

The Sin Which Remains

Romans 7: 7–25¹

Serious and Outrageous.

In the gospel of Luke, chapter 18, Jesus

⁹ ...told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:

¹⁰ “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’

¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’

¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” ^{Luke 18:9–14 ESV}

I come back to this story fairly often, because it’s just so indicative of who we are, or at least who we think we are, in the sight of God when it comes to sin and righteousness. See, the problem was not that one man was a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. There was nothing inherently wrong with either. Nicodemus was “a man of the Pharisees”², and Levi (we commonly know him as Matthew), was called from the tax booth, and immediately threw a big party for Jesus with all of his tax collector buddies.³ And in Luke 3, when some of those tax collectors came to John to be baptized, he didn’t exhort them to quit their jobs. He simply said, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.”⁴ So, this story is not about either social standing or affiliation with the “in-crowd”.

Nor is it about the reality that as a Pharisee, the one man made a practice of certain religious observances which were actually commanded in the Law of God.

¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get. ^{’ Luke 18:12 ESV}

said the Pharisee, and that was a good thing. It’s not even about the fact that a sinner dared to go to church and pray. That’s always a good thing too.

The problem is, there were two sinners in the story—one just happened to be a tax collector, and the other a Pharisee, but that really doesn’t matter much—but only one of them was ready to face the fact of the matter, and without the knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God. As Calvin wrote:

¹ All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

² John 3:1.

³ Luke 5:28–29.

⁴ Luke 3:12–13.

Each of us must, then, be so stung by the consciousness of his own unhappiness as to attain at least some knowledge of God. Thus, from the feeling of our own ignorance, vanity, poverty, infirmity, and—what is more—depravity and corruption, we recognize that the true light of wisdom, sound virtue, full abundance of every good, and purity of righteousness rest in the Lord alone. To this extent we are prompted by our own ills to contemplate the good things of God; **and we cannot seriously aspire to him before we begin to become displeased with ourselves.**⁵

That of course is the root of the thing. The tax collector, understanding that he was a sinner and throwing himself on the mercy of God, could aspire to know God and to experience His grace. The Pharisee, trusting in himself that he was righteous and, therefore, treating others with contempt, really had no need for God.

And this is important. As we have made our way through the book of Romans to date, we have talked a lot about sin (some might say, “too much”), but we’ve been talking a lot about sin because Romans has a lot to say about sin, and if we are honest with ourselves—if we are not the sort of people who stand off to the side and say, “God, I think you that I am not like other men...”—then we see it in ourselves and we know that it’s something that needs to be addressed. The Apostle, John, writing to those who know the Father, and whose sins have been forgiven,⁶ said,

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ^{1 John 1:8} ESV

And that’s all of us; Pharisees and publicans alike. But worse still,

¹⁰ If we say we have not sinned, **we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.** ^{1 John 1:10} ESV

So, this is serious. The Canons of Dort also remind us:

Although that power of God strengthening and preserving true believers in grace is more than a match for the flesh, yet those converted are not always so activated and motivated by God that in certain specific actions they cannot by their own fault depart from the leading of grace, be led astray by the desires of the flesh, and give in to them. For this reason they must constantly watch and pray that they may not be led into temptations. When they fail to do this, not only *can* they be carried away by the flesh, the world, and Satan into sins, **even serious and outrageous ones**, but also by God’s just permission they sometimes *are* so carried away...⁷

The Very Thing I Hate.

This is the force of our text this morning as well. Romans 7 is about the struggle that exists in every believer, and Paul states it in so many creative ways. Verses 7 – 11:

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion & 2*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 36–37.

⁶ Cf. 1 John 2:12–14.

⁷ “The Canons of Dort, 5.4”, ed., CRCNA (Christian Reformed Church in North America), *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 139, (emphasis mine).

⁷ ...if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.¹⁰ The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. Romans 7:7–11 ESV

Then verse 14 and following:

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. Romans 7:14–15 ESV

18 and 19 too:

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. Romans 7:18–19 ESV

And finally, verses 21 – 23:

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. Romans 7:21–23 ESV

Now I dealt with this at some length back before the holidays, and I don't want to do it again, but remember, this is the Apostle Paul talking here; this is Christ's own chosen instrument to reach the nations; this is the guy who the Holy Spirit used to give us a good bit of the New Testament. He's the one, speaking in his own voice, who wrote:

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. Romans 7:18–19 ESV

I point this out because there are at least 4 misinterpretations of this passage that we need to address before we move on to Romans chapter 8.

First, some have understood this text to be referring to the experience of an unbeliever who has not yet come to Christ, as if this describes the struggle of conscience in every person who ever lived. The problem with that is verse 22. Paul wrote:

²² For I **delight in the law of God**, in my inner being... Romans 7:22 ESV

Unbelievers do not do this. In fact, according to Romans 3, verse 18,

¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Romans 3:18 ESV

And in 1 Corinthians, chapter 2:

¹⁴ The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. ^{1 Corinthians 2:14} ESV

So, “the natural person” (the person outside of Christ), does not delight in the law of God. Romans 7 cannot be addressing that.

