

## I. Introduction

**If you have your Bibles**, you can turn to Romans chapter 7. That's where we'll be this morning. If you don't have a bible, I'd love for you to grab one from one of the shelves over in our welcome area. If you need a bible at home - that is our gift to you! Please take it and read it.

**Before we get into Romans**, I need to take just a minute and talk with you about something else. Pastor Kyle and I usually preach every other week, but he just took two weeks in a row to allow me to focus on some other responsibilities in the church and I'm about to take two weeks in a row to do the same for him. So, the last time I preached was three weeks ago. And three weeks ago when I was preaching I was foolish and said something really wicked. And because I was foolish publicly in front of the church, I need to repent publicly to you. I was talking about our union with Christ and how it is like when a person gains wealth through their own hard work and ingenuity: they gained all their wealth on their own, but when someone marries that wealthy person they gain all that wealth not through their hard work and ingenuity, but only by virtue of their union to another. That's what our union with Christ is like. That's true and that's glorious. But then, after I made that analogy, I made a joke. It wasn't a part of my notes or my preparation. It was off-hand. In the moment I saw a chance for a cheap, sarcastic comment and I took it. It was about Jeff Bezos and his ex-wife, Mackenzie Scott. I said that the only reason the world cares about who Mackenzie Scott is was because she had been married to Jeff Bezos. Now... not only is that not true about Ms. Scott – because I spoke out of ignorance about her accomplishments. She's very personally accomplished – But it also communicated something that isn't true about anyone: that a person should be cared about only because of what they've accomplished or who they are connected with. That is not true. A person should be cared about because they are made in the image of God and God cares about them no matter who they know or what they've done. And I'm sorry that I made a half-thinking reach for sarcasm, and in so doing modeled to you a lie from the pit of hell. And Ms. Scott, you have no reason to ever hear this message, but the internet is a big place and so if you ever hear this: please forgive me for my sin against you.

### Intro the Message

Now... I promise you that I would have said that no matter what passage I was preaching on today. That was not a contrived introduction to the message. But my goodness, does it connect:

<sup>15</sup> For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing... <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

When I read Romans 7:14-25 on I have two major feelings, and maybe you do too. The first is, *What is Paul talking about?* And the second is, *I know exactly what Paul is talking about!* I have to meditate and ask questions and parse out Paul's logic and theology and sometimes his sentences are just difficult to understand. But when I read verse 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." I understand that on a deep, experiential level. I hate my sin! And yet I sin!

I think that every human being knows the war of a divided heart. We want one thing and we do another. We get what we want and find that we don't want it anymore. Our desires compete with each

other and contradict one another. I want to be healthy *and* I eat french fries. I want to be loved *and* I push people away. I want to be honest *and* I lie. We are always doing the things we don't want. Our desires are a sea of turmoil within us. And Romans 7 doesn't just empathize with our experience. It tells us something hopeful about our divided hearts: **we are fighting a war within and the only way to victory is through faith in Jesus Christ.**

Now we need to dig into that sentence. Because on its own, it might land on you like an oversimplification or a trite, churchy phrase. But that truth is the difference between despair and joy today. So we need to unpack that sentence. And to do that I want to ask two questions that will help us look at Romans 7:14-25. So the two questions we need to ask are: (1) What is making our hearts so divided? (2) What kind of person could be so divided?

Before we dive into those questions, I'm going to pray for the Spirit to wake up our hearts to the gospel once more. Would you pray with me? *Father, we come to your Word as divided people. Full of warring desires and distractions. Me, not least of all. Please send your Spirit to calm and comfort and quicken our hearts and draw our gaze to Christ. Amen.*

The first question we should ask is...

## II. What is making our hearts so divided?

Maybe Paul makes the division of the human heart most clear in verse 18-19 where he says: "I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."

A moment ago I said that every human being knows the war of a divided heart. And that's true. But here in Romans Paul has been teaching about more than wanting to be healthy and then shoving 18 mcdonalds fries into your mouth at once. That struggle is real, believe me. But it's only a fluttering symptom of a deeper battle. In verse 20, Paul paints an even clearer picture of the war within: "if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but **sin** that dwells within me."

He says there is "me" and then there is something in me that causes me to do what I do not want. And he says that "something" is evil and sin. And it dwells within us. Sin doesn't just act upon us as an outside force that can be rebuffed or shrugged off or brushed away. It rises up from us. It's deeply rooted in us.

