

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

Pastor Mark Gartner

Sermon for Pentecost 7 – June 26<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008

### **Romans 7:15-25a**

**I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is 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. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.**

**So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For 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 within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!**

Dear Friends in Christ,

Does anybody know who Billy Graham is? Billy Graham who is getting closed to 90 years old was a preacher of God's Word. What made him famous is that many times he would preach to large groups like stadiums full of people or broadcasts that were televised or heard on the radio to literally millions of people. Based on his TV coverage and the hundreds of thousands of people who have attended his rallies over the decades, it is understandable why he's been referred to as the world's greatest evangelist, or at least the greatest evangelist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Regardless of his enduring popularity and impact, the title of "world's greatest missionary" will never be his (something I'm sure Billy Graham would readily concede). That honor is reserved for the writer of our text and at least twelve other inspired letters of the Bible, the Apostle Paul. Paul, handpicked and uniquely called by Jesus Christ himself, was and remains the greatest Christian missionary the world has ever seen.

From his letters as well as the Book of Acts we can learn quite a bit about Paul. We are given stirring examples of how he experienced both great hardships and great blessings in carrying out his mission work as God's chosen instrument. At other times Paul becomes reflective, letting us in on what's going on inside of him not so much as a missionary, but simply as a Christian. Our text for this morning is one of those times. Today, for our benefit and spiritual instruction,

### **Sermon Theme: Paul Gets Personal**

- 1. About the struggle of his faith**
- 2. About the solution to his sin**

It should be mentioned that the text before us is sometimes debated by Bible scholars. Some believe that such strong statements could not be made by a Christian and assume that Paul is speaking about his pre-conversion days. However, it seems far more likely that the key to understanding these words is tied in with what theologians refer to as the "dual nature" of a Christian; how each of us, in the words of Martin Luther, is both a "saint" and a "sinner" at the same time. We'll take up this matter more fully in just a moment. But with that as a general background, let's turn to our text, where Paul begins with this tongue-twisting

confession: **“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is 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. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”**

We’re not going to get into all of the particulars, but do you follow the general thought of what Paul is saying? If ever you, as a Christian, have felt like you have let your Savior down by your actions; if ever you have become upset with yourself because you find yourself falling into the same sinful patterns; if ever you have become disgusted with yourself by something that you did or didn’t do and scolded yourself by saying “I know better” or become mystified by your own actions and said to yourself “I don’t understand why I did what I just did” – then you know exactly what Paul is talking about here. And I think we all know.

What Paul is essentially saying is that even though he knows better, and even though out of sincere love for Christ he desires not to, he still found himself sinning. In view of this, a bewildered Paul concludes: **I do not understand what I do.** We as Christians have walked the very same road as Paul and drawn the same conclusion. We find ourselves in spiritual conflict. So the question we invariably want to know is: why is this? “Why is this?” is because Christians have two natures. On the one hand, we have a new nature. The Bible talks about us as being new creatures in Christ. Paul talked about this last week when we used the illustration of the two masters. Let’s review what was said... At one time Sin was our Master. He leads people down a path of spiritual destruction which eventually empties into hell. Many people follow him, and there was a time when we followed him as well. But not any more. As Christians we have a new Master in Jesus Christ. Through baptism and faith Jesus Christ applies His holiness and His perfection to our lives, takes away the sin that estranges us from God, and claims us as His own. That changes things.

Now Christ is the One we happily follow and voluntarily live for. He is the One who provides us with fulfilled life in the present and eternal life forevermore. Consequently following Christ as our Master is not something we do grudgingly or as if doing so was a burdensome chore. Living for Christ becomes our delight, and our new nature – fed and strengthened through Word and sacrament – becomes our *predominant* nature. Nevertheless, as Paul points out, living our faith is sometimes still a struggle. That’s because we still carry around in us **a sinful nature**. If we can continue with our illustration, old Master Sin may have relinquished his control over us; but he hasn’t left the building. And he still has a draw on us. It’s not as powerful as it once was, but within each of us is an attraction to fall in behind him for old time’s sake.

So we find ourselves, even though we know better, doing things we know are not God pleasing. We know what the Second Commandment says about proper language and the use of God’s name, but sometimes it seems we can make our point a lot more forcefully and effectively by throwing in a few expletives. We know what the Bible says about forgiving others as we have been forgiven, but we sometimes find ourselves very consciously hanging on to grudges and ill-will and an unforgiving spirit against those we’ve determined have wronged us.

