

A Review of Some Central Tenets of *Dead Men Rising* by Jonathan Williams

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I would like to begin by saying how much I respect Jonathan. There are not enough men like him. Our world, and this movement, need more men who are eager and able to make the sacrifices necessary to dig deeply into the word of God. Their greatest motivation is a love for God's people. Their burden is the destructive consequences of false interpretations of Scripture which essentially twist the word of God into a demonic and damaging lie. What greater tool has satan ever had against the Church than misinterpreted Scripture? Indeed, we need more men like Jonathan Williams, laboring away in the obscurity of their studies in order to protect the people of God.

And I know how difficult and demanding it is to write a book. And it is a great challenge to submit such long and hard work to your respected peers for their opinion. Will they agree with it? Even if they do, will they value it as much as you do? What Jonathan has done is really hard.

All of which is why I want to be one of his cheerleaders instead of a critic. He and I are kindred spirits in a way I do not experience with many men. By virtue of similar gifting, we understand the importance of accurately interpreting Scripture in a way that many do not. My tremendous respect for Jonathan, and the great encouragement I have experienced from his example, makes it very difficult and humbling to disagree with anything he says. I have some comfort from the fact that regardless of what I or anyone else thinks, God will no doubt reward our brother for the labor of love that *Dead Men Rising* represents.

But for whatever it is worth, after reading Jonathan's book and understanding his thoughts better, I have some significant disagreements. A more careful reading of Doug Brown's writing has brought me to a similar conclusion. And I wish it were otherwise. But perhaps some humble and honest discussion is warranted for the following reasons.

First, our identity in Christ is a vital doctrine to the Christian's well-being. If the issue under discussion were eschatology (which, by the way, Jonathan has told me we agree a great deal on) then the practical ramifications would not be as serious. But it is because of how practically important Romans 6 is to our lives that Jonathan wrote the book. I think some very important and powerful truths about our identity are being overlooked in Romans 6 in *Dead Men Rising* and I would hate to see these lost in our movement.

My second reason for asking for more careful discussion regarding the book is that we are planning on sharing it at the Pastor's conference. Again, if Jonathan were simply sharing his personal view, that would be one thing. But his book has been given the strongest endorsement possible by some of the most respected teachers in our movement. For all these reasons I would like to briefly share my own view and concerns.

First, let me say there are some significant things we are in agreement on. I do not believe that the flesh is an unredeemable part of us. But I believe this is because as new men (Eph 4:24) with new hearts (Ezek 11:18-19), the flesh is simply (although painfully) "**the pattern of this world**" ingrained in our thinking. Which is why we can "**be transformed by the renewing of our mind**" and significantly diminish the influence of the flesh over us (Rom 12:2). Accordingly, I think Dave B.'s description of the flesh is very good (email 11/12/12).

Secondly, I agree that interpreting being dead to sin as sin being eradicated or extinct in our lives is not only inaccurate but potentially harmful. But I think the solution is adopting the more common and historical theological understanding of death as *separation* rather than *extinction*. One of my concerns about the book is that it does not even address this probable meaning of death, nor interact with the

very respected Romans commentaries of Douglas Moo, Thomas Schreiner, John MacArthur, or F. F. Bruce on this issue.

Of course if the only understanding of death is extinction than we need to interpret Romans 6 as dealing with something that has been completely eradicated, like our guilt. But the idea of *separation* from sin in terms of its power and our new identity brings a message out of Romans 6-8 that I believe is even more powerful than simply being forgiven for sin.

In general, let me say that I believe Romans 6:1-14 is not only talking about our new relationship with God (justification), but also our new relationship, identity, and power in regards to sin, which is a critical belief if we are to have victory over it. Perhaps Jonathan would say that this power is talked about elsewhere in Scripture (i.e. Romans 8), but just not in Romans 6. Unfortunately, Romans 6 is *the most* powerful statement in Scripture about our radically new identity to sin, and if we neuter this passage by relegating it only to justification, I think we have lost a great deal.

I will not take the time here to respond to all of *Dead Men Rising* or "flesh out" everything in Romans 6. For brevity, I will only elaborate a little more on what I've already said.

