



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

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The Wretched Man- (Romans 7:13-25)

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

I wrote my master's thesis on this particular passage of Scripture, and I came to the conclusion that it was teaching something that most Christians sitting in the pews don't think it's teaching, so I'm expecting you today to check my work. You need to know that at the very front end. I do remember when I first started teaching it, though, in Bible colleges where I used to work. I was so excited about it that I woke up at 3:00 in the morning the day before, and couldn't wait to go and share all of this knowledge. And you spend, like, three years doing a master's thesis, for me, and I spent all this time, and I was going to share all the nuances of this passage with this class full of students, many of whom just came out of high school. I remember getting there and basically backing my theological dump truck up and just *unloading* on them. Halfway through the class, this young guy named Josh was in the back row of the class, and he wasn't even trying to hide his disdain [throwing his head back and closing his eyes] <snoring>. He was just, <snoring> the whole time, just snoring, out loud, so my hope is that doesn't happen today... actually [laughter].

In 1949, Andres Nygren was a Christian teacher and a commentator, and a pastor, scholar. He said this passage, Romans 7:13-25,

“This is perhaps the most discussed and fought over part of Romans. It presents us with one of the greatest problems in the New Testament. It was already recognized in the first Christian century, and since that time it's never come to rest.”

It's one of the most controversial passages of Scripture, in terms of its interpretation. Not in terms of its meaning, necessarily, but in terms of how do we decide what it's about? Or more properly, how do we decide *who* it's about? Because here's the question, “Whose experience is described here?”. And what I'm about to read to you, I'm going to read the entire passage to you, I want you to be thinking in your mind, “Whose experience is being described?”. Is this the experience of a Christian? Or is it the experience of someone who's not a Christian? If it's the experience of a Christian, you decide, is it the kind of Christian who ought to be living this way, like this is the normal Christian life, or is it the kind of Christian who ought not be living that way, it's abnormal. Is it the normal Christian, the abnormal Christian, is it not a Christian at all? Here's the passage, Romans 7:13:

“Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good [referring to the law there, it used what is



good] to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

So I find this law [this principle] at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin."

Who is it? Well, look, they've been fighting over it for all of the Christian centuries, and so in the next few minutes, we're going to solve it [laughter]. I'm going to try to anyway. My goal is actually to convince you...this is going to be more Bible study than it is sermon, alright? So, if you really like Bible study, and I'm going to draw on this chart, <laughs giddily> [laughter] alright? I'm going to share all sorts of stuff, and so it's going to be more classroom than it is sermon, alright?

So, here we go. I have an outline, here's how I want to go about this. First, I want to give you the three views on the passage. I've already kind of highlighted the three already, but I want to go into a little bit more detail on why it is that people view this the way they do. Three views on the passage, then I want to give three reasons in favour of the third view. And then, finally, three implications for what I think this passage is teaching. Alright? So, threes. We are so trinitarian here today. So, three views on the passage, three reasons in favour of the third view, three implications.

Here's the first of those three views on the passage. I just mentioned, the normal Christian, the abnormal Christian, and the nonbeliever. Those who argue that it's the normal Christian are basically looking at this passage and saying, look, Paul is describing his current life as a mature Christian on this side of heaven. This is the normal Christian experience. If you're new to the faith, you might think, "Really? It sounds really defeatist." But those who are older in the faith are like, "Yeah, the older you get, the more you realize how deep your sin goes, and the more you fight with it. And the more you realize that in that fight, there's a lot of failure. You want to do the good, but you can't...you can't do the good. So, yeah, we agree with the law of God, and what the Scriptures teach us, how we ought to live, but we don't carry it out. And so Paul is describing himself as somebody who is struggling with sin, and in this passage, losing that struggle to sin repeatedly." And now there are some arguments that people marshal in order to convince you that that's the case.



One of those arguments is a textual argument. By “textual” I mean you can find it in the passage itself. And it’s the fact that Paul, when he writes this, he writes in the present tense, doesn’t he? I mean he writes, “I don’t understand what I do.” He doesn’t say, “I *didn’t* understand what I *used* to do,” it’s, “I *don’t* understand what I’m *doing*.” So, if Paul is a Christian in this present moment and he’s writing in the present tense, it seems logical for us to say that Paul the Christian is writing about Paul’s Christian experience. There’s also a theological reason that people argue with this, and that is this. That when you look at the Scriptures and hear what they have to say about the spiritual condition or ability of those who are apart from faith in Jesus, so prior to coming to faith in Jesus, what kind of spiritual ability do people have? And it’s really a, a really dark answer: not much. So you get passages like 1 Corinthians 2:14:

“The person without the Spirit [so that’s somebody who’s not a Christian] does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit.”