We know what Christ tells us about contentment and trust, yet we still find ourselves craving more and becoming increasingly preoccupied with getting ourselves properly fixed for the future. We know about gossip and slander and how we are to look at things in the best possible light, but we still find ourselves wagging our tongues, making judgments without all the facts, and engaging in what in German is called “schadenfreude,” that is, rejoicing in the misfortune of others. We could go on.

Paul knew all about this, too. And it was confusing to him. He continues to press the issue as our text continues: **“So I find this law** (here “law” means principle) **at work: When I want to do good, evil is**

**right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law** (that is, God’s Word); **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 within my members.”** After reiterating what he’s already said, Paul concludes the matter on a note of exasperation: **What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?** But in the end exasperation gives way to this exclamation, which is the final word on the subject: **Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!** In other words, Jesus Christ is the One who rescues us from our sin and its rightful consequences of death.

Meaning: Deliverance from the sin that even now besets us comes not from “trying harder” or “bucking up” or “straightening up and flying right” or methodically applying 12 steps of this or 40 days of that in the belief that doing so will rid our lives of sin. The solution to our struggles with sin, says Paul, lies not in our own efforts to *stop them from happening*. Rather, it is *knowing what to do with them when they do happen*. And that is to take them to the cross of Jesus Christ where they are vaporized and fully forgiven. Then we join Paul in the final verse of our text: **Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!**

In looking over these words of Paul, I believe there are three basic but important lessons we can learn and apply to ourselves. The first is to simply recognize the battle that goes on within us. Christians have a dual nature. There are those who will suggest that Christians can reach a point where they are above sin. This is referred to as perfectionism. But it flies in the face of Paul’s words here. Moreover, the Apostle John says in his first epistle: **“If we say that we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.”** We must recognize and not deny or explain away the fact that we sin.

This is not to say that we want to. Because out of love for Christ we don’t. And this is not say that because our sinning is inevitable, hey, we can just let ourselves go. That is not the response of faith which wants to show Christ our appreciation by living according to His commands. The simple fact is that on this side of heaven we will struggle with our faith and we will struggle with sin. And sometimes we will lose. Then we come before Christ in daily confession and repentance, and with confidence...

Because – and this is the second lesson gleaned from our text – the good news is when we lose, we have forgiveness. Yes, we may lose some battles, but the war resulting in our salvation has been won for us by Jesus Christ. The battle took place 2000 years ago on a site called Calvary. And when Jesus cried out **“It is finished,”** He meant it. Everything necessary for our salvation was completed. 33 years of sinless living in our place and 6+ hours of suffering and death in our place resulted in our free and full forgiveness. We might put it this way: Sin is not *eliminated* from our present day lives, but it is *eradicated* in the eyes of God. And it is not held against us.

That being the case, the third and final lesson is to focus on the right things in our lives of faith. The conclusion that Paul came to was to focus on our forgiveness, not our failures. A healthy view of sin (if we can talk in those terms) is not to minimize it and certainly not to embrace it, but also to not let it paralyze us into a state of despondency. Very often devout Christians with tender consciences have a hard time forgiving themselves. They have great difficulty getting past what they have done, even if it was done before they became Christians. Maybe you are in that category. Maybe some past sin still haunts you. Paul’s counsel to anyone in such a situation is this: focus not on the greatness of your sin, but the greater-ness of your Savior from sin.

One of the best known and most misunderstood quotes of Martin Luther has to do with this. Perhaps you have heard how Luther once said: “Sin boldly.” Some misconstrue this to mean Luther was giving free license to sinful activity. Actually, it was just the opposite. That quote comes from a letter he wrote to his friend Philip Melancthon in 1521. In the context of that letter the point Luther makes is that great sins cannot compete with a greater Savior. We can sin boldly (not that we want to) because there is no sin so

bold or great for which Christ did not die. And so he points his friend away from an obsession on his sin, great as it might be, to the greater-ness of Christ Jesus who won our forgiveness on the cross.

A concluding thought is this. Everything Paul tells us today is in some ways summarized on a bumper sticker I've seen any number of times. Maybe you have too. It says: Christians are not perfect, just forgiven. To which Paul – and we along with him – respond: **Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.** Amen.