

Romans 6:1-14 **Grounded: Baptism**

Dear friends in Christ,

Early this past week, pop star Justin Bieber reflected on a time where he was arrested for driving under the influence in Miami seven years ago. The now 26-year-old singer posted photos from when he was arrested along with a note that read, "7 years ago today I was arrested; not my finest hour.

Not proud of where I was at in my life. I was hurting, unhappy, confused, angry, misled, misunderstood and angry at god."

He finished his caption with an inspirational message to his 159 million Twitter followers.

"My encouragement to you is to 'let your past be a reminder of how far God has brought you. Don't allow shame to ruin your *today*. Let the forgiveness of Jesus take over; then watch your life blossom into all that God has designed you to be."

I'm no pro on Justin Bieber. And I'm especially no judge on the sincerity of his words. Either way, what he wrote rings true and is a good reminder to us all of what Jesus does for us and how that makes a difference. Justin says, "Don't allow shame to ruin your 'today'. Let the forgiveness of Jesus take over; then watch your life blossom into all that God has designed you to be." The Apostle Paul in Romans 6 would say the same thing in a little different way: "in baptism our sin and sinful nature is buried with Christ and we come up, risen to new life. Now, in the power of Jesus, live the new life!"

What makes Justin's story so beautiful to me is that it's honest: "I sinned. But in Christ I'm a new person." He could use the words of Paul and say, "I was dead in my sin but now I'm raised to new life in Christ!"

Old & New Identity

Paul uses this wonderful baptism imagery to help us understand who we really are. Our baptism signifies a parting of ways between our old and new identity. This is critical for us as Christians to understand and get right. We may identify ourselves in all sorts of old ways, ways that are incomplete, ways that don't recognize the change that Christ has brought about in us and for us. We mis-identify ourselves. We settle for less than Jesus has made possible and given for us.

We could see ourselves as sinners. Justin Bieber could dwell on what he did wrong 7 years ago. A lot of people do that. We identify ourselves by something we did wrong. Others can identify themselves in contrast to someone who has wronged them. I'm better than so and so because I'd never do what she did. Whether we identify ourselves by our own sin or the sin of others, we're selling God short.

Our society has other limiting identifiers. Today people often identify themselves sexually. You've heard those descriptions. They are how people perceive themselves sexually. While understanding our sexuality is important, the problem is that these sorts of labels reduce us to sexual beings. I don't want to dismiss people's sexual struggles today as unimportant. If you struggle in this area, we want to walk with you. But I hope we can all agree that we are so much more than just sexual beings. To wrap ourselves up in a sexual identity alone is to sell ourselves short and to sell Jesus short.

Similarly, we can identify ourselves as working beings. I'm a pastor. I'm a mechanic. I'm a doctor or nurse, firefighter, teacher, or anything else. But we are more than working beings. Even identifying as a mom or a dad can also be problematic. So can identifying yourself as a husband or wife. Or a single for that matter. Identifying by the colour of your skin or ethnic background can be too limiting. I don't dispute that these are all important aspects of our lives, but we are more than that as Christians.

My mind goes to Paul's words to the Galatian church. He told them that in Christ there is neither slave nor free, male nor female, Jew nor Greek. His point is that we're all children of God first and foremost. He doesn't say that specifically in the first half of Romans 6 but he hints at it here and is very explicit about it later in the chapter. We need to know our true identity. Jesus raises us above these labels that **tend to divide** us from one another. In Christ, we are the same—all children of God and every part of our lives is redeemed for God's purposes.

Boys and girls, you know the story of the prodigal son. This young man left home with his inheritance, spent it all on wild living, Jesus said. Then he sheepishly and ashamedly comes home to his father only to discover that his father lavishly embraces him and throws an extravagant welcome home party. "My son is home again," declares the father! I use that to remind us, like Jesus did in that story, that we are children of God. That is our primary identity. In the father's eyes, that son was not "The one who once ran away." He was not the younger messed-up kid. He was not even "the farmer boy." He was "This son of mine!" His older brother was likewise, "my son!"

