

New Identity / New Life
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You have probably heard stories about how people sometimes fake their deaths in order to evade problems in their life. Perhaps the debts have piled up. Perhaps there is a relationship that they want to get out of. Perhaps they want to defraud an insurance company.

Sometimes people get a way with it for a few years, but often their former lives catch up with them and they are caught. I read about one fellow who faked a boating accident in order to avoid Russian mafia thugs and evade being held accountable for some negligent work he had done with regard to asbestos removal. His plan worked for several years but then one day was walking along and happened to bump into his older brother.

This fellow had changed his identity, secured false passports and even got married again. After he was caught and served time in prison, his new wife wanted to wait a year before getting married for real because she was not sure she could trust him.

This con man wanted manufacture a new identity and a new life but ended up back in his old life facing the consequences.

In the North west African country of Mauritania, slavery is still a reality. Though in August of last year, Radio, television and newspapers all proclaimed the end of slavery. Slave-owning was criminalized, and overnight, half a million people — a fifth of the country's population — were officially freed from bondage.

But there was a problem. Those half-million newly free people didn't own radios. They didn't own televisions. They can't read either. And the news — if they heard it — meant little anyway. In Mauritania, despite good intentions and high-minded words, slavery is still thriving, as it has for 800 years. It is just taking new forms.

Though these people have been legally defined as free, they have no land, no education and in practice not much has changed. Although they are free, the

former slaves have little choice to stay with their former masters and live according to their terms.

These people have new identities but have not received the power to live new lives.

What do these two stories have in common? They are both stories about new identities and new lives. Both however are sad stories because in the end the new identities were unable to ultimately produce new life. In the one case. It was a fake identity, an illusion, an attempt to make a new identity when in fact nothing had changed. The other was a lack of power to actually translate new freedom into new opportunity.

The Christian life, is also about new identity and new life, but unlike these stories the Christian life is about receiving a new identity and the power to translate this new identity into a new life.

When you become a Christian, there is a definite break with the past, you receive a new identity. You don't have to fake your death in order to manufacture a new false identity. And when you become a Christian there is power for a new future. You are not only free, but have the power to live a new life. The Bible puts it in terms of death and resurrection. You are already dead and raised to new life.

Consider with me Romans 6:3-5

don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? *4* 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. *5* If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

These verses indicate that all who identify with Christ in faith, represented by baptism are connected with Christ's death and resurrection. We are buried with and also raised with him.

This sounds spiritually noble and wonderful, but what does this really mean. In what sense have we died with Christ?

Look further at verse 6

6 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

This verse is a little more specific. It talks about our “old self” being crucified and suggests that the result is that we are freed from sin. We are non longer slaves to sin.

The term “old self” refers to our old way of living. This old way of living is described as slavery to sin. When you are slaves to sin you are bound up in sin, controlled by sin and forced to obey sin as your master. You might think that you are doing good, but if you are not acting in faith, then even the good you do is not pleasing to God. And chances are you don’t think twice about the things you do.

Romans 6 is saying that when you become a Christian there is a definite break with this old self.

If you back up to Romans 6:2. It says something similar when it says that we have “died to sin.” So if we are united with Christ by faith (signified here by baptism, which is the public declaration of faith) then we have died to sin, we have been freed from sin. Our old self, our old way of living has come to an end. Dead and buried.

It is important for us to see that this is an accomplished fact. We died to sin. Past tense. It is not something we have done in fact, but rather something that Christ has done for us and we receive in faith. Just like when slavery is outlawed and slaves are freed. In an instant as a work of grace, those once in bondage are declared free. The same happened to us, when we are united with Christ by faith. We are free from sin.

This does not mean that we are incapable of sinning. We know ourselves to well to say faith in Jesus makes us sinfully perfect. To die to sin is not to be completely perfect.

But it also means more than just being forgiven. Dying to sin is not just freedom from the penalty of sin. It is that but it is more than that. To die to sin is to be free from the rule of sin, to be freed from the power of sin.

To die to sin is to be released from sin as our master. While that does not mean we are incapable of serving our old master it does mean that we do not have to. When we are slaves to sin, we have no choice, but now we have a choice.

It goes beyond choice, however to a sense of empowerment. If freedom from sin was merely the opportunity for freedom, we might end up like those slaves I mentioned earlier. They were free, but lack any real ability to change their circumstances.

Our freedom from sin, our death to sin, however comes with not only the choice to reject sin, but also the power to live a new life. This is the idea of resurrection. We have not only died to sin, but we are raised with Christ and have the power to live a new life.

Reading further on in Romans, we are taught that believers receive the power of the Holy Spirit who gives us the strength to serve God.

Romans 8:9

⁹You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

You cannot belong to Jesus without also receiving the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. The Spirit lives in you and becomes the controlling influence of your life. You are no longer controlled by your sin, but rather by the the Spirit.

So Paul is trying to help us see that as we become Christians, we in fact receive a new identity. We die to sin. We are freed from its control. We are no longer slaves. And more than that we are raised to new life. Through the Spirit of God we are alive to God and have the power to live according to his will.

In Christ we have a new identity. We are dead to sin and alive to God. And with this new identity comes a new life. In fact apart from these very real changes, there is no possibility for new life.

But there are two dangers that relate to the two stories I told you earlier.

The first danger is to try to manufacture your own new identity like the fellow who faked his own death.

Spiritually speaking you cannot change your own identity. You cannot produce real spiritual change through your own self improvement program. You cannot free yourself from sin, merely by trying to be good. This would be like trying to create a new identity by faking your own death. The problem with carefully constructing your own new life is that you will keep bumping into the old one.

The only way to create a new spiritual identity is to let Christ do it for you. Only he can bring real change. Only he can pay for the penalty of your sin. Only he can give you the power of the Holy Spirit.

If you are struggling along with your own spiritual self improvement process, you have got it all backwards. You are only faking your death to sin. You will bump into you old life and you will fail.

Romans 8:6-8 is very clear about this

The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; ⁷the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. ⁸Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.

You cannot please God apart from faith in Christ. You can only die to sin with him. Don't fake your death. Die with Christ.

The amazing truth of this passage is that through our faith connection with Christ we are dead and raised. What happened to Christ, happens to us when we identify him as our representative.

And the second problem is that sometimes those whose spiritual identities have truly been renewed in Christ. Those who really are free from the penalty and power of sin do not realize it and do not embrace a new life. It is just like those slaves who were freed, but never heard about. They went on following their old masters not fully embracing the freedom that was granted to them.

It is hard for us to believe that we have died to sin, because we still struggle with it. But we have to remember that we are talking about a change in status and a change in identity. It may be difficult to comprehend, but it is no different than receiving the benefits of forgiveness. We are forgiven because Jesus did something for us. He died in payment for our sin. In the same way we are free from sin, because Jesus did something for us. He broke the power of sin through his resurrection and the sending of his Spirit. Both forgiveness and freedom were won by Christ on the cross and in his resurrection and are applied to us by faith. If you can have faith for forgiveness, then why not also have faith for power and freedom. Don't just receive part of what is yours in Christ, receive it all.

Unlike those slaves, we must embrace our new identity and then seek to make that identity real in our experience. We are free from sin. We have died to sin. We are raised to new life. We must live like it is real.

This is no contradiction. Freedom is both something we receive from Christ and something we must live out in practice.

Even in Romans 6 there is this strange paradox. Verse 2 says we have died to sin and verse 6 says that our old self was crucified. Yet in verses 11-13 we here Paul commanding us to

“count yourselves 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 evil desires. 13 Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.”

On the one hand we are dead, but on the other hand we have to count ourselves dead. We have been freed from sin, but we must not obey its evil desires. We are raised alive to God, but we have to offer ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness.

This is exactly the challenge for these slaves. They are free but they now must exercise that freedom. The difference between us and them is that they have not been given the power to live according to their new identity, but we have.

So my challenge to you is to live out what you are. You are dead to sin and alive to God. You are free from the penalty and the power of sin.

It is the same with forgiveness. When I believe that Christ purchased my forgiveness, I am encouraged to live in peace and can have the courage to put aside guilt and shame. Guilt and shame may try to drag me down at times, but I can say “Be gone, I am forgiven in Christ.”

In a similar way, sin may rise up to bind me and cause me to stumble, but I can say. I don’t need to give in to this, I am free in Christ. I am dead to sin and alive to God. I will resist temptation because I know I can.

You might think that if it still takes effort, then nothing really has changed. But this is not true. Christ has indeed made all the difference. The power of sin has been broken. Resurrection power has been granted us through the Holy Spirit. Before coming to Christ, we really did not have an option not to sin. We were slaves. We never thought about what we were doing. But now we are free and we can choose to live for God. It is more than a change of perspective, it is a real spiritual change,

So my challenge to you from this passage is live out what you already are.