

*Baptized into Christ Jesus:*<sup>1</sup> Romans 6:1-4  
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For the next few weeks I'm going to preach on the ordinances that are to be observed by the church. We call them ordinances because they were ordained by Jesus Christ Himself. And they are baptism and the Lord's Supper. In the Great Commission Jesus commands us, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Just a couple chapters earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper. He took the bread, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body." And He took the cup, saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28). Baptism and the Lord's Supper are the two ordinances which Christ has given to us, and each is filled with precious meaning. Each points to the death of Christ, and to the resurrection of Christ, and thus each ordinance is about the Gospel. Baptism is the ordinance which takes place at the beginning of the Christian life, and the Lord's Supper is the ordinance which is observed regularly throughout the Christian life. Just as we are born once into this world, we are baptized once when God gives us new life in Christ. And just as we eat regularly throughout our lives, we also come together regularly to eat of the Lord's Supper. And Christ has given us these practices so that we might have tangible and visible reminders of the most important spiritual realities. Baptism and the Lord's Supper, in very profound ways, help us to visualize the Gospel—that Jesus Christ died on the cross, His body was broken and His blood was poured out, and then He rose from the dead, and those who trust in Him will die to sin and be raised to walk in newness of life. Brothers and sisters, these things are so, so precious. And my hope for us in these few weeks is that we would grow in our appreciation of these ordinances, which are gracious gifts to us from our Lord Jesus Christ.

This morning and next week we'll focus on baptism. Today we're going to study Romans 6:1-4, and I'm going to say a few brief things about the mode of baptism (whether we should sprinkle, pour, or immerse) and then I'll spend most of the sermon explaining from this text what baptism symbolizes. What is the Gospel truth that is being portrayed in baptism? What is the meaning of baptism? Next week we'll go to Colossians 2 and I'll

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this message are from two sermons I preached in 2007. *Death to Sin*, 4/1/07 and *Believer's Baptism*, 5/13/07.

give some reasons for believer's baptism as opposed to infant baptism. I'll try to answer the question, Who are the proper subjects of baptism? Who should be baptized?

### **The Mode of Baptism**

The first thing I want to talk about is the *mode* of baptism, and then this will lead us into the main point of this message, which is the *meaning* of baptism. When we say the mode of baptism, we mean the way in which it is done. And it is done in different ways. In some churches, the water is sprinkled over the person. In other churches, water is poured over the person. But what I hope to convince you of this morning is that immersion is the proper mode of baptism. When we baptize individuals, we ought to get them in the water and immerse them. There are a few reasons for this.

First of all, the Greek word *baptizō* means "to plunge, dip, immerse." This meaning is evident both in the Bible and in Greek literature outside of the Bible. In addition to this, immersion in water seems to make the most sense of the way the New Testament describes the baptism of various individuals. For instance, in Mark 1:5 it describes those who were going out to John the Baptist, and it says they "were being baptized by him IN the river Jordan, confessing their sins." It doesn't say anything about sprinkling or pouring, but they were immersed IN the river Jordan. A few verses later we read of Jesus' baptism, and it says, "And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove." The point being, he came up OUT OF the water, implying that He had been IN the water.

Another example is when Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. In Acts 8:36, the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" Then the next verse says, "they both went DOWN into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came UP OUT of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away . . ." If they thought sprinkling or pouring would be sufficient, they wouldn't have needed to wait until they came upon a body of water. And the going down into the water and coming up out of the water strongly implies that Philip fully immersed this man in the water. A final verse along these lines is John 3:23, which says, "John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized." You don't need a lot of water to sprinkle or pour. But you do need a lot of water to immerse. And apparently immersion was important enough to John that he went to a place where there was a lot of water.

Baptism by immersion is consistent with the meaning of the word, and it is also the mode which was practiced in the New Testament. A final reason for baptizing by immersion is the fact that it best symbolizes our death with Christ and our resurrection to new life, which is what Romans 6 explains to us. And this leads us to our text for this morning, and the question, What is the meaning of baptism?