First, as Jonathan states, the Apostle is answering the question, "If we are forgiven for everything, why wouldn't we sin more?" Paul's short answer is that through the regeneration that occurred in spiritual baptism, we died to sin. As stated, death in Scripture means separation, not extinction. When Adam died, he did not cease to exist but was separated from God. In the OT, to be put to death was repeatedly described as being "cut off" from the people of God (cf. Ex 31:14). In the NT the essence of spiritual death is not the absence of a spirit, but a relational separation from God. Even physical death is not ceasing to exist, but our soul/spirit being separated from our body. Notice how the concept of death is used in Col 2:20 and how it relates to Romans 6: "**you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world.**" It is not that the spiritual forces of this world have been eradicated, but our relationship to them, our desire to follow them, our identity with them, and their power over us has been radically altered.

Accordingly, the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* interprets Romans 6 in this way: "The Christian passes through the experience of death in Christ but is now separated, not from God, but from the world and sin, which are dead in the sense of separation."

Commenting on being "dead to sin" in Romans 6, Douglas Moo writes:

What does this death "to sin" mean? Paul uses the verb "die" because (1) it creates an immediate tie with the death of Christ, central to the believers own "death to sin" and (2) it connotes a decisive and final break in one's state of being [i.e. identity]. The idea, then, is of a decisive separation from sin. This separation could be a separation from the penalty due because of sin, but the context demonstrates that Paul is talking not about the penalty, but about the power of sin (cf., v. 6b: "that we should no longer serve sin"; v. 14a: "sin shall no longer have lordship over you"). It is better, then, to view the separation as a separation from the "rule" or "realm" of sin.

Dr. Moo summarizes: "We Christians, Paul affirms, have "died to sin" (v. 2b); we had been taken out from under its tyranny [not just penalty] in a transfer so radical and decisive that the language of death and new life can be used of it."

Likewise, Thomas Schreiner lays out 4 options for the meaning of being dead to sin. One of them reflects the approach of *Dead Men Rising*: "We died to sin in God's sight, that is, in a forensic or judicial sense." Dr. Schreiner goes on to say:

The focus of Rom. 6 is not on the penalty of sin but on its power. What Paul argues is that the dominion of sin has been broken in the life of the believer. We "walk in newness of life" (v. 4). The mastery of sin has been shattered "so that we are no longer slaves to sin" (v. 6). Sin should no longer "reign" in our mortal bodies (v. 12).

Paul's purpose here is not primarily to explain the legal relationship between believers and sin; instead, he explains that those who are forgiven of sin also have power over it.

John MacArthur summarizes Romans 6:1-10 as follows:

Again, salvation not only is a transaction but a transformation, not only forensic but actual. Christ died not only for what we did but for what we are. Paul tells believers: "if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Cor. 5:17).

And so the phrase **died to sin** expresses the fundamental premise of this entire chapter in Romans, the rest of which is essentially an elaboration of that cardinal reality. It is impossible to be alive in Christ and also still be alive to sin. It is not that a believer at any moment before going to be with Christ is totally without sin, but that from the moment he is born again he is totally separated from the controlling power of sin.

F. F. Bruce, one of the most respected NT scholars of the last century summarizes Romans 6:

When men and women yield up their lives to the risen Christ and the power of his Spirit, their inward being is radically transformed; a new creation takes place. They receive a new nature which delights to produce spontaneously the fruit of the Spirit. To many people this appears impracticably optimistic. But Paul trusted the Spirit of Christ in his converts, and in the long run his trust was vindicated, though he had to endure many heart-breaking disappointments in his spiritual children until at last he could see Christ 'formed' in them (Gal 4:19).

I too am concerned about the lack of "optimism" regarding sin that I perceived in our discussions this week. And while many seemed to not like the term "nature" that many translations and commentators use, if defined correctly, it is a very good one-word definition of what Scripture is talking about. Webster's defines the term nature: "The inherent character or basic constitution of a person or thing: ESSENCE, DISPOSITION, TEMPERAMENT; an inner force or the sum of such forces in an individual." In other words, if we understand nature as a *habit of thinking and doing* then we can certainly say biblically and experientially we have two different natures- the Spirit and the flesh.

Dr. Bruce and MacArthur also related 2 Cor 5:17 to Rom 6 as I would. Whatever the radical "**new creation**" is, it certainly does not *exclude* what has happened to us in regeneration.

May I share a few scattered thoughts on how this all relates to Romans 6-8? First Romans 6.

