

Sermon 7-12-26
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Trinity Lutheran Church
W. Hempstead, NY
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost. Text: Romans 7:5-25; 8:1-4

Spirit and Flesh — Part 1

Because of the July 4th holiday I waited until today to preach about the second lessons of the last two weeks in Romans 7. Personally, this chapter is very precious to me. Let me tell you how.

As a young minister I had been trained in all the best doubt about Christianity that Philosophical Naturalism can offer. That sounds weird and it is weird. But that kind of training is responsible for what you see in the liberal Lutheran churches and all the other liberal churches. For instance, our sister Velma who has moved north reported that in church shopping she attended a Methodist Church that turned out to be very liberal. Here is her report. There was no mention of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Being June 28th, gay pride was very visible. There was lots of Buddha in the sermon and the closing music was the Maple Leaf Rag. The part that distressed her the most is that it's a large congregation with many well-behaved children. This is the kind of thing that the best doubt about Christianity can produce in what's supposed to be a Christian church.

And this might have been me if the Lord had not had other plans for me. Four years into my ministry I encountered a large, stable group of true believers in an Episcopal Church. It was not only clear that they believed in Jesus but that He was very dear to them. They knew the joy that Lord Holy Spirit produces in the heart when He makes it clear that Jesus is Lord. The rector (Episcopalian for pastor) of that church was one of the best teachers I have ever heard. What he said severely challenged the best doubt about Christianity that I had. And so after about five weeks of attending their overcrowded Tuesday morning mass the Lord Jesus finally made Himself known to me. And not long after that I set about doing something I had never done before. I read all the way through the New Testament.

So, sometime in the summer of 1979 I arrived at Romans 7. I remember being absolutely shocked. How did this ancient man Paul know so much psychology? Notice, I said psychology. That was the only terminology I knew as someone steeped in Philosophical Naturalism. In reality I was encountering the deep theology that so accurately describes daily Christian existence in this life. And to this day I remain powerfully impressed by Romans 7 and 8. When temptation and failure come my way, it's very comforting to know that an apostle — an apostle — not only knew about these things, but experienced them. And if Paul could go on, so can I.

So, before we dig into the actual text, let's put forward a thesis concerning what we're going to find. In these texts, Paul makes a sharp distinction between our human spirits and our human flesh. Both have been corrupted by Adam's fall into sin. Both are subject to Yahweh's righteous judgments as a result of Adam's sin. Therefore, both are in need of rescue — salvation — from the corruption.

However, the rescue occurs in a certain sequence. In this life and on this earth, our spirits can be redeemed from the effects of the fall. On the other hand, in this life and on this

earth, our physical bodies are not redeemed. They remain subject to the full effects of the fall into sin. Scripture teaches that those whose spirits have been born again of God take a new path in life. However, throughout this life the physical body with all its limitations and liabilities remains a constant nuisance to any Christian born of God. As we're going to see, chief among these liabilities is the sinful nature. And Paul is going to explain all this to us in Romans 7 and 8.

So let's dig into the text. Romans 7:5-12, "5 For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. 6 But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. 7 What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

Living in the flesh is Paul's term for the condition of Original Sin that we all inherit by physical birth into this world. The sinful nature is passionate. It goes all out to serve only itself. For, it is its own god, defining good and evil for itself and acting upon its own definitions. The sinful nature will abide no God who says He has authority over our human lives. The sinful nature very jealously guards its right to be god. It even jealously guards the right to die and go into hell being its own god.

The sinful nature leeches onto us at conception and infects us with evil and rebellion throughout our lives. However, the sinful nature has something naturally opposing it in this life — the remains of something that Scripture calls the Image of God. Sin cannot totally overcome the Image. The result is that everyone who does evil knows that they're doing evil. Their conscience tells them so.