This is the identity we receive through Jesus who takes away our sin. We are sons and daughters of God. That's why Paul says we must no longer identify ourselves as sinners or by our sin, nor by any other limiting category like slave or free, male or female, Jew or Greek. God doesn't identify us by human labels like single or married, alcoholic or sober, strong or weak, fat or skinny, ugly or gorgeous, able or disabled. Romans 6:6 declares,

Rom 6:6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him (Jesus) so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—⁷ because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

In Christ, the old is past. We are set free from sin and all the ways we allow it **to rule our lives**. Sometimes we allow sin to rule us by listening to self-condemning words; other times by living for the approval of others, or else by allowing the labels of our world to limit us to being less than what we are in Christ.

Jesus is all about restoring us to what God has in mind since creation. We are more than sexual being—male or female or anything else. More than economic beings—slave or free, poor or rich. More than ethnic beings—Jew or Greek, European, Asian, African or Canadian. More than white, black or brown. More than how we look—short or tall, big, small, ugly, cute. More than married, single or divorced. More than able-bodied or disabled. You name it.

The symbolism and significance of baptism as Paul spells it out in Romans 6 is life changing. It's new. Using the picture of baptism by immersion, being full dunked under the water, Paul is saying that when we are baptized, it is as if we are shoved under the water and held there until we die. Our sin dies just as Jesus died. With it, all the labels die, labels that can either divide us or make us less than we are in Christ. Dying to our old identities is part of baptism's significance.

Then we are pulled up out of the water. Just as surely as Christ rose from the dead, we are raised to new life. We are now and always shall be children of God, redeemed for his holy purposes in this world. That what baptism says to us. No matter what labels we put on ourselves; no matter what labels others identify us by, Jesus raises us to **new** life. In him we are raised to new life as sons and daughters of God.

Romans 6 echoes the story of Exodus where God's people Israel were slaves in Egypt. But God came to their rescue and brought them out of their slavery by taking them through the Red Sea. Pharaoh and his army tried to follow them through the sea but the powerful enemy who tried to keep Israel in bondage was drowned. The Israelites, though, were delivered from slavery, delivered from drowning, and brought to new life and freedom. That's the blessing marked by our baptism too.

The problem with a lot of our self-identifiers today is that they keep us in some form of slavery. The place of freedom is the place where Jesus wants us to live. The place of life, the place we come to when we rise from the water of baptism, so to speak, up from the dead. Friends, we must come to know ourselves as renewed, resurrected children of God, children called to be all that Jesus has redeemed us to be.

I think about Nick Vujcic ("voo-yi-chick"). He's is an Australian-American, born without arms or legs who has become a world-renowned speaker, New York Times best-selling author, coach and entrepreneur. His website says, "Nick faced tremendous obstacles in life—from living life without limbs, to being bullied at school and fearful for his future with no purpose in sight. Without hope, his feelings of helplessness and isolation led him to attempt suicide."

At age 10, Nick was in the bathtub and told his parents to leave him alone and close the door so he could have some privacy. He was considering letting himself slip under the water to die. You see, he identified himself as worthless because he had no arms and legs and felt like he was going to be a burden on people for the rest of his life. But around age 15 he came to know personally and to

believe wholeheartedly that Jesus redeemed him for a purpose. Jesus raised Nick out of the water of self-pity, above feelings of uncertainty about his future.

In a talk last year, Nick said, I needed truth—the truth of my value. I'm not determined in being valuable if I have a job or not, or if I have a family around me who loves me. Rather, I know that I am loved by my God in heaven, God Almighty who made me wonderfully....”

Knowing Jesus as our redeemer and knowing that he makes us children of God changes our lives. It raises us up from under the water. Nick found his identity in Christ alone as a child of God, created and redeemed for God's holy purposes in this world. Sin could not condemn him to an old way of life. Nor could human labels. The old identifiers had to die. They need to die in us all.

Raised to New Life

We need to see ourselves—in baptism—as raised to new life in Christ. The life of death—the old way of life—has died once and for all in Christ. Now we can live the new life.

