

APPENDIX 3

POWER: REALITY CHECK PART ONE

As the curtain rises for the second act of Broadway's longest-running musical, *The Phantom of the Opera*, a festive, masquerade ball celebrates the presumed departure of the villainous Phantom. With a spectacle of colorful, intricate masks and elaborate costumes, the cast cleverly weaves in a constantly changing and rhythmic pattern, singing a hypotonic melody—

Masquerade! Paper faces on parade

Masquerade! You can fool any friend who ever knew you

Masquerade! Hide your face so the world will never find you

Not only was each one masquerading as someone else, the audience also experienced a visual illusion. Even though previously I had seen the performance a number of times, my daughter told me, “Notice when you see the play again that all the people in the masquerade ball are not real.” The next time I attended the musical I forced myself to concentrate on the figures that were not swirling around during the dance. Sure enough, approximately forty percent of what appeared to be actual people were in fact manikins in costumes with masks. Like a magician's illusion using misdirection, the eyes gravitated to and are captivated by the actors who were in motion. What appeared to be

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true was actually not so. Without the right perception, misconception masks reality.

Misconception or Reality

The last chapter addressed the confusion that can result if a distinction is not made between eternal and temporal life and death. Faulty thinking and teaching leads to a mistaken understanding of biblical truths. Many other erroneous beliefs that deviate from reality can be found in the Church, as illustrated in the common understanding of the expression *saved from sin*, past, present and future.

A popular saying is that the past tense of the verb *save* refers in the New Testament to deliverance from the *penalty of sin* [referring to justification]. Similarly the present tense of [*save*] in the New Testament is said to deal with deliverance for the *power of sin* [referring to sanctification]. And the future use of the verb *save* thus refers to deliverance from the *presence of sin* [referring to glorification].¹

Salvation or deliverance from sin is typically understood in three ways: penalty of sin, power of sin, and presence of sin. Yet, we must remember that these categories are only theological distinctions.² While defended from various biblical texts, the three groupings lack actual definitive support since they are not specifically designated in Scripture.

Past and Future Sin

In the coming new heaven and earth, there will be no sin, and believers will finally be delivered from *sin's presence*. Nevertheless, other portions, past and present, of this popular saying lead to misconceptions. Maybe you have heard a well-known statement: "Believe in Christ to save you from your sins."³ This comment is typically associated with "being saved from the *penalty of sin*." Confusion exists because of misunderstanding man's problem. Non-believers are spiritually dead, and unable to please God. Alienated from God, they face not only physical death but also eternal death or separation from God. Their desperate need is life, eternal life, which comes through faith in Christ.

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Notice the need is not to be delivered from sin, but to be delivered from death. To be spiritually dead is the result of or product of sin. “Saved from the penalty of sin” at the new birth would be a theologically correct statement if actually understood as referring to being “saved from spiritual death caused by sin.” In view of the fact that Jesus has already paid for the sins of all mankind (1 John 2:2), it’s not salvation from our sins we need but rather deliverance from spiritual death.

Present Sin

Now lets turn to the problematic phrase “deliverance from the *power of sin*.” The *only* place that “power” and “sin” are linked together in the New Testament is found in 1 Corinthians 15:56, *the power of sin is the law*, indicating that the Law awakens and stimulates sinful desires in the believer (Rom 7:7-12). Notice that that particular text does *not* support the theological proposition that believers in Christ are “delivered from the power of sin.” While is it true that Christians at new birth are positionally set free from sin, that freedom is experienced only as each one is obedient to God’s Word. As previously discussed in chapter 1, positional freedom is a gift; experiencing freedom is a choice.

Regarding the Christian life, most would agree that the expressions *experiencing freedom from sin* and *being experientially delivered from sin* are equivalent and interchangeable. Notice, however, to insert “power” into either “freedom from the *power of sin*” or “deliverance from the *power of sin*” is contextually unwarranted and leads to interpretative error. I am suggesting that “power” has no part in a discussion of sin. While many understand sin to have power, that is a theological determination; a determination not based on scriptural evidence. Support for a *non-power-of-sin position* follows in this chapter and throughout the remainder of this book.

