

Honest Conflict - Real Answer!

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This Sunday's texts:

[Zechariah 9:9-12](#)

[Romans 7:14-25a](#)

[Matthew 11:25-30](#)

The Holy Gospel for today comes to us from the Gospel of Matthew, the 11th chapter:

²⁵At that time Jesus said, "I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶Yes, Father, this is what you were pleased to do. ²⁷All things have been committed to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. ²⁸Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

The Gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, allow the truth of Your Gospel, through the power of Your Holy Spirit, to take root in our lives this day to strengthen our faith, our fellowship, and our witness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

In these weeks of summer, we are journeying through Paul's letter to the Romans. Today, we arrive at that seventh chapter, a chapter that both reveals an honest conflict and real answers. I have struggled with this text for most of my life and gained some really good insights in the journey toward this week's sermon for which I'm very grateful. It's always nice when God preaches a sermon to me before I have to preach one to you.

Before we dive into this text, I want us to make sure we look at what has been happening over the last several weeks, as we've been journeying through Romans. So the theme of Romans is said to come from this verse. "For in the Gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed - a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"¹

Romans starts out in a rather tricky way with Paul. Essentially, he starts out by sucking the Jews in by agreeing with them about how bad the Gentiles are. In that first chapter of Romans, basically, Paul says, "Those Gentiles are filthy sinners!" And then he kind of catches them off guard because in the second chapter, he says to the Jews, "And so are you!" And then he makes it clear, and the first three chapters of Roman really drive home this point. "for all have sinned

¹ Romans 1:17

and fall short of the glory of God.”² The situation in which we find ourselves is that we have all sinned. We are all in need of Grace.

Well, over the course of the next few chapters then, and we've been in this for the last couple of weeks, we've heard again and again in our messages and in these texts that we are justified by Grace through faith. We hear that in the last verses of chapter 3. Then we hear that the justification by faith was illustrated first in Abraham,³ and also explained in the fall of Adam,⁴ and the sending of Jesus,⁵ this idea that we are saved from that guilt and shame of sin and freed from the Law. That's where we have been the last couple of weeks in chapter 6: victory over the flesh and in chapter 7, in the earlier verses, a liberty from the Law. As Joe moves next week into chapter 8, we get again that reassurance of security in salvation through the Holy Spirit.

So what is Romans 7 known for? It's really the place where Paul gets on eye level with these people he's been talking to. First, he said, “Gentiles you're sinners.” Then he said, “Jews you're sinners, too.” Everyone's a sinner and essentially, what we discover in chapter 7 is that Paul is very aware that he too is a sinner. “I'm no exception,” he's saying, “I've experienced in my own journey this battle with sin in my life.” I want you to know that there was a time when I really liked chapter 7 of Romans. It reminded me that Paul and I aren't all that different. I mean if you're going to be measured up against someone, why not make it Paul? I struggle with this; he struggles with this. Oh good, we're at least in the same place, right?

But the harder I've looked at that text, the more aware I've become that we need to be mindful of the movement of what's happening in Romans. This idea that we have been freed from sin, that we have been justified by faith is pretty dominant in verses both before and after the verses today. So how should we understand these verses? The trouble Paul essentially says is with me. In Romans 7:14, we hear this word, “I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.” Most of us have, as in this traditional service, used this Brief Order of Confession, very often where we say “I am in bondage to sin and cannot free myself” Listen to what the New Living Translation says “for I am all too human, a slave to sin.” The trouble is with me. I'm a slave to sin. Oh, by the way, just in case you hear me talking too personally, let me just suggest the trouble is with *you*. *You* are a slave to sin. Do you get it?

² Romans 3:17

³ Romans 4

⁴ Romans 5

⁵ Romans 6

But is Paul really saying that? Does Paul really want us to focus there? Some of our history would lead us to think that the constant confession of our sin would be answering that question yes. But let's pay attention to where we are.

In Romans, in this letter, Paul says again and again we're saved by grace. Let me remind you, from chapter 1, verse 7, "to all In Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people. Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He starts the letter by saying grace is yours; you are God's children. That's the beginning of the letter. He goes on in verse 16, "For I'm not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile." You probably fall into one of those categories. Thanks be to God. I'm not ashamed of the Gospel. The Gospel has the power to rescue us. In chapter 3, verse 22, it says, "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." It's not done. Verse 25 says "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood - to be received by faith." We hear again in [Romans] 3:26, "He did it to demonstrate His righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the One who justifies those who have faith in Jesus." Are you hearing the repetition? I'm not even done yet. Chapter 5, verse 1 says "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." [Romans] 5:11, "Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." Have received reconciliation. In verse 18 in chapter 5, "Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in the justification and life for all people."

So let's look again at this dilemma. "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do."⁶ Can you relate to that? For my whole life, I've related to that. I did spend several years in youth ministry and I just thought to myself if one of the youth came up to me at youth group and said this, what Paul is saying here, I would have laughed them out of the room. But listen to what Paul says in Romans 7 today. "As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is the sin living in me."⁷ In case you didn't catch it, he repeats himself down in verse 20. He says, "Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but the sin living in me that does it." It's not my fault. Sin is doing it. Does that sound like a cop-out? I got to tell you. For most of my life, I've read that and said "Paul, that's a wimpy excuse. You're guilty." I've also thought can we

⁶ Romans 7:15

⁷ Romans 7:17

really relinquish the responsibility for the sin in our lives by blaming it on something else? That's not me. It's just this other thing. It almost reminds me of "he hit me first" or the other excuses we come up with. "Well, it's really not my fault. It's his fault." You know, that blame game that we're all so good at sometimes.