Indeed our death to sin is related to Christ's death to sin. And what was exhibited in Christ's death to sin? *A power over it.* The power of sin is death, and Christ rose from the dead. The resurrection speaks of power over sin, and through it we have been given the same power- both because we will never die, and because we are no longer slaves to sin.

When did we die to sin? In the spiritual baptism of the regeneration of the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 6:4-5). It is here that we were born again into a different kind of human being that is not a slave to sin, but has power over it. This is why it is impossible for the Christian to live in sin. Not primarily because they appreciate their forgiveness, but their nature and attitude and power regarding sin have been radically changed.

What does separation from sin mean? We are dead, separated from sin, in many ways. First, our hatred for sin, and love for God's commandments have been exponentially increased. This is part of the practical power the Spirit gives us over sin.

Secondly, there is a separation in our response to the temptations of sin. Before regeneration, we were slaves to sin *and didn't even know it let alone care.* The temptation to sin and the act of sin were practically, usually, simultaneous and

automatic. One way that God has separated us from sin is that He has put “us” between sin’s temptation and acting on it. *We have a choice* in a much greater way than ever before. God has now made us the master of our lives instead of sin in the sense that sin no longer occurs without the permission of our will. It is the realization of this *choice* that God has given us over our old master, that has dealt a significant blow to the power of sin in many Christians’ lives. Not just believing their forgiveness for sin, but their actual authority over it. This is especially helpful when we claim the promise that we will never be tempted beyond what we are able to resist (cf. 1 Cor 10:13).

It is because we have now been given a choice about sin, and our desire for sin has radically changed, that Paul says in Romans 6 it is impossible for us to “**live in**” sin “**any longer**” (v. 2) and “**we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from [not just forgiven for] sin**” and “**sin shall no longer be your master**” (vs. 6-7, 14). We are now the master, the one who ultimately decides if we will sin. And the realization of that is very empowering.

Thirdly, our death to, and separation from, sin relates to our identity. And nowhere is this more powerfully illustrated than in Romans 7. If we compare Romans 7:14-25 with Galatians 5:16-17, it seems impossible to deny that the Apostle is talking about the born-again Christian experience in Romans 7, for he is certainly speaking about the believers experience in Galatians. It reads:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please. (Gal 5:16-17)

Recognizing that the man in Romans 7 had been an Apostle of Jesus Christ for about 20 years, and was still struggling with sin, is very encouraging. But the thing to notice in Romans 7 is the incredible, almost unbelievable way that Paul describes his relationship and identity to sin. He admits that he is sinning in his body, but twice says: “**If I do what I do not want to do . . . it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me**” (vs. 16-17) and “**Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it**” (v. 20).

Paul flat out denies he is a sinner. He claims there is an identity, a real him, that is separate from what he might do in his body of sin. When we sin we are *not* acting like our new real selves, but have been tricked and deceived into acting like our old selves. Have we fully grappled with Paul’s repeated statement: “I do not sin”? To be honest brothers, I heard a lot this week in our discussion about how we are *identified* with sin and being a sinner. I don’t believe this is either helpful, humble, or accurate. Nor will I be comfortable with any theology that does not do justice to Paul’s statements. Or John’s for that matter:

No one who lives in Him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen Him or known Him. Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. He who does what is right is righteous, just as He is righteous. ⁸ He who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. ⁹ No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God. ¹⁰ This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother. (1 John 3:6-10)

These are radical statements about our power over sin and they must not be ignored or diluted but explained and encouraged even in light of what some Christians experience.

Finally, on to chapter 8. Perhaps a quote from my book *Biblical Psychology* will help explain the identity issue I think is so important, but is missing in a "position," rather than a "power" interpretation of Romans 6:

The born again Christian, however, is recreated with a radically different moral makeup. They have been given something that the unregenerate do not possess: a **"new self created [past tense] to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"** (Eph 4:24). Our recreation has drastically altered our moral tastes such that instead of having **"a continual lust for more"** sin (v. 19), we have a continual lust for righteousness. That is our New Nature, to love and live righteousness. It gives us both a unique *desire* to be virtuous, and a *power* to be so, that spiritually unregenerate people simply do not have.

