

“Thank be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Romans 7:15-25a

A sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

In this season of Pentecost we have been looking at the Book of Romans with the counterfoil of the Gospel of Matthew. Paul writes in Romans 3-6 that we are free from sin and death. That comes out most directly in 6:5 in that remarkable verse: “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” That is repeated in Romans 6:8 and 11. Having gone that far, we ask: “In that case, am I secure forever? Nothing can happen? I don’t sin anymore”? It says in 1 John 3:6, and 9 that the Christian never sins: “No one who abides in Him sins” (1 John 3:6). And “No one born of God sins” (1 John 3:9). We may think we have eternal security. After all, there it is in the Bible.

On the other hand, as Paul writes in Romans 3:8 and 6:1 and 15, people will say: “Let us sin that grace may abound.” The answer Paul gives is that if you go that way, you don’t get it. We are really slaves to sin or slaves to our Lord Jesus Christ. We have a different kind of freedom.

With that background, we come to Romans 7:1-6 (which is not part of the text but a part of the argument Paul has about the law). Romans 7:1-6 says that the law is related to us the way a married couple is tied to one another. As long as they are both alive, there is a bond. When one dies, the other spouse is free. In this case, Paul’s argument in 7:6 is that we are free from the law. We are free from the authority of the spouse. He means the law of Moses. He says (without the devastating clarity there is in Romans 10:4) that Christ is the end of the law. In Galatians 3:25 Paul uses a different but similar analogy. In that time a boy was under the authority and guardianship of a slave. Paul writes that when a boy grows up, he is no longer under the slave who has been leading him but is now free from that authority.

In Romans 7:7-25 Paul writes that the law is all around us. This is emphasized by Paul in Romans 7:19: “The good that I would I do not, and the evil that I would not, that I practice” (KJV). How do we get out of this? This dilemma, this ambiguity, is not the way people commonly understand our situation.

Classical economics, going back to Adam Smith in 1776 and then Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, has said: Human beings work rationally. We do what is good for ourselves, as we see it. We go for the facts of the matter. We avoid pain and

seek pleasure. We are practical and that's how life works and that's how economics works. A modern philosopher, Peter Skinner, has said we are hard-wired to be rational.

Charles Dickens wrote a novel called *Hard Times*. One of the key characters is Thomas Gradgrind, a teacher. He teaches his students as if they were empty vessels into which he pours facts. You know the facts and life will work out well if you just follow the facts. In the later part of the novel Thomas Gradgrind's daughter has a nervous breakdown because there has been no concern for her feelings. It is really a satire on the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill.

As several books in economics have concluded: Human beings are predictably irrational.

This is a subset of what modern psychology has said about happiness and what is it to be happy. This perspective is that we are really good people if we could just figure out a way to be happy. But lo and behold some have discovered that it is boring to be happy and what people really want is thrills and excitement and meaning.

In Christianity we know "the dark night of the soul." When we think about life in the middle of the night, we wonder what's the meaning of it all? Where is it going?

The Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno talked about the tragic sense of life. That is to say, there is another dimension. We are not simply animals with instincts, and that is all there is to us. Rather, there is the tragic, the human dilemma.

There is a famous story by Frank Stockton called "The Lady and the Tiger." There were two doors. Behind one of the doors there was a tiger. Behind the other door was a beautiful lady. The hero had to decide which door he would open. The woman who loved him was sitting up next to the ruler and she knew what was behind which door. She had to decide what signal to give him because if he opened the door where the woman was, she would lose him to the other woman. But if she told him to open the door where the tiger was, he would be eaten by the tiger. There he stands looking for her signal, wondering which door to choose? That's where the story ends.

That's again: "The good I would I do not; the evil that I would not, that I practice." What do I do? How do I sort it out? Popular psychology says we can do good

because we really know what's good and evil. We have something called "conscience."

Paul mentions conscience in Romans 2:15. He writes about conscience indirectly without the word in Romans 14 and 1 Cor 8-10. But conscience is not the voice of God within, although people think so. They are really thinking of Pinocchio and Jiminy Cricket, who says: "Always let your conscience be your guide."

Conscience is not the voice of God. It's really something that says there's good and evil but the content of that is determined by the culture around us. We think that we know, and we can determine, and that we can judge what is good and evil for others and for ourselves, even though we know that sentence: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." We know it, but we say: "But my intentions are good. I don't know about others, but my intentions are really good."

We are caught as sinful human beings and we think that we can keep the law. About others we're not so sure and we judge them. It says in Matthew 7:1: "Don't judge others." Significantly Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4:5 where he is arguing with his opponents: "It is a very small thing to me that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me."

We still think we're not supposed to judge others. That's the popular culture of tolerance. But can we judge ourselves? Well, no. What this text in Romans 7 is doing is pointing out as we think we can keep the law, we end up in spiritual pride or spiritual despair. We're caught. Paul puts it another way in Galatians 5:17: "The flesh battles against the spirit and the spirit battles against the flesh." Our sins of omission and our sins of commission are upon us even though we say we're alright.

How does the text end? In 7:24-25 Paul writes: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Instead of this passage of Paul's writing, a very literary and catchy line, what's the bottom line? The bottom line is to go back to Romans 6. We are 100% saved, totally now, not somewhere later because he has done it and has made us his own in Baptism.

At the same time we are totally caught in ourselves because we look to ourselves, and we are tempted. We fall into thinking we can know, we can judge, especially we can judge ourselves. But the Christian life is totally by faith, by hiddenness, by trusting in him, not in us. It is summed up most remarkably by Luther in the Large

Catechism when he writes about Baptism: Therefore we return every day to our Baptism (LC 4:65; Tappert 445: "Thus the Christian life is nothing else than a daily Baptism, once begun and ever continued."). That's why we say with Paul: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:25). Or to use another verse by Paul: "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:57). Amen