

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

A Restored Divine Image

Romans 7

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The 7th chapter of The Epistle to the Romans reads like a tragic confession of a person completely torn apart in their internal conflicts. “I do not understand my own actions.” We know it’s written by the Apostle Paul, but it could be the tear-stained page in the personal diary of just about anyone in any generation. It’s here in typeset ink, originally written on 1st century papyrus, but not hard to imagine those same words in adolescent bubble gum pink ink, or likewise scratched in heavy pen in the dark night of an adult’s angst. It’s virtually a universal confession, “I do not understand my own actions.”

Curious, isn’t it? We have whole philosophical, legal, and moral systems set up on the idea that each of us does understand our own actions better than anyone else and that each of us is free, within limits, and responsible and accountable to take action in whatever way we see fit because it’s the expression of our true selves. Maybe at our best, we are that way. Maybe on our best days, we know exactly who we are, what we stand for, and we do what we do with conviction of purpose and a clear conscience of reason. Yet I think that’s an optimistic anthropology. More realistic is St. Paul’s, I do not understand my own actions. I do not know why I do what I do.

Did you see the story recently of the young man, a British tourist, who scratched his initials into the stone of the Roman colosseum? Rome has graffiti everywhere, but it’s definitely illegal to carve your and your girlfriend’s name into the stone of the Roman Colosseum. Did you see this story? If you did, how relieved were you that it wasn’t an American this time doing this kind of stuff? This guy, he gets caught—they track him down by comparing his initials that he carved into the stone of the Roman Colosseum to a database of hotel registries throughout the city, and they got him. And when confronted him with his crime of defacing the world-famous monument, his defense was “I didn’t realize the colosseum is that old. I thought it was just a run-down building.” Uh-huh. I love that the Italian response to that was, “His statement defaces reason.”

The guy isn’t too bright. He’s literally in the land of romance, of Romeo and all that. He could’ve said, “I got swept up in the beauty and the romance of my Juliet in the soft glow of the Italian aura of love and, without thinking, etched our names for all eternity in the place that has stood for thousands of years. May it stand a thousand more with the memory of our love.” This is Italy; they might throw him in prison, but they would’ve written an opera about the guy.

Or he could’ve said, since he’s literally in the city of the founding of the church, “I fall on your mercy. Like the Apostle Paul, who wrote to the Romans, ‘I do not understand my actions. I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate . . . Wretched man that I am, I repent, who will

save me from this body of death?” This is Rome; they might’ve martyred him, but in a couple of centuries, they’d name at least one church. Missed opportunities.

Missed opportunity, but a universal story. We have the propensity to do all kinds of things because our natural selves pull us toward things we—in our best selves-- do not want to do. Paul and Scripture’s witness calls that sin, and sin isn’t just something like scratching your name on a wall. It’s more than using a word you shouldn’t use or using your eyes or ears in ways you shouldn’t. It’s more than a matter of eating or drinking or not paying your taxes, though every moment in life is part of our moral formation in one way or the other. Sin, especially for Paul, isn’t just the sum of your wrongdoings--you’ve got to realize, for Paul, it is a *force*. Now it’s not a force he blames, claiming victimhood. He never says, “I’m not responsible, the devil made me do it.” For Paul, sin is a spiritual force, like law, like the good; these forces work on us. As someone said, “Sin is an opportunistic tyrant, using anything it can to gain hold over us and bend the world away from God, and people suffer.”

Yesterday, Paul was proclaiming salvation in Jesus Christ through faith. But today, he is telling his brothers and sisters in Rome about the battle he is waging within. I know that nothing good dwells within me, 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 which dwells in me.

Both sin and evil dwell in the world and in each of us, and it is our responsibility to live a life accountable to our faith in Jesus. Paul certainly believes that the human body can be used for both good and evil. In Romans 6, it is declared that we have been definitively set free from sin, but Romans 7 is an outpouring of confession—Paul’s and a universal confession—that in practical terms, it’s not always so simple.

When I want to do the good, evil is right beside me. We are all sinners, we say. Who will rescue me from this body of death? The answer is in the form of prayer, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Let us not forget what’s at stake in our faith. For what do we give thanks to God through Jesus Christ our Lord? For rescuing us as sinners from the eternal consequence of our sins. Our salvation. For helping us make better decisions when faced with temptations. Our formation. For giving us the grace to stitch our lives back together. Our redemption.

