

The Struggle Within

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Romans 7:14-25

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

*Paul describes
in Romans
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On a hot July day in 1967, a 17-year-old from Bethesda, Md. went with her sister and friends for a swim in the Chesapeake Bay. Joni dove into the water and knew immediately something was wrong. She couldn't move. She was rescued by her sister and rushed to a local hospital to determine the extent of her injury. In her autobiography, Joni writes about her first real awareness of the limitations from her paralysis. As she lay unclothed on a hospital gurney waiting for an x-ray, the sheet covering her body slipped to the side leaving her exposed. Joni desperately wanted to cover her naked body, but she could not make her arms and hands move. Joni knew in her mind what she wanted to do, but her body wouldn't cooperate.

The x-ray confirmed that Joni had broken her neck, a fracture between the 4th and 5th cervical levels. But Joni Eareckson Tada's story doesn't end here. She became a celebrated commercial artist, learning how to paint with her mouth. She is an accomplished Christian author and popular speaker. Her ministry, Joni and friends, is devoted to reaching

people within the disability community.

I thought of Joni's account of knowing what she wanted but being unable to do it in relationship to our Scripture lesson. Paul describes in Romans wanting to do right, but he doesn't always do it. This intense struggle, this internal war, if you will, is described at the outset of our lesson: "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (7:16). Paul returns to this theme later in the passage: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (7:19).

Paul portrays himself, in these verses, as a spiritually bipolar person. He wants to obey the Law of Moses, but he also wants to go his own way. Some Biblical scholars cannot imagine how this section of Paul's letter can be autobiographical. After all, we're talking about the greatest Christian missionary the world has ever known. They conjecture that Paul is writing about his life before his conversion. Yet, the pronouns in the passage all appear in first person singular. Earlier in his letter, he writes in second and third person pronouns. Paul

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Mary Gordon

also uses present tense verbs, whereas at the outset of the chapter, he writes in past tense. This passage is also part of a longer section of Paul’s letter, chapters 6-8, explaining a process called sanctification—what it means to grow as a Christian—whereas the first five chapters are devoted exclusively to the process of salvation—how someone becomes a Christian.

But I’m convinced this passage is autobiographical for Paul for another compelling reason. The sins of our Biblical heroes are not expunged from the record. The great king David—the man after God’s own heart—had an affair with Bathsheba. David attempted to cover his tracks by placing her husband on the front lines and deliberately withdrawing his own troops, thereby sealing his doom. The great Apostle Peter, who once boasted to Jesus, “I’ll never leave or forsake you,” denied any association with Jesus three times in quick succession. Why should Paul receive an exemption? He sins the same way everybody else does.

Sin is an old-fashioned word. Our secular culture has rendered it nearly obsolete. Sin is described as a shortcoming, a slip up or a mistake in judgment. Let me put it in terms we can understand. Sin is selfishness. Sin is living for me, for my glory and my happiness. When people become less interested in God, they become

more interested in themselves. We are all rebels at heart. We want to serve God, but we also want to go our own way.

Bill Moyers hosted a PBS special some years ago on the book of Genesis. He gathered theologians and writers of various religious backgrounds together to talk about the early chapters of Genesis. After the rest of the panelists tiptoed around the problem of sin, novelist Mary Gordon said, “People just aren’t right. There is something fundamentally wrong with us that we cannot fix ourselves.” What is wrong with us is what the Bible calls sin.

The story is told of a visitor who came to a town and asked an old rancher what the people were like in his region. The rancher responded with a question of his own, “What are people like where you come from?” The traveler answered, “They’re mean, nasty rascals.” “That’s the way they are here, too,” the rancher replied. A short while later, another traveler visited the town and asked the rancher the same question. The rancher asked the traveler what people were like where he came from. The traveler said, “They’re great people, honest, kind-hearted and high-spirited.” The rancher replied, “That’s the way they are here, too.” The moral to this story is that we can be honest and kind-hearted. We can also be mean and nasty.

