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The National Presbyterian Church

## **The War Within**

Romans 7:7-25

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Two weeks ago we began a new series of sermons looking at three chapters (6,7,8) in Paul's letter to the Romans – one of the most influential books in the New testament, and in the history of the Christian Church.

We began by thinking about the problem of moral motivation and incentive for living the Christian life, a problem that arises, paradoxically because of the knowledge of God's mercy:

The Problem is this:

If the heart of Jesus' message and the purpose of his death is to bring us **the** good news of God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness, then why bother very much with our behavior? God may give us his rules and regulations – his Law, especially embodied in the Ten Commandments, but if we fail to keep them – well – “Good News! God forgives!” So why strive to keep them in the first place, especially if they're hard, or we're just having a bad day and feeling sorry for ourselves, and we really don't feel like being particularly good or godly? So, why try hard – if there's always mercy?

It's like a sports coach saying 'you always get to play whether you play well or poorly. But what we know is that no team wins anything if that's the way it works.

So – in Romans 6, and in the beginning of Romans 7, this is the issue that Paul addresses and what he says is this: that we need to bother, we need to try hard to change our ways, for at least 3 reasons.

**The first is this: Forgiveness isn't the only thing God offers us for our salvation though it's pretty central!**

There's more to the good news than just forgiveness – in addition to forgiveness, God brings us into his Kingdom

**1. God gives us A New Country** – grants us citizenship in the Kingdom of God, not just when we die, but right now!

We belong to a new country and just as when we live in a new country (and sometimes, even when we just visit) our behavior always changes (because of different customs and habits as well as laws), God says, “You need to live as if you're already citizens of the Kingdom of God, now!

**The second is this: not only does God offer us Forgiveness and a new country through Jesus** but – in addition he gives our lives

**2. A New Conclusion or Climax.** One Day, he promises that our lives will be restored to image and character of Christ! That's his promise! His pledge! Do you know this?

It's like making it to the Olympic Team: a dream come true, but not the end, just a beginning! When you know that you are on the team – you are going to the Olympics, you don't

slack off! No! The opposite! If it's really true, then you train all the more, because of what's coming down the pike in the future! The new promised future, the new conclusion motivates you!

So God has a new conclusion for our lives (to remake us like Jesus) and that should motivate us to become as much like Christ as we can; right here and now.

**And then the third motivating factor, says Paul, is this: God doesn't just offer us Forgiveness and a new country and a new conclusion to our lives but he also brings us into**

**3. New Covenant/Contract** -- a new relationship with himself. In fact he says that we're to think of ourselves as actually being married to Jesus, belonging to him as spouse, and that that knowledge, that covenant, relationship should be a powerful force for change within us.

We all know that relationships change us: think of a person you'd do anything for – spouse friend, child. Well, it's the same (or should be) with God. God is willing to do anything for us, even dying for us in Christ! He gave us his Son. *“I don't just love you a little, says God, I'm crazy about you! I love you enough to commit myself to you in marriage. Will you do the same with me too? Will you allow my steadfast love to change you so that you follow my ways not out of obligation, but out of love and gratitude? Just because you're crazy for me too?”*

So God has given us (1) a new country, (2) a new conclusion for our lives, and (3) a new marriage covenant, and these gifts of grace should empower our moral motivation and drive us to be good and godly:

- Not driven by fear -- the fear that unless we keep God's rules we can never earn his favor or forgiveness,
- BUT driven by God's gifts and goodness!

But having said that – that Christian motivation isn't to be based on attempting to keep all of God's rules and regulations – to earn favor with a God who may always seem to be grumpy and never quite satisfied, the next question to rise-to-the surface is this:

**\* Why did God give us his laws and rules in the first place?**

\* Why did God fill the first-half of our Bible, the Old Testament, with commandments, and ordinances and rules? (In fact, the rabbis count not just Ten, but 613 of them).

Or, to put it another way

- If we're no longer afraid of being judged when we break God's laws (*because Jesus bore our judgment in his death on the cross*)
- If we're not being morally driven by God's rules and Laws
- If they are not central to our moral life as Christians

Then what's the point of God's laws in the 1<sup>st</sup> place?

- Why did God give them?
- What's their role? What's their function?
- Are they good, bad, or just plain indifferent?

And it's to questions like these – about the role of God's Laws – that Paul makes two different kinds of responses in various places in his writings.

The first response is to say that God gave his Law (especially to ancient Israel) to provide some specific details about how to live in God's Kingdom (*“every country has its laws and traditions, and these are the laws of the Kingdom of God”*)

The second response is to say that God gave us his Laws to show us that we need help – in fact a Savior! Because it's through God's Law – his rules and regulations that God shows us that ultimate right and wrong, good and evil actually do exist; and that more than that, none of us actually has the power consistently to do what's right!

**And these two responses are at the center of Paul's teaching in our passage of Scripture in Romans 7**

- ultimate right and wrong actually exist.
- and none of us has the power to consistently to do what's right.

So that if we are to be the people God wants us to be, the people that we ourselves want to be, then we're always going to need someone – a Savior – to help us.

Let me read again, first from Romans 7:7-8 (in our paraphrase, adapted from J.N. Phillips)

7 Is the Law of God good or bad? Well, of course it can't be bad – it's God's! But in fairness, it must be admitted that God's law is very much connected to both goodness and badness: without God's law I wouldn't even know that sin or evil exists and that it has great power over my life.

For example, I would never have felt guilty of the sin of coveting if I hadn't heard God's Law, embodied in the Ten Commandments, saying (explicitly), 'You shall not covet.'

