

“WRETCHED!”

Romans 7:14-25a

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

July 9, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost comes from *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, chapter 7, verses 14 through 25a. It is on page 800 of the pew Bible. In this epistle lesson, Saint Paul—that great missionary and author of several biblical letters—gives us a window into his own heart. And it's not pretty. In fact, the word he uses to sum it all up is “wretched.” Please stand as you are able for the epistle lesson. From Romans 7, we begin reading at verse 14.

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.
You may be seated.

I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that you are not as good as you want to be.

Now how can I say that? I can't read your mind. And I can't look into your heart. Most of you, I don't even know that much about your behavior. I simply do not know how good or bad you really are. And I know even less about how good you want to be. But I am still going to go out on a limb and say, *You are not as good as you want to be.*

So that's my guess about you. That's the limb I'm going to stand on today. And I think it's a pretty sturdy limb.

So why do I say that? Well, I know that I'm not as good as I want to be. And we learned from the epistle reading that the apostle Paul was not as good as he wanted to be. And I've talked to enough other Christians who relate the same experience that I, at least, am convinced this is normal for a Christian. So this is my guess about you: I don't think you are as good as you want to be.

Now maybe I'm wrong. Maybe your conscience doesn't work the same way as mine. That could be the case. Or maybe I'm right. Maybe you're sitting there thinking, *Okay pastor; you got me. I am not as good as I want to be. I am not as good as I know I should be.* Perhaps you can

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relate to Paul when he says, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (7:19).

So I think you will agree with me when I make this guess about you that you are not as good as you want to be. And, perhaps, you might be thinking now, *Okay pastor. Get on with it. You’re right. I’m not as good as I want to be. Now tell me how to be better.*

Well, I’m not going to do that, because I don’t know how. Believe me; if I knew how to be better, I would first apply it to my own life to see if it works, and then I would tell you all about it, so that you can be better too. And then I would write it all down in a book and sell millions of copies so the whole world could be better and I could be rich. But I don’t know how. And the apostle Paul didn’t know how either. If he knew how to be better—if he knew how to do the good things he wanted to do and how to resist the evil he wanted to resist—he would have just done it. And then he would have told us about it. But he didn’t. He did not know how to fix his problem. So he goes on and on bemoaning the fact that he is too sinful to do good even when he wants to do good. I mean, how bad is that? It’s one thing to do evil when you want to do evil. But even when he wants to do good, he still does evil! And all this leads Paul up to his cry of despair, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (7:24)

That’s pretty hopeless. And if what Paul says about himself is also true of us, then we are going to spend the rest of our lives doing the evil things we don’t even want to do. Now, for those of us who like to think of ourselves as decent people, that sounds pretty discouraging. It means that, if you haven’t gotten there yet, you will eventually get to the point where you confess the same thing as Paul: *Wretched man—or, Wretched woman—that I am.*

We can’t fix ourselves. Every Sunday, millions of people in America and all around the world go to Church thinking, *Maybe this week I will finally learn how to fix myself. Maybe I will finally learn how to be better.* But you know what? Your pastor cannot teach you how to fix yourself. God can’t even teach you how to fix yourself. We are that wretched.

Now you might think that sounds depressing. And I can see how you might think that. But, at least in my own experience, there is no passage of Scripture—not a single one—that has brought me more hope and comfort and joy than this passage. If I had not stumbled upon this confession of Saint Paul, I don’t know if I would be a Christian today.

I don’t tell a lot of stories about myself. And I think it’s generally a bad practice for preachers to talk about themselves. But I’m going to break that rule today, because I think my experience will relate to at least some of you.

This is the passage that finally convinced me that God does not judge me based on my performance. I should have understood that long before I did, because there were plenty of people—like my parents—teaching me. But I didn’t quite get it.

So it was either during my eleventh or twelfth grade year of high school—probably the summer in between. And I remember lying face-down on the floor in my bedroom weeping for joy as I read Paul’s confession in Romans 7. Even before I got to the part about Jesus delivering us (7:25), I was filled with more hope than I had experienced in a long time, because I realized that if Saint Paul—the greatest missionary in the apostolic Church and someone who was even privileged to write Scripture—if Saint Paul—someone who was obviously in God’s good graces—if someone like him couldn’t get his sin under control, then there might be hope for me too.

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I realized that I wasn't unique. I wasn't the only Christian who still does the evil I do not want to do.

Up until this point I wasn't even sure whether or not I was really a Christian. I wanted to be a Christian, because I believed all the stuff about Jesus' death and resurrection to be true, and I wanted my sins to be forgiven. So looking back on it, I know that I was a Christian, but I wasn't convinced at the time. And the reason I wasn't convinced was because there was a pile of evidence against me. There were things that I knew to be evil. And I knew they were things that Christians are not supposed to do. But I did them anyways. And I felt guilty about them. So I tried as hard as I could to not do the evil things, but I kept doing them. I understood that God forgives sins, but I couldn't believe that he would keep forgiving the same sins over and over and over again. I didn't expect to be perfect, but if I was a Christian, I at least thought I should be getting better, and I couldn't find any evidence of that. I tried as hard as I could to be better until trying harder just wasn't an option anymore. Trying harder was never going to get me to where I thought I should be.