Now, leading up to our passage today Paul has been talking about what it takes for people to get in right relationship with God. And he's been talking about how the works of the law cannot make you right with God. No outward adherence, no show of zeal, no religious practice can make you right with God. It is only by faith that you can be saved. And earlier in chapter 7, Paul writes about the law's relationship with sin, He says, "<sup>10</sup> The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. <sup>11</sup> For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me." In other words, when he truly understood the heart of God's law not only did it expose his wickedness, it aggravated it and provoked it.

So is it the law's fault that our hearts are divided by sin? That's the objection Paul is dealing with right before our passage for today starts. He says in 13, "Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me..."

This is why Paul says in verse 14, "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin." Another way to say "the law is spiritual" would be to say, "the law is *of the Spirit*" the law is from God; the law is good, Paul says, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. What's the problem in our lives? It's not that God's law has come and put something new in us. The problem of our divided hearts is rooted in our sinful nature.

This week I heard a really vivid picture of this. I listened to the audiobook "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" by Robert Louis Stevenson. In the story Dr. Jekyll is a mild-mannered, upstanding citizen, but he recognizes that he's not all good. He sees in his life a duality. He's a decent man, but there are also some embarrassing, unseemly parts of his nature that he can never leave behind. And he thinks that if he could just separate out the parts of himself that are upright from the parts of him that are more debased, he could really be free to do all the things he aspired to do, but never could attain because of his darker side. So he concocts a potion to give release to his bad side so that the good side will be unencumbered. But when he takes the potion and turns into Mr. Hyde for the first time he says to his horror, "I knew myself, at the first breath of this new life, to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil and the thought, in that moment, braced and delighted me like wine."<sup>1</sup> You see the law is like the potion that exposes what's really inside of us. And what's inside of us is far more wicked than we could ever imagine.

So, what's the source of our divided desires? It's our own sin. And it is not an outside force like the law that creates our sin, it rises up out of us because it dwells in us. Sin is what divides our hearts against God.

Now, the second question we need to answer is...

### **III. What *kind of person* could be so divided?**

You may not know this, but this part of Romans 7 has been the subject of an incredible amount of debate among students of the Bible. And the big question that gets debated has to do with whose experience Paul is describing. He writes as if he's talking about himself, but is he writing as Paul the Christian, the apostle-missionary-pastor-writer-of-most-of-the-NT Paul? Or is writing as if he is the Pre-Christian, unbelieving Paul? Christian or non-Christian? What kind of person could be so divided?

Some read the passage and think that it would be impossible for a Christian to say things like...

→ I am of the flesh, sold under sin (14)

→ 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. (18)

These are things that seem to contradict the Christian life and so they take Paul to be describing his life before his conversion to Christ. And there are many good-hearted followers of Jesus who take

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde"

that view. It's not a preposterous view to take. It doesn't necessarily lead you into false teaching. Most people who take that view would probably say, "*this text* isn't about Christian experience, but Christians can still have experiences like this, where a believer does what he does not want."

So some believe Paul is writing about the experience of a non-Christian, but I want to make the case that the kind of person who could be so divided is a Christian! I think Paul is talking about his own present-tense Christian life. Here's are some of the most important reasons why:

- It's true that it would be out of the ordinary for a Christian to describe themselves as a slave sold under sin, but it's not totally divorced from how the NT talks about a Christian's relationship to sin. For example, in Galatians 5:1 he says to Christians, "For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Or in Romans 6:12, "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions." In both of those examples, it's not out of the question that Paul is saying that in the moment of failure, we reverted to acting like a slave to a master, even though we've been emancipated from slavery.
- In Romans 7 Paul talks about the Law of God like Christian.
  - ◆ Not only does Paul say the Law is *of the Spirit* in verse 14, and "good" in verse 16, but in verse 22 he says, "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being..." That's not the way Paul talks about pre-conversion hearts. People who are not alive to God do not delight in the law in their inner being.
- In Romans 7 Paul talks about himself as if he is a Christian
  - ◆ In verse 15 Paul says, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." That is not how people who don't have faith in Christ think about their sin. Paul says in Romans one, they worship and serve created things instead of the creator. They love their sin! They're blind to it's evil.
  - ◆ In verse 18 Paul says, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh." That is a sober, humbled view of oneself. And it doesn't sound like the way Paul described himself before Christ in other places on the NT where he is advancing in Judaism, zealous for the traditions of the pharisees, the pharisee of pharisees. Pre-conversion Paul was confident! But this Paul says, "I know that nothing good dwells in me." It reminds me of the parable of the pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18. The Pharisee stood in the temple to pray and said, "God, thank you that I am not like other men..." But the tax collector said, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." And Jesus said, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other." (18:11-14)
  - ◆ Finally, only a Christian can say, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Ephesians 2 says, you were dead in your sins. You can't see your wretchedness unless the Spirit of God wakes you up to see your sin and your need for God! Only a Christian can look at the war of desire taking place in his chest and say, "I'm wretched! Save me!"

