be given something to do in the week ahead! The following Sunday, there will be an opportunity during the worship service for people to share about their experiences.

For the week ahead, to get ready for week 1 of our Season of Creation Sunday, here is what Marie prepared:

June 28 Theme: Coming to the water

For so many of us, our water arrives in our lives without much thought, at the turn of a faucet.

This week, take time to visit your local water source... It might mean walking by a river, paddling out on a lake, cycling on the bank of a canal, or walking out to your well. You may even take time to consult a watershed map to follow your water back to its original source.

Once you have found your water, take time to experience it with your senses: Listen to it, smell it, touch it, and observe how it interacts with plants and animals in its natural environment.

For reflection:

- Where has it come from and where is it going?
- How many people's lives depend on the gift of this water?
- Is it used to sustain animals? Does it irrigate crops?

Give thanks to God for the life-sustaining gift of this water and for God's abundant provision in the life of your community.

So, this week, that's your assignment. Go down to the river to pray. Or something like that 😊

Hélène will email a reminder out early next week and hopefully next week a few people can share about their experiences during our service.

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Ok, before we get to that series, today we're back in the book of Romans. And we're talking about sin and grace.

On Monday morning at the jail, we ended, as we always do, with time for prayer and with prayer requests.

The guys often share a fairly standard list. Loved ones. Upcoming court dates, bail hearings, etc. Peace on the unit.

The sharing time was proceeding along these lines on Monday when one young man who hadn't said much to this point, whose head had remained down when a lot of the other guys were joking around, quietly said, "I'd like to pray for the ability to take a different path in the future. And for the will to do it."

And, as it so often does when someone lets down their guard and exposed a bit of their true selves (which is risky), the room got quiet. A few heads went down. There was a lot of nodding around the circle.

A prison chapel is an understandable place for this kind of a prayer request. Many of the guys I sit with each Monday are painfully familiar with having the best of intentions but constantly returning to lives they wish they could walk away from.

To borrow the language from our passage in Romans today, they desperately want to “walk in newness of life” but the “old self” keeps reasserting itself. They very much feel like slaves to sin.

These are not sentiments that are confined to prison chapels on Monday morning. I suspect there are very few (if any) people in this room who cannot at least in some sense identify with the story I just shared.

I certainly can. I’ve spent a handful of decades at least *trying* to do what Jesus said, to pursue righteousness, to live the life I was made for.

Like everyone else who attempts such a thing, I’ve realized that my best efforts still come up woefully short. A sinner I stubbornly remain. A sinner I will be until I die.

I think this is a common human experience—we want to follow the path of righteousness and truth. But our wills are weak.

We find ourselves in this tension between the newness of life we want and the old patterns of life that we default to, between the holiness we were made for and the sin which comes so naturally to us, between the grace that accepts us as we are and the virtuous life that we know in our bones that we are called to.

Between the “not yet”—the new creation we believe is coming—and the “now”—this present life where God’s will is not yet done, on earth as in heaven (in the world and in our lives).

Somehow, we must make peace with this even as we stretch out toward making Christ more at home in our hearts and in our lives.

I have seen many people grind themselves into the ground trying to follow Jesus in ever more earnest ways. I have seen people crippled by guilt, wearied by their inability to walk on better paths, hounded by an unrelenting sense of their own inadequacy.

I have seen the best moral intentions and energies go badly wrong. I have seen people become miserable, incapable of experiencing anything resembling joy or contentment, so haunted are they by the unmet need, the untended wound, the unaddressed injustice, the unresolved crisis.

So how should we think about what it means to be dead to sin but alive to God?

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Paul's letter to the Romans is the densest and most theologically comprehensive of any of his letters. It touches on themes of law and grace, divine providence, justification by faith, Jew and Gentile relations, and many other things.

Our passage today comes immediately after a marvelous passage on the grace of God where Paul portrays Jesus Christ as undoing the sin of Adam.

As sin and death and condemnation came to all through Adam, Paul says, grace and righteousness and life have come to all through Christ.

Chapter 5 ends with these words:

But where sin increased, grace increased all the more,²¹ so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And that sets the stage for the words that began our reading this morning: "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase?"

If grace is the last word, if Christ undoes the curse of Adam, if there is nothing we can add to it or subtract from it, does it even matter how we live?

Indeed, if the goodness of God is shown most clearly in his grace and mercy expressed toward sinners, wouldn't it make sense to just keep sinning to highlight God's grace?

Sounds like a bit of a self-serving argument doesn't it. And it is.

This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously spoke against with his memorable term “cheap grace.” Cheap grace treats God's forgiveness like a free pass—“*God forgives, so my choices don't matter.*”

But they do. Paul is quite clear. Should we continue in sin? *By no means!*

And here he moves to one of his central themes, one that shows up in all his letters. We have been united with Christ, through faith in his death and resurrection.

