

How do we relate to ourselves?

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Date: 01 April 2018

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[0 : 0 0] Well, today, as I said, we're going to continue our study on Romans and we're going to turn to the last wee part of chapter 7. We're going to really look at the whole section from verse 13 to verse 25, but we can just read again verses 18 and 19. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. We've been studying the letter to the Romans and we've been saying that there's one big theme that runs through the whole of this letter and that theme is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. The letter to the Romans is like a great explanation as to how the gospel works. And we can just recap what Paul has taught us in the first five chapters. At the start, he talks about the problem that we all face, the problem of sin, the fact that we've turned away from God. But he then very quickly explains the solution. Thank you very much, Thorne. Thank you. He then very quickly explains the solution, the fact that Jesus has come as a sacrifice, dying on the cross in our place so that we can be justified through faith in him. So you've got the problem of sin, you've got the solution which hinges on justification by faith, and then he goes on to speak about the many, many great blessings that flow from justification. The whole of what he's saying can be summed up, and it is summed up at the end of chapter five where

Paul talks about the fact that really there are two humanities, two groups into which the whole of humanity can be separated. There are those who are still in Adam, who are still affected by the sin of Adam way back at the beginning of the Bible. And there are those who are in Christ, who've been released and saved and who now have new life. And at the very heart of that message is a wonderful word, grace. The fact that God freely gives to us what we do not deserve. That's one of the things that Paul emphasizes again and again and again. God gives us the blessing of justification and all the other wonderful things that flow from that. But he doesn't give it to us because of what we have done.

It's not like we come to God and say, oh I've done this, I've done that, I've done the next thing. Therefore you should save me because I've earned it. That's not how the Gospel works at all. The Gospel is a free gift. God graciously pours out salvation. We are saved by grace. But over the last two sermons we have been recognizing the fact that grace is easily misunderstood. And that's really what's being discussed in chapter 6 and chapter 7 of this letter. Paul in these chapters raises questions that he anticipates are going to arise in the minds of his readers, all of which come from a misunderstanding of grace.

And all of the questions have the same answer. Chapter 6 verse 1 and 2, what are we to say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? That's a misunderstanding of grace.

The answer by no means. Then the last one is in 7:13. Did that which is good then bring death to me? Again the same answer by no means. As we said before, really that phrase that's translated by no means basically means absolutely no way. It is a really, really strong negative.

[4 : 1 4] And in these two chapters Paul is basically explaining how we as Christians relate to three important areas. And we've summarized these two chapters under three questions.

First question, as Christians how do we relate to sin? Second question, as Christians how do we relate to the law? And we've looked at these two over the past two sermons. Today we come to the third question, as Christians how do we relate to ourselves? Now in terms of the first question, how do we relate to sin? Paul's great answer is that you are free from the dominion of sin. As a Christian sin is no longer your master. Sin will have no dominion over you. So we must never ever think that as Christians we are still under the dominion of sin. And for that reason we must never let the devil use us for his purposes.

We have been released from the power of sin. In terms of the second question, how do we relate to the law? It's easy to think well if I'm saved by grace I can do whatever I like. Paul says no way. And Paul wants us to recognize that sin is our horrible hideous slave master that wants to destroy us. And when we realize how serious and dangerous sin is, it should make us want to run a mile from it and instead of serving the realm of sin we want to follow God's law and obey the one who has graciously saved us. So Paul is saying you're free from sin. Paul is saying turn away from sin. Now does that mean that as Christians we never sin? Does that mean that if we do sin we're not Christians? Well that's the kind of question that is being addressed in the third section. As Christians how do we relate to ourselves? And that's what we're going to look at together today.

If we were to go back and read through verses 13 to 25 we would see very very clearly that Paul is highlighting the fact that within him and within the Christian there is tension.

If you look closely at this chapter you'll see that the tense changes when you come into the last part of chapter 7. Up to the point up to verse 13 in chapter 7 Paul is speaking in the past tense so he's looking back at his pre-conversion state but then in verse 14 he moves into the present tense and he is talking about his experience as a Christian.

