

## Romans 7:15-25

July 9, 2017

In Romans 7 St. Paul captures the dilemma of the children of God this side of heaven. We are both saint and sinner. If you're into Latin, *simul justus et peccator*. At the same time justified and a sinner. If you're into movies, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or *Norman Bates*. If you're into psychology, it's a split personality. As a friend of mine put it, it's two men fighting inside. As children of God and heirs of heaven, we are saved by grace and filled with the Holy Spirit. In our hearts we want to do what is right but on the other hand, we are still in the body, which is filled with sinful lusts and desires. Remember when Jesus said, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out"? He wasn't advocating amputation as the way to salvation. He was trying to get us to understand how deeply and pervasively we are corrupted by sin to our very core.

Are you willing to be honest with the depth of the problem of sin today? It's a scary thing to come face to face with your own sinfulness. Most people don't have a self-understanding that even comes close to Paul's understanding of himself. Our natural inclination is to seek to justify ourselves and pass any blame on to others. The inclination is to compare life's progress with others. Then we don't look so bad. Driving 120 on the freeway doesn't seem so bad after someone blows by you at 150. I'm just keeping up with traffic. Then you curse the guy doing 110, as if he's a worse sinner. The cashier gives you too much change back and you decide to keep it. With all the high prices, the store is ripping you off to begin with. A TV starlet was describing what she was looking for in a husband. He has to make me laugh. He has to make me feel good. He has to care about my needs. On and on it went. In the end it was all about me and my needs and wants and desires. Galileo was wrong. The earth does not revolve around the sun. Everything, revolves around her and she is the center of the universe. We look at descriptions like that and we thank God that we are so much better but that's only because we are not willing to be honest.

In our text today Paul invites us to get brutally honest with ourselves. Are you ready to do what AA says in step four? It's called a fearless moral inventory. How bad is it in the deepest recesses of my heart? Do I comprehend why I do the things I do? Before you answer, consider this: Why is it that we pray with Luther every morning, "Help me this day to live without sin," and every evening have to say, "Lord, forgive me ..."? In the Gospel for today Jesus invites all who are weary and burdened to come to Him and find rest for their souls. What does "weary and burdened" refer to? Sometimes we're tired after a hard day and want to lay our weariness before the Lord. Sometimes the worries and cares of this life get to be more than we can carry and we long to know that Jesus is with us. Sometimes our griefs and sorrows start to overwhelm us and drive us to despair.

We don't want to minimize these burdens as inconsequential or unimportant. Many people carry heavy burdens for months and years. Illnesses that are chronic and debilitating, mental illness that's the hardest to cope with of all because other people don't understand. But there's another burden that wearies us without mercy. It is the burden of our sinfulness, the wretchedness that we see in us that fights against our new nature relentlessly. We really are two people fighting inside, the Old Adam and the New Adam. Only a Christian can begin to see how bad our situation really is. I say it because without Christ, peering into the depravity of sin is too personally painful to bear. As a Christian, I also know that whatever darkness sin brings, I have rescue, so I can look bravely into the pit. An unbeliever can't bear to look that deeply, because all he can see in the darkness is his own doom.

When Paul takes a dead honest look at his sinfulness, it is almost too much for him to bear. What does he see? He sees that even outwardly good deeds are prompted by bad motives. Even when he does what is outwardly good and upright, it is often tainted and stained by wrong motives. Let me give you an example by asking you a question. How many of you have bought a hospital foundation lottery ticket? There's no shortage of them. How many of you bought the ticket, not because of the allure of the prizes, but to support the foundation? How much of it was selflessness and how much of it was the new BMW on the cover of the brochure? If you really just wanted to support the hospital, why not just give them \$100? And if you did that, was your motive a tax deduction? Was the motive bragging rights in front of your friends? Did you want to boast before God? Was it so you could feel good and warm inside? That's a selfish motive too. I'm not doing it for others, I'm doing it for me, so I can feel better

The harsh truth is that without faith, our motives are always tainted. And even with faith, our sinfulness is always there, trying to get its hairy toe in the door, and our motives are still tainted and less than pure. That's part of the burden of sin that afflicts us. As hard as we might try to get out from under its influence, that "what's in it for me"

attitude of our sinful nature is always right there, crouching at the door. Picture yourself as a Zebra: are you black with white stripes, or white with black stripes? Is our fallen nature such that we are mostly good and holy, with just a touch of sin here and there? Or is our fallen nature such that we are totally corrupt and dead in sin, and the only thing that can rescue us is the cross? This side of heaven we are beset by two opposite but equally deadly thought patterns. One is a false contentment that we are living morally responsible lives, that God must love me because I'm so good. The other is despair as we remember our sins and reason that God couldn't love me. The devil loves to remind me that I am such a poor excuse for a Christian. I fail to bring forth good works to the glory of my Lord and Saviour. Despite my baptism and my new life in Christ, the wrong I do is only outweighed by my failure to do good. We are frustrated and filled with despair over private sins and thoughts that convict and condemn us.