Another interpretation holds that this is the experience of a person in the process of conversion. So, once again an unbeliever, but one on the verge of turning to Christ. Of course, the same problem applies, and again, the text will not bear it. Romans 7, verse 4, makes clear that Paul is writing here, as in the rest of the book, to the saints—believers in Christ Jesus. We looked at this back in November.

⁴ Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. ^{Romans 7:4} ESV

Which is pretty much self explanatory.

The third possible misinterpretation is thinking that this refers to the “carnal Christian”—the Christian who hasn’t experienced some sort of second blessing, or the filling of the Holy Spirit. The rationale is that it’s possible to become a Christian by grace through faith in Jesus Christ without having received the indwelling Spirit of God, or in some cases completely apart from His work. Such a person (if there were such persons) would have the desire to do right, because they have been saved, but not the power. This view holds that in once a person has fully received and been filled with the Spirit, we move beyond Romans 7 and into the victorious life of Romans chapter 8.

The things is, Romans 8 itself precludes this understanding. Romans 8, verse 9:

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. **Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.** ^{Romans 8:9} ESV

A person without the Holy Spirit is by definition, not a Christian. Salvation itself is the work of God’s Holy Spirit by the power of the Gospel, and if you belong to Christ, the Spirit “dwells in you.” These things go together. There is not a work of grace for sanctification that is separate from the grace by which we are saved.

⁶ And I am sure of this... ^{Philippians 1:6} ESV

wrote the Apostle,

...that he who began a good work in you... ^{Philippians 1:6} ESV

(He who saved you by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone),

...will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. ^{Philippians 1:6 ESV}

Wretched Man that I Am.

The final misinterpretation would be the idea that Romans 7 is meant to describe the constant state of every Christian every moment and every day; the idea that we should go through life with a constant awareness of this struggle within; that we should be walking around every single day, beating our chests and saying, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”⁸

I remember years ago some people called this “pond scum theology”; the idea that we were totally depraved, we are totally depraved, and we always will be totally depraved, so we can just walk around like Christian Eyores (you remember the donkey from the old Winnie the Pooh stories). Then, when someone comes along and says, “But I thought you were a Christian,” we can respond, “Yeah, well, it’s a dirty job, but somebody’s got to do it.” But, as James Jordan says, Paul is describing a state of affairs that is sometimes true for every Christian,

“...sometimes you will feel this way when God is working on you...”⁹

(when you feel the convicting power of the Holy Spirit at work in your life).

And sometimes you won’t feel this way. Sometimes you’ll just be having a good time sinning and you won’t feel any contradiction at all. And sometimes you’ll be enjoying the fellowship of God and you won’t feel any contradiction at all.”¹⁰

This is not describing something that we are meant to feel all the time, then, and if we do, there’s something wrong. If we do, then we really do need to grasp the conclusion of the matter in verse 25. On the other hand, if we never feel this way, if we can sin and not notice it—if we can sin, and just slough it off without repentance and confession—if we can go to the Lord in prayer and say, “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector,” then we have missed the point and we will return from our prayers unjustified.

So, what are we to do? Well, as I said in November, we are meant to come to this place where we understand that we have grievously sinned against all God’s commandments, have never kept any of them (at least, not by our own strength), and, concerning the flesh, are still inclined toward all evil.¹¹ This was true of the apostle, and it’s true of us—all of us.

When someone points a finger at you or me and says, “You’re a sinner; you have sinned,” absolutely the only thing that we can do is say, “Yup, that’s true. I surely am.” This is, in fact, the *only* possible response for a Christian. For

⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ^{1 John 1:8 ESV}

⁸ Romans 7:24, King James Version.

⁹ James Jordan, n.d. *Romans: A 10-Part Series (audio book)*, (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, canonplus.com), accessed February 1, 2025. <https://canonplus.com/tabs/none/audiobooks/3904>.

¹⁰ Jordan, *Romans*, <https://canonplus.com/tabs/none/audiobooks/3904>.

¹¹ Cf. CRCNA, “The Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 23”, *Ecumenical Creeds*, 38.

But there is, an answer. We've been considering it since we began the book of Romans, but it's summarized for us in Romans 8, verses 1 and 2:

¹ There is therefore now **no condemnation**... Romans 8:1-2 ESV

How much condemnation?

¹ There is...**no condemnation** for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. Romans 8:1-2 ESV

So, when the accuser of the brothers comes to us, even in the guise of an angel of light, we may well cry out

²⁴ O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Romans 7:24 NKJV12

But then verse 25:

²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Romans 7:25 ESV