

“Addiction”

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Romans 7:14-21a

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 that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 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 that 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 man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

ADDICTED TO SIN

Today's lesson is about the power of sin.
 Paul says that he is “of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.”

That's a big claim about the power of sin.
 And it's quite different from how many people think about sin.

Sin is defined in the dictionary as “doing wrong” or “breaking the law”.
 Sin defined this way is serious, but there's something that we can do about it.

We can just say “no” to sin.
 We can do the right thing.

We can obey the law.

That's sin with a small "s".

But, today Paul is talking about Sin with a capital "S".

This big Sin is more like an addiction than a moral choice.

This Sin is not just slipping up once in a while
... breaking the speed limit or cheating on our taxes.

This Sin is being subject to a power that is too strong for us.

This Sin is slavery.

This Sin corrupts our personal life and our life together.

Perhaps the best analogy is the experience of those who are alcoholics.
Those who suffer from alcoholism lose control of their life.

They can lose their family, their job and their friends.

They know the problem is alcohol.

But, knowing isn't enough

They still continue to drink.

The power of alcohol is stronger than their willpower.

Paul tells that addiction is not limited to those with an alcohol or a drug
abuse problem.

We are addicted to sin.

We are slaves to a force that is stronger than us and can even turn some-
thing good into something bad.

SIN AND GOD'S LAW

For example, God's law, which is good, becomes in the hands of sin some-
thing that tempts us to sin all the more.

It's sort of like when we tell our children,
"No, don't do that." What do they want to do?

The very thing we forbid.

We tell the toddler, "Don't touch that light socket.
And what are they tempted to do more than anything else?"

Touch the light socket.

The thing that is forbidden becomes the object of their desire.

According to Paul, this is true not only for toddlers.
It's true for all of us.

We know the right thing to do.
But, what do we often find ourselves doing?
The very thing that we know is wrong.

Paul wrote, "I don't understand my own actions.
How can I know the right thing to do and yet always seem to choose the
wrong thing?"

It's almost as if Paul is at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

"Hi. My name is Paul, and I'm addicted to sin."
"Hi Paul."

The apostle, in his letters, often seems self-assured, almost strident at
times.

But, in today's lesson he seems different.
He seems vulnerable.
He admits that sin is stronger than his willpower.

The sin that dwells within is stronger than his knowledge and love of the
law.
It's almost as if Paul is possessed by sin.

Paul seems to be saying exactly that in verse 20. He writes,
"Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells
within me."

Sin takes on a life of it's own.

Sin is an evil influence that can thwart even the best of intentions.

Sin with a capital "S" is stronger than even the most righteous person.

ADMITTING THE TRUTH

So what's a sinner to do?

Well, maybe we begin by admitting the truth.

I'm a sinner.

My life is out of control.

I'm not the person I should be.

I'm addicted to sin.

I need help.

It's almost like we need a 12 step program for sinners.

And in a way that's what this passage delivers.

You'll remember that Paul tried to be a righteous person.

He was a Pharisee.

He had the law memorized.

In Paul's letter to the Philippians he lists these impressive qualifications.

But, what did his knowledge of the law lead him to do?

It led him to persecute the church.

It led him to reject the one that God sent.

Paul concludes that all the things that he thought were so important, all of his accomplishments and knowledge of the law were rubbish in comparison to God's grace as revealed in Jesus.

(Philippians 3:2-9)

Paul could not achieve righteousness on his own.

It took a bolt from the blue.

It took an encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus before he was able to see the truth.

In Paul's life sin had even turned God's good law into a tool for evil. This insight helped Paul go in a different direction.

Out of humility and a sense of shame he had to admit the truth.

He was a slave to sin and the only way out of that slavery was to trust in the grace of God as revealed by Jesus Christ.

For the rest of his life when Paul proclaimed the gospel, he began by confessing that sin had a hold on him. He told the story of how sin blinded him and even led him to persecute the people of God.

And for Paul the struggle was not over. He wrote that there was a spiritual war going on inside of him.

The things he shouldn't be doing are the things that he did. And the things that he should be doing he neglected.

SINNERS ANONYMOUS

For those of us who feel like our lives are out of control, it helps to join a community of people who are struggling with the same problem. It helps to meet with people who humbly acknowledge with the Apostle Paul that we're still not the people that we should be.

The things we shouldn't be doing ... those are the very things that we do. And the things that we should be doing ... those are the things that we neglect.

At first blush this might seem to be a defeatist attitude.

After all isn't the church about having a positive attitude and doing the right thing?

Isn't true religion about morality and righteous behavior?

There's nothing wrong with a desire to be moral and righteous.

But, if we think that we can achieve that on our own, we are kidding ourselves.

We will be filled with pride.

And the pride of the self-righteous can prove to be the most deadly of sins.

That's why some of the worst sins the world has ever seen have been committed in the name of true religion. The pride of the self-righteous can lead to terrible consequences.

The only cure is humble confession.

The only cure is to say with the apostle Paul,

"My life is out of control.

I need help."

In the church we offer this cure.

I've talked about it many times.

We begin our worship service with a prayer of confession because that's where faith begins. Faith begins with humility before God and each other.

The purpose of the church is to help us confess our weakness before God and each other.

The purpose of the church is not to present an image of perfection.

The purpose of the church is not to adopt the power of positive thinking.

The purpose of the church is not to become a social service agency.

The purpose of the church is to tell the truth about the power of sin in our own lives and in the lives of our society. Only the hard truth about the power of sin in our lives will lead us to the throne of grace.

We may present the illusion of perfection to someone on the outside, but it is just that, an illusion.

