

Sunday 4th February 2024 Romans 7:14-25

I have to say that as I was preparing for today, I envisioned you having a look over the passage, to check for any tricky words or difficult names and saying a wee prayer for me as I try to preach on this portion of Romans. I greatly appreciate it if you did, and indeed anyone who has been silently praying and continues to do so. It is very much needed.

In the last service where I spoke on Romans, I mentioned that I had to read the passage multiple times to get any sense of what was going on – the passage today is a whole different level of complexity. When I opened the commentary I'm using the first line says –

“This passage is one of the most controversial in all of Romans. Since early in the history of the church scholars have debated just what experience Paul refers to”. Thank you, Jonny!

I hope you will bear with me, and indeed that you will study this passage later in your own devotions, as we try together to discern what God is saying to us through Paul. I do feel that it is hard to get any understanding of the passage at all on just one reading, and equally it's important to measure it against the whole body of scripture. I'm going to ask David to put some slides up with verses which help to clarify this tricky part of the book.

Paul begins here by talking about how he, unlike the law, is unspiritual. This is a strange attitude for him to take, because we know that Paul was perhaps the most righteous religious zealot of his generation – in Philippians 3 v 4 he tells us “ If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”

If Paul, with those credentials, now describes himself as a slave to sin, what hope do we have?

The law is spiritual. Human beings are unspiritual, and we live in a fallen world where we continually experience the decay and degradation caused by sin entering the world. The law was given by God as a sign to His people of what he expects, however there is no possible way for sinful mankind to mix with the spiritual, Holy Law. It is like trying to mix oil and water – if you put them both in a bottle you can give it a really hard shake and have the whole thing look uniform - briefly. What has really happened is that there are little, tiny droplets of oil, separated in the water and they are looking for each other, rising to the top and joining and eventually there will just be the two separate layers again. Sinful human beings cannot achieve the perfection mandated by the law – it is against our fallen nature. Despite Paul being a hyper-religious zealot he was just as subject to the sinful fallen nature of mankind as the rest of us. In some ways I find that quite reassuring!

Paul spends quite a few verses discussing how he can't live the good, spiritual life that he wants to because of his sinful nature. There has apparently been a lot of scholarly debate about this – is Paul talking about a pre-Christian state? Is he talking about life as an immature Christian, or as a mature one? Why does he make it seem that even he, this super Apostle, has no hope of living a holy life?

Today we are not going to get into any of that. I don't have the ability to explain the subtleties of the theological arguments to you, not least because I don't fully understand them myself. What I want to do is to share how I feel this can be helpful in our Christian walk.

My first thoughts on reading this was that Paul was minimising the power that forgiveness and redemption by Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit have in the life of a

Christian. If we state that there is no hope of us living the life God wants us to live then Christ's sacrifice is incomplete and the Holy Spirit is insufficient to keep us. That is absolutely, categorically not the case.

1 Timothy 1:15

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance – Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the worst.

Paul again laments about how sinful he is, yet he is precisely one whom Jesus came to save. We know too that Christians cannot be pulled away from God, even if they fall down.

John 10:28

My sheep listen to my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.

And we know that we are loved and kept by God.

Jumping briefly forward to **Romans 8 38-39**

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. How can we reconcile all of these statements? They are all part of the Bible; every single word has been inspired by God and is absolute truth.

I think we have to look at it as the now, and the not yet. Today we are still living in the world. We have corruption, death and destruction staring us in the face every time we open a newspaper or turn on a TV. Our world is fallen. We bear in our human bodies the scars of the fall, the seeds of death that Adam and Eve bequeathed to all their descendants.

Because we are flawed, we are unable to separate us from the world of sin. Paul, as a disciplined and dedicated believer, was painfully aware of where he fell down. If we are Christians we are also redeemed - our souls are saved, we have life in Christ and we are cleansed by his sacrifice –

1 John 1:9-10

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

As Christians we have God's Holy Spirit living in us and empowering us. The problem is not God's inability to make us spiritual, or keep us holy, it is our own corrupt natures that have us turn to sin.

Paul seems to despair - but where is there any hope of being rescued? To quote Paul in verse 24,

“Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, though our Lord Jesus Christ”.

Paul struggled with sin. I struggle with sin. I believe any Christian will tell you the same story. We want to be spiritual, we want to be holy, but, through no fault of God, we aren't quite there. Yet. God has redeemed us, he loves us, he has forgiven us. In Christ our standing with God is Justified - it's just as if we had never sinned. We are reconciled - we are in fellowship with Him. Sanctification – becoming sinless perfection is a process. He is perfecting us into his image. We will get there one day, but not on this side of Glory.

This is not an excuse to go out and sin. We are trying to become more like Christ, we are wanting to grow in His image. We do not increase grace by going out and sinning – there have been lots of heretical cults which have taught that over the centuries, and it is contrary **to scripture. We need to aim for holiness –**

Matthew 5 48 – Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect. No pressure there!

We cannot do it, but, through Christ, we can enter the presence of God. I had considered showing what happens to an oil and water mix if you add a detergent, how you can combine the two, but that is a poor analogy. Jesus doesn't let our corruption mix with the holiness,

he doesn't create an emulsion of holy and unholy. He takes us, sinful as we are, touched by the fall as we are and changes our broken natures into sinless perfection through Him.

2 Cor 12

My grace is sufficient for you , for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Do not lose heart. Do not consider yourself to be an inferior Christian because you have sinned. None of us are any better. Live for Him, strive for holiness, for Christlikeness. Be comforted, secure in the knowledge that if we fall He is there to pick us up, to dust us off and to make us more and more like him every day. Be encouraged that we have a perfect God who inexplicably loves and redeems imperfect human beings and go out to tell others about Him.