Obviously different interpretations reflect variations in our understanding of the Bible, but incorrect interpretations open the door for invalid assumptions and mistaken conclusions are substituted for biblical truth. For most, I believe, the “power of sin” has been accepted as true because that is what is always heard and taught. While the three “Ps,” **P**enalty of sin, **P**ower of sin and **P**resence of sin, make for good preaching, the middle “P” is biblically incorrect. Providing a better

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approach, a friend suggested the following alliteration: deliverance from the **P**enalty of sin, **P**ractice of sin, and **P**resence of sin.⁴ *Practice rather than power* not only addresses the potential freedom that can be experienced in Christ but also aligns with the biblical texts.

Colossal Clashes or Careful Choices

Sin has no power; rather sins are a result of inappropriate thoughts and choices (Jam 1:14-15), missing God's mark. Nevertheless, most understand the inner "capacity to sin" to be an overwhelming power that must be counteracted with the power of the Spirit in order to live the Christian life.⁵ One author presented the necessity of a spiritual antidote to "sin's power" this way: "If there were no Sin Nature [*power of sin*], we would not need Christ's power [*power of the Spirit*] within us to reveal the righteousness of God in our behavior."⁶ The picture that is conveyed is of a battle within the Christian between the "power of sin" and the "power of God." In this alleged power struggle, each Christian is being pulled by each force in different directions.

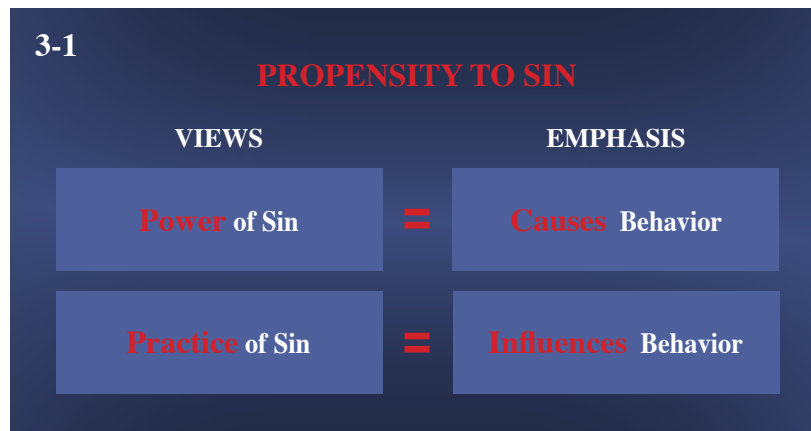
Contrary to the usual understanding, the inner *sin capacity* can be defined as the natural inclination, disposition, or propensity for sinful behavior. *It is not a power*. Granted believers can be overwhelmed by sin, even resulting in a "sin leading to death" (1 John 5:16; 1 Cor 11:30), but that is the result of a consistent disregard for God. Those defiant choices that can lead to death concern not only the loss of fellowship with God but also the possibility of a shortened lifespan. While we are told that the Christian's decisions are either to allow the power of God to produce obedience or the power of sin to cause disobedience, in reality the Christian life is simply choosing to obey or not. Unleashing one power or another *is not* the issue; making proper behavioral choices certainly *is*!⁷

You must decide which is the biblical approach. Does Christian living involve allowing the Spirit or sin either (1) to influence behavior or (2) to actually cause behavior? The *influencing approach* does *not* require empowering resources, while the *empowering approach* pictures two competing forces seeking to energize and generate obedience or disobedience. I submit the *former is true*, while the *latter is not*. The

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former is reality, while the latter is fantasy. That distinction is critical to properly understanding the Christian life.

While chapter 5 takes up the Spirit's role in Christian living, this chapter and chapter 4 will focus on the sin's role. As shown in chart 3-1, the role of sin takes us back to how we understand which "P" is correct: *power of sin* or *practice of sin*. The power-of-sin view emphasizes sin's ability to produce or cause unrighteous behavior. Sin's power then must be counteracted by the Spirit's power in order to live righteously. On the other hand, the practice-of-sin position views sin as swaying the Christian's choices and actions, as opposed to the Spirit's influencing ministry for righteousness.



In order to gain a biblical perspective of the part sin plays in the Christian life, chapter 4 will consider Romans 5. In this chapter, our concern is Romans 6.

