

## **Romans 6:1-11**

**6** What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? **2** By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? **3** Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? **4** Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

**5** For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. **6** We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. **7** For whoever has died is freed from sin. **8** But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. **9** We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. **10** The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. **11** So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

### Wash and Be Clean

Just a month or two ago, I watched the movie “Through the Eyes of Tammy Faye”.<sup>1</sup> The movie follows, as you might guess from its title, the rise and eventual fall of televangelists Tammy Faye and her husband Jim Bakker. It shows how they went from being wandering Pentecostal preachers, to their first appearance on television and then to their great stardom on their own ‘Praise the Lord’ network which broadcasted to millions of viewers. And then the movie shows how the whole system suddenly collapsed amidst a series of sex scandals and financial investigations that ultimately led to Jim Bakker being convicted of fraud.

Now, what I found so interesting about the movie was the way that it captured how that faith can so quickly become corrupted by performance. You see, the problem wasn’t that Jim Bakker and Tammy Faye were cold, calculating fraudsters who lacked any real faith. No, the problem was that they could not distinguish between worship and performance, service and self-promotion, God’s Kingdom and their own stardom.

And when the line between these things became blurred, the Bakkers were able to rationalize all sorts of things. Using ministry funds to buy luxury goods and a mansion were justified as a sign of God’s blessing and kingdom. Huge bonuses to themselves were deemed necessary, due to the vital role they played in the ministry. Abuse was excused as simple mistakes, which had to be hushed up— for the Gospel’s sake of course!

But what struck me, perhaps even more than the corruption, was the deep exhaustion and unhappiness that consumed the Bakkers. Even as they lived in their mansion and were surrounded by luxury, none of this seemed to satisfy them. They began to rely on drugs and to

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<sup>1</sup> *Through the Eyes of Tammy Faye*. Directed by Michael Showalter, Searchlight Pictures, 2021.

have affairs just to get them through the day. Their relationships suffered as they became increasingly anxious and depressed about their lives which seemed to be slipping out of control. What they couldn't find comfort in was their faith. Because when faith becomes conflated with performance— when it becomes a tool of self-promotion— it no longer is something you can rest in. It is always something you have to prove, you have to act out.

In our passage from Second Kings today, we can see hints at this same complicated relationship between faith and performance in the character of Naaman. Naaman certainly has some sort of faith in God: he clearly believes that Elisha is capable of healing him and is willing to bring gold and silver to reward him for it.

But Naaman wants more than just a healing, he wants a show. Naaman, after all, is a mighty general. He's won great battles, he's held in high esteem by the people of Aram and even the King of Aram himself. So now, as Naaman approaches Elisha, he's thinking that this is not just a great opportunity to be healed, but an opportunity to increase his reputation, to add a feather to his cap. He expects an elaborate ritual, for Elisha to "*stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, and [to] wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy*" (2 Kings 5:11). A miracle that he can tell his friends about later with pride and just a little bit of condescension.

Now it might be easy to judge the Naaman and the Bakkers for their excessive displays of piety, but how often don't we fall into the same trap. Perhaps, being proper Reformed folk, we aren't tempted to wild shows of worship or grand ceremonies, but we have our own way of turning faith into a performance. How often are we tempted to see church committees and events, not as opportunities to serve others, but as chances to build up our reputation? How often do we come to church more concerned with the state of our appearance rather than the state of our hearts? How often don't we see church more as a social club to build connections with the right people, rather than a place to worship God? There are reasons that Christians so often have a reputation for being judgmental and more concerned with our own piety than the welfare of others. The temptation to turn faith into a performance is real— and it has had disastrous consequences for the Church.

This is why it is so important that Elisha refuses to play Naaman's game. You see, Elisha realizes that if he gives in to what Naaman wants he may be able to heal his skin, but he will corrupt his soul. He would allow Naaman to think he can worship God and build the Cult of Naaman at the same time. So instead of giving Naaman a show, he gives him a simple command: to humble himself and go down to the River Jordan to wash himself seven times.

This passage from Second Kings has some interesting resonances with our New Testament passage from Romans where Paul talks about baptism. The most obvious is the connection to water. Elisha tells Naaman to wash in the river seven times, and baptism is a sacrament where we are washed by water. But the connection is even deeper when we consider Paul's words on what baptism means. "*Do you not know*" Paul writes "*that all of us who have*

*been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?*” By itself this is a strange, shocking passage. But it becomes even more uncomfortable when we consider just how Jesus died. Crucifixion was not only an incredibly painful death, but also a deeply humiliating one. The priest Fleming Rutledge notes that “If Jesus’ demise is constructed as mere death — even as a painful, tortured death — the crucial point will be lost. Crucifixion was specifically designed to be the ultimate insult to personal dignity, the last word in humiliating and dehumanizing treatment. *Degradation was the whole point.*”<sup>2</sup> The crucifixion was in its own a performance, similar to the one hoped for by Naaman, but it was not a performance put on by Jesus, but rather the Romans. A spectacle meant to display Roman power and superiority at the cost of Jesus’ dignity and life.

What then does it mean to be baptized into this death? What does it mean to identify with someone who has been crushed by humanity’s pursuit of glory and honor. That is a deep, perhaps even disturbing question, that I can’t possibly hope to answer completely. I am just the intern after all. But what I can say is that it has some radical implications for how we understand our faith. That true faith never leads us to promote our own honor or name, but rather it leads us into solidarity with the marginalized, the broken, the humiliated. As the Apostle James writes “*Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world*” (James 1:27).

It tells us that faith requires sacrifice. Sacrifice that may not be recognized by others. Or worse that may be spat on and mocked by others. We live in a highly performative culture. A culture where people only want you to speak the truth when it aligns with their narrative, and where people only want you to show kindness and love when it’s to the right sort of people. What would it look like to try to speak the truth in all circumstances, and to try to truly love all people? Refusing to buy-in to our performative culture might cost you.

But I should be clear that Paul does not end this passage only talking about Christ’s death. He writes that “*we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life*” (Romans 6:4). Christ does not remain dead, but is living! And in his resurrection he exposes the facade of all human attempts at self-glorification. He reveals them as empty, capable of only bringing exhaustion and death. His resurrection points us to true glory and true life. Glory that doesn’t come from honoring ourselves, but that comes from building others up and honoring God. And true life. Life that is content to rest in the love of God and that finds joy in serving those around us. It is this life that our faith hopes in and that our faith works towards.

In some churches that I’ve been to, they’ll have a little bowl or basin of water just outside the sanctuary, so that as you leave you’ll remember your baptism— and what you are baptized

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<sup>2</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*, (Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2015), 84. Italics hers.

into. We do not have one of those bowls, but I'd encourage you all the same as you leave this service to remember your baptism. Or— if you haven't been baptized— to consider what baptism could mean. To go out into the world and live your faith not in a proud, self-aggrandizing way, but as people who have been baptized into the death and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.