

OUR ONGOING STRUGGLE, HIS GRACE

SERMON FOCUS — ROMANS 7:4-18,24-25

We have been on a journey together the past 6 weeks exploring Paul's epistle to the Romans. Pastor Dan, Pastor Jonna, and Joe Hill have walked us through the opening chapters of this letter. In this book of the New Testament, Paul offers us a systematic presentation of biblical doctrine and deep theological understanding. He used these insights to guide the Jews and Gentiles of his day through solid teachings on condemnation and justification, what Luther has brought forward to us when he speaks of the Law and the Gospel. In chapter 7 of Romans, Paul begins to look more closely at what God wants to accomplish in us and through us, as followers of Christ. He provided a real-world roadmap to help those of his day and to enlighten those of us in our day to grow in our sanctification — our spiritual formation and growth to become more like Christ and set apart to glorify God in all we do.

Through his own autobiographical experiences, as He wrestles with sin's struggle, Paul begins to exhort us on the practical nature of living out the Gospel in our lives. He points us towards obedience to God's Word as the foundation for our lives. The letter in Romans unfolds the Good News of Jesus Christ as more than simply facts to rationalize in our heads; Paul points us towards an abundant life that we are to live through our hearts — each of us can live our daily lives with joy knowing we have been "justified [made righteous] as a gift by [God's] grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24).

Over the past few weeks, Pastor Jonna, Anna Marie and myself have had the blessing of walking alongside the students in Confirmation class. The teachings have covered the Ten Commandments, The Apostle's Creed, and will be moving into the Lord's Prayer. The students have learned that Christ redeemed us. He gave his holy and precious blood, suffering, death and resurrection to fulfill God's just calling on our behalf. The students are growing to understand that the Holy Spirit has called, gathered, and enlightened each of us in our faith. His Spirit guides our ongoing journey of spiritual formation and growth as disciples, allowing us to strengthen our faith and remain centered on His truth.

Our students are learning through the lessons on the Ten Commandments the purposes of Law. First, to help curb lawlessness in society that results from our sinful natures. Second, to serve as a mirror to our own sinfulness and convict our hearts to turn from the temptations of life. And Third, to guide us and teach us to lead a God-pleasing life. They have learned that original sin entered the world through one man, Adam, and brought guilt and condemnation to all mankind. The Fall has left everyone one of us as blind and corrupt in all we do when acting out of our own flesh and sinful desires. In our human natures, we commit actual sin by acting against every commandment God has placed before us in our thoughts, words, desires, and deeds.

Martin Luther, himself, demonstrated for us through his catechesis and his own life that a “righteous man shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17). Luther was clear in his teachings that good works and religious rituals could not save the Christian. Instead, He leaned on Paul’s Spirit-led insights to allow us to recognize that it is faith in the Lord’s unmerited grace that justifies us as followers of Christ.

Our good works are not the means by which we can achieve salvation, rather our good works are simply the delightful response of thankfulness for the grace God has given us through His Son. Here in Romans 7, we begin to more clearly understand the role of the Law. Paul sets the stage for then sharing the impact of the Gospel as we continue through the remaining chapters of Romans.

Paul enlightens us in this epistle to more clearly see five key points:

- (1) our bondage to brokenness,
- (2) our death in disobedience,
- (3) our resistance to God’s revelation,
- (4) our frustration in our flesh, and
- (5) our power found only in His Promise.

The law is powerless to save us as sinners. Through the law, we see our brokenness, disobedience, resistance and frustration that leads only to death. We learned in Romans 6:23, “for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”

Paul expresses from his own personal wrestling, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 7:24-25). Instead of trying to overcome our sinful natures through mere willpower, we must take hold of the promise that comes through the power of Christ alone. He is the provision God has given us for victory over sin. He sends us the Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts and minds. His Spirit empowers us to turn from our sinful ways. His Spirit gives us the wisdom to claim the freedom Christ has given us.

Bondage to Brokenness

Let’s unfold each of these in more detail beginning with our bondage to brokenness. In our natural selves, we are slaves to sin. Psalm 51 speaks to how we are “sinful from birth, from the time our parent’s conceived us.” (Psalm 51:5) and how our sin is always before us subject to God’s judgement. (Psalm 51:3-4) Throughout history, mankind has continually fallen into the trap of our sinfulness. In Isaiah 64, we see “all of us have become like the one who is unclean, and all our acts are like filthy rags; we shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away. (Isaiah 64:6) In the nation of Judah in Isaiah’s time up through the Romans of Paul’s time to our present day here in the Valley, we continue to see our best efforts infected with sin throughout our lives.

Our mind set is centered on our own personal gratification. We see self-determination as our source of power. We are driven by our will to be in control. (Romans 7:15). Sin darkens and hardens our hearts moving us to speak and behave in ways that reflect our human nature following the Fall. Our text in Matthew 15 reminds us, ¹⁸ *But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them.* ¹⁹ *For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.* ²⁰ *These are what defile a person.*" (Matthew 15:18-19) Temptations motivate us and sin enslaves us to act in ways that we know to be against God's will and causing to "do what we do not want to do."