[7 : 33] In other words he's talking about how he relates to himself and throughout this section from verse 13 onwards there's contrasting language used by Paul to highlight this tension. We can see it on the screen here. If you look at that verse 14 he compares the spirit and the flesh the law spiritual bedding of the flesh verse 15 makes another comparison between our actions and our desires. I don't understand my actions for I don't do what I want so actions here desires here verse 18 similar desire and ability I've got the desire to do what I was right but not the ability to carry it out and in many ways he sums it up in the verse 22 to 25 where he talks about that his mind and his members or his body are wanting different things. I delight in the law of God in my inner being but in my members I see another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Each of these contrasts is highlighting the fact that as Christians our relationship to ourselves is one of tension. In other words there's a battle going on within us between competing and opposing forces. That's what Paul is highlighting and that's what I want us to think about today. Why is there this tension within the Christian? In order to understand this I think we need to take a wee step back to begin with and remind ourselves of the effect that sin has had on the human race.

You remember way back in Genesis chapter 3 way back at the start of the Bible Adam and Eve the first humans sinned against God and their sin has had a big effect on the whole of humanity. And when Adam sinned when he disobeyed God that brought the human race into a condition that theologians call total depravity. Okay that's the term that we tend to use. Now when we say total depravity we do not mean that everybody is as evil as they possibly could be. So when we say total depravity we're not saying that everybody is a devil. We're not saying that everybody is as sinful as they could possibly be. That would be what we would call absolute depravity and we don't that's not what we mean when we say total depravity.

What we mean by the term total depravity is the fact that sin has affected every part of our being. In other words sin's effect is not partial it's total. So in my mind in my body in my senses in my desires in my emotions every single area of me has been affected by sin and this results in tension and difficulty this leaves the human race broken. Now at the same time we must never forget that we still bear the image of God but now we don't do that perfectly. We do it in a way that's been undermined by the effect of sin. I think a few months ago I mentioned C.S. Lewis's great description of humanity as a glorious ruin and that's a really good description. We are a glorious ruin because we bear the image of God and yet we've been totally ruined because of sin. Every area of life has been affected by sin. And Paul is talking about this in Romans 5 and he uses the very simple concept of mind and body to refer to our whole being. And so we can draw a diagram I love drawing diagrams to help us understand. Here's a person, a human being. Sin has had a total effect on that person. So in their heart, in their mind, in their inner being which Paul refers to sin has had an effect. Right to the core of our being in our mind sin has corrupted us. And alongside that the rest of our body is affected as well. So our members as Paul calls them. So the circle in the middle that's really what Paul refers to as our mind, our core, our inner being and the arms and legs and head, eyes, senses. That's his members, that's his body. It's a bit of a simplified drawing but I hope you can see exactly what

I mean. The fact that as sinners the governing principle of our lives, our core and our actions, our being, our senses, all of these are affected by sin. Now that affects everyone, every single person who has ever lived. But as I said that doesn't mean that everybody is a devil and we do not believe that and we are still shaped by the fact that we're made in God's image.

Paul talks about this in chapter 2. He says that Gentiles, people who don't have the law still by nature do what the law requires. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. And this is part of what we call common grace. The fact that God restrains fallen humanity and he blesses us with a measure of quality and ability that otherwise we would not have. That's why we see people in life who show a standard of conduct and a standard of morality that is close to what God requires in his word and that's something to be very, very thankful for. It's a sign of God's great mercy. So you can look around the world and you can see people who in many ways follow aspects of what God requires of us. But alongside these examples of common grace, it is also true that there are many, many people who are in a state of thorough rebellion against God. And at the heart of that is a pattern whereby sin affects us at the core of our being and it works its way all the way out into outward actions and conducts and conduct. Paul speaks about this in chapter 1. He says, sinful desires lead to sinful actions. Chapter 1, claiming to be wise, people have become fools. They've exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up to the lusts of their hearts to impurity to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. Now do you see the progression that's there in the last sentence? The lusts of their hearts leads on to dishonoring your body in terms of your actions and what you do. Our minds affect our bodies and it all arises from abandoning God. So as those who have rejected God, as those who have turned away from Him, humanity has inwardly and outwardly rejected God. Depravity has had a total effect. That means that there is a sense in which there is a harmony within those who rebel against God. In their minds they rebel against God and in their actions they do the same thing. Now this is really, really important because this explains why people today think that sin is the right thing to do. Now that's a really, really important point to recognise. All around us we have people in the world who are going directly against God's law and they're doing it because they think it's the right thing to do. What they want in their hearts shapes what they do. And people who support actions that are contrary to God's law, they think that they're doing the right thing because there's a kind of harmony within their thoughts and within their actions. And there's a huge power in that when people, they think they're doing the right thing and so they go on and do it.

