

“When Habits and Addictions Consume”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, July 13, 2014

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Romans 7: 15-25 (The Message)

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ I can anticipate the response that is coming: “I know that all God’s commands are spiritual, but I’m not. Isn’t this also your experience?” Yes. I’m full of myself—after all, I’ve spent a long time in sin’s prison. What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can’t be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God’s command is necessary.

¹⁷⁻²⁰ But I need something *more!* For if I know the law but still can’t keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don’t *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don’t result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

²¹⁻²³ It happens so regularly that it’s predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God’s commands, but it’s pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. ²⁴ I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn’t that the real question?

²⁵ The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

Romans 7: 13-25 (Clarence Jordan’s “Cotton Patch Version of the Paul’s Epistles”)

Did something good, then, bring about my destruction? I should say not! Rather, it was sin – naked sin – working through a good thing, that destroyed me. So then sin, working through the commandment, became the biggest sinner of all. Now we all recognize that the commandments are spiritual, but I’m not. I’m human, bought off by sin. Half the time I don’t know which end is up. The things I really don’t want I make a habit of, and the things I just despise I go right on doing. But when I say that I go right on doing what I don’t want, then I’m agreeing with the Bible that it has a good point (in prohibiting it). Actually, then, it isn’t even I who commit the act but the sinful habit to which I’m addicted. I know full well that from a human standpoint the element of good is not at work in me.

The desire to do right is there, yes, but the deed, no. I simply don’t carry through on my

good intentions; worse, I fall into the habit of doing the bad things I don't intend. If then I keep on doing things against my will, it really isn't I, is it, who's committing the act but the sinful habit that's in my driver's seat. I am discovering the principle that when I really want to do right, wrong embraces me. Way down deep inside of me I appreciate God's law, but I'm seeing a different "law" at work in my personality — a law which violently wars against my better judgment and takes me prisoner to the sinful addictions of my personality. What a scoundrel I am! Who can get me out of this rut of destruction? Thank God, it is done through Jesus Christ our Lord. So now you see that intellectually I bind myself to the law of God, but down where I actually live, to the law of sin.

Sermon

“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7: 24, RSV)

Three Rs

Classic definition from education in one-room schoolhouses across the American frontier:

Reading wRiting and aRithmetic

For some of us the three Rs are *Reading, wRiting and Running*

For today's – and life's – purposes the three Rs are *wRetched, Rescue, and Relationship*

The first R stands for: **“Wretched man that I am!”**

Scholars teach us that here the Apostle Paul is not speaking personally, telling his story, nor is he confessing his own wayward ways, calling himself wretched, a scoundrel, a soul at the end of his rope.

Rather Paul is speaking for all of us, on our behalf, referring to all of humanity.

Paul reminds his readers in the Christian churches in Rome

that we who are yoked together in the human condition are wretched

when it comes to sinful behavior

and our collective failures to live out and live up to our best intentions.

We are like the young person in time out who whimpers,

“Mommy, Daddy, I want to be good, but I just can’t!”

Ever want to do right

yet end up doing wrong?

Ever not understand

your own actions?

Ever not do the thing you meant to do,

and end up doing that which you despise?

Ever have good intentions and bad inclinations,

good will and poor progress?

Ever have the best of intentions to say and do the right thing,

yet discover that you have not lived out, filled out, or given out your best?

Take a number!

Join me and all of our neighbors and friends standing in this same line of folks,

standing in the need of prayer,

saints and sinners alike,

wretched people that we are.

We so much want to do the right thing,

and so often – too often – we end up doing wrong.

We feel wretched, like a scoundrel, like we are at the end of our proverbial rope.

Good friend in a nearby state is a fine Christian man.

He darkens Christ's church doors whenever they open;

he would give you the shirt off his back;

he is raising a wonderful family;

he readily confesses in private and in public that he is far from perfect.

Yet he cannot bear to sing the opening verse of "Amazing Grace."

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me.

I once was lost but now am found, Was blind, but now I see."

He says, "Hold on a minute. 'Saved a wretch like me?'

I am not a wretch. Sorry. I can't relate to the verse."

Good point.

Who can?

Who likes or enjoys or appreciates being called wretched,

much less taking it on as a personal identity?

Are we wretched, or are we blessed?

Our starting point is so good, so blessed, so holy.

We are created and live into life with a yearning for God,

naturally, spiritually, intuitively leaning in God's direction.

Our core commandment is *"Thou shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself."*

This Commandment, this mantra, this ethic, this Golden Rule emits from the human condition in every land and religion.

You are made good, in the image of God,

a divine child of love,

created and birthed and given to the world an original blessing,
filled with purpose and meaning and hope.

And we cannot wait to see what God is doing in and through you!

We who are naturally made and spiritually inclined toward God and God's ways
discover along the way that even though we intend to do good
so often we don't.

*"Not only are we unable to fulfill [God's] commandments,
we often ignore our desire to do so.*

*The longing at the center of our hearts repeatedly disappears from our awareness,
and it's energy is usurped by forces that are not at all loving.*

*Our desires (to do good) are captured, and we give ourselves over to things that,
in our deepest honesty, we really do not want.*

*There are times when each of us can identify with the words of the Apostle Paul:
'I do not understand my own behavior.'" (Gerald May, Addiction and Grace)*

"Half the time I don't know which end is up.