Yeah, they might hear the things that come –they might hear the law of God, but they think to themselves, nah. I’m not convinced, not only am I not, but I *cannot* be convinced, unless there’s some sort of work that God does in the heart, make it possible for them to believe. The language that’s used in other places is that they’re *dead* in their transgressions and sins, or they’re blind. That first line, that “dead” comes from Ephesians 2, which is a really helpful passage here. It says this:

“As for you, [Paul’s speaking to the Ephesian church about their former life, prior to coming to faith in Christ.] you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”

You used to serve Satan, man. And as far as your spiritual ability goes, *dead*. I don’t know if you’ve ever spent time trying to talk to dead people, but... they don’t answer much. You can stand there above the tombstone and say, “Speak to me!” But it’s not going to happen, that’s what Paul is saying. Listen, if you go and you tell people, “Here’s what the law of God is like, and here’s what God wants,” dead people are like [long pause]... nothing! They don’t have the ability to respond. So here’s the point here. Theologically, we say that people don’t have the ability to respond to God, they don’t really love God’s law, they don’t like God, they’re running away from him, they’re rebels, dead, blind people. And yet this passage that we’re looking at describes this person as someone who loves the law of God, right? Wants to keep the law of God. Surely this is the description of a Christian. The only people on the planet who love God’s law, say those who hold this view, are Christians.

The second argument for this viewpoint, though, is far easier for us to understand, right? It’s a personal argument, because when I read that earlier, when I read the passage earlier, didn’t you hear your life? So, you’re in a public place right now and you probably won’t admit that, but quietly later, you’re kind of like, “Mmm, yeah. Like, I’ve followed Jesus for a whole long time, and I know that I’ve tried and tried and tried to follow him and yet, there seems to be an inability. Like, I fail and fail and fail and fail, and so, yes, this sounds like me. This sounds like my tension, my fight, my failure. This sounds like me.” And so people, because they hear that, are like, “Yeah, it’s gotta be about a Christian. And it’s gotta be about the normal Christian life, because this is what people experience.” And so, that’s what those who



hold this view are saying: Listen, as you get older in your life, you'll experience that on this side of heaven, you will fail repeatedly to sin, but that's okay, Jesus will deliver you when he comes back, or you die.

This second view, though, is those who hold the view that this is an abnormal Christian. So, they're going to say, "Yes, all of those arguments make a ton of sense, *except* for you saying that this is the *normal* Christian life. Yeah, it might sound like lots of Christians, but that's just because lots of Christians are living carnally." Now that's a word that we don't use very much, right? It used to be, in the Christian church. The word "carnal" means "immature." So, this viewpoint says that Paul is an immature Christian, in Romans 7. A carnal Christian, who is trying to obey God part from the power of the Holy Spirit. His experience described here, is the experience of those who try to obey God on their own strength.

So there's all sort of imagery that's used to convey this, and I'll draw a little bit on my flip chart. So we come to faith in Jesus at a particular time, okay? This is the way that people in this viewpoint would argue it, okay? We come to faith in Jesus, and when we come to faith in Jesus we are kind of on the same spiritual level as what we were before. [Drawing a line from left to right interrupted by a cross] It's not a huge change. If somebody comes to faith in Jesus, you know, it's not like, immediately, bam! Holy! Like, perfect, obeying Jesus at every point. No, they're immature. And some people stay that way for a long, long time. [Continuing the line to the right side of the page] Maybe for their whole lives, say, for those who have this view. We call those people "carnal Christians." [Writing the word "Carnal" below the line] Immature Christians. There should be some moment, though, in their life, subsequent to conversion, I mean after conversion, that somebody is confronted with their sin, and they realize, no, I don't want to sin anymore, I don't want to follow in that way, and through the power of the Spirit they are freed from it. They let go and they let God. And they are elevated to a new plane of spiritual existence [Drawing a vertical line up a couple inches from the halfway point of the horizontal line, then parallel to the original line across to the right.] they call that person a "spiritual Christian." [Writing the word "Spiritual" under this higher line] Those who are reading Romans 7 and 8 are applying those passages to this image. They're saying, look, those in Romans 7 are carnal Christians and those in Romans 8 are spiritual Christians. I know that, because in Romans 8, it talks about the Spirit over and over and over again. But in Romans 7, does it mention the Spirit? Not at all.