### **The Meaning of Baptism**

In verses 3-4 we see the meaning of baptism, but we have to begin in verse 1 to understand Paul's point here. He begins with these questions. "What shall we say then?" He means, what should we conclude based on the doctrine of justification by faith alone which has been taught in the previous five chapters? The truth that we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, and not by our works—how will this truth affect our thoughts and actions? And then he identifies a critical objection that is raised against what he has been teaching. "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" It's important to see what Paul is responding to here, because the same kind of question is still being asked today. And some come to the same conclusion that Paul is condemning here. People will study the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and then conclude, The way you live your life is completely irrelevant to salvation. If you made that commitment in your heart, if you professed faith, if you said the prayer, if you signed the card, if you walked down an aisle, if you were baptized, then your salvation is sure and there's nothing that can change that. That's how some people twist the truth of salvation by faith alone into easy-believism. Your life doesn't have to change, many would say. It's good if it does change, but it doesn't have to. You can continue living in sin, and as long as you said that prayer of repentance and professed faith in Christ, you will be saved. That view of salvation deceives so many people by giving them a false assurance that they are saved when really they are not. Paul's argument in these verses is designed to clarify how salvation, which is by faith alone, will necessarily change your life. He's not contradicting himself. He's not now saying that salvation is by works. He's simply saying that those who truly trust in Christ will be changed. They won't continue in sin. Instead, they'll walk in newness of life.

So the question that Paul is raising is this: Do we just take this truth that we are saved by faith alone and use it like a free ticket to heaven and a license to continue in our sinful ways of life? Look at his answer in verse 2, "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" In this rhetorical question Paul is making an emphatic statement. He's saying, "There is absolutely no way that we who died to sin can still live in it!"

Dead people cannot sin. That's the answer to the question. Dead people cannot sin. That is, those who are dead to sin can't continue living in sin. What does that mean? That's a scary thing to say, because we all know that we continue to sin. We didn't stop sinning when we were converted. We wish it were so, but it isn't. So what does it mean that we are dead to sin? I don't feel dead to sin! Does that mean I'm not a Christian?

I don't think Paul is saying that we have died to sin in the sense that we no longer commit any sins. It seems clear from the context that he does not mean that. Let me point out three things. First of all, in verses 11-13 Paul gives some commands. Verse 11, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Verse 12, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions." Verse 13, "Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness." These commands clearly imply that sin is still a struggle in the life of Christians, and we must wage war against the sinful tendencies that are still very much present within us.

Secondly, he says in verse 6 that "our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be *enslaved* to sin." He doesn't say, "so that we would be sinless," but "so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin." Also in verse 14, "sin will have no *dominion* over you." Again, it's not that sin will be totally absent from your life, but "sin will have no dominion over you." It's about who your master is, as the rest of the chapter goes on to talk about. Are we slaves to sin or slaves to righteousness?

And a third observation is the way Paul talks about sin in verses 1-2. He asks, "Are we to *continue* in sin . . .?" And in verse 2, "How can we who died to sin still *live* in it?" What he's saying we *cannot* do is remain unchanged in our sinful lifestyle. We can't continue living in sin. True believers, those who have really died with Christ, will not just continue living in all the same sinful patterns of the world. There will be a radical change. There's a new master. There's new life. And that doesn't mean sinlessness, but it means we are no longer under the complete bondage of sin. I think it's the same thing that John is teaching in 1 John 3:6, "No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him." Or a couple verses later where he says, "No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God." He's not talking about

being sinless. He's talking about no longer living a life characterized by sin, enslaved to sin, under sin's dominion.

So in what sense have we died to sin? If it doesn't mean being sinless, then what does it mean? The answer is: Christ died to sin, once for all, and we have been united to Christ in a death like his, and therefore we have died to sin. Let's trace the logic through these verses briefly. In verse 2 we see this truth that we have died to sin. "How can *we who died to sin* still live in it?" In verse 5, Paul speaks of our union with Christ. "For if we have been united with him [that is, Christ] in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his." And then verse 10 says that Christ's death was a death to sin, once for all, meaning He destroyed the power of sin. He triumphed over sin through His death and resurrection. So by virtue of Christ's death to sin, and our union to Christ, it can be said that we have died to sin.

If that still feels abstract to you, let me say it this way: Sin is no longer our master. In Christ we have triumphed over sin, and sin no longer has dominion over us. The thrust of Paul's argument in response to the question in verse 1 is that God's grace will certainly not cause us to continue in sin, because the power of sin has been broken. Now we have a new ruler, a new master, new life, new desires. We will still sin, but now we will struggle against sin, because we have tasted and seen something much better than sin. Before, all we knew was sin. We were completely under the reign of sin, and we didn't have a desire for anything else. But now, even though we will still sin, we are no longer under sin's dominion. Sin is no longer our slave-master. We have died to sin and have new life in Christ.