It shouldn't surprise us that sinful thoughts, desires, words and deeds ooze from every pore of our bodies. We live self-absorbed lives under the mantra of what's in it for me. Our sinful nature resists every effort to be quieted and subdued. What should surprise and delight us is when, by God's power working through Word and Sacrament, that we are able to rise above our inborn nature once in a while do what is pleasing to God. The rescue from our sin and our accusing conscience is found only in Jesus our Saviour. God actually has two rescues in mind. First, He rescues us from our failures through confession and absolution where He grants us the forgiveness of sins. Then, He promises a future resurrection deliverance from this body of death. That's the beauty of God's promise for you. *"He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ"*

If you are feeling the weight of this sinful nature, you are not alone. Consider how Scripture describes the heroes of faith. Abraham grew impatient for God to give him a child in his old age, so he took a concubine. He doubted God's ability to protect him from those attracted to his wife, so he lied to protect himself. David committed adultery and then murder to cover his sin. In pride he conducted a census just to see how great his kingdom had become. Solomon took many wives who led him into idolatry. Peter denied Jesus three times. In the mission field of the early church, John Mark, in his fear, abandoned working with Paul and Barnabas. If these great saints could fail so, is it any wonder that evil assails us too?

Paul understood this when he wrote, *"We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us."* The hymn writer understood it when he wrote, *"The good in me to Thee I trace."* Our failure to avoid evil is not the end of us. The battle that continues within us is evidence of the Holy Spirit at work. If He wasn't there in your heart and my heart, there would be no battle, no daily struggle. The reality of the struggle gives proof of the reality of the Spirit's indwelling. But now, what about this danger? What if I don't experience the struggle? What if I'm not feeling the heat of the battle?

How many times have we made resolutions with good intentions, but failed to accomplish them? The harder we try, the more our frustration grows, and the more our failure is apparent. Satan reminds us of our past failures to try and discourage us from future attempts to do his will. He uses our failure to breed doubts about whether our baptism into Christ has really accomplished anything. Am I really God's child? Am I really forgiven? What has Jesus done to rescue us from all this? He frees us from our past failures. We can be brutally honest and come to Him with our guilt, because we already know we have been forgiven.

I remember a cleanup day in the Nursery School a few years ago. We took everything out of the storage room and it almost filled the big room downstairs. We shook our heads in disbelief. How could all that stuff have been in that little room? But we were brave to be ruthless and throw out everything we didn't need. Why? We knew we could put it all in the neighbour's dumpster! When Jesus brings us forgiveness, He also brings us something else. He brings the power of His resurrection. Take the power of His resurrection and add it to our complete helplessness and weakness. Do you know what you get ... the ability to do far more than we could ever do in our own imagined strength. When I am weak, then I am strong. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength. Should we just throw in the towel and forget about living a Christian life?

We need to give up the idea of trying to do it by our own power, our own effort, our own good intentions or personal resolutions. We need to depend on Christ and His strength to accomplish His will in our lives. God's Word helps us to understand that we are at the same time saint and sinner. We can expect to fail from time to time. We should not make excuses for our sins, but neither do we need to drag around a load of guilt. The guilt from all our failures, even tomorrow's failures has already been nailed to the cross. God's Word also helps us understand each other as saint and

sinner. As sisters and brothers in Christ, we will hurt and grieve one another at times, sometimes in ways we don't even realize. We need to be forgiving of each other as Jesus is of us. This applies in the church. It applies in your home and in your family.

Scripture would have us recognize two truths today: This is normal life for justified sinners in the church on earth. This side of heaven we still carry around the sinfulness we were born with. We will not escape this body of death until we bury it in the grave. For this we have the blessings of forgiveness and new life every day. The second truth is this: Jesus has rescued us from slavery to our sinful nature and He will finally rescue us when He calls us home. Only in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come will we find complete relief. Until then, we live under grace. Until then, God's Spirit in us continues to give us power to turn from sin and live for Jesus. Until then, we cling to the cross and we rejoice in the empty tomb