

SAINT AND SINNER

Romans 7:14-25

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Series A)

July 9, 2023

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The epistle lesson comes from *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, chapter 7, verses 14 through 25. Please stand as you are able for God's holy Word. From Romans 7, beginning at verse 14, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³but 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. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

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

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is Paul's experience. It also happens to be the experience of every Christian, whether we like to admit it or not. It may be a hard thing to admit that we do not have control over our own behavior. But it's true, and there is a certain peace in admitting this.

We can think of this as Paul's "personal testimony," or at least part of it. The conversion part of his story is recorded three times in the book of Acts (9:9-19; 22:1-16; 26:9-18). Paul had a remarkable encounter with Jesus. Prior to believing in Jesus, Paul was a persecutor of Christians. He thought they should be silenced, arrested, and, in some cases, even killed. But then Jesus appeared to Paul in visible form. He revealed that he is the Christ, and Paul had been very, very wrong to persecute his Christians. And from that point on, Paul's life did a complete 180 ... sort of. Paul's life completely changed in the sense that he went from persecuting the Christian Church to preaching the Gospel of Jesus. That part changed. But he did not change from being a sinner to a good boy. In this part of Paul's "personal testimony," he confessed that he continued to be a wretched man (7:24).

This is the story of every Christian. We like to think that being a Christian will change us. And in some ways it does, but not completely, and usually not as much as wish. Occasionally we hear the story of an addict who was converted, and their addiction was immediately overcome. Or we hear the story of someone who was an open sinner, and they were proud of it. But then

they were converted and their life changed. Occasionally we hear those stories, and they give us hope that we also have the potential for great improvement. But there are many more stories of addicts who are converted but remain in chains to their addiction. There are many more stories of open sinners who are converted, and they come to hate their sin, but their temptations still remain, and the struggle gets worse, not better. There are many more stories of Christians who live with depression, fear, shame, and habitual sin. We want to be free from these things. Christians especially want to be free from sin. But we are not. We hear the story of how someone was released from addiction, sin, or shame, and it actually leads to despair. It leads to despair because, at first, it gives us hope that we can improve, but then we don't. And we think that there must be something wrong with us, something worse than other Christians, if we even consider ourselves to be Christians anymore.

Maybe you listen to Christian music, and the people seem so happy and filled with hope. And you wonder why you don't feel that same way. Or you read Christian fiction, and the characters are so strong and virtuous, and they get their happy ending, but you're still waiting for yours. That kind of music and those kinds of stories appeal to us, because that's what we want. And that's why it sells. But it's not true to the Christian experience. The true Christian experience is much more like Paul's. He says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (7:15). And again 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). That's the true Christian experience. We know this to be true in our own lives, so we resonate with Paul when he laments his own heart.

But you might look at the Christians around you. And they might seem so much more virtuous than you are. You might look at your brothers and sisters in another pew. They might seem to have it together. They might be dressed well. They might seem happy and virtuous. And you might also be dressed well. And you might pretend to be happy and virtuous. But in your case, you know it's just a covering for your true self. Well, guess what? It's a covering for them too. We all cover ourselves. And it's much more than our clothing. We cover our shame. Our words, our smiles, and our actions are, to some degree, a covering for what we actually think and what we actually want to do.

The first great danger is that we might cover ourselves so well that we start to believe our cover. We might start to believe that we are better than we really are. Then we forget our need for a Savior. The second great danger is that we might think we are the only ones covering ourselves. We might think that we really don't have what it takes to be a Christian. We feel like we either can't keep it up, or maybe we were never really Christians in the first place. So we fall into despair.

That's why Paul's personal lament is one of the most hope-filled passages in the entire Bible.

At first it might not seem like it. At first, it might discourage us. Here's a man whose life was radically changed. Here is the greatest missionary in the history of the Church. Here's a guy who has at least thirteen letters published in the Bible. We hear what he says about the secret struggle in his own heart. He admits that his heart is not really changed. In pure and complete honesty, he calls himself "wretched." And we relate.

And that might seem 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. 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."

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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 that might sound depressing ... until we actually come to the end of ourselves. If we come to the end of ourselves, and we despair of our own righteousness, and then we hear Paul say all this nasty stuff about himself, this passage actually becomes one of the most hope-filled passages in the entire Bible. We realize, *If that's the experience of Saint Paul, then maybe I can be a Christian too. Maybe I'm not beyond the grace of God.* And that's exactly right, except there's no "maybe" about it.

Every Christian is a saint and a sinner at the same time. These realities might seem 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. The math might not add up, but we are 100% saint and 100% sinner at the same time. According to our old 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% righteous. This is not something you will find in yourself. You will only find it in Jesus Christ. Being justified by God does not mean that he makes us righteous, at least not yet. He creates a new nature in us, which is righteous, but the old sinful nature still clings to us, and it is just as filthy as it ever has been. So if we look for righteousness in ourselves, we will still find that same sinful nature. So becoming righteous is not what it means for God to justify us. Being justified means that God declares you to be righteous. All of our righteousness comes from Jesus. And if it comes from Jesus, it's perfect. In Jesus, you are 100% righteous.

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. Instead, 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 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!" (7:25). 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.