And this is what baptism is all about. This is the reality that baptism symbolizes. This is the meaning of baptism. Look at verse 3, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" When we were baptized into Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death, which is an illustration of what this whole passage is talking about. We have died to sin, meaning Christ died to sin, and we have been united with Him in that death. And baptism is a symbol of that death, an illustration of that death.

Verse 4 explains further, "We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Verse 3 was about death. The first half of verse 4 is about death and burial. It's interesting to note that outside of the Gospels, Paul is the only one who specifically mentions the burial of Jesus Christ (Acts 13:29; 1 Corinthians 15:4; Colossians 2:12). Four times we find him referring the Jesus' burial, and two

are in the context of baptism—here and in Colossians 2:12, “having been buried with him in baptism.” It seems that Paul wants to stress the finality of Jesus’ death. He was really dead. He was buried in a tomb. And a key component of baptism is how it signifies this death and burial. Being plunged under the water is a symbol of our death and burial with Christ Jesus. We have died to sin.

We see, though, in verse 4 that the death and burial is only half of the picture. The other half is the resurrection to new life. This is the purpose of the death and burial, “in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Christ was raised from the dead in a miraculous and glorious way, and in the same way we are raised to walk in newness of life.

I’ve been talking about baptism as a symbol of these spiritual realities, but we have to ask whether that interpretation squares with this text. The way verse 4 is worded, many think that baptism is actually the *instrument* by which we died with Christ. In other words, many people think that baptism actually saves. And if you read verse 4 all by itself, without the rest of Paul’s writings to inform you, then you might very well come to that same conclusion. But when we look at the rest of Paul’s writings, and the teaching of the New Testament as a whole, we have to think further about what Paul is getting at here.

Look at Romans 5:1, just one chapter back, where Paul writes, “Therefore, since we have been justified *by faith*, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” It’s not by baptism that we are justified, or by faith plus baptism. The instrument by which we are justified is faith, and faith alone. Another example is Colossians 2:12, which also speaks of baptism: “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him *through faith* in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.” Again, faith is the instrument.

The conclusion I believe we must reach is that when Paul says in Romans 6:4 that “We were buried therefore with him *by baptism* into death,” he is not referring to baptism itself, but to the inner spiritual reality that baptism represents.

The wedding ring is a great illustration of this. When Stacy and I were married we said, “I give you this ring as a sign of my vow.” But we could have said, as many do, “With this ring, I thee wed.” And nobody means by those words that the physical ring establishes the marriage. The ring, rather, is a symbol of what establishes the marriage, namely, the love and commitment expressed in the vows. The ring is an abiding symbol of our love for each other and our commitment to forsake all others and remain passionately committed to one another. In and of itself it

does not create a marriage. It's a symbol. A picture. It's an outward sign that represents a profound inner reality.

Baptism is the same. In and of itself, it does not save. But it is a wonderful tangible symbol of the amazing truth that Christians *by faith* have died with Christ and have been raised to walk in newness of life.

It is tragic that so many people think they're saved simply because they were sprinkled with some water when they were a baby, or dunked under water at some point in their childhood or as an adult. Baptism does not save anyone. Rather, it is a symbol of what happens in a person's heart when they are truly saved, when they die to sin and are raised to walk in newness of life. Baptism is a symbol of conversion. It's a powerful drama of these inner realities.

I close by asking you if you have died to sin. Have you been united to Christ by faith so that you are now dead to sin and have been raised to walk in newness of life? Don't continue in rebellion against God. Don't continue to turn your back on Him and live for the things of this world. I promise you: if you continue down that road you will never find any lasting joy. Instead you will come to the end of your life and face the terrifying wrath of God. Repent of your sin, and turn to Jesus Christ. He will forgive you. He will release you from your bondage to sin and cause you to walk in newness of life. Come to Him today. Trust Him. Rejoice in Him.

For those of you who are already in Christ, but have not been baptized as a believer, I encourage you to do so. Let us, as a congregation, rejoice with you in this wonderful ordinance. Be immersed in water to symbolize the radical change that has taken place in your life, and to proclaim to the world that you are in Christ—dead to sin and resurrected to walk in newness of life.