

Romans 7:15-25
The Paradox of Self

Main idea: Jesus saves us from ourselves.

A woman answered the knock on her door to find a man with a sad expression. "I'm sorry to disturb you," he said, "but I'm collecting money for an unfortunate family in the neighborhood. The husband is out of work, the kids are hungry, and their landlord has told them that they will be forced out of their apartment if they don't pay him their rent by this afternoon." "Oh, I'll be happy to help," said the woman with great concern. "How do you know them?" To which he replied, "I'm their landlord."

Have you ever noticed how many things we do out of self-interest? Even when we do something that's good, we often do it because it's also good for us.

I don't know if you've noticed this, but as human beings, we're pretty much obsessed with ourselves.¹ If you're like me, you were probably taught in school that you should try to have a healthy self-esteem. Psychology says that the greatest state of being is to be self-actualized. But in the pursuit of being self-aware, we're often self-absorbed, self-centered, and self-indulgent. And when we realize that, we often become self-conscious. And we may even self-destruct.²

So I'm going to encourage all of us this morning to do a self-analysis. In order to do that, you're going to need to practice self-control,³ because we tend to want to be self-congratulatory, but I'm going to urge you to be brutally honest with yourself in order to possibly make a self-discovery. And I hope that what you find is so clear that it really should have been self-evident and will lead you to a more godly form of self-expression.⁴

And it starts by reading Scripture and allowing it to transform your mind and yourself.⁵ Let's read it now. Romans 7:15-25. Please stand with me for the reading of God's word.

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 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. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.
(Romans 7:15-25)

The word of God for the people of God. *Thanks be to God.*

¹ 1 John 2:16

² Proverbs 16:18

³ Galatians 5:22-23

⁴ John 8:32

⁵ Romans 12:2

Even though this is a fairly well-known part of the Bible, I've got to be honest, it's a somewhat perplexing passage of Scripture to me. On one level, it makes sense, but when you start digging deeper into it, it raises a lot of questions.

On the surface, it's talking about how we're all sinners, and since we're sinners, we sin, and because we sin, we need Jesus to forgive us and cleanse us. That's the surface level that we all understand and believe, because it's true.⁶

But the next level down raises some questions. If, as Paul writes, "nothing good dwells in me," how can I even desire to do what is right? And even if I ultimately cave in and do the evil that I don't want to do, why is it that I don't want to do it? If I myself am nothing but a depraved, wretched sinner, why do I even want to do good?

And I don't think it's just me. I think Paul was perplexed by his own words and thoughts. That's why he wrote in verse 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.
(Romans 7:15)

Paul said, "I don't get it!"

Maybe you can relate to Paul. Maybe you've desired to do some good things, but your plans fell through, and everything turned out wrong, and you ended up making a mess of things. Maybe every time you try to make a change in your life, it ends up falling flat, and you end up right back where you started. Maybe every time you try to obey God, it just reminds you of just how much of a sinner you are, and you fall short of the glory of God.⁷

When Abby had her surgery a few months ago, I had every intention of stepping up and filling her shoes. I made a mental list of all the things I needed to do. I was going to stay on top of the laundry. I was going to keep the house clean. And, even though I previously only knew how to cook pizza rolls and Ramen noodles, I was going to cook. My kids weren't going to live off of pizza rolls for the next month. No, no, no!

Well, the first time I tried to cook, it was a disaster. I ended up burning meatballs so badly that even I wouldn't eat them. And the second time wasn't much better. I tried to make cheesy broccoli, but the cheese was as runny as water, so it was more like broccoli and cheese soup.

You see, the mental list I made in my head just showed how much I fall short of these things. And in the same way, the purpose of the Old Testament law is to show that we're sinners.⁸ And the law does a very good job of that.

Which is interesting to me, because it often seems like many Christians treat the Bible as if it's purpose is to justify ourselves. We use it to show how everyone else is wrong, but that we ourselves are right. We're right about God. We're right about Jesus. We're right about the sanctity of human life. We're right about marriage, and family, and how there actually IS a difference between male and female.

⁶ 1 John 1:8-9

⁷ Romans 3:23

⁸ Romans 3:20

And the thing is, the Bible IS RIGHT about all these things. And we shouldn't apologize for what the Bible says, or hide what we believe, or bend to the culture on what God says in His word. But it's interesting that the purpose of the Bible is not for us to prove to others that we're right, but to prove to ourselves that we're wrong.

Verse 16.

Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. (Romans 7:16)

You see, the law is good. But the purpose of the law isn't to justify us, and to prove that we're perfect, but to remind us that we're all lawbreakers.

I read about the manager of a minor league baseball team who was so disgusted with his center fielder's performance that he took him out of the game and assumed the position himself. The first ball that came into center field took a bad hop and hit the manager in the mouth. The next one was a high fly ball, which he lost in the glare of the sun, and it bounced off his forehead. The third was a hard line drive that he charged with outstretched arms; unfortunately, it flew between his hands and smacked his eye. Furious, he ran back to the dugout, grabbed the center fielder by the uniform, and shouted. 'You idiot! You've got center field so messed up that even I can't do a thing with it!'