Paul tells us in v.11

¹¹ ...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 any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Do you hear that? Don't identify yourself as a sinner any longer! Not that you never sin anymore. That's not Paul's point. It's that in Christ you are not identified as a sinner any longer. So stop seeing yourself as a slave to sin. Don't identify yourself as an addict anymore. It doesn't mean you don't struggle anymore with certain substances. But see yourself as God sees you: his redeemed child, with all the resources of Christ at your disposal to help you live in freedom. The same is true for every other human identity we put on ourselves that somehow limits our value in Christ or limits the life we can live in Christ's power. You see, in his power, as Paul says elsewhere, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. We can become all that Christ has in mind for us as children of God.

It's so important as we think about the baptism of baby Dexter this morning to remember as parents that we need to be reminding our children of who they are in Christ. Remind them that all those limiting labels we place on ourselves or let others place on us are buried with Christ in our baptism.

In the book *The Help*, an African American woman, who works for a white lady, helps to raise the children in the home. Despite how she is mistreated by her

boss, she keeps reminding the little girl she works with that she is smart, kind and important.

In a similar way, we all need to remind our children today of who they are in Christ. There are lots of false or incomplete labels that our society will stick on our kids. You're too skinny. Too fat. Too tall. Too short. Too feminine. Too masculine. You're gay. You're ugly. You're poor. You're dumb. Your dad is no good. You're from the wrong side of the tracks. The voices are many and come with a relentless assault.

Parents, we need to bring the voice of Jesus into our homes so our kids know that they are not identified in Christ by human labels. They are redeemed for God's holy purposes in this world. Sin and burdensome labels are not God's will for us. Rather, we need to remind our children, "Who does God say you are? What does our baptism say about how God sees us and what Jesus has redeemed us to be?"

Count yourself as being new creatures in Christ! You're not a slave to your sinful desires. Christ who raised up from the dead lives in you. His Holy Spirit empowers us to say no to sin and yes to God. We don't have to give in to the false identities our world put on us. We might—we do!—struggle with all sorts of things that are part of life in a sinful world. But we always need to point ourselves and our little ones to Jesus.

Remember your baptism into Jesus' name. Remember your baptism ensures you of Christ's new identity for you. It ensures us of his power for us to live into that identity as sons and daughters of God. To use Paul's words, we can say to our children,

*offer **every part of yourself** to God as an instrument of righteousness. ¹⁴
For... you are ...under grace."*

Yes, in short, it is the grace of God that enable us to live a new life.

It's not that we and our kids never sin. We do. But we are forgiven. Yes. But more than that, we have a renewed identity. We are not sinners. We are redeemed children of God with all the gifts of God at our disposal, as signed and sealed in our baptism. With the promised sign and seal of God on us, the power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit in us, we gratefully offer our lives to God. Not just our sexuality. Not just our role in the family. Not just our job. Not just any other single thing that we are often identified by. No, we offer **our whole life** to God as his children. We offer it all to him because it's all redeemed by him in Christ.

I think that's what Justin Bieber was telling us. Let Jesus take your sin away and you offer him your whole life in return. And God will do with us what we could never imagine. He will do great things in us and through us. That will look different for each of his children, but he has good purposes in mind for his children.

That's what Nick Vujcic discovered too. He might not have arms and legs, but he's offering all that he's got to God, the God who changed his life by changing

his perspective on his life. God said to Nick, "I don't identify you as a handicapped man. In Christ, you're my child. I forgive all your sins, I free you from all the fears you have, from all the labels and lies that you've been believing about yourself. I will give you grace to live with whatever weaknesses you may have. And I promise I will love you as my own child and I will use you for my kingdom and glory as you offer your whole life to me for my purposes.

Now what is God saying to you, friends? What lies have you believed about who you are? Let the truth of God's forgiving grace in Christ set you free from those lies and labels and limitations. Live by the truth sealed in your baptism. Live out of the comfort that you're redeemed in Christ, your whole life is redeemed. And offer that all back to God for his glorious and righteous purposes and plans.

Amen.