

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We are currently discussing the doctrine of sanctification, and last week we made the point that there are two aspects to sanctification, a definitive aspect and a progressive aspect. We started to discuss Chapter Six of the book of Romans, where the apostle Paul argues that Christians cannot continue to live in sin. In fact, in Romans 6:2 we read, “We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”¹

Dr. Spencer, you ended with a quote from the 20th-century theologian John Murray, who wrote about this verse, saying that “What the apostle has in view is the once-for-all definitive breach with sin which constitutes the identity of the believer.”² That is a very strong statement, to say that a breach with sin constitutes the very identity of a believer.

Dr. Spencer: It is a very strong statement, but it is also completely biblical and, therefore, true. And it makes clear that the modern idea that a person can be saved independent of how he lives simply because he prayed a certain prayer at one time, is a monstrous and damning lie. As Paul said, “We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”

Marc Roby: And the obvious answer is, that we cannot.

Dr. Spencer: And we won't if we have been born again. We were careful last time to also say that we not speaking about sinless perfection. But, nevertheless, it is absolutely clear in the Bible that a Christian *must* live differently. And it can't be that you just go to church once in a while, or even that you go to church every week. You must do that of course, but that is not enough.

Marc Roby: Yes, God has never accepted a dead and formal religion. I think of the prophet Amos, who prophesied in Israel in the mid-8th-century BC, which was a prosperous time, much like America for the past 70 years. In Amos 5:21-23 we read that God said, “I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Though you bring choice fellowship offerings, I will have no regard for them. Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps.”

Dr. Spencer: That is a terrifying passage. We have cited it before, but it is a passage every professing Christian should pay careful attention to. You may think you are worshiping God, but both your motives and your methods must be right or your worship is not accepted by God. In fact, he hates it because he hates hypocrisy of every kind. Jesus himself was extremely critical and even harsh in his condemnation of religious hypocrisy. In Matthew 23:27-28 we read that he said, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and

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² John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997, pg. 213

everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

Marc Roby: You're certainly right in saying he was harsh with them. Just a few verses later, in Matthew 23:33, we read that he said, "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

Dr. Spencer: And we must remember that he was speaking to people who lived very strict lives in outward conformance to God's commands. The only problem was that they didn't see how sinful they really were. They didn't humble themselves and cry out for mercy and then seek to please God by doing their best to keep his law. Instead, they turned God's laws into a set of very detailed rules crafted by men. Rules that it was possible for them to keep, at least in theory. And they then thought they could save themselves by keeping those rules. If you think the standard is low enough that you can meet it, then you don't have a biblical standard at all. We can never save ourselves. Salvation is only possible through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Marc Roby: And while the men of whom Christ was speaking are all dead now, their souls still exist either in heaven or hell. And, eventually, they will receive an eternal body and continue forever, again either in heaven or hell. So, the only really important question to ask about them is, "Where are they now?"

Dr. Spencer: That is the only question that matters in the end for any of us; "Where will we go to spend eternity?" And that is why the doctrine of definitive sanctification is so important, if we don't show forth the fruit of regeneration, then we have not been born again. And if we have not been born again, we will go to hell. That is the reality. So this doctrine provides us with one way to examine ourselves and avoid that reality.

Marc Roby: And hell is a scary reality to say the least. Which is why Paul wrote in Philippians 2:12 that we should continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Dr. Spencer: Very true. But to balance that, we should also point out that there is great joy given to a Christian walking in obedience. When Paul said we should work out our salvation with fear and trembling he didn't mean that we should run around terrified and morose all the time. We are to be serious about examining ourselves and we should cry out for mercy if we fail the examination, but there should be great joy and peace if we see the evidence of new life in ourselves.

Marc Roby: Although we must be careful to use the biblical standard when we do the examination.

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. We never want to be presumptuous about our eternal destiny. We don't want to be hypocrites. Which leads us back to Jesus' condemnation of hypocrisy, it is interesting to see how Christ started the address we've been quoting from the 23rd chapter of Matthew. In Verses 1-5 we read that "Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 'The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy loads and

put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done for men to see”.

