

MYTH 3

Sin Is Eradicated
at Salvation



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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; for he who has died is freed from sin.

Romans 6:6-7

Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, 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.

Romans 6:11-13

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CAPACITY TO SIN REMAINS ACTIVE

Computer hardware employs two distinct types of software: operating system software and application software. The operating system (OS) software manages and coordinates the operation of the computer's resources. In contrast, end-user programs (e.g., word processing, spreadsheets, graphics, etc.) are application software, with the OS software being the interface between application software programs and the computer hardware.

With advances in technology, computer and software suppliers continually make improvements to their product offerings. As a result of these product changes, I was compelled to make the conversion of the OS software on my Apple computer from OS9 to OS10. This change was extreme since version 9 and version 10 were completely incompatible. The OS9 was entirely erased from the computer and OS10 was installed. However, that was not the end. Application software that ran on OS9 was incompatible with the new version 10, so new application software was required. Nevertheless files of the old applications could with some difficulty be accessed, opened, and restored to usefulness.

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Spiritual regeneration is somewhat like physical, software installation within a computer. The new man, similar to switching out the old operating system for the new, replaces the old unregenerate man. The old man is entirely erased and gone. The new man has an entirely new capacity to act toward God. With newly installed applications and through proper choices, the believer can live for God and evidence that new life in his walk. However, and even though incompatible with the new operating system, there remain files of old applications from one's former life. The old man has been erased, but those old application files remain on man's spiritual computer. Like a computer, a believer can access, open, and use old files in one's spiritual life.

Not Just an Illustration, But a Reality

Paul provided insight into the reality of God's work within the believer at initial salvation (Rom. 6:6-7), and then he commented on the believer's potential to live in conformity to God's Word (Rom. 6:11-13). 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:

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; 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

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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.¹ 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 (Rom. 5:10).² But at regeneration this sin capacity, “the body of sin,” is rendered inoperative.³ 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.⁴ 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 not 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.

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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

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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).⁵ 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.”⁶ Believers are “dead to sin,” meaning they are separated from sin’s domain.⁷

Position Doesn’t Guarantee Practice

However, make no mistake. Even though a believer is a new man (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:9) and the sin capacity has been rendered ineffective, the old sin software remains on his spiritual computer. 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).

Even so *consider* yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore *do not let sin reign* in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, 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 12 focuses on the

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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).⁸

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. Believers can choose to be either slaves of sin or slaves of righteousness. Likewise Paul commanded believers to "put off" sinful behavior (Col. 3:8-9a) since the "old man" has been "put off" or erased from the computer (v. 9b). Also Paul expected believers to "put on" godly behavior (vv. 12b-14a) since the "new man" has been "put on" or installed (v. 10a). True, sin's claim has ended, but believers can choose to place themselves under its reign, and unfortunately many do.

Believers can choose to be either slaves of sin or slaves of righteousness.

Others Have a Different Perspective

Many Bible teachers disagree with the view above that a believer can walk in the realm of sin. Some say the believer's ability to sin has been erased, and others say this ability has been diminished to a state of inactivity.

Ability to Sin Eradicated

Those in the holiness tradition believe that the believer's sin capacity can be totally eradicated. For example the Wesleyan doc-

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trine of “entire sanctification” or “Christian perfection” envisions the “freedom from sin that believers could experience in this life.”⁹ Wesley taught that the believer’s continual struggle with sin can be removed. His entire sanctification concept addressed a “definitive work of God’s sanctifying grace by which the war within oneself might cease and the heart be fully released from rebellion into wholehearted love for God and others.”¹⁰

The ultimate conclusion of this view is that the believer’s ability to sin is annihilated and believers can experience freedom from the struggle with sin. However, nowhere in the Scriptures is this doctrinal position presented.