I'm struggling with this idea why is Paul saying this? I mean is it really possible in this theological treatise of Romans that Paul is pulling out this wimpy excuse, saying basically "Not my fault. The devil made me do it." So I've wrestled with this idea. Paul, near the end of our verses, says this, "What a wretched man I am! I am a sinner."⁸ I almost feel like when we gather on Sunday morning and start our service with that confession, we're being encouraged to say "What a wretched man I am. I'm a sinner."

I have a look that I've never been able to cast off and many of you may know this look. I apologize. My children know this look very well. It's when I'm not happy with what is being said or done. It's the "disappointed look." Have you ever pulled that out, Mark [Smith]? Is that one of your tools in your children's discipline? You don't have to say anything, right? It's the look. Well, my son, Paul, has figured out that sometimes that look on my face, that look of disappointment or disapproval or unhappiness, kind of gets locked in and in his mind at least, it lasts a little longer than it should. So Paul has gotten to where he would say to me, "Dad, your face is stuck" which is his way of saying move on with it; you know, let's move on down the road.

I've often read Romans 7. I've often experienced the regular pattern of confession as getting stuck, such that "I am a sinner" becomes an identity statement. I want to suggest to you that I read all those other verses leading up to this to say Paul has already clearly declared his freedom from sin, his reconciliation by faith through Grace and Christ. This statement "wretched man that I am" is *not* Paul's identity statement. It is the truth of his life. It is the reality of what we wrestle with. But it is *not* who he is. It is *not* who we are.

We need to ask this question. Who am I? We need to ask the question. How do I think about myself? What is it that I say to myself? What is it that I believe about myself? Do we believe that we're in control of sin and there's nothing we can do about it? It's just going to constantly overwhelm us and we're going to do the things we don't want to do and not do the things we want to do when we are in our best place. Will we live our lives with an understanding that we are slaves to sin?

⁸ Romans 7:24

My suggestion is, if you read that in Romans which, by the way, it clearly says, but if you fixate there, if you take that as the place of identity, you've really missed the heart of what Paul is saying in Romans. He's already said it for the world. He's already said Gentiles: sinners; Jews: sinners; everyone else: sinners. Now he's saying me too. *But* then he says, "Thanks be to God, who has delivered me."⁹ Thanks be to God who has declared me to be righteous through Jesus. The problem that I've had growing up in the church, confessing each week that I'm in bondage to sin is that I stopped listening.

Some of you may remember a few weeks ago Joe said I basically only have one sermon. Have you noticed how creative he's gotten with that one sermon? I'm just impressed. The one sermon is this: we're justified by Grace through Jesus Christ. It's interesting because, you probably don't know this, but right now, we have these slides and with the slides, we do the Kyrie [eléison], this "Lord have mercy ..." in some fashion or another after our confession. Then right after that is "Glory to God ..." [hymn of praise] and, in fact, there's no absolution there. Right Bill [Mowson]? No absolution there. All we have is a blank slide. Some of you probably saw me flipping the pages in the LBW [Lutheran Book of Worship], finding that word of absolution.

Let me suggest to you that every, single Sunday, often multiple times in the service, this is what I say to you "You are forgiven. You are a child of God." We've already done it once this morning in the confession and absolution. I'm certainly doing it now in the sermon. And in a few minutes, you're going to receive communion in which, through the body and blood of Jesus, your sins are declared as forgiven.

I want to ask you this question. Who are you? Who do you see in the mirror? How do you talk to yourself? Are you a slave to sin which some of the choices you make in your life might suggest? Or are you who God declares you to be?

You are forgiven. Romans has declared over and over and over and over and over and over again and will continue to do so that we are justified by Grace through faith through the death and resurrection of Jesus. You are a child of God. You are forgiven. To stay fixated, to keep your face stuck on the sin and confession part is to miss the fact that where we really want to focus our hearts and lives is on the absolution part. You are forgiven. You are a child of God. He has given His Holy Spirit to those who believe in Him. The Holy Spirit now journeys in this life with you.

⁹ Romans 7:25

Remember who you are and remember who the Judge is. The Judge is the one who declares to you "You are righteous in My Son." Know that's who you are. Know that's how you're invited to live this lifestyle of Grace. Know that the Good News of God changes your identity, gives you a new name.

And why am I harping on this point over and over again? And why is it that Pastor Joe only has one sermon to preach when he's got this long career ahead of him? For the next 5 weeks - he's bringing in a guest for one week, but for the next 5 weeks - you're going to hear the same sermon over and over and over again.

Not exactly, but we're going to keep reminding you that while the reality of our lives is a struggle with temptation and evil and lots of other hurts and hardships, you are forgiven and righteous in Christ. God declares that to be true.

You may have noticed that in the Absolution this morning I chose to read the one that says "As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, I declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins." Is that how it says it? Did you notice I skipped a line? "As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ and by His authority, I, therefore, declare to you the entire forgiveness ..."

We preach this Good News. We hear this Good News. Paul writes this Good News in Romans. By the authority given to us by God who is the judge, by God who loved us so much that He gave His Son... He decides whether or not you're guilty and He says, "No, you're forgiven. It's who you are. It's who I declare you to be." At the end of this chapter, where he's talking about this struggle of his own life, Paul says, "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ Our Lord!"¹⁰ That is the truth, brothers and sisters in Christ. That is what we need to believe because it is the declaration of God Almighty, who gave His Son for you. And so, I say again the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

¹⁰ Romans 7:25