

# *A Spiritual Spring for the Week*

Rev. Dr. John V. Callahan, Jr.

Sermon Text: Romans 7:13-25

Sermon Title: "To Do or Not to Do: Jesus Settles the Question" (A Journey through Romans)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

July 3, 2016

**{SLIDE 1, TITLE}** I knew from a young age the difference between right and wrong. My family went to church on Sunday; we split our time between the Catholic and Presbyterian Church. My mother and father always reminded me of what was good and what was bad. They would tell me not to do something, or they would say I should do a certain thing, and if I didn't my mother would grab a wooden cooking spoon from the kitchen and let me have it, or my dad would grab his belt and let me have it after he came home from work.

And from an early age I wanted to do what was good and not what was bad. I didn't want to get in trouble with my parents, or with the police, or with my teachers, or with anybody. Most of the time I did what was right, but then there were times I did what was wrong. It was easy to convince myself that I wasn't hurting anybody. My friends were doing the same things, mischievous things, things that curious boys and immature teenagers would do. Where was the harm? Sometimes I got caught, and other times I got away with it.

There were times my sister and I would get into fight. I felt justified in showing her that she was wrong and I was right. I would get in trouble, because I was the oldest child. I should know better. Sometimes I wouldn't fight with my sister, because I knew she was trying to get me into trouble. I tried to do what was right and not what was wrong.

We are all like this. As children and teenagers we felt the pull to do what was wrong, but we also had this sense of what was right and we tried to do it. As adult we still live between the tension of what is good and bad. We don't want to do what is bad, because it is simply the wrong thing to do. It is immature, it is insensitive. But we still get caught stepping over the line. We find ourselves doing the thing we don't want to do, and we are embarrassed. We get down on ourselves, and we hold ourselves to better standards. Do what is right and not what is wrong. This is how civilized people live. This is how God wants us to live.

**{SLIDE 2}** Paul gets personal in Chapter 7 of his letter to the Romans. Paul is not above getting personal once in a while, especially if he needs to emphasize a significant spiritual issue. He talks about his sinfulness, how he feels the pull to do the complete opposite of what God wants him to do. "I am of the

flesh,” Paul says, “sold into slavery under sin.”<sup>1</sup> He might be the Romans’ spiritual guru when it comes to learning about faith in Jesus Christ, but Paul wants to make sure that these new Christians don’t think he is perfect. He isn’t Jesus Christ, who was and is perfect in every way. No Christian who comes to faith in Christ is perfect, above messing up for time to time. Paul feels the wrestling inside. He feels the tension between good and bad, sin and salvation.

**{SLIDE 3}** “I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”<sup>2</sup> It is like a great tug-of-war that happens within Paul. He agonizes over the war that rages within him. He knows what Jesus Christ has done for him. He would continue to be lost in his sin if it weren’t for Jesus confronting him, throwing him to the ground, and changing his life forever. Paul greatly appreciates what Christ did for him. He wants to live his life completely for Christ as a loving response.

But there is this thing called sin that pulls him the other way. It nags at him. It convinces him to go another direction. Paul hates the struggle and what sin does to him at times. “I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the

---

<sup>1</sup> Romans 7:14.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 7:15.

evil I do not want is what I do.”<sup>3</sup> We feel the same struggle. Sin pulls us in directions we do not want to go. It makes us feel good. It makes us believe we are doing the right thing. When it’s all over, we feel terrible. We cannot believe what jerks we were. We have to do the work to make things right again. But we wouldn’t have to do that, if only we could absolutely resist sin, do the right thing all the time, win the tug-of-war.

**{SLIDE 4}** Now, as Paul deals with the tug-of-war that happens inside all of us, he realizes that he might have an out. There is a small escape for him and us. When Paul does the bad things he shouldn’t do, he understands that he isn’t doing the bad things but sin itself. “[It] is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me... Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul knows that it is the sin within him doing the wrong things, because he is aware of the struggle between good and evil. He knows it is the devil on his one shoulder, so to speak, telling him to ignore God’s word and do what he pleases. He wants to reject the devil’s persuasive arguments. He wants to do what God wants him to do. We all want to do what God

---

<sup>3</sup> Romans 7:18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 7:17, 20.

wants us to do. Although we don't at times, we are aware of the struggle. We realize that sin is within us messing things up, so therefore there is the chance to reject what sin is doing. There is the chance to refuse sin's will and carry out God's will. We have an escape.

We only know there is an escape because of what God's word has said to us. We are only aware of the angel on the other shoulder, so to speak, because God constantly speaks to us about faith and love and forgiveness and service and strength. God tells us that we are not our sin. We are not like puppets being manipulated by our sin to do as it pleases. We are aware of the tug-of-war inside us, the devil telling us to mess up and hurt others. If we are aware of it, then we are not mindless people who can be easily influenced. God tells us this. God makes us abundantly aware of the struggle with sin, and then God shows us how we can live. God show us through Jesus Christ how to live a better life. There is an escape. We don't have to be our sin, what sin could do with us. We could be transformed, resurrected people who do a world of good for others and God.