In Romans 8 the Apostle also vividly illustrates all of this. In essence, he makes it clear that the unregenerate possess *only* a *sinful nature*, while *only* the regenerate possess the *Holy Spirit*. Only the Christian has supernatural power over sin, and has had their sinful nature dethroned. If this is true then the expected outworking of these facts clinches the matter, and we would expect moral superiority for the spiritually regenerated. . . .

The first thing to notice in this passage is that the Apostle is contrasting believers with unbelievers, not sinful or "carnal" believers with "Spirit-filled" believers. In other words, some may take this passage as an exhortation for the Christian to live in control of the Spirit instead of the sinful nature. While the Apostle addresses the real and present battle that the regenerated Christian has with sin elsewhere (cf. Rom 7:14-23; Gal 5:16-25), that is not his intention here.

Rather, the Apostle wishes to contrast the *power* over sin which the Christian has with the *bondage* to sin that the unregenerate have, all of which he has been discussing in the previous two chapters. This becomes clear when he emphatically tells the Roman Christians in verse 9 that, **"You, 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 [living in them], he does not belong to Christ."** In other words, the Apostle is saying that if you are a Christian, you have the Holy Spirit, and if you have the Holy Spirit then you *are* controlled by Him, not the sinful nature. This is not to say that Christians never allow sinful thinking to influence them, but the general course of their life will demonstrate the influence of the Spirit.

Backing up in the passage then, we see that the Apostle is describing all regenerated Christians as, **"free from the law of sin"** (v. 2), living **"in accordance with the [Holy] Spirit,"** having **"their minds set on what the [Holy] Spirit desires,** (v. 5) and having a, **"mind controlled by the [Holy] Spirit"** (v. 6).

The Apostle is obviously not implying that Christians live in sinless perfection, as just a few verses earlier he describes his own personal battle with sin. But even the difference illustrated in Romans 7:14-23 is that only the Christian consistently *can*, *does*, and *desires* to fight sin. . . .

It should also be emphasized that it is not just any spirit that the Apostle is saying the Christian **"lives in accordance with,"** and is **"controlled"** by in Romans 8, but specifically the *Holy Spirit*. We can confidently conclude then that anyone possessed by the *Holy Spirit*, which is the sole possession of regenerated believers, will exhibit a greater degree of holiness than all the unregenerate who do not possess the *Holy Spirit*. . . .

The Apostle is clearly claiming that the unregenerate *only* have a *sinful nature*, and that *only* the born again Christian has the *Holy Spirit*. If this is so, we would not only *expect* the truly regenerate of the world to practically, consistently, and convincingly demonstrate a superior holiness, but we believe that *they actually do*. By virtue of the Holy Spirit's regeneration, the born again Christian is, from a moral, spiritual, and epistemological perspective, *a different species of human being*, a **"new creation"** (2 Cor 5:17), **"created . . . to do good works"** (Eph 2:10), and **"created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness"** (Eph 4:24). . . .

Likewise, J. I. Packer has written concerning God's unique enablement for holiness in the Christian:

For healthy Christians, holiness is an electric word. Why? Because God has implanted a passion for holiness deep in every born-again heart. Holiness, which means being near God, like God, given to God, and pleasing God, is something believers want more than anything else in this world. . . .

In Romans 6, Paul explains that all who have faith in Christ are new creatures in him. They have been crucified with him; this means that an end has been put to the sin-dominated lives they were living before. Also, they have been raised with him to walk in newness of life; this means that the power that wrought Jesus' resurrection is now at work in them, causing them to live differently because in truth they are different at the center of their being in what Paul in Romans 7:22 calls "my inmost self" and Peter in 1 Peter 3:4 calls "the hidden person of the heart."

They have been changed by the dethroning in them of that allergic negative reaction to the law of God, which is called sin, and the creating in them . . . a "heart after God"-a deep, sustained desire to know God, draw near to God, seek God, find God, love God, honor God, serve God, please God. . . . Holiness is the naturalness of the spiritually risen man, just as sin is the naturalness of the spiritually dead man, and in pursuing holiness by obeying God the Christian actually follows the deepest urge of his own renewed being. . . .

In one who has not been united to Christ in his dying and rising, motivational holiness is so unnatural as to be impossible, because at motivational level sin has the dominion all the time. "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot" (Romans 8:7). Loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength is altogether beyond the unregenerate man's capacity.