I needed something more. So I went to every Bible Camp and youth event I could. I felt like these were spiritual boosts for me. Being at camp was like a mountain top experience. I felt like I was really a Christian, and I felt like I would finally have the power to get my sin under control when I went home. But it never worked. For a little while I felt like my performance was better. But these spiritual boosts only lasted for a few days—maybe a week or two at the most. But if I was going to succeed at being a Christian, I needed these boosts to last for a whole year—you know, before I could go back to camp again. And they never did that.

Sometimes a camp or convention would really get me fired up. But the higher the high, the harder the fall. I went home and quickly learned that I was still just as sinful as I was before. Nothing changed. And this was devastating, because I was convinced it would. The preachers made me believe it should. They nearly convinced me that I wasn't really a Christian and never could be.

Often times, there was at least one evening speaker who made a firm, impassioned plea for us to either commit our lives to Jesus for the first time, or—if we had done it before and slid back into sin—to recommit our lives. Now I was a “backslider,” and I knew it. So I recommitted my life to Jesus every opportunity I had, because I was never really sure if I had done it right the last time. I didn't know if I was ever really sincere about it, because I was always sliding back into my sin. So every time there was an invitation to recommit our lives to Jesus, I took it, hoping that this time it would finally work. But it never did. I basically thought, *If at first you don't succeed, try, try again*. But after enough devastating failures, you eventually just give up.

Now I don't know how many failures I had left in me, and I'm glad I didn't find out. Because for me to give up would have meant giving up on Christianity. I was on the path to realizing that I simply was not good enough to be a Christian and never would be.

So I thank God that I finally found what I needed. But it didn't happen where I expected it to happen. It wasn't at a Bible camp or convention. I was all by myself. And there was no soft music playing in the background. If I would have had the courage to talk to my pastor, I know he would have given me the answer I needed. But my dad was my pastor and I didn't want my parents to know how evil I was. So I was all by myself, sitting in my room, reading my Bible. And there it was—Paul's confession of his ongoing depravity:

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“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (7:18-19, 24)

I felt like the apostle Paul had given voice to the deepest groaning of my soul. But they weren't my words. It wasn't my confession. It was the confession of Saint Paul—an honest-to-God Christian. If he could have this struggle with sin and still be a Christian, then maybe I could be a Christian too.

This was the last obstacle to fall that was preventing me from knowing that God really does forgive me. This is the passage that finally convinced me that God does not judge me based on my performance.

In that moment I realized that my struggle with sin was not unique. I felt like I was a normal Christian. It didn't make me any less sinful. I'm still just as wretched as ever. But I am forgiven.

Now, I tell you this story, not because I think it's all that special. I don't. In fact, I think it's quite ordinary. The details and the various strategies we employ to get our sin under control might be different. But this experience of the struggle with sins we think should just go away—it's normal for a Christian. And by “normal,” I don't mean it's okay. Sin is *never* okay. But this struggle is the typical experience of a Christian.

We are simultaneously both saints and sinners. Now, these realities are contradictory to each other, but that's the way it is. And that is why we have this struggle. A Christian is both. And it's not like we're a percentage mixture of the two. It's not like we start out 1% saint and 99% sinner, and we have to get to at least 51% saint. It's not like that. There is no mixture. I know the math isn't going to add up, but we are 100% saint and 100% sinner at the same time. According to our own natures—what Paul calls the “flesh”—we are 100% sinful. He says, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (7:18). Nothing. That's 0% good. Or to put it another way, 100% evil. That is who we are according to the flesh.

But according to the righteousness of Jesus Christ, we are 100% saint. The math may not add up, but it's true. We have this righteousness. It is yours by faith. But it does not come from inside of you. It comes from another. It comes from outside of us. So when your doubts wage war against your faith, questioning whether or not you are really God's child, do not look inside yourself to see if you are really God's child. Because you will not find the evidence there. Look to another. Look to Christ. Look to the perfect and sinless Son of God who sacrificed himself for you, was raised for your justification, and bestows his righteousness upon you as his gift. It is upon this righteousness of Jesus Christ that God judges you. And his judgment is this: you are holy. God declares you to be righteous. You will not find this righteousness within yourself. But you will find it in Jesus.

So when Satan tempts you to despair, do not look inside yourself. Ask, *Is Jesus righteous?* Yes. *Did Jesus bear my sins in his body?* Yes. *Was Jesus crucified for me?* Yes. *Was Jesus raised from the dead?* Yes.

If all these things about Jesus are true—and they are—then God does, indeed, declare you to be righteous. And the promise of Scripture is certain that when Christ returns he will raise

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you from the dead and transform you into his perfect image. So this struggle with sin will not last forever. It will last for a time, but not forever.

So when Saint Paul cries out in despair, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” he knows enough to answer his own question: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (7:25a) Jesus will deliver us from this body of death. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.