

**July 9, 2017**  
**Romans 7:7-25; Matthew 11:28-30**

As we've read from the book of Romans over the past few weeks, we have heard Paul's discussion about the law and grace. In it, he demonstrated the right use of rhetorical questions. Twice in Chapter 6 (1-2, 15), and twice more in today's reading (7:7, 7:13)... By no means! Asking questions to further his argument. It's an interesting device that can trip a reader, but as we look at the bigger sections, we see a pattern emerging. Listen again for the Word of God to the people of God.

READ ROMANS 7:7-25

There was an old Mickey Mouse cartoon wherein Pluto was torn between a small angel on one shoulder, and a devil on the other. The angel was, of course, dressed in white and spoke with a respectable British woman's voice. The devil, of course, wore a black cape and spoke with a scrappy Jersey accent. These two figures (presumably his conscience) lobbied Pluto to make opposing choices. The angel wanted him to "be a good dog," while the devil wanted him to have fun and look out for himself. The two figures eventually got into a wrestling match; the devil clocked the angel and bound him with his own halo, then the angel knocked the devil out of existence with a cosmic "poof!"

That's a little bit of what Paul described here in Romans.

Paul wrote about the earnest wrestling match between his mind and body. "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate..." Then he reiterated, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." While his heart knew God's law and wanted to follow it, his body knew the law of sin and inevitably fell into it. Paul wrote with some amount of consternation about the struggle.

When Jesus offered open arms to the weary in Matthew, we tend to think of the sick and the dying, the poor and the grieving. But if we think about spiritual weariness, Paul seems as worn down as we are. The constant struggle with our sinful nature is like a parent trying to keep a baby out of trouble. Now that Huck is crawling and climbing, Adam and I are challenged to keep up with him. Everyday. From 7am – 7pm. We tell him, “No! Don’t touch that.” But he doesn’t understand, so we say again, “No! Don’t touch that.” And we redirect him, but he turns right back to the trouble. Then we say again, “NO! Don’t touch that.” And on and on and on... for many minutes, like a broken record player, until we’re distracted or tired, and don’t notice or care as much when he first headed toward trouble. He split his lip yesterday because I looked away at the wrong second. And he got hurt. And his pain hurt me.

That’s how it goes. Sin pulls at us and nags at us. And we can be attentive for a long while, but eventually we are worn down. We get distracted. We look the other way for half a second, and suddenly, it gets us. Everyday. We lose the energy and awareness to keep it at bay. So we do what we do not want. Everyday. We say a harsh word to someone. We do not practice kindness or self control. We do not honor God in all that we say or think or do.

This is an important piece of our Reformed theology. Presbyterians understand creation’s relationship to God as one of needy sinners standing before a perfect Judge and Lord. We don’t deserve God’s love. We can’t do or be what we should. We are thoroughly sinful, thoroughly corrupted in heart and mind. Augustine, an early Christian theologian, went so far as to say that “nothing is ours *but* sin”. And John Calvin, our Presbyterian ancestor, was insistent upon the nature of our tainted souls. Both Augustine and Calvin use language like Paul’s: “possessed”, “held hostage,” and “held captive”. Their words remind us that sin is not something we are

meant to do, but is a force that has taken hold of our lives. It is a force that temporarily controls us.

This talk about our sinful nature spirals down until we remember the other cornerstone of Reformed theology. As sinful as we are, we don't believe that sin deserves much attention other than the initial naming and claiming of it. Sin doesn't define us. Instead, God's grace stands in the spotlight. The most important tenet of Reformed faith is grace. We believe that God's grace is bigger and stronger than sin. We believe that God loves us *in spite of* our sinful nature. We believe that God sacrificed part of God's self in order to be in relationship with us, sinful beings. God went above and beyond to bring us back to the family. We don't deserve it – and that's what makes it grace. “Wretched people that we are! Who will rescue us from the body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Jesus was not just a symbol of this grace; Jesus practiced and embodied this grace. He said to the disciples, “Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” He made a way for those who had been excluded. He offered healing (rest!) – in body, mind, and soul – to all those who were sick and broken. He offered reconciliation to the world. Friends, this is the good news. (The Christian story always ends with good news.) We are not masters of our own destiny, or masters of our fate. We could not do it on our own. Our fate was and is accomplished by the Triune God. Regardless of who we are or what we've done, someone else (not ourselves) brings us freedom. When we thought we were trapped in the pit of sin and death, Jesus Christ rescued us and carried us to freedom.

This is counter culture to our Protestant American, middle class work ethic. We have been taught to work harder, dig deeper, try and try and try again until we get it right. We were taught financial and intellectual independence. The one place wherein we rely on someone else

to take care of our problems is in our judicial system. The welfare of someone accused of a crime is dependent on others' actions. Regardless of someone's innocence, they may be freed because their lawyer did a good job defending him, or imprisoned because the prosecution did a good job. An accused criminal may be imprisoned because the jury was biased, or freed because the evidence was inconclusive. The accused person's freedom has little to do with what they actually did, and more to do with those around them – judge, jury, lawyers, and such. Amanda Knox was recently interviewed on the radio show, “Live Wire.” (You may remember that Knox was an American collegiate studying abroad several years ago when her roommate was murdered, and she was declared guilty. Her arrest and subsequent trial were in the headlines for months.) Knox always maintained her innocence. The “Live Wire” interview was not about her accused crime, but about her incarceration in the Italian prison. When she was asked what it was like to be at the center of the international uproar, Knox did not blame anyone or express a desire for revenge. Instead, she recognized the complexities of each individual who interacted with her case. From the judge to the police and media and other bystanders. She said, “it [doesn't have] a lot to do with me, which is kind of a relief and kind of the saddest thing about my existence – that so many people feel so much about something that has nothing to do with me. Some people want me to be a bad guy.”

We are caught in a cosmic battle between sin and God. And sin has our number. Like Knox said, this is bigger than us. It doesn't have a lot to do with us. Sin wants us to be the bad guys, but God knows the Truth. God saved us from enslavement to sin, and chained us to his grace. While sin wrestles around frantically, God simply exists and exudes awesome power. Sin will eventually exhaust itself. Sin will die a horrible death. (with Christ's death on the cross.) So

in the meantime, we wait while the wrestling match goes on, always keeping our bets on God's grace.

It is good to think about the particular sin that exhausts you, and the counter ways that you experience God's grace. For this is not just theory, but our daily reality. Just as we are wearied, we are even more grateful to turn to Christ who welcomes us with open arms. Wretched people that we are! Who will rescue us from the body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"