In opposition to the conscience, the sinful nature can do several things. It can callously ignore that it's doing evil. Or it can justify its evil in some way. Or it can attempt to flip the script — as the Marxists often do. They say greed is a sin. Therefore, they flip the script by saying that their great sins of envy and violence are really not sins when used to fight the sin of greed. But, when it comes right down to it, the Marxists are the greediest of all. For in a full blown Marxist society, only the top Marxists do well. Everyone else is dirt poor.

In addition to the conscience, Yahweh opposes the sinful nature with the commandments He gave humanity through Moses, the Prophets, Jesus and the Apostles. But even wherever no one has ever heard of these commandments, the conscience is still in operation. Everyone who does evil knows they are doing it.

It's interesting that in explaining the situation we're in, Paul chose a commandment that opposes a secret sin — covetousness. For unless someone takes an action — for instance theft or adultery — only the person coveting something or someone knows that they're doing it. Nevertheless, Paul says that when he heard the commandment not to covet, he was immediately struck with death in his inner being. That's the power that the commandment has. It stands over the sinful nature with the killing power of Yahweh's perfect righteousness.

But Paul tells us that knowing the commandment did more. The commandment only wanted to make him covet more. And this is the situation we face from the time we're old enough to understand "no." Tell a young one "no" and he or she will want to try the "no". The desire to defy the "no" and do the forbidden thing is something that grips every one of us. In fact declaring something "no" makes the desire for the "no" even greater. This is the sinful nature at work.

We have to understand something. Adam and Eve were not powerfully tempted by the forbidden fruit — the "no" in the garden. Without a sinful nature, they could naturally forego the fruit in complete purity. For this reason, Satan had to deceive them into eating it. And with Jesus it was the same way. We know that Jesus regularly preached to prostitute women. Yet, because Jesus didn't have a sinful nature, such women were no problem for Him. In fact, Scripture tells us that they came to Him in deep repentance.

Therefore, Jesus could not be deceived with all the normal sins we're susceptible to. So, the devil didn't even try. Instead, he resorted to the playbook he used with Adam and Eve. When we carefully study all the temptations Jesus underwent, we see that they're all deceptions. For deception is the only way to get a being without a sinful nature to sin. On the other hand, we who have a sinful nature cannot resist what is forbidden. We have to try it out, especially the easiest sins to commit like gossip, envy and lies.

Therefore, Paul concludes that God's Law is not the problem. God's ways are always holy. His commands are always good and righteous. The problem is something in us. Paul acknowledges this conclusion in Romans 7:13-14, "13 Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. 14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin."

In Romans 6 Paul speaks of being a slave to sin. And that's what he means here — sold under sin. Sold to the devil. That's the condition under which every human being is born on this earth. The devil's ball and chain is the sinful nature attached to our flesh.

Now, contained in these verses is a most important argument. God's Law can't make any of us righteous. All it can do is reveal how bound we are to sin. For, the sinful nature cannot be removed by the Law. It cannot even be disciplined under the Law. It successfully violates the commandments one way or another.

So, the crushing reality of our situation was revealed to Paul by Lord Holy Spirit. Romans 7:15-20, "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. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. 17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 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. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me."

As a Christian, you come to hate the things you thought, said and did as an unbeliever. Yet, they still have a pull on you. And the pull can get so strong that you violate your own desire and commitment to do what is good and right. Why is that? Why doesn't it stop? Where is it coming from? What can be done about it?

The painful answer that was given the Apostle Paul is that even as a Christian the sinful nature still dwelt within him — even though he was an apostle. He might have been able to

resist the deeds it drove him to and perhaps most of the words, but the nasty thoughts of the sinful nature certainly keep coming back uninvited. And Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that the thoughts themselves are enough to send us to the place where we can fully put them into action — hell.

There's a wretched conclusion to all this found in Romans 7:21-23, "21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 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."

One of the things about being a Christian is that you delight in what is good, right and true according to Yahweh. You delight in His virtue and beauty. Your joy is when you and your brothers and sisters in the Lord enjoy Yahweh's righteousness together. (And by the way, if you don't joy in any of this, then you had better seek out Jesus about it. You need to know Him in a way that you currently don't.)