It's as if the power of sin-within-me, finds in the commandment an opportunity to express itself, and *stimulates* all my deadly covetous desires . . .

Or, to use the more literal translation in your pew Bibles;

If it had not been for God's law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if God's law had not said, "You shall not covet."

God's law, in other words, is God's way of telling us that God has standards! That ultimate *right and wrong*, ultimate *good and evil*, actually exist.

And this is something we desperately need to remember today –

in a world in which some people – many people, a growing number of people, and especially intellectuals, simply don't believe it to be true at all!

that there are any absolute standards at all; instead, everything's relative, we are free to do whatever we choose to do – me first.

Though, to be fair, the most common version of this outlook in our society today is not quite so cynical or self-centered, but adds this caveat:

*that everything's permissible as long as it's consensual and doesn't hurt someone else.*

In other words – there are no ultimate laws that transcend our impulses or our feelings, except for ONE! – just one rule that everyone should keep – the caveat, the phrase: "*as long as it's consensual and doesn't hurt someone else.*"

Though this little exception – this little rule, or law – itself begs the question as to where it comes from? Why do we add it in? Why should we care about others at all? Why can't we be moral relativists the whole way down the pike? – without a caveat? Why feel any obligation to others whatsoever? If, in fact, we believe that "anything goes?"

To which both the Apostle Paul and the Christian author, C.S. Lewis, would say that "it comes from God!" The caveat comes from God! That what even secular society is tapping into

here – believer and unbeliever alike – is the existence of **God’s absolute standard** that, even when we try to forget or deny it, never quite goes away, but lingers in our human consciousness.

For C.S. Lewis, it’s this truth that he deals with right at the beginning of his classic and remarkable book, *Mere Christianity*. Universally, he says, every human being has a conscience that tell us that here are some things we ought to do, and want to do, and other things we ought not to do and ought not to want to do. We may disagree, and do disagree, on what those things are (our consciences are messed up!), but, he says, it’s this very feeling of ‘ought’ and ‘obligation’ built into the human mind that unites us and that points beyond itself to the existence of a deeper and universal law. All human beings *know this sense of “ought”* instinctively, Lewis says, but ignore it.

And this ignoring leads not only to the denial of the existence of ultimate right and wrong, but to the Law itself being blurred, at which point, the apostle Paul would add that’s why God comes along and spells it out for us in the specific laws in the pages of Scripture.

So, God lays down the law quite specifically when he says “*You shall not covet.*” Our Maker says that coveting is WRONG! Universal right and wrong exists, and in his Law God spells it out.

And more than that, through his Law, God demonstrates, too, that we don’t make it! That even when we KNOW what is right, even when we believe that God has given us his Law, we still don’t do it. We’re weak – all of us. We’re weak – our bodies don’t do what our minds want. And sometimes our minds don’t do what our bodies want. There’s a battle inside us that all too we often lose! And Paul describes this inner battle like this:

**Romans 7:15** (adapted from J.B. Phillips)

It’s my own behavior that baffles me! For I find myself *not doing* what I really want to do *but doing* what I really loathe.

I, by myself, often find that I have the will to do what is right, but not the power. But if that’s the case – if I do things that I don’t really want to do, then it is not just me who’s running my life, is it? No! It’s as if there is something else within me – sin – which has made its home within me.

Or, one more way of thinking about this struggle is to think of the mind. My inner mind whole-heartedly endorses God’s Law (and knows that there is a real God-given right and wrong). **Yet when** I look at my hands and feet and the rest of my body, what I see is a continual war and conflict with my innermost mind that makes me an unwilling prisoner to sin.

I’m like a slave. I’m trapped. I’m bound inevitably to sin. In fact I feel completely torn apart

An inner turmoil that Fyodor Dostoevsky describes in his Notes from The Underground (Chapter 2). The “*Underground Man*,” a retired civil servant living in St. Petersburg puts it like this:

Tell me this: why does it happen that at the very, yes, at the very moments when I am most capable of feeling every refinement of all that is "sublime and beautiful," as they used to say at one time, it would, as though of design, happen to me not only to feel but to do such ugly things – actions that all, perhaps, commit; but which, as though purposely, occurred to me at the very time when I was most conscious that they ought not to be committed?

The more conscious I was of goodness and of all that was "sublime and beautiful," the more deeply I sank into my mire and the more ready I was to sink in it altogether . . . at first, in the beginning I did not believe it was the same with other people, and all my life I hid this fact about myself as a secret. I was ashamed

But then, he realized that this is our human story, that everyone knows this war within.

Of course this is not true all the time: human beings are capable of enormous great good. But what is just as true is that all of us are caught up in a personal battle with evil, and we lose! We've lost! We're weak! And without help from someone else, we'll lose eternally.

It happens all the time – people who do not make it because they think they can make it by themselves, they underestimate their weakness and their danger, and simply do not ask for help:

- A man with heart history who shovels snow
- A swimmer who goes into deep water and forgets the tide is against her
- A lottery winner who thinks the money will never run out
- A driver who thinks there's more gas in the car than there is.

True! Jesus is full of mercy and forgiveness. Indeed he is! Jesus calls us into his Kingdom as citizens. Indeed he does! He promises that we will become like him: a new conclusion to our mortal lives. He makes a covenant pledge to us in love, like the most faithful spouse ever.

- But he will not impose his mercy on those or do not think they need it, and do not want it, or do not ask.
- But my friends: the danger is real. God's law points to a universal standard of morality – a standard that we have not kept, and cannot keep without help. Seek his help and mercy. Today

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