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***Sin is
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***Will power
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The Protestant reformer Martin Luther made famous the Latin phrase, *Simil Justus et Epeccator*. Literally, this phrase translates, “At the same time righteous and sinful.” We can be at one and the same time both saint and sinner.

When I became a Christ-follower at age 19, I somehow expected my life to get a little easier. I didn't expect all my problems to be solved, but surely I didn't expect following Christ to be this hard. It's hard to let go of deeply ingrained sins. I never realized the hold sin had over me until I tried to resist it. C.S. Lewis wrote “...that no one knows how bad he is until he has tried to be good...Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is....We never find out the strength of an evil impulse until we try to fight it.”

The great 20th century German theologian Karl Barth wrote, “Only Christians sin.” Surely unbelievers sin also. Yet, unbelievers aren't always aware that what they're doing is sin and this sin is separating them from God. Only when we become aware of God can we sin against God.

My first takeaway from this passage is: *Everybody struggles with sin*. Paul struggles with sin. You and I do also.

My second takeaway is: *Sin is complicated*. Let me take you back to verse 15, where Paul writes, “I do not understand my own actions” (7:15). Sin is not easily understood. It is

irrational. Why do we demonstrate more expertise at diagnosing other people's sins than our own sins? Why do we find it hard to rejoice when other people succeed? Why are we so attracted to behaviors that bring us heartache and misery? Who can fully explain our predilection toward sin?

We may try to rationalize our sins in order to make it appear that we have good reasons for acting the way we do. But there are no good reasons for our sins. I want to do good deeds, but I don't always do them. I don't want to do bad things, but I do them anyway.

My third takeaway is: *Will power doesn't cut it*. Will power alone isn't enough to defeat sin. Paul references *the flesh* several times in this passage. He speaks about it in verse 14: “I know that the law is spiritual but I am of the flesh,” and again in verse 18: “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh.” Flesh is not a reference to human skin and tissue. It's a catch-all term to describe our human nature apart from God. Whereas the Law of Moses is spiritual, the flesh is weak. He writes in verse 22, “I delight in the law of God but I see in my members another law at war in me, making me a captive to sin.” Then he writes, rather despairingly, “Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death.”

Sin is complicated but its solution is simple.

Wretched is a strong word. The only other time I recall this word used in our religious vocabulary is the first stanza of the hymn Amazing Grace: “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.” Wretch doesn’t mean a vile, despicable person, but someone who is lost or in deep distress. “I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

My prayer is that we will come to see the immensity of our struggle with sin. As long as I see my sins as some minor peccadilloes, as things I did along the way between high school and college, I will never recognize my need for a Savior. This is the problem the Pharisees had with Jesus. They felt as if they didn’t need salvation. They just needed a little fine tuning.

A college student once challenged a university chaplain by saying, “Christianity is just a crutch.” The chaplain countered, “Who says you don’t limp?”

Gospel is a word meaning good news. Jesus brings people good news. But this good news will never make sense to us until we know the bad news. The bad news is that we are sinners, that our sins separate us from God and we lack the resources to save ourselves. Until we reach the end of ourselves, we will not look to God.

My fourth and final take away is: *Sin is complicated but*

its solution is simple. Paul concludes the passage with the words, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25). We don’t have to understand sin in order to be delivered from it. We need merely to receive God’s remedy for sin and appropriate it into our lives. We receive the finished work of Christ on the cross into our lives. I pray that you will come to forsake all efforts to save your life in your strength alone and cast yourself on Christ’s saving mercy.

Earlier in this service, you heard a courageous Minute for Witness from Alexandra MacCracken. I’ve heard some people from this pulpit make veiled references to their substance abuse. She told us in plain English of her alcohol abuse. I’ve never heard anyone, in all my years of listening to people give such testimonies, publicly admit to having an abortion, let alone two.

I’ve watched God through the years put Alexandra’s life back together. She said in her testimony, “It is good to be in the house of the Lord and know that I can be of good cheer because Jesus has already won the victory for me.” Amen, sister! We’re like people who can flip ahead to the end of a novel to see how the story turns out. Jesus Christ wins the victory. Take heart, Christian, we don’t stand condemned for recurring sins. Jesus wins, after all!

