

*For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 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. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

*So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

*So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.*

**Note:** *During the announcements at the beginning of worship, I brought out a bright red gift bag as I mentioned the preaching series on Romans – but then told the congregation to ignore the bag, as we would discuss it later during the sermon. I set the gift bag on the pulpit, where it remained visible during the service.*

*At the beginning of the sermon, I picked up the gift bag again and said it was relevant to Romans 7, but as I began to reach into the bag I said we should first review some key points on Romans, and I set the bag back on the pulpit and continued with the sermon.*

As we move into the middle section of Paul's letter to the Romans, this is a good time to remind ourselves why we're doing this series on Romans in the first place. One reason is because it's part of the assigned readings laid out in the Revised Common Lectionary. This lectionary is used not only by many Lutherans, but also by many Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics, among others. Every three years during the season after Pentecost, the lectionary has us dive into Paul's letter to the Romans together. Since this year is also the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation, for Lutherans it's an especially good time to take a closer look at this part of scripture that was so instrumental in Martin Luther's rediscovery of the gospel good news that frees us.

So why did Luther think Romans was so valuable? When he published his translation of the New Testament into German in 1522 – making it available in the language of the people -- he included a commentary on Romans. It was Romans, not one of the gospels, which Luther described as “the clearest expression of the gospel” and “a brilliant light that illumines the whole of Scripture.” He thought not only that all Christians should know Romans word for word by heart – which I'm confident we all do, especially your pastors, of course! – but also that Christians should turn to it daily as “the soul's daily bread.” One of the things Luther identified as especially helpful about Romans is that it explores many key words and concepts essential to the Christian faith, like “grace,” “sin,” “freedom,” and “righteousness.”

One of the words we've heard Paul use repeatedly in Romans is “law” and it comes up again in this passage at the end of Romans 7. In addition to talking in chapter 7 about God's law, that is, the law as revealed to Moses and passed down through generations of God's people, Paul also mentions here a kind of universal law he's observed, which is that even when people know the right thing to do, we often fail to do it. His observation is still universal enough that we can easily use his very words as part of our confession at the beginning of worship this morning. What particularly concerns Paul here is, what's the relationship between this universal law and God's revealed law? That is, why is it that this universal law is just as evident among God's people as it is in the general population?

This brings us back to the gift bag. By a show of hands, how many of you have been focused on this gift bag ever since I mentioned it way back during the announcements and have been distracted by it to the point of missing some other parts of the service that have happened since? How many of you know something about learning styles, educational methods, or presentation skills, and have been thinking it's really poor planning on my part to have introduced this bag three times before actually explaining its purpose? How many of you are unwilling to raise your hand, either because you aren't interested in what's in the bag anyway or because you're worried what I might say about what it means to be in one of these groups?

This is more or less how we interact with the law given by God, as described by Paul and by Luther. Even though the law is a good gift from God, intended to promote good and restrain bad, intended to help us live in right relationship with God and neighbor, we have a tendency to instead be distracted by it and as a result our attention gets redirected, often away from God and our neighbor. We might fixate on the law itself and ignore other things. Or we might come to resent or even reject the law, or the One who gave it to us. We can turn inward instead of toward God and neighbor, and either become proud of our ability to fulfill the law or terrified of our inability to live up to it.

So Paul wants to know why this is the case. More specifically, he wants to know who or what is responsible for the law being twisted for other purposes and why sin exists and continues to exist even among God's people. Is this the law's fault, or the self's fault?

Paul rejects the idea that the law is to blame, because he notes that even when doing something bad, the self still agrees that the law is indeed good, and given by God who is good.

But he also rejects the idea that it's the self's fault – that the personal or corporate self, the “I,” is responsible for sin. He's so sure of this he says it twice in the span of a few verses: “it is not I who do what I know to be wrong, but the sin that dwells within me.” The self has capacity for good, and can recognize that the law is good. The human person, created in the image of God, and the community of God's people, gathered together into one body, are not the cause of sin. Paul affirms both the goodness of the law and the capacity for goodness in the personal and corporate self, while also acknowledging the very real effects of sin and death in the world and even within the Christian self and the Christian community.

Paul does something really important here, making clear that human nature is not the same as sinful nature. Part of what it means to be human is to be limited, finite, vulnerable – these are what make us humans rather than puppets or robots. Vulnerability is what makes it possible to love and be loved. But it's also what makes humanity susceptible to manipulation, able to hurt and be hurt. This is sin, the thing that brings evil close at hand even when we do good; it's separate from the self but so close by the self that it too seems part of our very flesh.

Luther describes this as the distinction between doing the works of the law and fulfilling the law. It is possible, he says, to do the works of the law for the wrong reasons, and so even in doing good we can condemn ourselves. Fulfilling the law means to do the works of the law with a joyful and willing heart, without regard for the effects on the self. It is impossible for us to do this, impossible for us to fulfill the law. We are so often motivated to do good works by pride in our own abilities and self-righteous arrogance in our own goodness, or by fear of what will happen to us if we don't do it, or by concern for what God or others will think of us. We do the works of the law for self-interested reasons, not because we are interested in God or neighbor. The works we do may in themselves be good, may create good in the world, but in doing them motivated by our reasons rather than God's we do not only not fulfill the law, we condemn ourselves by the law.

So we are stuck. The law is good and the self, created in God's image, is intended for right relationship with God and neighbor. But sin wriggles in, between us and God, between us and the law, between us and our neighbor, into Christian community, even dividing the self within an individual Christian between what we know is good and what we do anyway. Sin bends the law to evil purposes and the self away from God and neighbor. Sin holds us captive, and we are unable to free ourselves. With Paul we wonder “who will rescue us?”

The good news is, Paul's letter to the Romans doesn't end at the end of chapter 7. Next week, in chapter 8, Paul will tell us that sin isn't the only thing dwelling within us. But here, at the end of chapter 7, he gives us a hint of what we already know we will hear. So with Paul, stuck in our captivity to sin, we cry “thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” that it doesn't depend on us anyway.