What Romans 6 Actually Says

Beliefs that are not evaluated as to their accuracy continue to be perpetuated as myths. Continually repeated, yet unsubstantiated, myths are misleading at best or entirely false at worst. They impact the Christian's everyday life and walk with God. It is, therefore, imperative

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that the basis for the “power-of-sin” teaching be examined. To do so, we get perspective from Romans 6 where Paul addressed the question “How shall we live as believers?” He provided insight into significant facets of Christian living: first, addressing God’s provision (vv 1-10) and then the believer’s potential (vv 11-23).

Provision for Living (vv 1-10)

Following the introductory questions in Romans 6:1-3, Paul explained that the believer is identified with Christ in His death (vv 4-7) and, since Jesus now lives, the believer is identified with Christ in his life (vv 8-10). The actual realization of this union with Christ in death and life is predicated on knowing what God has accomplished. Romans 6:6-7 states what we must know to grasp the import of our union with Christ:

6 Knowing this, *that* our old man was crucified with Him, *in order that* our body of sin might be done away with, *so that* we would not longer be slaves to sin; 7 for he who has died is freed from sin (italics added).

The progression of verse 6 is significant, revealed by the three “that” statements. Paul developed his argument by first stating what God *accomplished* in the believer: “our old man was crucified with Him.” The believer’s old unregenerate self, the person the believer was before Christ (Eph 2:1-3), is the issue here. At initial salvation, the unsaved, natural man (1 Cor 2:14) died with Christ. Believers, sharing in the benefits of Christ’s work, are new creations at regeneration (2 Cor 5:17). The old is no longer; it is not remodeled, but it is replaced; it was previously spiritually dead, but now is spiritually alive. In computer terminology the old man has been erased and the new man has been installed.

The *purpose* for the new position the believer possesses is stated in Romans 6:6: “in order that our body of sin might be done away with.” Before becoming a new creation, the natural man could not act toward God. We were enemies of God

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(Rom 5:10). But at regeneration this sin capacity, “the body of sin,” is rendered inoperative. The translation, “done away with,” does not do justice to the text. The Greek word does not suggest annihilation or eradication; instead it means that the sin capacity is rendered ineffective. This makes it possible for the believer to act toward God in obedience to His Word. That takes us to the *aim* of regeneration: “so that we would no longer be slaves to sin” (Rom 6:6b). A better translation is “so that we should no longer serve sin.” Prior to salvation, serving sin was the unbeliever’s only option. In Christ, that is no longer the case; the believer has a choice, to serve sin or to serve God.

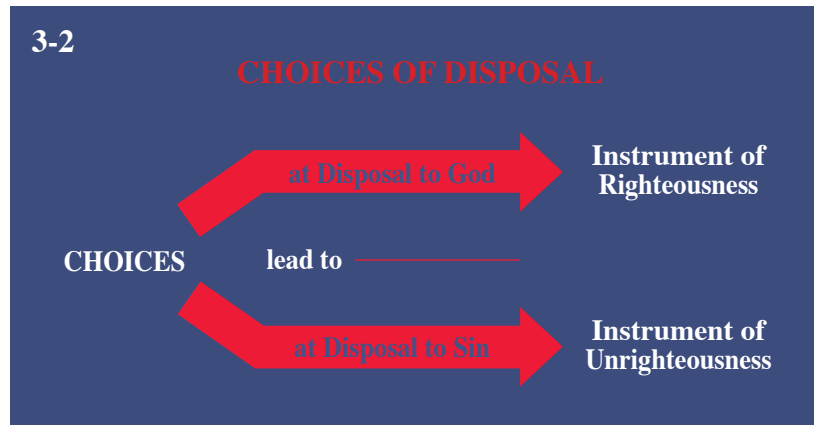
In other words the point of Romans 6:6 is that “the unsaved man died with Christ in order that his sin capacity would be rendered inoperative and that he should no longer serve sin.” Verse 7 then gives a summary explanation: “for he who has died is freed [literally, acquitted or justified] from sin.” Not until verse 18 did Paul address Christian “freedom” from sin’s domain (vv 18, 20, 22; 8:2, 21). In verse 7 justification rather than freedom is the issue. Verse 7 refers to being declared righteous and acquitted from sin since the believer is delivered from the penalty of sin. “Thus, sin’s claim on believers legally ended when they believed in Christ.” Believers are “dead to sin,” meaning they are separated from sin’s domain.⁸

Options in Living (vv 11-14)

Having set forth God’s provision for Christian living, Paul then addressed the Christian’s potential for godly living. He begins with the choices believers face in their daily walk (see chart 3-2).