Marc Roby: That is interesting. Jesus says that the people need to do what these hypocritical teachers told them to do even though the preachers themselves didn't obey. And he referred to all of the man-made rules that attempted to codify God's law as “heavy loads” that these teachers placed on men's shoulders.

Dr. Spencer: We are to obey all legitimate authority so long as we are not told to sin. Christians are not free to disobey just because some authority is wicked; Paul lived at a time when the government was very wicked. But the authority must be legitimate and it must not be telling us to sin. So, for example, the policeman must be obeyed if he gives you a lawful command, like to stop walking or running away and to show him your identification or answer legitimate questions. But if a policeman tried to tell you that you that you must vote a certain way, that would be completely illegitimate. It is outside of his proper sphere of authority and you would not be obligated to obey.

Now, we have discussed the proper spheres of authority before³, so let's get back to the idea of laws being heavy loads. We have to recognize that one of the purposes of the law is to cause us to see our sin and to drive us to Christ for salvation. The law was never meant to be a means of salvation.

Marc Roby: And yet, Christians are told to obey the law. Both God's law and man's laws, so long as they are proper.

Dr. Spencer: Yes. In fact, we are to aspire to perfect, joyful, immediate obedience. And Murray was certainly correct to say that a once-for-all definitive breach with sin constitutes the identity of a believer. But we must define sin properly.

Marc Roby: Now, the Westminster Shorter Catechism gives a concise, biblical, definition in the answer to Question 14, “What is sin?” The answer given there is that “Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.”

Dr. Spencer: And that answer makes it clear that the law still applies to Christians. Without the law of God, we don't know what sin is. Our consciences can guide us to the extent they are biblically informed, but they are not infallible. Only the Word of God provides us with an infallible guide to what constitutes sin. We have looked at the frightening passage in Matthew 7:21-23 before, but it will be useful to take a brief look at it again now.

Marc Roby: In those verses Jesus Christ says that “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

³ See Sessions 27-33

Dr. Spencer: Those verses explicitly tell us that many people who think they are Christians on their way to heaven are not. And they also implicitly tell us how to identify those false believers. Christ says that true believers do the will of his Father in heaven, in other words, they obey God's written word. And he makes the same point clear at the end of the passage. When he says to these false believers, "Away from me, you evildoers!", the Greek word translated here as evildoers is ἀνομία (anomia), which literally means one who is against the law. Evildoers are those who break God's laws.

Marc Roby: That will come as a surprise to many modern professing Christians who have been taught that Christians don't need to observe the law because Christ fulfilled it for them.

Dr. Spencer: Well, the truth will come as a surprise to someone who has had that teaching because that teaching is a lie. But, like most good lies, it has an element of truth in it. Christ *did* fulfil the law for us and we *are* saved based on his perfect obedience, which includes his sacrifice on the cross. Our keeping of the law is not the basis for our salvation ...

Marc Roby: Which is awfully good news since we never keep the law perfectly!

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. If we were judged strictly on our own record of keeping God's law we would all be condemned. But, at the same time, if we have been born again, we have been united with Christ, the Holy Spirit dwells in us, and we *will* live differently. Our keeping of God's law is the inevitable fruit that results from our changed nature. We are not only God's children by adoption, but we are also in the process of being made God's children by nature.

Marc Roby: Which, we must hasten to add, is only fully accomplished after we die; at which time God will perfect us.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. We never achieve perfect obedience to God's law in this life, which should cause us to repent daily and seek God's forgiveness and his help to do better. But the mere fact that we can't meet the standard doesn't in any way imply that the standard does not apply. As Christians we are obligated to keep God's law *and* to do so for the right reasons.

Marc Roby: We are told in Proverbs 16:2 that "All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD."

Dr. Spencer: Yes, we must never forget that fact. God looks at the heart. Outward obedience from wrong motives is not true obedience. God wants us to obey *and* to do so for the right reasons.

