

Sermon 'What a wretched man I am'

Rom 7:7-25

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The last few weeks we have looked at the urgent call of the Apostle Paul to the Christians in Rome to not live for themselves, for their own pleasures, pushed by their own passions. He urged them to live for God. As we are also urged to live for God.

The apostle argued that we are able to live for our Lord God, because thanks to the grace of Jesus Christ we are no longer slaves of sin. God is our owner and through his grace we are able to live for him.

Paul presented this Gospel to the church in Rome, because the congregation was divided. The Jews in the congregation wanted to hold on to their Thora, the laws of the Old Testament, and they wanted the gentile Christians to also adopt the Jewish laws. Those gentile Christians did not accept this and they looked down on those Jews who.

Paul underlined that the laws of the Old Testament had never helped Israel to come closer to God; the Thora actually laid bare the sins in the life of the people. Jesus Christ saves us, and Thora did not contribute to the salvation of Israel - except in the sense that it drove people back to God, crying out, save me, I am a man of impure lips, I am not worthy...

1 How to understand this part of Rom 7?

So some of the Jews asked Paul, "are you then saying that the law is bad? That it makes us sin?" "No", he answered, "the law helped you to know your own sin - the law is good. But we Jews all share in the same sins as the whole community of Adam, as a all of humankind. We all need a saviour."

And Paul then writes these tough words of Romans 7 that we have now read. Let me repeat some of his words:

"I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin." (vs 14)

"What I want to do, I do not, but what I hate to do." (vs 15)

"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature, for I have the desire to do good but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing." (vs 18-19)

"In my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work in my members." (vs 22)

"So, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin." (vs 25)

These are difficult words. What is Paul talking about! If only we knew for sure. :)

It is very easy to now present my own views and say, "This is it! This is what God tells us..." But that would be presumptuous. This is a complicated passage and good Christian thinkers, people committed to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, have explained it in very different ways. I give you four basis ways of how good people have explained these words of Paul

Most of the early church fathers think Paul describes the situation of people before they become christians. It is not really about the apostle as a good Christian, even though he uses the

"I-form" all the time. Paul embraces humanity by speaking in the first person singular, in order to avoid pointing the finger at them.

St Kirillos of Alexandria wrote a commentary on the letter to the Romans in the 4th century; he comments:

It appears that this refers to the ignorant gentiles, whose thoughts Paul is reproducing.

So, Paul speaks of non-Christians; they are slaves of sin - Paul himself is of course not a slave of sin. The passage cannot be about Paul personally.

Others say that Paul speaks here of immature Christians. They have been saved by the grace of God, but they still have to learn to walk with Christ, and sin wins again and again. The fact that Paul speaks in the I-form must be seen as his way to identify with these immature believers, in order to lead them to a more mature Christian life. In any case, the immature believers are still slaves of sin. They want to do good, but they fail a lot.

Others argue, you have to take the 'I' of Paul seriously; he even speaks in the present tense. He describes his own mature Christian life. He gives us insight in his own struggle to live for God. He wants to lead a perfect Christian life, but each time he realises his inadequacy. In the end of the day, nothing that we do is perfect. In the end, we are still slaves of sin.

This is for instance the viewpoint I came across in a useful bible commentary by William Hendriksen a reformed theologian:

In the present, the christian is living in an era in which the two ages, the old and the new, overlap. There was a time when Paul as exclusively a sinner, There will be a time when he will be exclusively a saint. Right now, as he is dictating this letter, he is a sinner-saint. A saint, to be sure, but also a sinner; hence the tension, the inner conflict. It is a struggle which every true believer experiences.

I came across this view among Roman Catholic scholars as well, by the way.

A fourth view is that It is about Israel, the people of God, while under the law before the coming of Christ. Theologians of this school believe that Paul with the 'I' identifies with Israel, but with the Israel before the coming of Jesus Christ - still living under the law. It describes also the life of Paul as a good Pharisee. As long as he and Israel were under the law, the law only made them see their sins and it did not bring them closer to God. They wanted to serve God, but sin was always stronger. They were still slaves of sin.