What kind of person could be so divided? A Christian person!

So put that in your pipe and smoke it next time you're lying in bed and you're wracked with uncertainty: *How could I be saved if I've done that? How could I be saved if I keep struggling and*

*stumbling and being defeated by sin?* When that fear dries out your heart and drains you of your joy, you let the river of Romans 7 flow over your dried up heart and know that there is room at the table of Christianity for a Christian who yet again does the very thing they hate. And preach to yourself what John Newton, the former slaver and author of Amazing Grace preached: "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."

Now - hear me! This cannot mean that we become complacent or accepting of our struggle with sin. We don't lose a battle with sin and then say, well that's me. I just do what I don't want to do. That's not the Christian life. Paul's point is not to give permission for us to live a defeated life. His point is to say that when we experience defeat, this is the Christian response! No covering up, no superficiality, no hypocrisy, no hiding our sin away - but honestly crying out "I'm a great sinner, but Christ you are a great savior."

#### **IV. Conclusion**

So we've asked two questions of Romans 7:14-25. What is making our hearts so divided? And What kind of person could be so divided? And we've seen that it is our indwelling sin that stirs up the war within and divides our hearts. And that the experience of a heart divided by indwelling sin is not in conflict with how the bible talks about your life as a Christian.

So, the last question we have to ask is so what? How should we then live?

#### **Live to Become What You Already Are**

To be a Christian means to live in the already-not-yet. We are not yet fully sanctified, we are not yet free from the thorns of the curse in this world. But in Christ God has already irrevocably, irreversibly declared that we are justified, adopted sons and daughters in his family, heirs with Christ, citizens of his kingdom. And that means that from the moment the Spirit woke you from death to life in Christ you have been on a journey of becoming in your flesh what you have already been declared to be. The NT is full of reminders of who you are in Christ, and commands to live like who you already are. Here are few:

1. Who you are in Christ: Romans 6:14, "Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace."
  - a. Command to live like who you are: Romans 6:12, "Do not let sin reign in your mortal body."
2. Who you are in Christ: Romans 6:18, "Having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."
  - a. Command to live like who you are: Romans 6:19, "Present your members as slaves to righteousness."
3. Who you are in Christ: Romans 6:6, "Our old self was crucified with Him."
  - a. Command to become new: Romans 6:11, "Consider yourselves to be dead to sin."
4. Colossians 3:9, "You laid aside the old self with its evil practices."
  - a. Ephesians 4:22 "Lay aside the old self"

5. Colossians 3:10, "You have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him."
  - a. "Ephesians 4:24, "Put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth."
6. Galatians 3:27, "All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ."
  - a. Romans 13:14, "But put on the Lord Jesus Christ."

When Paul says at the end of Romans 7, "So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind" He means for us as followers of Jesus to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, in meditation on these truths, letting the grace of God drive us toward the effort of putting sin to death even as we struggle with sin while we wait for him to fully complete the work he's begun in us.

### **Live with Joy**

I mentioned the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Robert Louis Stevenson gives a vivid picture of the war within the human heart in that story, but he misses the hope of the gospel. Dr. Jekyll tries and tries and tries with all his might to hold back Mr. Hyde's evil, but in the end Mr. Hyde takes over and the story ends in suicide. The war within us can only end in despair apart from Christ.

Theologian J.I. Packer tells the story of his conversion when he was a student in Oxford many years ago. When he came to Christ there was a lot of false teaching, especially the doctrine of perfectionism that teaches that it's possible for a Christian become fully sanctified in this life. As one pastor tells it, "Packer had a very sensitive conscience and could not deceive himself. He was not perfect and no matter how many times he reconsecrated himself to God there was still no perfection. He said it could easily have led him to suicide if it were not for [him learning about] the Biblical realism of 'indwelling sin' and the ongoing fight of faith and the glorious rest that comes from God's righteousness imputed to us in Christ by faith alone."

The war within us can only end in despair apart from Christ. But in Christ, wretched people that we are, we can say thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. My sin is paid for and forgiven, my sin has no claim on my life, my heart is awake to God, and one day every ounce of my flesh will be made new, fully willing and able to live with God in holiness. That is a reason to replace despair with deep, lasting joy.

That joy can be yours in Christ!

So with Paul, let's have an honest realism about our indwelling sin and our battle with it. But let the battle be punctuated with this victory cry: thanks be to God in Jesus Christ our Lord!