I'll give you another image, right? [Ripping off a piece of paper] <Laughs giddily> [Laughter] Come on, that's kind fun –okay. So, this is not a smiley face, okay? [Drawing three a horizontal line at the middle of the page and two large circles above the line and one large circle below the line] One of the ways that people convey this is to say, look, in the life of every person there is a throne. [Drawing a throne in each of the circles] Those below this line, this is a description of the non-believer, [Writing the word "Non" beside the lower circle] and this is a description of the Christian. [Drawing "Xn" beside the top right circle] The big "X" means the Greek word "Chi" which is the sign for Christ in the ancient world, so that just means Christian, okay? So below the line, we would say that everybody has a sphere of their life, and inside that sphere a seat of authority. If you are not a Christian, Jesus exists outside the sphere of your life, [Drawing a cross outside the circle of the lower circle] and certainly he does not sit on the throne of authority. But if you're a Christian, Jesus can be in your life, [Drawing a cross beside the cross in the top right circle] but not sit on the seat of authority, right? You can have accepted Christ



but not submitted to him, ultimately, say those who hold this view. And we call people like that “carnal.” [Writing the word “Carnal” under the top right circle.] And then there are those who have Jesus on the throne of their lives, [Drawing a Cross on the throne in the top left circle.] and we call those people “spiritual Christians.” [Writing the word “Spiritual” below the top left circle.] What Romans 8 is describing is that [points to image of spiritual Christians]. What Romans 7 is describing is that [points to carnal Christians]. So you need to get out of Romans 7 and into Romans 8, say those who hold this viewpoint. So it’s about a Christian, but not the kind of Christian you ought to be.

Here’s the third one. It’s about a non-Christian, but more specifically, it’s about a Jewish person who’s received the law of God and is finding this tension in themselves, because they love the law of God with their minds, but they find in their body an inability to carry out what the law commands. So they say, “Yes, God, I see that if I keep this law I will live, but I can’t live because there’s something going on inside of my body, sin that is stopping me.” So Paul is basically describing his pre-conversion self. He’s a committed Jewish man who lives under the law, and isn’t yet a Christian. He agrees with the law of God, just like Psalm 119, you know, “I delight in your law,” and all that sort of thing, as a Jewish man, but this passage describes in vivid detail what happens inside of an unredeemed person who tries to obey God’s law. There’s a tension, it’s just not the tension of a Christian; it’s the tension of an unbeliever. Now listen, I’m going to try to argue for that viewpoint with three arguments. So I said three views on the passage, and here are three arguments in support of that third view. All of them are contextual. What I mean by that is, all of them are found within the passage itself, or in its environment, right? So what came before it, falls after it, that sort of thing. All of them are contextual. So this is Bible study time, <whispering> focus.

Here we go. Here’s my first one. It’s called “the diatribe.” The diatribe is a way of writing or speaking that involves an imaginary debate partner. So if you’ve been here at church for the last while we’ve been going through Romans, you know that I’ve repeatedly mentioned this imaginary debate partner. So Paul will raise up questions from this imaginary debate partner, that he will then emphatically answer, and then he will give reasons for the answer and an explanation for the reason. In fact, that’s the order that you get in every bit of diatribe, is that there’s a certain form that it takes. [Ripping off a sheet of paper] You start with a question, [Writing the word “Question” at the top of the page] and then you have an emphatic answer, [Drawing a small vertical line down from the first word, then under that writing “Emph. Answer”, then under that another small vertical line] and then after the emphatic answer you get a reason for the answer, and then, finally, an explanation for that reason. [Writing “Expl. at the bottom]” Now here’s the way the diatribe works. This is a whole unit of thought, [indicating all of the page] so if you want to know what the spiritual condition of somebody, say, in the explanation is, [drawing a circle around “Expl.” and drawing an arrow up to the word “Question”] it’s tied to the question. If you want to know what the passage is about, look to the question. Look to it’s immediate answer and the reason for that answer, and then you’ll know. So, here’s what you get in the diatribe throughout Romans. So I’ll give you the four different movements in Romans where this happens. So you go back to Romans 6, and you get the first question. Romans 6:1:



“What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? [And here’s an emphatic answer] By no means!” [Here’s the reason] We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?”