So, Christians joy in what is good, right and true. However, the sinful nature attached to our bodies makes us like robots under sin's control, marching us instead toward evil. Therefore, a desperate Paul cries out in Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Now, remember, this is the heartfelt, frustrated cry of an Apostle of Jesus Christ — a holy man of God! So, what about you? Have you despaired this way yet? Do you know the horrendous hell you're headed for if there is no answer to this question? Do you somehow think you'll escape doom because you consider yourself a good person? Well, if so, you somehow know more than what an apostle of Christ knows. You even know more than what God Himself knows. Good luck to you!

But there is an answer to Paul's desperate cry. Romans 7:25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" As we're going to see in the next few verses, Jesus is the powerful answer to our wretched situation.

However, first there is this conclusion in Romans 7:25, "So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." And this is the crazy situation a Christian lives in until Jesus returns. But keep this conclusion in mind because it sets up the important dichotomy that we mentioned at the beginning — the mind versus the flesh. As we'll see, it's the way this dichotomy works out that distinguishes the Christian from the non-Christian.

Now, because Jesus alone is deliverance from our bodies of death, we see a marvelous assurance in the very next verse. Romans 8:1, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." And there is a most important reason that those who are in Christ Jesus are no longer under condemnation. Romans 8:2, "For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." This is a declaration that a new Law has been established by Jesus that abrogates and supersedes the Law given to Moses. However, the new Law of the Spirit doesn't set us free to ignore the righteousness of Yahweh. For, the new Law is no less holy than the old Law. The difference between old and new is that the new Law of the Spirit is much more powerful than the old. It can establish us in God's righteousness in a way that the old Law can not.

Thus, we read in Romans 8:3, "For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son. . . ." (NIV) This is one of the most powerful statements in all of Scripture. God gave us His righteous Law through Moses. But, according to Romans 8:3, if we ask the question, "Which is more powerful: the Law given to

Moses or the sinful nature, also called the flesh?”, the only answer is that the sinful nature is more powerful. No wonder our attempts to obey the Law given to Moses under our own power always results in failure and condemnation before Yahweh. The leech on our flesh known as the sinful nature is more powerful than the Law.

Therefore, Romans 8:3 declares that because the sinful nature is so powerful, Yahweh personally had to step into the fight in the person of Yahweh, the Son in order to get the victory. Therefore, if we ask the question “Which is more powerful: the sinful nature also called the flesh, or Jesus?”, the answer far and away is Jesus. Jesus is Lord!

Verse 3 and the following verses declare how and why Jesus is Lord. Romans 8:3-4, “3 For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” (NIV)

God’s most holy and righteous Justice absolutely demands that sin be most severely punished, along with every creature that commits sin — both human and angelic. But God the Son, who came in human flesh, took all of humanity’s punishment upon Himself as a gracious gift to every human. In this way He fulfilled every righteous requirement of the Law given to Moses. And in so doing, Jesus also opened a new way to live — the way of the Spirit.

And here we’ll leave off to pick up the trail of Romans 8 again next week. So, we close with two things. First, what we’ve just studied from Romans 7 is a most accurate picture of human life. More importantly, it’s an accurate picture of the Christian life. Christians live in a strange dichotomy of the mind versus the flesh, the Spirit versus the sinful nature. Nevertheless, as we’ll see from Romans 8:31, in this wretched situation, God is on the side of the Christian. God is on our side through Messiah Jesus.

Second, the power of Jesus has been declared to us through the Word revealed to the Apostle Paul. Jesus is stronger than our sinful nature. That’s the Good News of the Gospel. Therefore, Lord Holy Spirit can bring us through every temptation of this life. Through the forgiveness of sins proclaimed in Jesus, Lord Holy Spirit can finally bring us to eternal righteous life in Jesus. Jesus is Lord! Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV except where otherwise noted.