

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 9A)

July 6, 2014

Text: Romans 7:14–25a

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

I received a good deal of feedback about last week's sermon, particularly about the first part. Most of the feedback was joyous relief once they heard that their salvation rested in the Gospel of Jesus. As you may recall, I somewhat tongue and cheek, listed all kinds of things Christians should be doing in order live out their Christian lives of faith and obedience. It was quite a laundry list of conferences, disciplines, habits, and attitudes that are intended to assist believers in living a victorious, Christian life.

But alas, such things do not lead to salvation or greater sanctification, not if they are pursued under your own merits. Life under the Law leads to death, eternal death without hope of redemption and salvation.

The Law reveals God's good and gracious will for your lives. It is holy, righteous, and good. But sin, through the Law, brings death to all people. The more Law, the more commands of do's and don't's, the more sin. Living under the Law either produces deceived self-righteousness – I can be righteous on my own merits and strengths – or despairing resignation – I can't overcome sin so why bother. We cannot stand before God in a righteousness accomplished through the Law. It is simply impossible. The problem is not with God's Law but the sin that corrupts our human nature from the moment of conception.

Hence the need for Romans 7, one of the greatest, more important chapters in Holy Scripture. These inspired words accurately describe the relationship Christians have to God's Law. In addition, it most powerfully describes the daily struggle we Christians face as desire to live according to God's will and purposes even as we daily sin much and certainly deserve nothing but present and eternal punishment.

This may sound a bit odd to your Lutheran ears, but today's sermon is really about you. That ought to cause you to jump in your pews. Sermons are supposed to be about Jesus. Don't worry, we'll see how Jesus fits into Romans 7. But we need to talk about you first.

The problem is which “you” are we talking about? You, according to your sinful flesh as revealed by the Law? Or you according to your redeemed nature as revealed by the Gospel? As a Christian, you experience a cleavage, a mysterious divide, in your whole person. Your fleshly nature, according to vs. 14, is sold under sin. Paul is using the language of the slave market with these words. By contrast, your redeemed nature, your “inner being” as Paul calls it in vs. 22, is alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11) and released from the condemnation of the Law (Romans 5:1; 7:6). Which is the real you? Both of them are you: you are sold under sin and, at the same time, you are alive to God in the freedom of the Gospel.

Are you confused? So was the apostle Paul, at least to some extent. Look at vs. 15, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” Have you ever felt that conflict? I want to do the right thing. I even know what the right thing is. But I do the very thing I hate instead.

Have you ever found yourself scratching your head, wondering how on earth did I find myself doing or thinking or feeling this or that sinful thing? It’s almost as if it caught you unaware or off your guard. I didn’t wake up today with the intention of falling prey to that temptation. Then there are those times which you know and feel the temptations. You take every precaution: you pray, you read Scripture, you may even have received absolution for prior sins. And you find yourself caught anyway. You desire to do what is right and good and holy. But sin is constantly present; it’s the universal problem.

Consider vs. 17–18, “So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 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.” Your sinful nature cannot be reformed or rehabilitated into being anything other than sinful. Nothing good dwells in my flesh for it is sold under sin. And God’s Law makes that all the more visible.

Now this doesn’t mean that you do as much evil as possible. Perish the thought. But you must know that your sinful, fleshly nature will be with you until death. You will never be able to get rid of temptation or the frustrating, daily struggle against sin. The apostle Paul, in Romans 6, has declared that we are dead to sin and alive to God because of our baptism into Christ. Such is the powerful promise we have in Jesus. But the on-going presence of sin remains even though its dominion over you is broken.

Before the Gospel came to you in all its liberating power, you could not resist sin. You were dead to God and alive to sin. Now that you are filled with the Holy Spirit and walk in the promise of that your sins are forgiven, you struggle and fight against sin and your own sinful nature. Martin Luther keenly describes this daily struggle that only Christians have in his explanation to the 6th petition of the Lord's Prayer, "And lead us not into temptation." He writes, "We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us so that the devil, the world, and our sinful nature may not deceive us or mislead us into false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice."

The desire and will to live in obedience to God's Law is present in our hearts and minds. But the ability to do it is lacking. Therein lays the daily struggle of each and every Christian. With a certain measure of purposeful bluntness, I have told Christians that if they are struggling with sin, rest at ease and don't worry. Repent and live in the forgiveness of their sins; they're ok. If they aren't struggling with sin, however, be very afraid.

What kind of struggle should you be having as a Christian? Vs. 19–20, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me." The great disconnect, what I called a mysterious cleavage earlier, is created because of the sin that dwells within you. This is why baptized Christians need to hear the Gospel day after day, week after week, year after year. You struggle with sin. The war is waging in your hearts and minds. You need to hear that your sins are forgiven, that you stand at peace with God not because of your own keeping of God's Law but through the love and righteousness of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel is for sinners. The Gospel is for you, not only when you first came to faith, but now, at this moment in time. You Christians need to hear, more than anyone else, that you are forgiven, that Jesus stands with you and for you into the ages of ages.

The reason is made all the more clear in vs. 21–23, "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 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." Yes, Christians, like not others, know and feel the war between good and evil. For that battle isn't just simply out there somewhere. It goes with you where ever you go for that war is within you. At this point, Paul bursts out in the frustration that each of us has felt, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (vs. 24).

I said earlier that this sermon was about you. It's about you as you stand under God's Law and you as you stand under God's Gospel. According to the Law, you are a damned sinner unable to fulfill the will and desire to live a righteous, God-pleasing life. According to the Gospel, you are a completely righteous saint, alive to God, dead to sin, free from the Law's condemnation, forgiven in Christ, and an heir of the Father's eternal kingdom. At one and the same time, you are a saint and a sinner. Or if you like Latin, and who among us doesn't!!, you are *simul justus et peccator*; at the same time, saint and sinner. Which is the real you? Both.

The question is really, which will endure into eternity? That's where Jesus comes in. Vs. 25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" He's the one who delivers us from this body of sinful flesh. He's the one who declares us righteous, a pure saint of God. And this is no mere make believe. You truly are saints of God even as the battle with sin wages in your hearts and minds. For those sins which you know and feel in your hearts and minds and even those you may not even be aware of are forgiven in Jesus. Your victorious Christian life rests in the hands of Jesus. He's the one who conquered death and the grave and who's coming back in glory and majesty.

Dear saints of God, and you really are saints, Jesus stands with you, in you, and for you. On the Last Day, the *simul justus et peccator* becomes *solus justus*, a saint only, no sin, no *peccator*, only perfect and righteous in Jesus. That's the real you!!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.