[16 : 50] We see that all around us. And that's why Paul can say in chapter 1, though they know God's righteous decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but they give approval to those who practice them. All of this manifests itself in a humanity that believes that what we want determines what we believe is right. That's the great sociological force that's shaping society today. If you really want something, it's the right thing to do. And that's why long standing laws are being changed because people want things. And of course the really fascinating thing is the fact that the great sociological forces of 2018 were predicted 2000 years ago in the letter to the Romans.

Paul makes it very clear if we rebel against God, our desires will lead us into actions that are ultimately going to be in rebellion against God. So the key point I want to highlight in all of this is that in the person who is unconverted, there is what we could call a harmonious rebellion against God. Now what I mean by that is the fact that what we want in our hearts and what we do in our bodies is in a kind of harmony, isn't it? Because people, they don't want God in their hearts, they don't want God in their actions. There's a harmony and a consistency there. When somebody becomes a Christian, the governing principle at the core of their being changes. And so we go from having a sinful heart to having a regenerated heart. Without Christ, the core of our being is broken, it's corrupt, it's spiritually dead. But when we put our faith in Christ, that core of our being is changed and we are regenerated or born again, as we could say. So instead of being spiritually dead, we're spiritually alive. Instead of being governed by sin, we're governed by the

Holy Spirit. Instead of being under the dominion of sin, we're under the Lordship of Christ. Instead of being slaves to sin, we are slaves to righteousness. And the passage we read in Ezekiel at the start describes it beautifully. I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you. And I'll remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. When we come to faith in Jesus, God gives us a new heart, the core of our being changes. Spiritually we are no longer dead, no longer on the dominion of sin, no longer God's enemies. But the immediate result of that is that there is tension with our bodies. Look at the diagram again. Unconverted, there's a harmony. Mind, body in a united rebellion against God. At the resurrection, at the end of time, we will be spiritually and physically fixed. So our hearts will be renewed, our bodies will be renewed and we will instead of being in a harmonious rebellion against God, we will be in a harmonious worship and service and devotion to God. We'll all be in harmony as fully renewed humans.

But at the moment, we have got a regenerated core living in a physical frame that is still sold under sin. That's why if you go into chapter 8, you'll see that Paul says that we eagerly await the redemption of our bodies. We long to be the blue stick man at the end who is fully renewed. Right now we are not. Yes, our hearts have been changed, but still in our members, we are struggling with the presence of sin. And so there's no longer a harmonious rebellion against God. There is now an internal battle between a renewed mind and a body that has long been in the habit of satisfying sinful desires. It's a great reminder of the fact that the cross has dealt with the penalty of sin. There Jesus took our punishment. The cross has also dealt with the power of sin. There victory was won.

But the presence of sin will not be dealt with until Christ returns again. And until we are brought into the new creation, our renewed hearts are battling with members that are still corrupted by the effect of sin. Now all of that is theological teaching. But as with all good theology, it is confirmed by our experience. Look at what Paul says in verse 19. I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. And I am sure every single Christian here says, I know how that feels. I know exactly how that feels. Paul is making the point that we have this battle and this struggle. But the great thing that he is emphasizing is the fact that the part of you that falls into sin, the part of you that does the things that you do not want to do, it is not the real you. The real you is regenerated. The real you is a renewed child of God. The real you has been set free from sin. The part of us that sins and keeps going back to sin is the remnant of the old humanity that is still drawn towards sinful, rebellious behaviour.

