

June 28 2020 – The Gift of Desperation

Romans 7:15-25

¹⁵ I do not understand what I do; for I don't do what I would like to do, but instead I do what I hate. ¹⁶ Since what I do is what I don't want to do, this shows that I agree that the Law is right. ¹⁷ So I am not really the one who does this thing; rather it is the sin that lives in me. ¹⁸ I know that good does not live in me—that is, in my human nature. For even though the desire to do good is in me, I am not able to do it. ¹⁹ I don't do the good I want to do; instead, I do the evil that I do not want to do. ²⁰ If I do what I don't want to do, this means that I am no longer the one who does it; instead, it is the sin that lives in me.

²¹ So I find that this law is at work: when I want to do what is good, what is evil is the only choice I have. ²² My inner being delights in the law of God. ²³ But I see a different law at work in my body—a law that fights against the law which my mind approves of. It makes me a prisoner to the law of sin which is at work in my body. ²⁴ What an unhappy man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Message: The Gift of Desperation

A couple of years ago, I was doing some pulpit supply – filling in for a minister on a Sunday morning – and the Scripture text for that week was about sin. So I preached a nice message, all about sin and grace and salvation. During coffee time after the service, an older woman came up to me and said, “You shouldn’t have talked about sin so much; no one wants to hear about that. You should have just talked about salvation.” And I, rather naively, replied, “but if we don’t talk

about sin, how will we know what we're being saved from?" I'm afraid that the other woman abandoned the conversation at that point. On the other side of the spectrum, though, a famous theologian once observed that of all our Christian beliefs, sin is the only one that is inarguably real, because we can see it and its effect all around us. If you say the word "sin," our first thought is generally about all the things we're not supposed to do; maybe it's the "thou shalt nots" of the ten commandments, or the rules of Christian behaviour that are scattered through the letters and gospels of the New Testament. There are things we are not to do, and things we are to do, and failing to either do what is right or avoid what is wrong...both fall under the definition of sin. Step back a bit, and we recognise that we are often hurt by the sinning of others; another person's anger, for example, or being stolen from if your house is broken into. That's sin, as well. If we take an even bigger view, we recognise that we can hurt others and be hurt by ideas and attitudes that shape society; things like sexism or racism, political systems focused on personal power and aggression, economic systems that are more about profit and greed than fairness and equity. So really both that woman at church and the famous theologian are right: sin is everywhere; do we really have to talk about it?

Let's stay small and personal today, where sin is the things we ought not to do. In the ancient Jewish worldview, there was this unpacking of sin, building off the ten commandments, which they called the Law. The Law was rules and guidelines to help one live a holy life, acceptable to God. Building on that, Jesus – in the Sermon on the Mount – took the Law further. We can't just follow the rules on the outside, by acting in a particular way or performing a particular set of religious

activities; there has to be some internal rearranging, too, in our hearts and in our thinking. Wanting or thinking about hurting someone or doing something sinful is the same as actually doing the deed, according to Jesus.

And that brings us to Paul, writing his letter to the Christians in Rome. What we read this morning is a portrait of desperation, the moment of spiritual crisis when one realises how completely unable we are to fully please God, to live that kingdom-life, to be holy, on our own. It's the moment of recognition that where we want to be, who we need to be is up there, and our own capacity and ability can't get us there. Paul writes about wrestling with his desire to do good, to follow the Law on the one hand and what he actually does, which is generally not good. Frustration and despair bleed through every word: he knows what sin is because the Law describes it, and yet, despite wanting to do what is good and holy and right, he does the thing that he knows is wrong anyway. If this is indeed an inside glimpse into Paul's heart, it's pretty bleak. Paul was a man of tremendous faith, a committed Christ-follower, a pastor to dozens of churches...if he's struggling, then where does that leave the rest of us? Reading this deeply personal bit of Paul's letter...it sounds like we must all simply resign ourselves to a life of constant inner struggle, in spite of the joyous exclamation of thanks at the end. Maybe it is a foregone conclusion that we are stuck in sin, but that it's okay, because there's also grace.

If we were talking big perspective – at the level of societies and ideologies – then yes, there might be some truth to the unavoidability of sin...at least until Christ's kingdom is finally fully here. But Paul is writing at a personal level. So let's take a

closer look at this letter he's written. This bit, chapter 7, falls right in the middle of his letter to the Roman Christians, who were culturally a mix of Jewish people and Gentiles (A.O.V.). Leading up to this exposition of his own desperation, Paul has soundly rejected the idea that we're stuck with sin in us but that's okay because of grace. So that's right off the table; we're not stuck. In Romans 6, Paul makes the case that those baptized in Christ have "died" to their inner sinful tendencies and have been united with Christ instead. Those who are one with Christ no longer live stuck in sin and are no longer "enslaved" as he puts it to sin and injustice. There has been a real transfer of existence from one "lord" to another, from one way of living to another, for those who are in Christ. And this is borne out by what immediately follows Paul's description of inner spiritual crisis: "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

And maybe that's the clue to what it is we really need to know about sin and ourselves; this transfer of existence, like being picked up out of this pit of desperation and being set down on higher ground. The inner conflict of wanting one thing and finding the other in ourselves and in our actions instead, the constant struggle to follow the rules, the unpleasant awareness of our own limitations and helplessness, the desperation to be who God wants us to be...all of that, seen now from the new perspective of our new identity in Jesus, is the very thing that Jesus saves us from. What Paul is describing is the identity and experience of the old humanity, humanity without Jesus.

Knowledge of what is good is not enough. Knowing what the "good" act is, trying to always do the good thing - whether that's because you know your ten commandments, or follow the laws of our Canadian society, or have a personal

moral and ethical rulebook – however you know what is good, that knowledge is not enough to free you from the pervasive power of sin, from the spiritual crisis, from the despairing moment when we realise that we are not capable of doing good, of being good or even effecting good, lasting change in the world, on our own. We need Jesus. That transfer of existence, being lifted up and brought into a new way of living, is being accomplished in us, for us, by the Spirit of the living Christ. In Christ, that tension, that inner struggle and division, becomes resolved, because we are united with him. No longer frustrated, but fulfilled; no longer at odds with God's plan and will for us and the world, but willing participants with him. God has done all this for us. Nothing else can; it's only the Spirit through Christ that frees, that rescues, that saves. We need Jesus; and by God's gracious gift, we have him. Thanks be to God. Amen.