One pastor put it this way,

"We invest wisely, dress appropriately and worship discreetly.

Our children like our homes are well maintained and do us credit ...

Looking out at my congregation, I see a people who embrace the motto, 'Never let them see you sweat.'; but God knows the truth and so does Paul: we're all sweating."

The church is not a country club for righteous people.

Indeed, our attempts to be righteous often lead us to even greater despair.

The church is akin to alcoholics anonymous.
We might call it sinners anonymous.

We find strength in admitting as a community that sin has a hold on us that we cannot break.

And our only hope is in the power of God's grace as revealed in Jesus Christ.

We need God in Christ to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY

We might be strong willed people but the power of sin, the power of the flesh as Paul calls it, is stronger than our greatest efforts. And ironically, without a proper appreciation of the power of sin, our best efforts at righteous living will prove to be futile.

Our attempts to be righteous will come across as self-righteousness. We will be (to adapt the words of Mark Twain) "good men" [and women] in the worst sense of the word."

The Bible tells us that we need more than just a few tweaks here and there. We need salvation.
We need a cure that comes from above.

Today's lesson injects a note of caution when it comes to sin. We cannot overcome sin by trying harder to be good.

Sin is stronger than we think.
Sin can distort even our best intentions.

In traditional Reformed theology we have a rather colorful way of describing the pervasiveness of sin. We call it “total depravity.”

Now, what do we mean by that phrase?

Just this:

Adam and Eve’s story is our story.

On our own, we turn from God and seek to become our own gods.

Instead of trusting in the goodness of God, we trust in ourselves and our own abilities.

And when that happens, we spoil the garden.

We corrupt even the best gifts that God has given us.

And we are ashamed.

Our guilt and our failure are laid bare for all to see.

The most religious and righteous person is still a slave to sin.

In our lesson for today we learn that the dramatic conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus did not end Paul’s struggle with sin. It was just the beginning of a long a difficult journey.

Years after his conversion Paul could still cry out in despair, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

THE CURE

If even a Damascus road experience was not enough to prevent Paul from struggling with sin, what hope do we have in our battle to do the right thing?

What is the cure for our sin sickness, if the effects of sin are so widespread and pervasive?

How can we ever see God’s will if we are so blinded by sin?

The answer is God’s amazing grace.

In our lesson for today Paul writes,

“Wretched man that I am!

Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

And then that question is answered with a statement of thanksgiving.
 “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The key word is “thanks”.
 It is thanksgiving, a grateful heart that transforms the life of the believer.

What we could not do for ourselves, God in Christ has done for us.
 While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.
 Gratitude can overcome our addiction to sin.

To say it another way, it’s grace that taught my heart to fear and grace
 those fears relieved.

Maybe that’s why some of us like to sing that song so much.
 We instinctively know that grace is what we really need.

It is the cure for what ails us.
 It is the balm in Gilead that cures the sin sick soul.

LEARNING TO FEAR

This passage points out something that we often forget.

In order to make progress in the Christian faith, it is necessary to be sensi-
 tive about our sinful nature. To use the words of the hymn, grace must
 teach out heart to fear.

And it is this holy fear guides us and keeps us dependent upon God’s
 grace

This runs counter to the prevailing attitude of the modern world, and I must
 say the prevailing attitude of some in the church.

When I was in seminary, many of my teachers wanted to say that this pas-
 sage was not about the struggle of a sensitive soul.

Using other passages from Paul’s writings where he projects a more self-
 confident approach, they said that Paul had a robust conscience.

He did not have a sense of guilt and failure.
And they suggested that his statements in this passage were rhetorical and not personal.

I bade to disagree.

Paul's personal history gives us ample reason to believe he felt a sense of guilt and failure.

He did, after all participate in the persecution of the church. It took a confrontation from the Lord on the road to Damascus to change his course.

His initial attempt to preach the gospel was a complete failure, and it took several years of reflection in the wilderness before he was ready.

And though Paul was able to plant churches all over the ancient world, quite often the churches he started struggled. Many of those who worked with him in the church deserted him when the going got rough.

And at the end of Paul's life so many churches were in trouble and so many leaders had deserted him that the old apostle was on the edge of despair as he awaited execution in prison.

The only thing that gave Paul hope in a world terribly corrupted by sin was this: he believed that in the long run God's power to save was greater than the power of evil.

He did not come to this conclusion easily.
It was the result of a lifetime of spiritual struggle.

OUR STRUGGLE

We too need to be a part of that spiritual struggle.
Until we learn to hate sin, we will not turn from it.

We often do not know the joys of God's grace because we do not understand the depth of our own sin. Remember, it was the religious people, the scribes and Pharisees who did not come to Jesus for forgiveness because they thought that they didn't need it.

It is not a bad thing to have a heart that fears, if the One we fear is God. The Bible tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

The battle between sin and righteousness continued in Paul's life after his conversion.

And I would contend that this battle continues in the lives of all Christians.

The question for us this is this:

Do we know that we are in combat?

Do we know that sin is so deeply embedded in our world and in our lives ... that on our own we have no hope?

I ask that question not to lead us to despair but to lead us to our one true hope.

I want God to bring us to the point where we ask with the apostle, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

And like the apostle our confession will be met with outburst of praise. "Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

As C.H. Dodd put it in his commentary on this passage,

"One thing is clear:
when Paul could do nothing,
God did everything for him,
and all that was left for him to do was give thanks."

There is a cure for the sin sick soul.
There is a cure for our addiction.

The cure is gratitude
... gratitude for God's amazing grace.

Amen.