And then the rest of the passage is about an explanation for that. Listen, you’ve died to Christ through baptism, therefore you are dead to sin. Sin’s not dead, but you are dead to it. In Romans 6:15 you get another question,

“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means [emphatic answer]! Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?”

So Paul’s basically saying, “Don’t get the wrong idea. Just because you’re freed from sin doesn’t mean that you’re freed to do anything; you’re a slave of Christ. You’ve been freed unto slavery.” The rest of the passage describes an explanation for why that’s the case. You go all the way down to verse 7 of Romans 7 now,

“What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? [Emphatic answer] Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law.”

And so he’s going to explain now how the law arouses sin in us. So this good law that the Lord has given to use arouses sin in us somehow. In Romans 7:13:

“Did that which is good then [meaning the law], become death to me? By no means [emphatic answer]! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.”

So listen, if I’m right about this, and the diatribe is what he’s doing here, which is what I think he’s doing, then that means that this passage that describes the “I don’t do what I want to do, and I feel what I feel...wretched man that I am,” is tied to a question. And that question is found in Romans 7:13 and it deals with the law. So here’s my point. What you have in this passage is not a description of somebody who’s a Christian. What you have is somebody who is fighting to obey the law of God. The Old Testament, Mosaic Law of God. “But why is it in present tense!”, you say. Well, actually, the explanation is in the present tense, but the question, emphatic answer, and reason, are all in the past. Look at verse 13 again,

“*Did* [that’s a past tense, did] that which is good then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it *used* [past tense] what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.”

So what you have is a past tense question answered in a present tense way. Why would Paul do that? And the answer is because it’s really vivid. You probably don’t know this, but in lots of places in the gospels this happens. You get gospel writers who use the present tense, but when you translate it and you read your Bible, it looks past tense, because this was a common way for people to write in those days. It’s way more vivid to speak in present tense, even if you’re talking about something in the past. We do this...so I won the grade six spelling bee at my school [long pause]. Thank you [laughter]. In



order to win the grade six spelling bee, it was me and this one other girl, and we had gone head to head for the last, like, four words, and finally they said, “Spell ‘phlegmatic.’” And I spelled “phlegmatic,” and they came forward and said, “You win!” And I said, “Yay!” And they came forward and, “Here’s your prize.” And they gave me a dictionary. And I was like, “<sound of dissatisfaction>.” Like, I don’t need this, I clearly know all of the words [laughter]. So, I could tell that story the way I just did, or I could tell the story this way. So I’m going head to head with this girl. And we are battling back and forth. And finally, I get up, she misses her word, and I get up, and the questioner says, “Spell ‘phlegmatic.’” And I say, “P-h-l-e-matic” [laughter]. And they say, “Ding ding ding! You’re right!” And I say, “Yes!” And they say, “Here’s a dictionary!” And I go, “<sound of dissatisfaction>.” Now, none of you in the room right now are confused by the fact that I happened in grade six and not right now. I didn’t just win the spelling bee. It didn’t happen in the present moment, because you and I use the present tense to talk about past events *all the time*. “And I says to him.” That’s a present tense. When you’re telling me a story about how you “says to him,” you’re telling me something in the past. And I don’t say, “Really? Where is he? Is he here right now?” No, I know how this is working, and so this what Paul’s doing. He’s giving you this vivid illustration in the present tense of what it’s like to be a Jewish man under the law, and when the law comes, he’s trying and trying and trying, but he cannot carry it through because of sin dwelling in the members of his body.

That’s my first argument. Here’s my second one. If you go back to Romans 6, here’s what it says in Romans 6:6-7:

“For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.”

This is the teaching of Romans 6. God has delivered you through Christ. By being baptized into Christ, you’ve been risen to new life. You are no longer bound to that former slave owner. You are *not* a slave to sin if you are a Christian. You are not. If you are not a Christian, you are a slave to sin.

In Romans 7, then, here’s what you get. In this passage that we’re trying to determine between whether or not this is about a Christian or not a Christian, here’s what you get in Romans 7:14:

“We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.”

Who does that describe? Christian or non? Based upon Romans 6, one chapter prior, where Paul said, “No, Christians, delivered, slaves to Christ now. Nonbelievers, slaves to sin,” and then in Romans 7, you get, hey, here’s a guy who’s been sold into slavery, as a slave to sin. The only way that that works is either, one: Paul is just really forgetful. And he just was like, “I don’t know what I wrote a chapter ago.” Or this passage is not about a Christian. It is a description of someone who is not a believer, who’s under the law. Trying to keep it but can’t.