Death in Disobedience

We move from bondage to death. Where sin reigns, the Law brings death. The Law incites, uncovers, and convicts us of the sin present in our lives; and, at the same time leaves us to the outcome and consequences. The Law cannot deliver us from sins grasp when we rest in our own power apart from Christ. The Law itself is not sinful in its own right, nor would Paul argue that the Law is the source of sin. On the contrary, Paul sees the law pointing out the knowledge we need to recognize the sin in our lives. The law positions us to avoid the penalty of death, eternal damnation, that comes as a result of our disobedience. Paul argues that the Law was intended to bring life through the revelation of God's will for us. Instead, we find ourselves put to death by the Law.

Resistance to Revelation

Paul opens the door in Romans 7 to shed light on the relationship of the Law to those who follow Christ. He begins to shift our perspective from the adverse view in which we see the Law as a catalyst that arouses our sinful passions to the constructive light of God's ordained role of the law – one that reveals the human nature behind our sinful actions. In doing so, God gives us the Law to allow us to see the reality of our sin in light of the moral foundation that He desires us to understand right from wrong.

Through the "holy, just and good" law, we can begin to recognize that God uses the law to reveal to us those actions and attitudes that can ultimately bring us harm. (Romans 7:11-12) Paul uses the Greek word *pneumatikos* meaning spiritual in Romans 7:14 to assure us that the Law was given to us by God in order to reveal His character.

Paul shows us with true openness and vulnerability how difficult he finds living his life in alignment with God's calling that comes from following Christ and brings with it the costs of being a disciple. While he is "desiring to do what is good," he realizes that anytime he attempts to overcome his "sinful nature" in his own power he cannot carry it out. We all must recognize in the same way that only when we look to the Holy Spirit to direct our path and our ways can we truly live up to the spiritual victory that was revealed to us in Christ.

Frustration in Our Flesh

Paul expresses his own frustration in living out a life free from the desire to covet. He found himself longing for, lusting after, and greatly desiring the things of this world that he saw in others. He found himself unable in his own will power to overcome his personal desires and then giving into his sinful nature. (Romans 7:7, 19) Paul desires a life fully governed by the Spirit at work within him, but he finds himself trapped in his own flesh, "carnal" to the actions that follow from the "sin that dwells in him." (Romans 17, 20)

How many of us experience a similar frustration and misery in our own lives today here in the Valley? Each of us knows what God asks of us as we live out our faith in everyday life. Yet, we get pulled by our natures to crave the things that others have and to desire more than we have been given. We look for more than God's provision and then begin to wrestle with guilt, condemn ourselves for the feelings that rise up in us, and become defeated in ability to live up to the expectations we find in His Word.

Throughout Romans 7, Paul describes the deep battle that each of us find intrinsic in our life's journey. We stride into the everyday challenges that face us trying to overcome them in our own strength. Paul speaks of his own actions as unspiritual. The Greek word *sarkinos* used in Romans 7:14 "I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin" make reference to the weakness that all people share when living out their lives in their flesh. Even though we have the indwelling Holy Spirit within us, drawing us to abide in Christ, our sinful nature continually calls us to give into the temptations of this world. We find ourselves wrestling internally to conform to God's perfect will, always finding it out of reach in our own flesh.

Power in His Promise

So what is the promise we gain from Christ? Because we responded to God's call and have put our faith in the crucified Christ, the Law can no longer condemn us. "For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:19–20, NIV)

God created us in His image, however, we inherited from Adam in the Fall our predisposition towards sin. All of us are fallen beings in need of hope that can only come from the Good News of the Gospel. As we respond in faith to His calling, the Holy Spirit indwells us and turns our hearts and minds away from trying to follow our own pursuit of personal advantage. We begin to pursue Christ on the basis of His righteousness. In love and gratitude to what He has done for us at the Cross and in His resurrection, we become bond servants to His ways. (Rom. 7:4-6)

In Mere Christianity, C. S. Lewis shares, "No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good... Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down... We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means-the only complete realist."

Because we have new life in Christ, the Law can no longer condemn us and bring death upon us. Christ has empowered us with the Holy Spirit to turn from our transgressions. Because of what He has done, we can serve God beyond the boundaries of the law in the “newness of the Spirit.”

We must see sanctification, our spiritual growth, as a gradual process that we cycle through, experiencing failures along the way. In doing so we move away from our dependency on ourselves and look upward to gain God’s wisdom that He has provided for us through the Spirit he has placed within us.

As we are led by His Spirit, we are given a resurrected life. We can claim our rightful place in God’s kingdom strictly on the merits of what Christ has already done. Our lives move away from our sinful passions to the passionate pursuit of God’s will where we can bear fruit and live in alignment to His righteousness.

In his closing words to Romans 7, Paul reminds us that our “rescue” comes through Christ alone. “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 7:24-25) He has set the stage for how we respond to our new life in the Spirit and the Future Glory to come that He will share with us beginning in Romans 8 and as we move through the rest of the book of Romans.

Let us pray...