

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Inside Out: To Be What the Creator Intended

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Romans 7:13-25a

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We've been talking over the last few weeks, in this sermon series, about who God is, and who we are. And understanding who God is, and figuring out who we are as humans, shows pretty quickly, there is quite a divide, a chasm, something that separates us from God. And yet, there is also a desire for a closeness, a relationship – we are God's created, God created us out of love.

Paul writes about this tension, that we will read in a minute. But first a little background. Paul is writing to the church at Rome. He writes at a time when Jews had come back to Rome, after having been expelled by Claudius, but after Claudius' death, the Jews had returned. The churches had become increasingly Gentile, and so when the Jewish Christians came back, there was some tension between the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians in the churches. He addresses the Jewish law and that following the law isn't enough – it just doesn't quite cut it. Before Christ, the law had addressed sin, but Paul explains following the law isn't enough. He has written earlier in the letter that the law, while it pointed out limits, and caused us to recognize what sin is, it doesn't bring about the atonement, it was meant to bring about. The law seems to have brought about a feeling of death, that the first verse of our pericope talks about. Our passage has some cyclical points, so stay with me.

¹³ Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin that was working death in me through what is good, in order that it might be shown to be sin, so that through the commandment sin might become sinful beyond measure.

¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. ¹⁵ 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 that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that, when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ 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. ²⁴ Wretched person that I am! Who will

rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God! Will you pray with me? Lord, help us with this passage. Fill us with your love and shed your understanding on us today. May the words of my mouth, and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

What a struggle! Have you ever seen a video of children who were told to not eat some marshmallows, or some candy, or some kind of treat that was sitting right in front of them, until their caregiver comes back and lets them know it's okay to eat it? The looks on their faces is agony! It's probably similar to the look on my face as I was studying this passage! Talk about inner conflict! I have to admit, I had some inner conflict as I studied this. Did you, as we read it? Were there parts of this that had you struggling? It's a good thing that from what we have learned about God, is that God loves us, understands our lack of understanding and is with us in the struggle!

As I mentioned before, Paul has been talking about the big problem of sin and how in the past God has been in covenant with us to help restore humanity to be what God intended. First there was the Law – Torah. But because of free will, which allows us to make good or bad choices, the Law was made into something that simply showed how badly they were failing. Have you ever felt as if no matter how hard you tried, and no matter how hard you worked, you couldn't live up to the standards that someone had set? You make mistakes. I don't know about you, but when I am in that kind of relationship, it keeps me at arm's length. And so the relationship struggles, no matter how hard one works at it. And often there is pain, because the very fact that there is a relationship indicates a need or a wish for it to work.

And so there is more struggle. With what do you struggle? Is it not living up to standards even when you work so hard to do things right? Sometimes, we struggle, because we want to do right, but we look at the world around us, and so many things just aren't right. Often the world's standards aren't right to begin with, but those are the things the world encourages us to attain or assimilate to. Sometimes we struggle, and we want to do right. That is our will, but it does not become our action. Sometimes we are encouraged to love our neighbor, but it's easy to find fault with our neighbor, and find it so hard to love them, and sometimes it's easier to sin, and hate instead of work at loving them. We want to give our lives over to God, follow God's laws, and God's ways, but what happens when that means giving up the things that this world tells us to give allegiance to? We want to do it, but we just can't do it. No wonder we struggle!

And what makes it worse is when you try and fail at living up to standards and you are taught that you can never live up to those standards, anyway, because you were taught something like vs. 18, "For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is in my flesh."

Really? Nothing good dwells in me? Nothing? Did anybody else have trouble with that part of the passage? I am still struggling with that. It reminds me of an agonized face I saw on a little boy years ago when I worked in the school system. I was a Personal Accountability Class Teacher in elementary schools. When children acted out, they came to my class and my job was to give them a safe, quiet place to calm down and find some alternative behaviors. Well, one little boy came to my class, and I knew it was going to take quite a while for him to calm down. What an understatement! He was only in the first grade, and he was so angry that he literally tore the baseboards off the walls in the room where we were. When he calmed down a little bit, I asked him why he was so angry. His reply to me was, “It’s just the devil in me, it’s just the devil in me! I know about the devil! I go to church!” As Pastor Mark talked about last week, I was filled with woe! It just broke my heart that this little boy felt as if the devil was in him. And I think it broke God’s heart, too! I think that this little boy may have been taught this kind of verse, but not taught, the rest of the story. If he was taken to church, why wasn’t he feeling that it was God in him? I wanted to wrap him up in my arms and tell him how much God loved him and was in him. I think that God wished for things to be set right for this child.

The whole point of God being in covenant with humanity, and establishing laws was for us to know more about God and to be in close relationship with God. When we are out of sync with God, it is easy for the world to seem out of sync. We see that in our reading from Psalm 82. We treat our neighbor, especially those who are vulnerable, with little respect, and injustice. That is not what God wants or what God intended. As you may have heard me say before, the ten commandments show us how to love God, and how to love neighbor. In fact, I like the way Children’s Worship entitles them better, “The 10 Best Ways to Live.” It’s not about **keeping** rules, **keeping** the 10 commandments, it’s about how they make life better, because they’re all about love! It helps there to be a close relationship with God, and with ourselves, and this causes a closer relationship with neighbor – and neighbor means everyone. God has always wanted to restore humanity to what God intended. “What is required, therefore, is that justice be done, not so much in the punitive sense that phrase often carries, . . . but in the fuller sense of setting to rights that which is out of joint, restoring things as they should be.” And thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! Jesus came to show us what that love looks like! And that love is powerful! More powerful than any sinful part of us. Jesus came to show us what God intended for us to be and what to look like as Christians. We may struggle, but God is always with us through that struggle. Paul continues on in just a few verses after our pericope, and reminds us the role that Jesus Christ plays to allow that to happen, especially when we feel so defeated, “But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the

dead dwells in you, the One who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.” (Romans 8:10-11). That is how the story continues.

I told you a story about a little boy earlier. There was another young man that I think understood the fuller story. He was in our youth group in another church I served. He also had behavior issues, he was on the spectrum, he struggled and throughout that struggle, he was sometimes hard to deal with. Our young people loved him and showed concern for him, especially when he was having difficult days. He explained to us one day, as we were sharing our highs and lows for the week, that he really had a difficult time, sometimes. Later in the session, we were talking about sin. Some of the young people were talking about the devil and someone asked him what he thought of the devil. He held up his arm and said, “the devil’s nothing but a flea. With Christ, I just flick the devil off my shoulder” and flicked him away. He knew the love of Jesus Christ and gave thanks for him! It is not always easy to fight off our sinful behavior. But that young man taught us the rest of the story and what God intended for us to be, if we will lean into Christ. In the Name of the Creator, the Christ, and the Holy Ghost.