We typically like to point out how everyone else is a lawbreaker, and at the same time, we don't want to take any blame ourselves.⁹ We point to the murderers, or the racists, or the corrupt politicians, and blame them for all of our world's problems, but the Bible is clear that we've all sinned.¹⁰

Did you know that according to the Old Testament law, we should have all been killed? There were a ton of things that were punishable by death according to the Jewish law. We're probably all aware of what we consider to be the big ones, such as murder,¹¹ homosexuality,¹² and adultery,¹³ but did you know that the Jews were also commanded to kill the one who was disobedient to his parents?¹⁴ It was punishable by death! So was doing work on the Sabbath!¹⁵ Punishable by death! So was lying in a court,¹⁶ practicing witchcraft,¹⁷ and commits blasphemy,¹⁸ which are all serious offenses, but death?

You see, the Bible is clear that we're all guilty, and the punishment is death. Verse 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. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. (Romans 7:18-21)

⁹ James 2:10

¹⁰ Psalms 14:1-3

¹¹ Genesis 9:6

¹² Leviticus 21:10

¹³ Leviticus 20:10

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 21:18-21

¹⁵ Exodus 31:15

¹⁶ Deuteronomy 19:16-21

¹⁷ Exodus 22:17

¹⁸ Leviticus 24:14-16

So the Bible proves that we're all guilty of sin, because we're all sinners, but then Paul says even though he doesn't seem capable of actually doing the good, he still desires to do it. And I'm sure you often feel the same way. But then why do we do bad if we delight in what's good?

Our society today wants to vilify every person of our past who ever did anything wrong by today's standards. But it's amazing that just about every person of the past was a mix of both good and bad. All of our heroes were also flawed, and all of our villains also loved their mommas.

And we're the same way. If I'm only bad, then how can I ever have a good thought? If I'm only evil, then how can I ever do anything that even appears godly?

Please don't misunderstand what I'm saying. I'm not saying that we're not totally depraved. We are.¹⁹ Apart from Christ, we can do nothing.²⁰ But with Christ, we can do all things through Him who gives us strength.²¹

You see, there's a paradox within every believer. We want to do good, but evil is right there. There's nothing good that dwells in us, that is, in our flesh, and yet by grace through faith in Christ, the very Spirit of the living God dwells in us.²²

So if we were made in the image of God,²³ and God's very Spirit dwells in us, why do we so often choose to do the evil thing that we don't even want to do? I think the next few verses tell us exactly why. Verse 22.

For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 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.
(Romans 7:22-23)

There's a war going on inside us. Our inner being wants to obey God, and the presence of sin in us keeps us from doing it. Our spirit is willing, but our flesh is weak.²⁴ And it's not that our physical bodies are bad, and that our spirits are good. That's a heresy called gnosticism that was condemned in the early church. Rather, we have both good and evil in us and only Jesus can reconcile ourselves with ourselves.²⁵

That's why Paul makes this declaration in verses 24 and 25.

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7:24-25)

So even though we're set free from sin, we still sin. Even though we've become slaves to righteousness, we still act like we're slaves to sin. Even though Jesus is our Lord, we still act like we ourselves are still our own lords and saviors.

¹⁹ Ephesians 2:1

²⁰ John 15:5

²¹ Philippians 4:13

²² 1 Corinthians 3:16

²³ Genesis 1:26-27

²⁴ Matthew 26:41

²⁵ Colossians 1:20

And yet, when we remember what Jesus did for us, we begin to praise Him. We make all of our lives less about what we've done, or can do, and more about what He's done and will do in us. We remember that not only does no good thing dwell in our flesh, but also that the Spirit, who is good, dwells in us by faith. So we begin to be transformed from the inside out.

So I hope that at the very least, through all of this, you would also get your mind off of yourself. I think the reason we so often have such a wrong view of ourselves is because we are hyper focused on ourselves rather than the Spirit of God in us. In the song, "We Have Come Into This House," there's a line that says, "So forget about yourself, and concentrate on Him, and worship Him."

D.L. Moody once said, "God sends no one away empty except those who are full of themselves."

You see, Jesus saves us from ourselves. He saves us from our sin, and hell, and even from our sinful tendency to make life all about me, myself, and I.

Someone once said about Mother Teresa, "Her secret is that she is free to be nothing. Therefore God can use her for anything."

Jesus invites you to surrender to Him. He invites you deny yourself,²⁶ to empty yourself, just as He emptied Himself,²⁷ so that He can fill you back up with His love and grace.

So this morning, I invite you to receive Jesus into your life.

²⁶ Matthew 16:24

²⁷ Philippians 2:7