

What you are
Romans 6:1-11
June 22, 2008

Most of us think of our lives as a journey, a journey through time and through space, a journey from birth, through childhood and adolescence, young adulthood and middle age, old age and one day, some day, somewhere along the way, a journey that ends in death.

The journey takes us through different life stages, each with its own blessings and challenges, and the journey takes us to many different places -- homes and workplaces, neighborhoods and churches, schools and vacation destinations -- each place enlarging our appreciation of life's beauties and complexities, and each place presenting new problems, putting new obstacles in the path that we must get around or over or through if we are to continue on the way.

For some of us, the journey is like a quest, our whole lives focussed on a single dream, a single goal, a single objective, a lifelong quest for ... success? ... significance? ... a sense of accomplishment? ... a sense of value?

For others of us, the journey is more like wandering in circles, aimlessly! Life just happens to us and we react as best we can, however we can, just trying to get by, just trying to survive.

But, for most of us, I think, the journey is something between those two extremes. We have some sense of purpose and direction and we pursue certain dreams, but a lot of life takes us to places we do not choose. There are many surprises -- some for better and some for worse -- but we do our best to enjoy and appreciate what comes our way along the way, trying to deal with life's challenges and disappointments with some measure of resilience and grace.

But however we live our lives, when we do think of our lives as a journey, we have this in common: we know that we are not there yet, wherever "there" is! We are still on the way. We are on a journey, somewhere between where we have been and where we are going. We are not yet arrived. There is more for us to experience, more to learn, more to do, more to discover. We are still growing, still becoming, still on the way.

Most of us think of our spiritual lives in the same way. We are somewhere along the way. We are somewhere along the way from unbelief to belief, from alienation to intimacy, from isolation to community, from selfishness to unselfishness, from willfulness to obedience, from choosing my will to choosing God's will, from the kingdoms of this world to the kingdom of God, from slavery to freedom, from death to life. We are still growing, still becoming, still on the way.

And I'll bet most of us think we're not very far at all along that way! I'll bet most of us think we're barely begun, spiritual novices at best, still very much wrapped up in doubt and self-will, still feeling rather distant from God, still very much pushed and pulled by the influential culture around us, still wanting to do things "my way" whether "my way" is working or not!

And probably a good many of us think of ourselves as not even started, still on the outside, curious onlookers, eager learners, but not yet ready to commit to belief, not really sure the spiritual life is for us, or not really sure we are even worthy enough to consider ourselves followers of Jesus.

In any case, we think of ourselves as not there yet. We think of ourselves as somewhere along the way.

In one sense, thinking about our spiritual journeys in that way allows us a certain amount of grace, a certain degree of understanding of our still-flawed selves. You've heard the saying: "Be patient with me, God is not finished with me yet!"

But, on the other hand, thinking of ourselves as still on the way can lead to resignation and a too easy acceptance of an unhealthy status quo. "I'm only human." "Nobody's perfect." "That's just who I am."

It is that kind of attitude, an attitude of spiritual complacency and too easy grace, that the apostle Paul confronts in Romans 6.

Should we continue to live in sin so that God's grace will increase?

Actually it seems like a reasonable question! Don't our imperfections show God's perfection all the more clearly? Don't our flaws prove that we need God's grace and can't make it on our own? Doesn't our constant need for forgiveness lead us again and again to appreciate and give thanks for God's love?

Yes ... but,

What shall we say, then? Should we continue to live in sin so that God's grace will increase? Certainly not!

"Certainly not," Paul says. That way of thinking misses the point entirely. It misunderstands the purpose of God's grace; "God's kindness is meant to lead to a change of heart." Forgiveness is not the end, but the means.

Forgiveness is not the end, but the means. Guilt is not the problem, and we misunderstand grace if we think that forgiveness and taking away our guilt is the substance of grace.

How many of you came to church today carrying some kind of guilt? Regretting something you said or something you did, or regretting something you didn't say or didn't do when someone else needed you, or regretting your inattention to neighbors who are poor or lonely or suffering or treated unfairly?

Good! You have a spiritual pulse! Do ask God's forgiveness. Do let go of the guilt, but don't stop there! Don't just unload your messed-up lives, ask God to forgive you and take away the guilt, and then go right on back to your messed-up lives! That's not grace, that's a whitewash!

Guilt is not the problem. Sin is the problem. Sin is anything that takes away from the fullness of life God intends for us and for each and every other human being. Guilt is just the symptom. Sin is the disease.

But here's the thing. Here's the heart of what Paul wanted to tell the Roman Christians and what God wants to tell you. The disease has been cured! The disease has been cured!

[You] have died to sin ... by [your] baptism you were buried with Christ Jesus and shared his death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from death by the glorious power of the Father, so also [you] might live a new life!

So ask God's forgiveness. Let go of the guilt. And then, be what you are! People living a new life in a new way, in fellowship with God!

This is what you are. You are not just on the way, you are there! When you are joined to Christ in baptism, you are not just somewhere on the way from what you were to what you will be. What you were is gone ... gone ... dead and buried!

So be what you are. You are free! You are alive! You are God's servant, God's child, no more a slave of this world and its cruel and unloving ways!

Be what you are ...

Really, the meaning of Paul's argument is much the same as the meaning of Jesus' message, "The kingdom of God is ..." We bemoan a fallen world. We acknowledge that neither the world nor ourselves are as they should be. We hope and wait for the day when God will make all things new. But the fact is, the kingdom of God is ... now ... here ... among us, with us, in us.

We are not fallen, we are lifted up.

We are not dying, we are alive.

We are not trapped in a doomed world, but we are free. Sin and death have no power over us! When you are in Christ, sin and death have no power over you!

This is the gospel. Not just forgiveness for sin, but freedom from sin, from everything and anything that takes away from the fullness of life God intends for us and for each and every other human being. Not just hope for a new world one day, but the power to make the world new today. Not just that God forgives your imperfections, but that God makes you perfect.

Do you dare to live a perfect life? It is what you are!