Though the believer’s sin capacity has been rendered inoperative, he can choose to open, access, and activate that old sin capacity. This is the very reason Paul moved from the believer’s new position in Christ to explain the believer’s responsibility through four commands, noted in italics below (Rom 6:11-13).

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11 Even so *consider* yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. **12** Therefore *do not let sin reign* in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, **13** and *do not go on presenting* the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but *present* yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God.

Paul appealed to believers to make their position in Christ a reality in their lives, in every decision and in every action. They should begin to become who they already are positionally (v 11). The first prohibition in verse 12, speaks to the realm of existence in which sin rules over and influences the believer's decision-making process. And the second prohibition in verse 13 focuses on the actual outworking of poor choices, resulting in behavior contrary to God's Word. On the other hand Paul's positive command, "present yourselves to God" (v 13), suggests a demonstration of behavior that reveals the righteousness of God within. Each believer is to place himself at God's disposal "as instruments of righteousness to God" (v 13), realizing he is no longer required to serve sin (v 6).

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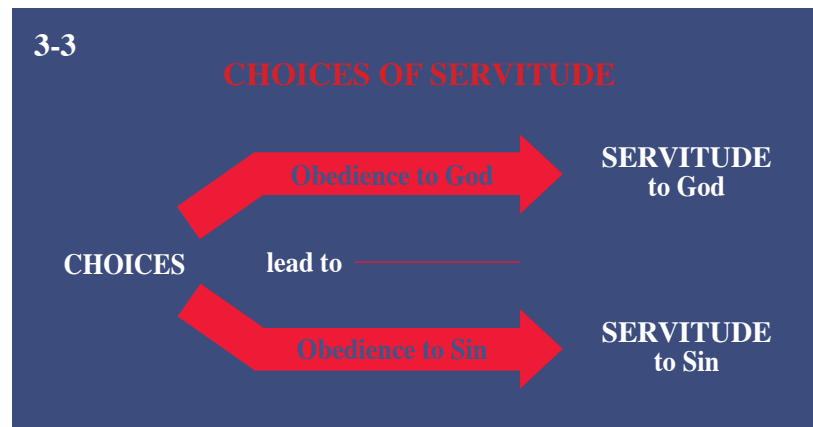
Believers must make choice after choice: (1) to walk, as they previously did as unbelievers, in the realm of sin, or (2) to walk in the realm of life. This continued to be Paul's argument in Romans 6:15-23.⁹

Principle of Servitude (vv 15-16)

Since Christians are positionally dead to sin, they need not serve sin (Rom 6:6). Notice the issue in Romans 6 is not that believers cannot be enslaved to sin; rather Christians are either a slave of sin or of God. The question—"Where is their allegiance placed in their daily walk?"

Do you not know that when you present [see v 13] yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves to the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? (v 16).

Believers in Christ choose to serve either sin or God (see chart 3-3). This is the two-masters dilemma facing each Christian. Serving sin ends in behavior contrary to God's Word leading to a lack of fellowship with Christ. On the other hand, the result of serving God is intimacy with Christ and behavior that is pleasing to Him. It's the Christian's moment-by-moment choice whether to serve God or sin.¹⁰



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Conditional Freedom (vv 17-18)

Before the new birth a person does not have the option to serve God, being spiritually alienated from God and dominated by sin. At conversion a Christian, then and only then, can properly act in response to God.

17 But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, 18 and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (vv 17-18).

As a result of God's work of regeneration, the believer is not only positionally dead to sin but now can experience freedom from being under sin's dominance. He is free to choose to serve God and share companionship with Christ. Notice from verse 18 above, "freedom comes through slavery."¹¹

Believer Behavior (v 19)

Paul moves from the believer's status to his conduct.