{SLIDE 5} OK, so we have an escape from our sin. What is that escape exactly? How do we stop this tug-of-war?

{SLIDE 6} Paul mentions the law. He would

mention the law, because he is a former Pharisee who studied it. He knows that the law comes from God for spiritual direction. If we want to be holy as God is holy, then we need to follow the law.

Here is the problem, though: The law of God stands before us as the greatest standard that we must achieve, but on our own we can never achieve it. We can never do exactly what God's law wants us to do every minute of every day. It is impossible. So let us take a Commandment from the Ten, "You shall not make or worship any other god." Sounds reasonable. We wouldn't want to have any other god than the Lord our God, right? Sounds like an easy Commandment to follow. But what happens when we get up some Sunday morning and refuse to attend worship? We make an easy excuse about wanting to play golf or going to bed late the night before or being on vacation. The Commandment says not to worship any other god, but it also implies that we are to worship our God on Sunday and every day.

What happens when we give too much adoration to a person such as a movie celebrity or pop star? We think these people to be great, maybe being like gods themselves, who do incredible things. Maybe we view a political candidate as some sort of savior that is able to save us from our miserable lives. "You shall not – shall never – make or worship any other god," the

Commandment says. How easy it is to break it.

Or, another Commandment, “You shall not steal.” How easy it is to fudge that Commandment. We know it is wrong to steal a person’s car from his garage, or a person’s furniture off her porch, but what about stealing a dollar or two from mom’s purse or dad’s wallet? What about stealing paperclips or pens from our desk at the office? What about taking a grape or two from the produce area of the grocery store? We can laugh at such situations and not think them to be terrible, but it is still stealing. We are still breaking God’s law, as though we are above God’s law.

So, is God’s law our escape? Paul says no. God’s law is the ultimate standard which we cannot achieve. We cannot follow every single law every single day. We are too imperfect. Paul says, “Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.”<sup>5</sup> It is spiritual; it is flawless. We are not. We try to act spiritually by acknowledging that God’s law is holy, just, and good.” We try to act spiritually by trying to follow God’s law to the best of our ability. Sadly, we fall short of God’s glory and thus God’s flawless law. “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

---

<sup>5</sup> Romans 7:16.

members.”<sup>6</sup>

{SLIDE 7} So, what is the escape from all of this? What may be able to keep us from repeating Paul’s words, “Wretched [person] that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”<sup>7</sup> Who, indeed. Our escape is that a What but a Who. There is a Person who has provided the escape for us through his own sacrifice. Without such an Escape we keep wrestling and crying out. With such an Escape we are made new people with a new purpose. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Paul says.

I normally use short quote from people to help with what I am trying to say, but here I have to quote Karl Barth, which goes on for half a page. I love what he says:

“And so we retrace our steps to the place from which we set out at the beginning... We know only the religious [person], the [person] of human possibilities, the [person] of this world... Such a one [us] can never be what he [or she] is, and he [or she] is not what he [or she] ought to be. [the person] bears about with him or her always the remainder that he [or

---

<sup>6</sup> Romans 7:22-23.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 7:24.

she]... must die. Yet, once the reality of religion is established, there arises an ultimate ambiguity concerning the future of [human beings] on the earth. [A person] can neither live nor die. In piety he [or she] is suspended between heaven and earth. But what does this ambiguity [this uncertainty] profit me? In spite of all the contortions of the soul, of all the gymnastic of my [conflict], the brutal fact remains that I am – a man. And it is precisely my religion which compels me to recognize this so clearly. No other possibility is open to me except the possibility of being a [wretched, sinful, imperfect person] of the earth... But Jesus Christ is the new man, standing beyond all the piety, beyond all the human possibility. He is the conclusion of the man of this world in his totality. [Jesus] is the man who has passed from death to life. He is – what I am not – my existential I – I – the I which [is] in God, [the I which finds freedom in God] – I am! Thanks be to God: through Christ our Lord I am not the wretched [person] that I am.”<sup>8</sup>

The little devil on the one shoulder will tell us that

---

<sup>8</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 197.

we are not good enough. Sin will say that we have no hope, no purpose, no life, so might as well do what sin wants. The struggle continues within us between heaven and hell.

And then Jesus comes along and cuts the rope. The tug-of-war ends. Jesus arrives and the devil on the shoulder is kicked out, gone. Jesus provides for us a new reality. Jesus says that, yes, we might still have to deal with sin, but we are not our sin. We are God's children, resurrected people set aside for another life. And we live that life in Christ. We take on his death to sin and his new life from the grave.

In Jesus Christ we can finally do what we want to do. The thing we hate has no hold on us. The thing we hate we can ignore. The thing we enjoy we do to the glory of God. The thing we delight in magnifies God's name. The thing that we desire gets God's word out to the many who need to hear it.

We have our Escape, he is Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord: we are not wretched people anymore.

## **Assurance of Pardon:**

Hear the *Good News!* The saying is sure and worthy of our full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might be dead to sin and be alive in Christ. Friends, in the name of Jesus Christ, you and I are forgiven! Amen.