Okay here’s my last one, which is the most important one, because I think that Paul gives you an explicit signal to the spiritual condition of the person that’s being described here. I think he actually *tells* you what their spiritual condition is. Where, you say? In Romans 7:4, 5, and 6. Now, I’m bringing that passage up, do you guys know what an internal summary is? So, if you’re writing a paper, kids, it’s very helpful for you to, when you’re transitioning from your first point that you’re making to the next, your



second or fourth, for you to say, “Now here’s what we just said, and now here’s where we’re going.” It’s what we call an internal summary. Some call it a hinge paragraph. We do it in public speaking frequently; it’s very helpful to give people a feeling for where you are, so that they don’t feel like it’s not going to ever end. I’m saying that Romans 7:4-6 is a hinge paragraph. It is an internal summary where Paul basically says, “Look, here’s where we’ve been in Romans 6, and here’s where we’re going in Romans 7 and 8.” So what you find in Romans 7:4, 5 and 6 [Ripping off a sheet of paper] is that Romans 7:4 is what Paul just said in Romans 6; [Writing at the top of the page “Rom 7:4 = Rom 6”) it should be a summary statement (if I’m right about this). In Romans 7:5 you get a summary statement for what Paul says in the rest of Romans 7. [Writing on the next line “Rom 7:5 = Rom 7”) And this is the passage that we’re trying to figure out who it’s talking about. [Writing on the next line “Rom 7:6 = Rom 8”) And in Romans 7:6 you get a summary statement of what he’s going to talk about in Romans 8. So here, let’s put this to the test just a little bit. Here’s what Romans 7:4 says:

“So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.”

Now, I’m going to dare you to go and read Romans 6 and come up with a better summary than that. That’s exactly what it’s about. You were baptized into Christ, been delivered from the law and from sin, and therefore that you could be bound to another, to Jesus, who is now your master. That you might bear fruit for God. Romans 7:5, then, which (if I’m right) is talking about the rest of Romans 7, it says,

“For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death.”

And that’s really what you find. So if you go to Romans 7:9, which is in the following passage, it says,

“Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.”

Or in other words, sinful passions were aroused by the law to bear fruit for death. “In fact, let me give you an illustration,” says Paul, in the present tense, “to give you an idea as to how this happened. I hear the law, I want to keep it, but I can’t keep it, because there’s sin in my members. Wretched man that I am.”.

Romans 7:6, then:

“But now [so this is going to be summarized in Romans 8,], by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.”

And then you go to Romans 8:1, and just listen to how similar the wording is:

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.”

Now, you can go home and check my work on this, but here’s my point. Okay, everybody back with me? Hey, wake up. Everybody back with me? Everybody back with me? I’m saying, Romans 7:5 tells



you what's going on in the rest of Romans 7, and at the beginning of Romans 7:5, Paul explicitly tells you the spiritual state of the person he's describing. Did you see it?

“For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death.”

Past tense: “when we were in the realm of the flesh,” when we under the authority of sin, when we were under the authority of the flesh, not the authority of the Spirit, that's Romans 8. This is about somebody who is not a believer. Paul tells you so.

Okay, I hope you're convinced. I've got more, but we'll stop there. Here we go, let me give you three implications to what this is teaching, then. Number one, a text without a context is a pretext for a proof text [laughter]. A text, passage, without a context, what's around it, is a pretext for a proof text. A proof text is a lifting out of its context, a verse of the Bible, to make it mean what I want it to mean because I feel like it means that thing. So I need proof that what I want to have happen, and that God's on my side in this, so I'm going to take a passage of Scripture and I'm going to quote it. Doesn't matter what it says, or what the author's intent is around it; it means that to me. And so you have people who do what we call Scripture dipping, right? You've never done this. I did, lots of years, you know, “Oh God, there is a moment now that I need you to speak to me,” and sometimes we don't even go to the Bible these days, but let's say we're going to go to the Bible, and we go, “Okay, Lord...” [opens to random page of the Bible] [laughter]. And this is the Lord's word to us. So there's an old illustration about Scripture dipping that goes like this. You know, you're there, and you drop the Bible open and the first passage is Matthew 27:5,

“Judas went away and hanged himself.”