His identity has become ours.

In our baptism, we have been crucified with Christ and raised with him. We have died to sin and been raised to new life.

Our old self was crucified. We are no longer slaves to sin—we have been set free.

Paul is saying that in light of our identification with Christ, it makes no sense to say, “well, let's just keep on living how we want, because... grace.”

Even asking the question means that we don't truly understand who we are or the gift we have been given.

Is Paul saying that to be Christian is to no longer sin? It sure sounds pretty black and white in this passage doesn't it!

Old self, new self.

Enslaved, free.

Dead to sin, alive to God.

Simple, right?

Well, no. Obviously not, as I touched at the beginning of my sermon, our experience is much more grey than black and white.

And the same was true for Paul. The same Paul who said, “you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” also said, just one chapter later in Romans,

For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing (Rom 7:18-19).

Later still, in 1 Timothy, Paul said, ““Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst” (1 Tim. 1:15).

So, Paul is under no illusions that the Christian life is just a steady story of moral progress and holiness.

But the key word is “consider.” *Consider* yourselves dead to sin and alive to God.” Remember that your primary identity is now located not in your performance but in the finished work of Christ.

Live as if however you tend to be doing at any given moment, *this* is what is true about you.

To be alive to God is not to be sin-free. It is to be constantly oriented toward and alive to God and God’s purposes in our lives.

It is to be quick to confess and seek forgiveness. To extend mercy. To remember our identity in Christ and to declare this to be the truest thing about us.

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I want to end with a few metaphors that I encountered a while back in a book by Charles Mathewes called *The Republic of Grace*. Mathewes is a professor of religious ethics at the University of Virginia.

In one chapter he talked about the human pursuit of virtue, our striving to be better people, and how we should think about it.

He was a profound admirer of the great St. Augustine who, like Paul, had a high view of God’s grace and a lower view of the human ability to be good on our own.

Mathewes said, “we must change our perception of ourselves from “Promethean” to “Adamic.”

Well, that’s a bunch of syllables. What does he mean by this?

In Greek mythology, Prometheus was a powerful divine being who defied Zeus by stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humans.

Used as an adjective, “promethean” means, “someone who is boldly creative, ambitious, rebellious, or transformative, especially in pursuit of knowledge or progress.” It usually carries the idea of reaching beyond normal limits, often at great risk.

Adam’s story we know better, don’t we? Adam reached beyond his creaturely limits and sought to be like God, knowing good and evil as God does. He refused the parameters of his creation, was not content to be an image bearer.

According to Mathewes, a Promethean approach to sin and virtue sees us as athletes in the gymnasium. If we just work harder, apply ourselves more diligently, take more risks, refuse more limits, we’ll achieve the goal of moral perfection.

An Adamic approach to sin and virtue puts us not in a gymnasium but a hospital. It recognizes that to be human is to carry a wound, to be born longing for God but by nature turned inward on ourselves (as we saw last Sunday).

Mathewes says this:

Insofar as we want to use the language of virtue, then, we must do so with profound care. The basic way we should use it is to transform it from a gymnastic language of achievement to a medical language of suffering, of being willing to be shaped (not to shape ourselves) by the medicine of a gracious God.

Now, it’s not as though the gymnasium approach doesn’t say anything about truth. Paul talks about running a race, disciplining ourselves. In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, he doesn’t say, “you probably can’t be good, so don’t waste your effort” he says, “Be perfect, ‘complete,’ as your heavenly father is perfect.”

Moral striving, the pursuit of virtue has an important place in the Christian tradition and in the Christian life.

But ultimately, I think we are less like Prometheus and more like Adam. And the hospital, not the gymnasium tells the deepest truth of the human condition.

I have come to realize that it is not simply the case that I *do* not follow Jesus as well as I ought to. It's also that I *cannot*. A more strenuous moral regimen might do me some good, but it won't get me the whole distance.

Jesus pointed this out to those who were convinced of their own righteousness: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick" (Luke 5:31).

The implication was *not* that some had no need of the Divine Physician and others did; it was that everyone was in need, some just didn't recognize or acknowledge it.

I need the medicine of a gracious God.

So do the guys I meet each Monday at the jail.

So do all of us who try and fail and try again, who want to be better than we are.

Grace is not cheap. It is not a blank cheque. It is not an excuse to live however we please.

It is the free gift of a God who loves us, who longs for us, who offers healing and hope, who invites us to live into the newness of life.

May our lives be a response to this gift. May we consider ourselves dead to that which is passing away, and alive to the God who makes all things new.

Amen.