Ability to Sin Rendered Inactive

Others teach that the believer’s ability to sin, while not eradicated, is rendered inactive and that believers cannot be subject to sin’s

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dominion. As one author writes, “Though we are no longer subject to sin’s dominion, all of us struggle desperately with sin in our lives.”¹¹ In the same vein, a theologian says, “Though sin resides in us, it is ridiculous that it should have the power to exercise dominion over us.”¹² In this view, though believers struggle, fight, or battle with sin, they cannot be dominated by it.¹³ The battle with

sin can rage, but sin never gets the upper hand. Its power is limited; its extent is restricted. But if it is true that sin can never control or dominate a believer, then this means that the ability to sin has been rendered inactive.

However, Romans 6 teaches that a believer by his own choice can place himself at sin’s disposal to serve sin, or he can place himself at

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God's disposal to serve Him. How the believer responds to either of the two influences determines which one he allows to dominate his attitudes and actions in his Christian life. This does not mean that one's battles with sin are small skirmishes or insignificant encounters between good and evil. Battling with sin is a large part of the Christian life. It is absurd to think that Paul's prohibition to "not let sin reign in your mortal body" (Rom. 6:12) does not refer to allowing sin to control areas in the believer's life. When Paul spoke of being "dead to sin" (v. 11), he did not mean that the believer is unresponsive to sin's influence.¹⁴

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The issue in Romans 6 is not that believers cannot be enslaved to sin, because the text states that believers can choose to be so enslaved (Rom. 6:15-23). Being dead to sin and its penalty, believers need not serve sin (Rom. 6:6). However, the potential of enslavement to sin is a reality in the Christian 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).

The believer places himself at the disposal of one of two masters, choosing to serve one or the other. Serving sin results in deadly behavior, while serving God produces righteous behavior.¹⁵ Biblically death refers to a separation, and so when death is mentioned one must ask, "Separation from what?" While death can refer to a "final and eternal exclusion" from God,¹⁶ the context concerns believers. Sin produces a separation in fellowship between God and the believer.¹⁷

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Broken fellowship with God is the result of choosing to be controlled by sin. On the other hand righteous behavior produces continued fellowship with God (1 John 1:7).

Computers Do Only What You Tell Them

Having died with Christ, believers are free from the penalty of sin. However, the idea that believers are free from enslavement contradicts the entire context of Romans 6, since believers can be slaves either to sin or to God (vv. 15-23). We can tell our spiritual computer to choose either sin or God. The end result will produce growing separation from God or growing intimacy with Christ. The choices are reflected in our character.

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Myth 3, NOTES

1. Rene A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked* (Springfield, MD: 21st Century, 2005), 129; John R. W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1966), 44; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 373; and J. Dwight Pentecost, *Pattern for Maturity* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 91-92.
2. Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1966), 34-36.

Even though he equated the “sin nature” with the “old man,” Ryrie’s concept of two capacities within the believer, one to serve sin and self and the other to serve God, is beneficial to the understanding of Romans 6.

3. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 130-31; Stott, *Men Made New*, 44-45; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 375-76; and Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1986), 301.

The “body of sin” is understood differently by various authors:
Lopez—“the whole man where sin resides seen manifested through the body”

Stott—“the sin nature which belongs to the body”

Moo—“to refer to the whole person, with an emphasis on that person’s interaction with the world”

Ryrie—“body as a vehicle of sin”

4. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 131; Stott, *Men Made New*, 44; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 375; and Pentecost, *Pattern for Maturity*, 99-100.

5. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 138.

The verb *to set free* (*eleuthroo*) is used in Romans 6:18, 22; 8:2, 21 and the adjective *free* (*eleutheros*) is used in 6:20. Verse 7, however, does not address freedom; rather the verb *to justify* (*dikaioo*) is under discussion.

6. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 131.

7. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 300.

Death means separation. The question that must be asked is, “Separation from what?” In Romans 6 separation is from sin’s domain.

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8. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 135.
9. Melvin E. Dieter, "Wesleyan Perspective," in *Five Views of Sanctification*, ed. Melvin E. Dieter (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1987), 14.
10. *Ibid.*, 17.
11. John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 121.
12. John Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians* (reprint, Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1960), 128.
13. Anthony A. Hoekema, "Reformed Perspective," 82; and MacArthur, *Faith Works*, 117.
14. Stott, *Men Made New*, 40.
15. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 136-37.
16. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 339.
17. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked*, 139-42.