We should recognize that God's law is good and just and proper and we should want to obey it to honor and please God, our heavenly Father. We should hate sin, our *own* sin most of all, and to do so more and more as we grow in faith. But, if we have been born again, there is a hatred of sin right from the beginning. We immediately see that we have an enemy within, our own sinful nature. That realization is a part of definitive sanctification.

Marc Roby: And that enemy within is our most ardent foe!

Dr. Spencer: Yes, he is our worst enemy. But, praise God, Christ has already defeated sin, so our own victory is assured. Paul wrote about this victory, which will only be completely ours in death. In 1 Corinthians 15:54-57 he wrote, “When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality,” in other words, when we have died, “then the saying that is written will come true: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’ ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Marc Roby: That is wonderful. We have a hard battle to fight, and we must fight it every day of our lives, but our ultimate victory is assured.

Dr. Spencer: And Paul’s burden in Romans Chapter Six is to encourage and admonish us by causing us to see where the power to fight sin comes from. It comes from our union with Christ. The Rev. P.G. Mathew wrote that “In Romans 6, Paul speaks about why believers should live holy lives and how they can do so in Christ. Holiness is the key to happiness.”⁴

Marc Roby: That’s an important point. I think people often believe that obeying God’s law is misery. It requires self-denial. But the truth is that it is the only way to real happiness.

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. I remember listening to a sermon about depression years ago when I was on vacation. And the minister gave an entire sermon on the causes and cures for depression and cited a number of scriptures, but he completely missed the main point about depression. It is caused by sin. Now that doesn’t deny that there can be other contributing factors, but the dominant cause of depression is sin. After Cain killed his brother Abel, he was depressed. But God said to him, as we read in Genesis 4:7, “If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”

Marc Roby: That verse personifies sin, which is entirely appropriate since it is very much a traitor within that opposes our doing what is right at every turn.

Dr. Spencer: And sin brings misery. But in Romans 14:17 we are told that “the kingdom of God is ... righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”. God wants what is best for his children. In regeneration he implants a new nature in us. This new nature desires to do what is right and good in God’s sight, which is also what will lead to us have the greatest peace and joy in this life. As P.G. Mathew wrote, “Holiness is the key to happiness.”

But God does not completely remove our old sinful nature when he regenerates us, we must fight against it. The good news however, and the thing we need to look for to be sure of our own salvation, is that we do have this new nature at war with our old nature! And God has guaranteed that this new nature will win in the end. He makes this point clearly in Romans 6:4-7, where he speaks about our union with Christ in both his death and resurrection.

⁴ P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pg. 337

Marc Roby: Yes, let me read those verses. In Romans 6:4-7 Paul wrote, “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. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.”

Dr. Spencer: This is a difficult passage and I don’t want to get into every detail, but it speaks of the reality of our union with Christ. If we have truly been saved, then our baptism symbolizes the reality that we have been born again, we have repented and believed and been united with Christ. And, just as Christ died, we too died in a sense. Specifically, our old sinful nature no longer rules. It is still there, but it doesn’t rule. As Paul says, we should no longer be slaves to sin; rather, we have been freed from sin. So, just as Christ was raised from the dead, we too may live a new life Paul says.

Marc Roby: The definitive nature of the change that occurs is very clear in this passage. We are dead to our old way of living and alive to a new way of living. It is hard to imagine how Paul could have stated it more forcefully.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. John Murray wrote that “We are compelled to reach the conclusion that it is by virtue of our having died with Christ, and our being raised with him in his resurrection from the dead, that the decisive breach with sin in its power, control, and defilement has been wrought, and that the reason for this is that Christ in his death and resurrection broke the power of sin, triumphed over the god of this world, the prince of darkness, executed judgment upon the world and its ruler, and by that victory delivered all those who were united to him from the power of darkness, and translated them into his own kingdom.”⁵

Marc Roby: That quote seems like a great place to end for this week. So, let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our best to answer.

⁵ John Murray, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, Banner of Truth Trust, 1977, pg. 289