2 How to deal with different opinions?

So what to do if we as Christians have different views of this or that?

What to do if in one church, people have different ways of explaining the Bible. We have examples all around us of people beating each other up verbally, kicking others out of church, people starting new churches over doctrinal differences.

When we come across different viewpoints, it is always important to begin with underlining that our communion is based on being related to Jesus Christ, not on our theology. It is not possible to speak of our Lord Jesus Christ apart from our theology, I realise, but it is not theology that saves us, or theology that blesses us, but God through Jesus Christ.

Secondly, all of our exegesis of the Bible is human work. It is not our good exegesis, but faith in Jesus Christ that connects us with our Lord Jesus and with God. And faith has something

mysterious - it is given by God to us. It is primary, and all theology is secondary, as our theology is our human effort to explain our divinely given faith in the Triune God.

This does not mean that the church does not have certain limits, a certain basic teaching all Christians must adhere to. But this is about the essentials. Historically we have expressed this in our great creeds - like the one we use each week in Church.

In church it is best to focus on the essentials. Those are the things that St *Vincent of Lerins*, a distinguished priest of Gaul in the 5th century, said: "We must hold that which has been believed everywhere, always, by all."

I find that a great rule for Christian unity. As Christians we may have many differences, many views, many ideas. But as long as people embrace what has been believed everywhere always by all, we can accept each other as faithful fellow believers. As people who are related just as much as we are, to our Lord Jesus Christ.

If someone is God's child through Jesus Christ, how could he keep such person at a distance because of different viewpoints.

Disagreement about details that have not been believed everywhere by all should not be allowed to damage our unity. We agree in the essentials and allow freedom in regard to the rest.

3 What to learn from Paul in this passage?

What can we learn from what Paul wrote to the Romans? I am personally more charmed by the last viewpoint that I mentioned, that Paul describes his life as a Pharisee and the life of Israel under the law in general.

In chapter 6 he had described that we are no longer slaves of sin, and he calls us to present ourselves as servants to God. It would be very strange if he would now, a few lines further, say that he is still a slave of sin.

And in chapter 6 he had pointed away from the Thora as the means for living for the glory God - and now in chapter 7 he says that he tries to live by the Thora but he does not succeed because he is a slave to sin? I think it is more logical to think he describes his previous life as a pious Pharisee.

Paul is writing this whole letter to tell the Christians in Rome that they should be one in Christ, that they should not allow their social and cultural differences to undermine this unity.

And now in chapter seven he shows that the adherence to the law did not help Israel to grasp salvation; it made them only more aware of the fact that something was fundamentally wrong with them.

The whole world has drifted away from God; even the people of God, those who had the law, had drifted away from God. They wanted to obey, but there is something at work in all human beings, that precluded us from truly obeying God.

And so with all of Thora/law abiding Israel, Paul cries out: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death!" From being a person who like all people is infected with the sin of Adam and always gravitates to doing wrong...

Knowledge of the will of God seems not enough to help us obey him. Knowledge by itself does not make us good.

And a strong resolve to do the will of God was also not enough for Israel and for Paul the Pharisee. To know what is good and then to strongly decide "I will do it I will do it I will do it", that does not make us better people.

Paul even knew what was wrong. He realised that he was a sinner. As a person, he lacked the inner strength to do the will of God. He wanted to obey, he did the opposite. Paul had the right diagnosis - but it did not help.

Conclusion

The answer for the wretched man is not the laws of God, not strong resolve, not good self-knowledge, the answer is that God comes to save - through Jesus Christ.

He is able to change our lives radically, to turn them upside down. He came to forgive our sins, but also to free us from slavery to sin, and to make us obedient servants of our God.

That seems to be the opposite to the idea that we are still slaves to sin, always gravitating to do wrong, always doing the opposite of what we desire, always losing.

God desires from us that we obey him through Jesus Christ. That is why he send his son. And his Spirit - of which we will speak more next week. God offers his presence, the presence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, his presence in our life through Holy Communion so that we serve and love the Lord and all people.

So let us receive his presence, in faith, and through his grace, live today, and this week, for him.

AMEN