For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in *further* lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification (v 19).

The result of continually allowing oneself to be swayed by sin, only results in increasingly more sinful behavior. Now, freedom from sin is a present reality as the Christian determines to make himself available to God, being "alive from the dead, and...as instruments of righteousness to God" (v 13). "The result of this new form of active obedience will be the production of holiness."¹²

Conduct Consequences (vv 20-23)

Conduct has consequences.

20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 Therefore what benefit were you then

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deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. **22** But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. **23** For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (vv 20-23).

Formally non-believers, spiritually dead and slaves to sin, they were incapable to live righteously before God. Now “freed from sin and enslaved to God,” their choices can lead to enriched living or a living death. Notice while Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord,” can unfortunately be used incorrectly for evangelism, the text actually concerns Christian behavior that results in obedience and fellowship with Christ (life) or disobedience and forfeiture of fellowship (death). Remember, eternal life begins in present time and lasts forever. The reference to “eternal life” in this particular text refers to the present time.

What Romans 6 Doesn't Say

It is important that the principles for Christian living Paul presented in Romans 6 are not distorted or misinterpreted. Since the flow of his argument into Romans 7 provides a case study in the misapplications of those principles, illustrated by Paul's own real-life experience. Thereafter, Romans 8 explains the correct way the truths of Romans 6 are to be applied in the believer's life. The right application of Romans 8 is found in our discussion in chapter 5. A further explanation of Paul's experiences in Romans 7 is found in chapter 12 of this book.

To eliminate potential interpretation errors from the Romans 6 text, it is imperative that we address issues that perpetuate the power misconception, assumed necessary in Christian living. What *was not said* in Romans 6 is as important as what *was said*.

“Power” Is Absent

Notice that nowhere in Romans 6 is the term *power* used.¹³ In fact,

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in the important section on Christian living (Romans 5–8), Paul did *not* use the term. The only exception is in reference to demonic beings that are at work in the world to thwart God’s purposes (8:38). The silence is deafening. If Christian living is by means of empowerment either of sin or the Spirit, why did Paul miss the opportunity to address the topic? Rather, he taught that the believer’s position in Christ provides the opportunity to choose to be a servant of God rather than a servant of sin. *Choices rather than power are the issue in the Christian life.*

“Power” Is Not Imported

It is argued by some that even though the term *power* is absent from Romans 6 perhaps for variety Paul used other words in its place. The argument is that though power is not intentionally mentioned, it is implied from the context.

It has been suggested that God’s “resurrection power” in Romans 1:4 should be extrapolated into 1:16-17; 6:4,9-10; and 8:10-13.¹⁴ By implication, each believer should expect power to live a resurrection life since he has been raised with Christ in order to “walk in newness of life” (6:4). “Resurrection power” is then understood to refer to empowerment by the Spirit producing resurrection life and opposition to sin’s power. However, this is unwarranted since resurrection power is only the basis of the Christian’s walk, not the means (see chapter 10).

Imposing “power” into Romans 6 is also supported from the typical interpretation of Acts 1:8. There promise of power in Acts 1:8 is alleged to refer to power for living the Christian life. Nevertheless, the promise of power in that context was given exclusively to the Eleven as Christ’s witnesses in authenticating their message, not for Christian living (see chapter 10).

Introducing power into Roman 6 not only is unjustified but also turns the text upside down. A Christian’s new status brings the opportunity to experience abundant living through obedient choices rather than the automatic result of the Spirit’s power.¹⁵

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Illusion Collision

The emphasis of Romans 6 is sin's "control" or "mastery over" the believer. The context concerns "influence" or "control" rather than "power." The implication of confusing "power" with "control" and "influence" is not insignificant. It establishes a dichotomy between the alleged "power of sin" with a presumed "power of the Spirit," resulting in the necessity of the Spirit's power for living the Christian life.

A *great disservice* occurs when God's Word is used incorrectly. I am afraid a *grand illusion* regarding Christian living has taken place in the Church through misinterpretation and misapplication of Paul's instructions in Romans 6. While motivation may be sincere, the result is that God's people are misinformed and cannot live in response to His Word as He intended.