But in one who is thus united to Christ, by faith from the human side and by the Spirit from the divine side, motivational holiness is spontaneous and natural, and the unnatural thing is for him to do violence to his renewed nature by yielding to the desires of the flesh (see Galatians 5:16-26)-which explains why backsliders are always so miserable inside.

I am concerned that the view portrayed in *Dead Men Rising* does not sufficiently reflect how radical the born again experience is, not just positionally with God, but practically in regards to sin. It is a "reckoning" of our power and authority over sin that does a great deal to give us victory over it. For example, many have heard of the powerful testimony of Mike Quarles, who is now a co-author of many books with Neil Anderson and Freedom in Christ Ministries. If we were to interpret Romans 6 in only a positional way as Jonathan's book argues, the vital truths that Mike needed to set him free would not have been available to him:

"I graduated from seminary and went into the pastorate. It was my custom to spend at least an hour a day in Bible study and prayer. I memorized chapters of Scripture. I fasted and prayed. I read hundreds of books and listened to numerous tapes. . . . I witnessed enthusiastically to anything that moved. . . . I tried to do everything I had been taught in order to live the successful Christian life. What was the result of all this? My wife and children didn't respect me because in my zeal to make them be good Christians, I became legalistic, harsh, and unloving. My marriage was a mess and my personal life was a shambles. I came to the realization that everything I had learned about living the Christian life just was not working for me. Finally I came to grips with reality and left the pastorate. . . . In a short period of time I became a full-fledged alcoholic. . . .

I . . . began trying everything I knew to stop, but nothing seemed to help. This is what I tried:

1. Consistent Quiet Time
2. Bible Study
3. Fasting
4. Visitation Evangelism
5. Christian Twelve Step Program

6. Accountability group
7. Hundreds of AA meetings and five different sponsors
8. Christian counselors
9. Christian psychiatrist
10. Secular psychiatrist
11. Christian psychologist
12. Secular psychologist
13. Addictions counselor
14. Flew to New Jersey and spent 3 days with an addictions specialist
15. Secular treatment center
16. Christian treatment center
17. Read every book on addiction I could find
18. Healing of memories session
19. Baptism of the Spirit session
20. Casting out of demons session (twice)
21. Public confession
22. Group therapy
23. Taking the prescription drug antabuse
24. Disciplined by my church
25. Rigid schedule with every minute planned
26. Hundreds of hours studying Scriptural principles
27. Memorized chapters of Scripture
28. Discipleship groups
29. Prayer
30. Promises to God and my wife.

Where did all of this get me? I became totally out of control. I was depressed for days on end and suicidal. . . .

Why didn't any of this work? All were things I was doing in the flesh and "sinful passions are aroused by the flesh" (Rom 7:5). Whenever we commit ourselves to a program, rules, method, principles, etc. to perform, we put ourselves under law and the law is what gives sin power in our lives (1 Cor 15:56). . . .

What was the problem? The problem was not the bad behavior but the belief behind the behavior that caused me to act that way. . . .

Finally a close friend handed me some tapes and said, "Here, listen to these, maybe they'll help you." . . . [Later] I was driving along listening to the third tape which was teaching on our death in Christ. Rom 6:6-7 says, "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." [I thought] That's what I need, but how do I make that true in my life? Then [the teacher] said, "It is not something you do, it is something that has been done; our death with Christ is past tense, the old person that we were was crucified and anyone you has died has been freed from sin' (Rom 6:2), you are 'dead to sin' (Rom 6:11). I know you don't act dead to sin, you don't feel dead to sin, you don't even look dead to sin, you think that is just a positional truth, that's just the way God sees me. Listen, if that's the way God sees you, that is the way it is. If that is what God says about you, that is the truth about you."

It was at that moment that the lights came on and in that moment I knew the truth. I knew I had died with Christ and the old sin loving sinner had died and was no more. I had believed the lie and acted like it for all these years, but that was not who I was. . . . I had believed the lie that I was a hopeless, helpless alcoholic and had lived in bondage all the years I believed it. But [now] I knew without a shadow of a doubt, that I, Mike Quarles, was a child of God who was "in Christ," because I had died with Christ, was dead to sin and had been freed from sin. Free at last, free at last! Praise God I was free at last !!!!!!!!!!!

I believe Jonathan's book is in danger of robbing the Christian of the vital truths in Romans 6 regarding our power and position in relation to sin.