

July 3, 2011

Romans 7: 15- 25 & Matthew 11: 28-30

“Liberty”

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Paul’s letter to the Romans is known best for its thorough, precise and intricate theological exposition of the good news about Jesus Christ. Unlike Paul’s other letters, this letter has little to say about Paul’s personality and relationship with a particular church. You may know that Paul writes this letter to Rome before he has met them in person. But here in chapter 7, Paul recounts his pre-Christian struggle as a faithful Jew with his own sinfulness. We hear in this passage his sincere and earnest desire to obey the law, please God, and act in ways that are consistent with God’s law. Paul earnestly wanted to love God and love his neighbor as himself. But he did the thing that he did not want to do. In the course of living his life of faith, he perceived another power at work in his life.

Sold as a slave to sin, Sin was his master. He was completely powerless to resist the sin that was in work in his body. Sin kept him captive and although he wanted the law of God to be his master, he wanted to be honest that in his life he was slave to another law – the law of sin and death. Paul very personally struggles with sin and its consequences in a very serious way.

In our day and age there is a temptation to trivialize sinfulness or to over emphasize other people’s sinfulness. It seems that the primary sin of our day is that we don’t want other people to infringe upon our liberties. People can do as they please without judgment, as long as it does not affect me and what I want to do. We also tend to trivialize sin when we talk about sin and its consequences in very superficial ways. I have often been troubled when we talk about sinfulness in relationship to how much chocolate we eat or having extra dessert. Paul’s discussion is that sinfulness is much more weighty and the scriptures take our sinful nature very seriously.

The Bible has lots of ways of describing our sinful nature, its consequence, and how sin affects our relationship with God. In the Bible, sin is described as rebellion against God’s revealed purposes. Sin is also described as Idolatry – worship of created things instead of the Creator. Sin in the scriptures is also considered separation from God and exile from the life that God intends. Sin is also described as brokenness – life shattered into a hundred pieces and never to be whole again. Sin is compared to a disease – a life threatening disease working the power of death in body and spirit.

But here, Paul describes sin as “Missing the Mark”. If you’ve ever aimed a rifle at a target, only to miss the bulls eye; if you’ve ever followed someone’s great recipe, and it never turns out quite the same; if you’ve ever sliced a drive into the woods, you know what it means to miss the mark. You intend one thing, you envision things as they should be, you sincerely, with every fiber of your being strive with all your might to do right, and despite all this, you fall short. Or as Paul says, “For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.”

As a pastor I have seen up close and personal people's struggles with "missing the mark." This is not just about extra dessert. This is about people I have seen struggle with addictions. Addictions that are hard core, life destroying addictions. And I have watched as people wrestle with every fiber of their being to find courage or to find their way out and to find new life. It is amazing to watch this moment by moment struggle that is so intense that I can barely imagine it. And yet some of these people with addictions would describe a sense of powerlessness. An inability to do the very thing that they wish they could do.

We ourselves know the things that make for justice and peace and yet all of our daily decisions do not seem to portray those very things that we know are right to do.

Sometimes we even seem powerless in our relationships with one another. We know how we ought to relate but we just can't seem to do it. I remember talking to a friend a couple of weeks ago, and he was getting ready to go back for a visit with his father and he was saying, "You know I will spend that whole drive saying to myself over and over again, 'Don't lose your temper. Don't take the bait. Don't get involved with that mess. Be gentle. Be kind. Don't ruffle the waters.'" And then I cross the threshold of the house, and it's like I'm 15 all over again and we're rehearsing all the same old stuff." Powerless to change anything.

We identify closely with Paul's struggle here. We may be Presbyterian, but when we read this passage, it makes us want to stand up and say, "Amen," "Tell it brother," because Paul is telling our story. This is how we are. We feel this emotion. We know this struggle. We are just as perplexed with Paul about our own behavior. Because we do have deep desire to please God, and yet a deep inability to do it. When Paul comes to the point in this passage where he most fully expresses his struggle and his pain, he cries out, "What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body of death?" And his question hangs out there.

It is interesting that Paul recounts his struggle under the law before he was a follower of Christ. Paul had the very deep personal memory and it does illustrate the futility of trying to please God apart from the renewing work of Jesus Christ. Earlier in Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul affirms that the believer in Christ, is a new creation. Those who place faith in Christ are no longer slaves to sin. In Romans 6:17-18 he writes, "But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness." [Romans 6:22] "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap is to holiness and the result is eternal life."

This is why Paul in his passage says, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" To the memory of Paul's hopelessness and to the memory of his struggle with sin, he said, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Because in Christ Paul has found his true liberty. For in this statement Paul recognizes that he has been set free and

is no longer slave to his sin but now is enslaved to God and no longer a servant to sin. This is what Jesus means when he said, "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls." Jesus knows that we are completely unable to deal with our sin. The yoke that we would choose for ourselves is self righteousness and legalism. The yoke that we would choose for ourselves is our effort to deal with sin or simply to just wish them away. But the yoke of Christ is to allow him to forgive and to take on this new and gentle yoke of Christ's righteousness.

If in Christ we have become slaves to righteousness, if in Christ we are at liberty and free from our sins, if we know in Christ the gentle yoke, then why does Paul's pre-Christian struggle with sin, and his heart breaking cry, "What a wretched man I am," sound so much like our current struggle? Why is this so much like my life right now?

Genuinely I can only answer this question for myself. Two things I thought of as to why this struggle seems so close for me.

1. Simple forgetfulness. I have simply forgotten who I belong to. I have forgotten that in Christ, I no longer belong to myself, but in life and in death I belong to my faithful savior. You see when I forget who I belong to, I start struggling against sin as one who is trying to follow the rules and earn favor with God. I am trying to make things right. It is forgetfulness that makes this struggle so real. Forgetfulness of what God has done for me.
2. And the other thing is hopelessness. Isn't there hopelessness in Paul's cry? "Who shall rescue me from the body of death"? See, I am burdened with hopelessness from time to time. I wonder, is God really able to make all things new? Is the resurrection real? Is God changing this world? Is God changing me? That hopelessness sometimes leads me to laziness. Ah, we are all sinners after all, why bother? I don't see God's new work taking place. I may as well throw in the towel and do as a please.

When we are being renewed in the image and likeness of our Lord Jesus Christ, this table is the answer to our forgetfulness and for our hopelessness. This table tells us who we really are and who Jesus really is. Jesus is the one that redeems us from our sins. It is Jesus that sets us free. Free in a way that we are incapable of becoming on our own. A love that is so great that it must set us free. This is a table of Liberty and remember it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. This is a table of Liberty, renewed in the hope that God is making all things new. All things new, including each one in this room.

Friends, remember to whom you belong and in whom you have hope. Have your faith and hope renewed at this table for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen