

# **“I do not understand my own actions”**

**Psalm 45:10-17 and Romans 7:15-25a**

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**Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

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I must say, it's not easy to follow the youth of this church.

Last Sunday, as some you know, we participated in what is becoming an annual tradition ... a youth-led worship service. The youth of this church sang and prayed and led us in what I thought was one of the best services of the year.

But the youth also spoke.

Six members of the confirmation class this year – there were 14 in all, which is something to celebrate all by itself – but six of them were willing to stand up here and read their “testimonies,” which they were asked to write as part of the confirmation process.

I don't know what you thought, but – to me – what they said took my breath away. They were honest in a way that most of us are just not able to be honest. Maybe we were when we were their age, but somehow the years have robbed us of the ability to look honestly at ourselves.

Our youth spoke about the disappointments in their lives, which takes courage. How many of us would be willing to stand up here on a Sunday morning and say anything at all about failure. They spoke about their doubts when it comes to faith, and not many of us dare to do that. When we're with other Christians, we think we're supposed to be all brave and self-confident about our faith, when that's simply not true. And they spoke about the humility they feel at the beginning of their Christian journeys, and I don't hear much of that from ... the rest of us.

So, what we heard last week was breath taking, and – to be honest with you – it's tough to follow that. All week long I felt as though I needed to raise my own game to another level.

In any case, thank you to our youth for leading us last week. And thank you to Sam and our youth leaders for the time they give to the youth of this church. In many ways, what our youth did last week leads perfectly into my plans.

What I want to do this morning – and for the next two Sundays – is to take a look with you at the heart of Paul's Letter to the Romans, chapters seven and eight. And I don't mean to say that the rest of this letter is unimportant. In fact, it's one of the most important books of the Bible.

But chapters seven and eight are in many ways the hinge on which the entire gospel message moves. Unless you get this, you really don't get what the gospel is about. If you could take only one chapter of the

Bible with you to a desert island, most people would choose Romans 8. Maybe Psalm 23. Maybe one or two others. But Romans 8 is everything we believe, it's everything we stake our lives on.

And Romans 7, which we are looking at today, sets us up to hear the good news in Romans 8.

Over the years – and this may sound harsh to you, but I think it's true, so hear me out – over the years, my experience has been that people (at least in the churches I have served) embraced the Christian faith, and joined the church, and became active in church life, in order to become better people.

The thing is, they were already good people before they came to us. Do you know what I mean? They were very good people. Good educations, good incomes. Attractive and well-mannered. They lived in the best neighborhoods and sent their children to the best schools.

And frankly, the churches I served never attracted bad people, or desperate people. or people who had fallen so low that there was no way to go but up. Those people would not have felt welcome among all the good people who came to the churches I have served over the years.

So, what happened was that we attracted the finest people, and for them coming to faith and getting active in the church was a way to make the resume stronger. It strengthened the C.V. It made a good life seem even better.

And what we find in Romans, chapters seven and eight, is a devastating critique of that way of thinking. Actually, the first seven chapters of Paul's letter contain a description of the human condition, and the picture is not pretty.

When Paul addressed the people in Rome, he did not assume that they were all good people. It helped, I suppose, that he had not met them when he wrote this letter. He wrote to them about the seriousness of the human condition, how desperate we all are. Already in the third chapter of this book, Paul writes the famous words, **“All have sinned – all! – and fallen short of the glory of God.”**

Let's listen to a few of these verses from chapter 7, and then I want to reflect with you on what our lives are really like, when we are honest with ourselves.

**<sup>15</sup> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup> But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.**

**<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!**

**So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.**

**The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Do you find those words hard to hear? Do they make you uncomfortable...at all? They should, because Paul is describing for us the human condition in all of its wretchedness, and he gives it a label, a word that has fallen out of fashion.

And that word, as you heard, is sin.

You might be surprised to know that scholars are engaged in a lively debate about these words. Actually, there are a few debates. One debate is whether or not Paul is describing his own experience. He is never quite so personal in other places, so these words seem jarring. So, it's possible that Paul is describing the situation of every human being and conveniently using himself as an example.

Another issue where there is lively scholarly debate is whether Paul is writing about our lives before we come to faith in Christ, or whether he is describing the Christian life itself with all its constant struggles to do what is right.

I have my own opinion about that debate, and I would be glad to tell you what I think, but for now maybe it's enough to say that when people hear these words, they see themselves in them. Paul is describing a situation we know well. So, let's begin there.

Paul describes accurately – in fact, with a devastating accuracy – how much we struggle to be the people we want to be, the people we know we should be, the people we are called to be. I mean, we would be embarrassed and ashamed if other people really knew our thoughts and habits and the issues we struggle with, and of course, as I mentioned, we work so hard, night and day, to assure ourselves and everyone around us that everything is just fine, when everything is not just fine.

Anyone in the world today who has an internet connection knows that there are thousands – maybe tens of thousands – of remedies for our problems, self-help tricks that will get you through a tough time, life hacks that will turn you into a happier, friendlier, more effective person.

I confess that I am a sucker for these headlines. They are designed to get me to click, I know that, but I click on them anyway. “Five things every effective leader knows.” Well, if I don't read that, then I might be a bad leader. And so, click. “Six ways that every entrepreneurial person starts the day.” Well, I'm an entrepreneurial person, I should read that to make sure I'm doing the right things. Click. And on and on.

Interestingly, the Apostle Paul doesn't begin there. And I know he was writing two thousand years ago and did not have the benefit – if you can call it that – of the internet, but his thinking is worth paying attention to. His thinking – or his logic – is that we first need to diagnose the problem. Before we decide on the remedy, and click through to the latest gimmick, we need to know what the sickness is.

And the sickness, for Paul, is the dreadful condition known as sin. And until we face up to the awful situation we are in, we are not going to be made well. It's as simple as that.

Before I say something about sin, I want to say first where sin comes from. I have been a pastor long enough to know that people like to blame the devil for lots of things. It's devil who twists my thinking, it's the devil who introduces a deceptive thought, it's the devil who probes and looks constantly for a weakness in my armor.

I know those statements very well, and the truth is, the Bible supports them. It's true. The devil who poked and probed Jesus' most vulnerable issues for 40 days and 40 nights in the wilderness is the same devil who is poking and probing in your life. I get that. But there's more that can be said about this. There's a deeper way to understand this.

What I want you to see today is Paul's insight that this struggle we face is actually "a war within." What we face each day is a human condition that we were born into. Sin is so pervasive, according to Paul, that we can't avoid it. It has worked its way into our cell structure.

I found a headline this week in a Christian humor magazine – I'll bet you didn't know that Christian humor magazines existed – and the headline was "**Mother of two year old now embraces the doctrine of total depravity.**"

It's funny – at least I thought it was funny – because it's true. We were born into it. We can't escape it. It's now the state of things. Even two year olds are capable of mystifying behavior. We think, "**Where did that come from?**"

To use the old language of the fall of Adam, *everything* fell in Adam. People, structures, systems, all of creation. Sin entered the world. And if you think things are bad and getting worse, you're right. It's a fundamental Christian teaching.

My point is that we need to agree on the diagnosis before we find the remedy.

Not long ago I heard Rick Warren preach a sermon about this war within, these things we wrestle with, these things that need and require God's intervention, and he called them "weapons of self-destruction." And since I can improve on his list, I'm just going to give them as he did. The commentary is mine, but this list is his:

**First, shame.**

Do you want to know what sin is – or feels like? Then, look no further than your sense of shame. We all feel bad about ourselves, some of us more than others, and if we let it, if we get caught in a downward spiral of shame, we destroy ourselves, we destroy any chance at happiness and contentment and peace.

Shame is an awful thing. Sometimes I wish that certain people felt some shame over their behavior, so maybe there's a healthy shame that we're supposed to feel, but what I have in mind right now is the unhealthy kind that infects all of life, the kind that says, **"I'm not very good."** **"I'll never amount to much."** **"I'm not as talented or good-looking or smart or whatever it is as that person over there."**

Until we come to grips with our shame, we cannot live the life that God offers to us.

### **Second, our uncontrolled thoughts.**

You know, most of us have very active conscious minds. Our brains are chattering all the time. I have heard this situation called "monkey brain," which I hope is not insulting to monkeys. But the fact is, our minds are filled with thoughts, excess thoughts, undisciplined thoughts, and often – for most of us – unhealthy thoughts.

I don't know if you've ever considered this, but until we impose some discipline on our minds, until we get our thoughts under control, until we are able to quiet our minds, we will never know that grace and peace that God intends for us.

An undisciplined mind is an example of sin.

### **Third, compulsions.**

Call them habits – that seems better than compulsions – call them inner drives, call them impulses. Until we learn to manage our compulsions, we are going to be caught up in a life that looks nothing like the life that God intends for us.

When I hear people talk about this – unhealthy habits – it's almost as though these habits have a life of their own. **"There it goes again. Did you see that?"**

We convince ourselves that that behavior is not really us. We're better than that. It's this habit I have that has control of me.

And do you know something? You're right. You are better than that. Your compulsion, your unhealthy habit, is not really who you are. But right now it has control of your life. And left untreated, it will take your life down.

Paul's word for compulsion is sin.

### **Fourth, fear.**

You know, as with shame, I suppose that there are some healthy forms of fear. I wanted my children to be afraid of certain things that would be harmful to them – fear of a hot stove, for example. My fear always prompted me to study for an exam. Fear kept me in the library on many nights when my friends were out having a good time.

So, some kinds of fear, as with some kinds of shame, can be healthy.

But the fear I have in mind is the unhealthy kind, the kind of fear that prevents us from living fully, or loving fully.

If you are fearful of rejection, you will never say to another person, “**I love you.**” If you are afraid of failure, you will never know what it feels like to accomplish something truly extraordinary. If you are afraid of public speaking (and just about everyone is, including me), no one will ever know what God has put within you to say.

We all have our fears. And age – sorry to disappoint you about this – but age does not lessen our fears. Age just gives us new ones, more ominous ones, to think about. I am afraid of things today, situations, that I was never afraid of in the past.

And fear can be debilitating. Fear keeps us from being the people God intends for us to be. Fear – much of the time – is sin. Don’t mistake fear for good judgment or prudence. Fear robs of us the joy that is available to us.

### **Fifth, hopelessness.**

This one is scary because loss of hope leads to discouragement. And being discouraged leads to giving up. And when you’ve given up, there is nothing left but death.

Living without hope is a state of sin. It’s not where God intends us to be. It’s not how God made us. But we are susceptible to it. Every one of us.

Maybe you’ve heard the expression “first world problems.” Much of what gets us down in life is, frankly, a first world problem. Every time I go to Paris, I get sick. That’s a first world problem. I’ve been without internet now for two whole days. That’s a first world problem.

I don’t know what triggers hopelessness in you, but most of the time the problems we face are not as big as we think they are. They may seem big in the moment, of course. And we may worry about what tomorrow will bring. And so, we easily fall into hopelessness, and then despair, and then we have the feeling that the world would be better off without us.

That’s not what God intends for us. I can assure you. And so, hopelessness is self-destructive, and it is sin.

### **And that leaves one more. Sixth, bitterness.**

Life has not turned out as you planned. You didn’t expect to get to this age and – what? – be single, not have completed your degree, still living with your parents. The list is long. If you want to know all the ways life has been unfair to me, I will tell you, but you’ll need to set aside several hours.

If you are anything like me, carrying around a list of grievances about life, please listen to me.

Nothing eats away at our insides like bitterness. It starts out small. It burrows under the skin and then from there it travels, it metastasizes. Bitterness soon becomes our life story, our calling card. Peoples see us coming, and they know what we’re going to talk about – all the people who let us down and treated us badly and took advantage of us. Some of us carry big signs around our necks that say, “**I’ve been treated unfairly.**”

That is no way to live. That is not the life God desires for us. That is not what I would call spiritual health.

And yet, that's where some of us are.

Most of us – maybe all of us – are stuck in these self-destructive patterns and habits and ways of living. And to paraphrase the apostle Paul – **“wretched people that we are. Who will rescue us from this body of death? And then, because we can't take anymore, he writes, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”**

And those words set the stage for the next chapter. There is good news, all is not lost, we can live with hope, we can be “more than conquerors,” and that's what Paul tells us about in chapter 8.

But, until then, I want you to know that this condition in which we find ourselves is not irreversible. This state in which we find ourselves doesn't have to be permanent. It may feel that way right now, you may be tired and discouraged, and that's good...because it's at this point that you may be ready – at long last – to hear about the remedy, the incomparable news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Will you pray with me? Good and gracious and loving God, we have become so accustomed to our lives as they are that we think this is normal and expected and all there is. Our sin has dulled us to the good news of a better life, a life lived in your presence, a life of joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Remind us once again that you have come among us to offer us something better – and not just better, but something indescribably better. Make us ready to receive that gift, we pray. In Christ's name.