Ohhh! [Throwing his head back in agony] [Laughter]. I said, Lord, you need to speak to me! Alright? [Drops Bible open] Luke 10:37,

“And Jesus said, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

Whaaa! [laughter] Okay, maybe if I shake it, right? It's a magic book, right, cause the verses are going to fall out, let's open it up again, and John 13:27,

“So Jesus said, ‘What you are about to do, do quickly.’”

[Laughter] And you say, “Now that's dumb, Jeff.” Yeah, it is, but why? Why? What makes it dumb? And the answer to that question has to be: because you're not treating the Bible with any kind of regard here. That those passages have a context, and that context determines the meaning of them. Context *always* determines the meaning. If you came to a restaurant where I was with Greg Harris, one of our teaching pastors here, and we were having lunch together, and you peered through the window and said, “Oh, there's Jeff and Greg. I've always wondered what they're like in private moments.” And I just take my right hand and I slap Greg across the face, and the food in his mouth goes flying, you'd think, “Well, that's kind of what I thought Jeff was like, but I didn't know about that. He's a jerk.” Yes, that is a possibility. Or, I could have just saved his life from the poison you put in his food. Alright, the context determines that. Most of the misunderstandings and disagreements that you have with your loved ones comes down to them misunderstanding the context of your words. If you were to write me an email, and



I were to attribute to you motives or thoughts that you did not convey, you'd be like, "No! That's wrong! If you didn't understand, read the context!" I'm just asking you to treat the Bible the way you want to be treated. Text without a context is a pretext for a proof text. The context of every passage determines that passage's meaning.

You know, I had a friend years ago, after seven years of preaching and teaching in New Zealand, she came to me, like, on the last week I was there, and she said, "I just want you to know that over the last seven years you have ruined Bible reading for me [laughter], in the best way." And I thought, now there's a mission statement for me as a pastor. I want to ruin your Bible reading in the best way. A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text. You do know that you are going to be able to fight off most false teaching by simply being able to understand that the Bible has a context to it. Because people are constantly wanting to proof text you into their doctrinal understandings, to give you this or that or believe this or that. Don't buy it. Focus on the context.

Second one, second implication: indwelling sin is the problem. Look, we took a 10,000 foot look at this passage, but when you get into the details of it, it's actually not that complicated. It sounds repetitive because it *is* repetitive. Paul is making a single point here: sin is the problem. Let's just listen to the way he says this. Romans 7:14:

"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it."

Sin is the problem. I hear the law of God and I agree but I just can't, I can't make it work, it's like there's a clog somewhere in this system. You vacuumed your car out, right, after four years of kids, and I don't know how many trips to McDonald's, right, so you're in there, and you're vacuuming it all out. You've got the will to do it, it took a lot for you to get down there, right, because you've been avoiding it for four years, finally, you know, I'm going to do it, it's the right thing to do. You go down there, you've got that little shop-vac going, it's whining <high-pitched noise>. At first it's going great and then halfway through it stops, and you put your hand over the edge and it's barely sucking anything up. What's wrong? You shake it. "Oh!", and then you unattach the hose and, you know, out comes toys from whatever, and French fries *everywhere*, right, coming out, and you're like, "Oh, there was a clog in it." Right. The will of the machine is there, the engine's going, your will is there, you agree that you should do the cleaning of the car. But the actual performing of the duty was stopped in the part of the vacuum that was necessary to carry it through. This is what Paul's basically saying. The problem with people in the world today is that, not that they might not want to do good things, or not have good ideas as to how the world can be fixed; the problem is we can't do it. We humans, there's something inside of us that just clogs it.

So look, the law of Moses in the Jewish tradition, the noble eightfold path in the Buddhist tradition, the five pillars of Islam, they're all great. If you sat and read them, they're fantastic, several of them. Yeah,



the world would be a better place if those kinds of things happened. The problem, of course is not that the ideas aren't good, the problem is that we don't do them. There's something causing the utopia from happening. It happens to be inside of each of us.

My wife's been looking through the United Nations development goals recently, to teach some classes that she teaches at her school. If you've read these, they're pretty remarkable. There are 17 goals for a better world that the United Nations has sought to enact. The first one is no poverty, the second one is zero hunger, good health and well being, quality education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation. All in favour?... [raising his hand]. I don't know anybody who would disagree with these. We all say, "Yes, a better world would be had through all of those things." And they will pass laws, the nations that are influenced by this will pass laws in line with this stuff. So we should expect utopia, right? Wrong. You can make all the laws that you want, but until you deal with the problem of humanity, sin, you will not reach it. You will not find that those laws are carried through. No poverty requires less hoarding. And the problem is, we like hoarding.