*The things I really don't want I make a habit of,
and the things I just despise I go right on doing.*

*But when I say that I go right on doing what I don't want,
then I'm agreeing with the Bible*

that it has a good point (in prohibiting it).

*Actually, then, it isn't even I who commit the act
but the sinful habit to which I'm addicted.*

*I know full well that from a human standpoint
the element of good is not at work in me." (Romans 7:15-18, Cotton Patch Version)*

Paul is talking here about habits and addictions that lead us astray,
away from God's will and hope for our lives and community.

Speaking theologically about sinful behaviors, harmful addictions, consuming habits,
"sin is what turns us away from love –
--away from love for ourselves,
away from love for one another,
away from love for God." (Gerald May)

Teresa of Ávila wrote in *Interior Castle*:

*"The devil frequently fills our thoughts with great schemes,
so that instead of putting our hands to what work we can do to serve our Lord,
we may rest satisfied with wishing to perform impossibilities."*

We may allow our best intentions and good works and will
to be waylaid and undone by selfish or self-centered behaviors,
behaviors that detract and distract us from doing and being what we ought.

Paul recognized that,

wretched man that I am, wretched people that we are,

there is help.

There is hope.

There is a solution to the problem of being consumed by that which harms and hurts.

Paul asked, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

For the wretched of the earth there is rescue.

Teresa of Ávila said, *"The closer one approaches to God, the simpler one becomes."*

Draw nearer to God, and reach out for help, for release, for rescue.

Most every rescue is a two way street.

One hand reaches out for help, another extends hope.

And often this exchange of grace is not as complicated as we make it out to be.

Max Lucado describes the sufficiency of God's grace this way:

Imagine we are all passengers on an airplane

and suddenly the pilot rushes out of the cockpit.

The pilot exclaims, *"We're going to crash! We have to bail out!*

Here, there are enough parachutes for everyone!"

The first passenger makes a request. *"Any way I can get a pink one?"*

The pilot shakes his head in disbelief. *"Isn't it enough that I gave you a parachute at all?"*

So then the first passenger takes it and jumps.

The second asks, *"Any way you can keep me from getting airsick as I fall?"*

"No, but I can ensure that you will have a parachute while you fall."

One after another every passenger asks for goggles, or boots,

or to wait for later, or to change the plans, or to overcome a fear of falling.

"You people don't understand," says the pilot.

"I have given you a parachute; that is enough!"

Only one item is necessary for the jump, and it is provided.

God places the strategic tool in our hands.

God's gift of grace is adequate; it is sufficient.

But are we content?

No, says Max Lucado, we are anxious, restless, even demanding.

Yet God loves us so much that God gives us a nudge, a tool, and suspends us in the grip

of grace.

Annie Lamott wrote in *Traveling Mercies*,

“It’s funny. I always imagined when I was a kid

that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools:

the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience.

But then when I grew up I found that life handed you

these rusty bent old tools – friendship, prayer, conscience, honesty –

and life said, Do the best you can with these, they will have to do.

And mostly, against all odds, they’re enough.”

Rescue is here, in the tools that are already at our disposal:

in the grace of Jesus Christ,

in the gracious hands that reach out to help us cope

with our behaviors and addictions and habits that

seek to consume and conquer our souls, our families and livelihoods.

Paul said, “Wretched man that I am!

Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7: 24, RSV)

Wretched,

Rescue,

Relationship

Relate with God and one another;

allow God to use you to reconcile and rescue those of us

wrestling with harmful addictions and habits and behaviors.

Teresa of Ávila said,

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours,

no hands but yours, no feet but yours, Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good; Yours are the hands with which he is to bless [humanity] now."

I shared a very long night and early morning with a gentleman who held in his hand a loaded handgun,

threatening to shoot himself because his beloved had left him.

He finally allowed himself to be persuaded to remove the bullets out of the .38.

They clattered one at a time onto a coffee table.

I placed one bullet in my left hand and then extended both hands to him, saying,

"In my left hand is death. You can choose it now.

In my right hand is hope. You can choose it now.

I offer to you the love of Jesus Christ and His Church.

My left hand is an ending; in the right is a fresh start.

Make a choice. Take a hand."

He grabbed my right hand and we burst into tears and began to pray.

Afterward I collected the stray bullets and slipped them into my pocket, and then offered to hold onto his handgun for a while.

He handed me the .38, saying, *"Sure, take it, preacher."*

Then he laughed and said, *"I have a Glock hidden in the sofa pillow you were sitting beside.*

Don't worry; me and Jesus will still be here in the morning."

And they were.

And very soon so was his beloved, and they're still together today.

Don't worry, my wretched and wonderful, wondering and wandering friends;

come whatever may be,

me and you and Jesus will still be here,

thanks to the amazing grace of God.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

Communion Invitation

“Becoming Food for the World” By: Henri Nouwen

When Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, he summarized in these gestures his own life. Jesus is chosen from all eternity, blessed at his baptism in the Jordan River, broken on the cross, and given as bread to the world. Being chosen, blessed, broken, and given is the sacred journey of the Son of God, Jesus the Christ. When we take bread, bless it, break it, and give it with the words "This is the Body of Christ," we express our commitment to make our lives conform to the life of Christ. We too want to live as people chosen, blessed, and broken, and thus become food for the world.