The thing that strikes me the most about the kind of severed life described in Romans 7 and experienced to one degree or another by most of us, is its heaviness. They say an elephant weighs 10,000 lbs and the Colosseum weighs 24 tons and the cares and worries of the world can feel like crushing weight, but almost every person knows there’s nothing heavier in all world than themselves, when they are living a life in shattered in pieces.

I’m thinking of a pre-med student years ago, deep in her biology classes, really digging into all we’ve come to learn about the world and how the world works. And she loved it. She wanted to

be a doctor. But the message from back home, from her home church and her mom was “Watch out, you can’t trust what you’re learning there at university. Be careful of science; it’ll kill your faith.” She was torn in two, severed between what she learned years ago from people who loved her and whom she loved, and how her mind was now being sparked by all she was now learning and wanted to pursue in a career. She sat on our sofa one night and broke down in tears. We were there that night with a brilliant and wonderfully compassionate Baylor science professor who leaned forward in her chair, put her chin in her hands and didn’t condemn or judge her but just gently said, “It’s hard isn’t it? It’s hard feeling like you’re being torn right down the middle.” It was for her and is for so many others.

Even more, we might think of those times or those examples of people who aren’t torn between competing ideas but torn within themselves in the way Paul talks about--between what they should do and what they actually do, between who they should be and who they’re actually becoming.

I’m thinking of the tragic figure of Gollum-Smeagol torn in half, apart in himself in tortured proximity to the Ring. I’m thinking of Clyde Griffith’s in Dressel’s *An American Tragedy* whose moral compass only pointed toward his relentless need for acceptance, destroying everyone’s life around him in the process. I’m thinking of the characters in the show *Severance*, whose lives were each so troubled in different ways they took what seemed like a shortcut to divide their lives down the middle, only to discover that the human need for an integrated life, no matter how painful it is, is relentless.

I’m thinking of all the ways so many of us carry the heavy burden—not the holy burdens—but the heavy burden of ourselves, and we don’t have to. We aren’t fated to this. We weren’t made for this. We were made to be set free from this prison of severance. Our aim is a life of wholeness that makes us light on our feet and light in our hearts, no matter the darkness in which we walk. Yet there’s a paradox here: we were made for this—what Thomas Merton and Parker Palmer call a hidden wholeness at the heart of the world. It’s not easy, not even for someone like St. Paul. But it’s not beyond grace.

We were made for an integrated life. This is what Paul is giving witness to in Romans 7. Not that you’re condemned to the eternal, everlasting conflict that rages, but this conflict recognizes the rage within us is that from which we are set free in Christ. We are created as beings with integral relationship within ourselves, with others, with God, and with the world around us. The way of Jesus is a grace and a journey to recover this hidden wholeness within each individual and within the whole world. This is a kind of conversion—when you learn to see and experience the world in wholeness and yourself part of it . . . yourself in God’s wholeness, in holy relationship with others and all the creatures in the gentle, compassionate, fierce love of God.

“Come to me,” Jesus beckons to all who carry heavy burdens and who long for wholeness... “and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

This is the same Jesus who said earlier in Matthew's gospel that the way of discipleship may very well be a way of rejection and pain and that we must take up our cross to follow him. I suppose the weight of the cross with him is easier to bear with him than whatever weight your dragging around on your own.

As we refer to our mind or our body or our soul, in God's image we are made as one even as God is one. Our oneness is a God-given unity, shared with friends and strangers and all the creatures and the earth itself. Part of the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is that Jesus, who is the image of God, restores the divine image in us, partially now and fully in that day to come. (Felker Jones, 12) It is an image that tells the truest story about who you are, no matter how heavy you feel lugging yourself around day to day.

You are God's beloved. You are part of a revolution of wholeness re-integrating a broken world with truth and with love. And you were made for this. We all were.

If that sounds impossible . . .or rather, if that sounds like it's a message for someone in a different row than yours, make something like this your prayer, over and over with your breath:

I come to you, weary and carrying heavy burden.

Give me rest for my soul.

Be assured: your prayer is to the one who is gentle and humble and whose yoke is easy and burden light. For that, we say thanks and praise to God. In him, we are being remade whole. Amen.

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