Mark Zuckerberg recently, you know he's the CEO of Facebook, he wrote this utopian vision on his Facebook account. Here's what he wrote, he said, you know, he's talking about the future of Facebook and how it can solve the world's problems, he said,

"Facebook stands for bringing us closer together and building a global community. Yet now, across the world, there are people left behind by globalization, and movements for withdrawing from global connections. See, in times like these, the most important thing we at Facebook can do is develop the social infrastructure to give people the power to build a global community that works for all of us."

Right? Facebook, where peace, harmony, and true community happen [laughter]. Mark, do you have Facebook? Like, do you actually... I don't know. You want to –I want to pat him on the back and say, "That's an awesome vision, yes, isn't that fantastic. The problem of course is, you've got sin in your members, man, sin in the part of your body...you have indwelling sin and it's the problem." Listen to me, you will never reach utopia in this world unless you address the clog. And the only one who addresses the clog is named Jesus. And that's why, when he returns, he will bring with him a utopia that you can't even imagine. And he has the power to do so because he has solved the problem, the fundamental problem that people have. And if you don't have that problem solved, you will not reach that utopian goal.

Here's my last implication. If I'm right about this passage, then I think the fight is winnable! Some respond when they hear me teach this, they say immediately, "Okay, I'm willing to kind of go with you to see this, but what does that mean, are you saying there's no struggle in the Christian life?" And I say, "No, I'm not saying that, I'm just saying that this passage doesn't describe it." *This* passage describes the struggle in the non-Christian religious life. But in the Christian life, if you go to Romans 8 or Galatians 5, you find that flesh and spirit are warring against each other. But in each of those occasions, consistently the Bible says you *can* obey God. That the Spirit has come and by walking by the Spirit you *will not* gratify the desires of the flesh. You *can* obey.



I've been using this image in the last number of weeks of a former slave owner who comes, you've been freed and purchased by another, and you're walking down the street and the former slave owner says, "Hey boy! Hey girl! Get over here!" And instinctively every part of you jumps to attention. And you start walking across the street, because that's just what you used to do. But there should be a moment, as you cross the street where you stop and you say, "Wait a minute, I don't owe you anything. You don't own me." That when temptation comes on, you don't have to give in. You can stop in the middle of that street and say, "Wait a minute. Not today. I have a new master, and I can walk in his way." You *can* obey. The Christian life, according to my friend and Professor John Grassmick, "The Christian life is not one of wretched despair and frustration, but of walking under the rule of the life-giving Spirit, who provides enablement to serve God instead of sin."

Or maybe an image is better for you. It usually is. There's an old story about a First Nations chief who heard the gospel of Jesus through a missionary who came, preached the gospel, and was there for a while. So they instituted a church, and then he left. And about five or ten years later, the missionary came back. And he met with the chief, the chief had him into his hut, he had a fire going and a big party, he was welcomed in with all honour, this missionary. Finally as things quieted down, the missionary pulled up kind of a seat right next to the chief and said, "So, how's it going, really?" And the chief said, "Well, it's like there are two dogs fighting in me. And it's been this way ever since I became a Christian. There are two dogs fighting in me, there's a black dog and there's a white dog. And the black dog always wants me to do the wrong thing and the white dog is always pushing me to do the right thing, and they're battling against each other and it's just this constant fight and tension." The missionary said, "Wow, that's fascinating. If you don't mind my asking, which one is winning?" And the chief said, "Whichever one I feed."

Listen closely to me Christian, you *can* feed the white dog. Listen, you *can* have significant victory over worry. You *can* have significant victory over pornography and lust. You *can* walk with Jesus by the power of the Spirit. You can. Let me pray for us,

Father, I'm thankful for your Word. I'm thankful, Lord, for this section of Scripture, in particular, as it pushes us in so many ways to acknowledge that you have meaning in the passages that you have given to us through the apostles, and understanding that according to their rules, Father, will bring us to some good conclusions. But ultimately, Lord, I pray that you would help us to walk in your way. That's the whole goal of Romans 6-8, that we would honour you by how we walk in the Spirit. Would you make it a reality among us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.