[23 : 35] That's what Paul can say. 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 with the law that it's good. So now it's no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me that is in my flesh. But I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. Paul is saying, deep down in the core of my being, I want to obey God. But in my body, in my members, in my senses, I find all sorts of things drawing me towards the very opposite of what I want. Paul is highlighting that his members are not a true reflection of who he really is in Christ. And for that reason, he's battling against himself. And if you are a Christian, then you will know how that feels. And that's maybe a good question to ask yourself. Some people think, well, how do I know if I'm a Christian? How do I know if I am a changed person? Ask yourself, read those verses and think, do you know how that feels? If you think yourself, yes, I know exactly how that feels, then it shows that a change has happened in our lives. As

Christians, our relationship to ourselves is one of tension. We want to obey God, but we don't have the ability. We want to keep God's law, but we also find ourselves drawn to rebel against it. We hate sin in our minds, and yet we're attracted to it. And the result is that the things that we don't want to do are the very things that we do. So as Christians, how do we relate to ourselves? We are in a battle, a battle between a new heart and a body that is still broken. And as God's law is written on our hearts more and more through the indwelling of the Spirit, we will become more and more aware of the times when our bodies are drawn towards what God does not want for us. We will become more conscious of sin and better able to avoid it. But all of this is a reminder of the fact that ultimately as Christians, we are always looking forward, looking forward to a resurrected body which will be righteous and holy and honouring to God.

Now, two brief points in conclusion. You've been very, very patient and in many ways all of that is quite sort of theological. It's very relevant to our lives as well, and I want to highlight two points just to conclude. First of all, this means, all of this means that as Christians, what do we need to do? We need to watch ourselves. We need to watch ourselves. Paul draws a distinction between our minds and our members. In our minds, we want to obey God, but there is a constant threat on our doorstep. Paul says evil lies close at hand. And we need to remember that that attraction to sin isn't simply out there in the world. It's within us. It's in our own members. Sin can creep up on us. A very clear example of that is David in the Old Testament. If he went up to David and said to him, is adultery and murder wrong? He would say, yes, of course it is. In his mind, he knew what was right and wrong. So did David get up one morning and say, well, I want to go and take another man's wife and get her pregnant and then murder her husband? No.

He didn't get up saying that. So what happened to him? He saw Bathsheba and his members, this physical attraction to it, pounced on him and took over and he ended up doing something that he knew was wrong at every step. And we have to recognize that we could do the same.

As Christians, we could do the same. We can find ourselves marching over our consciences in order to satisfy a sinful desire. We need to watch ourselves. We need to repent every day and we need to always pray, Lord, keep me. That brings us to our last point. When we talk about all of this, it's easy to get discouraged, isn't it? Can all seem a bit negative, can't it? And when you read Paul, there's actually a sense of discouragement and frustration in him. He says, I don't understand what I do. The very thing I hate in my heart is what I do. He ends up despairing at himself in verse 24, wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death? He is so frustrated with himself and I'm sure every single one of us knows how that feels. He seems to be just at his wit's end. But the amazing thing is that Paul's question here is not simply a cry of despair because his question has an answer. Who will deliver you and me from these stupid, foolish, wretched, sinful bodies that keep going back to the same awful sins that ruin our lives?

[29 : 50] Who is going to deliver us? Jesus is going to deliver us. And so Paul says, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. And that's what makes the Gospel such good news.

The world is broken, we are broken, but Jesus has come to fix us. And his great goal is to bring us into a new creation where we will never, ever sin again. God's grace doesn't mean that we never sin now. At the moment we're in a state of tension. But one day, we are going to be brought into that new creation with new hearts and new bodies and our transformation will be complete. One day we will all be like Jesus. As Paul says in the next chapter, we will be conformed to the image of his Son. So as a Christian, you are probably going to face tension every day as you battle with sin. That is to be expected. It's part of the process of following Jesus. But do not despair because Jesus is going to deliver us all from our bodies of death and bring us into the new creation with resurrected bodies to serve him forever. Let's pray.

Our Father, we thank you for what your word teaches. And we thank you that it speaks so with such relevance into our experience. Because we so often find that the good that we want to do, we don't do. And the bad things that we don't want to do is what we end up doing. We pray, oh God, that you would help us in this battle that we face. Help us to walk in your ways. Help us to look to you for help and for protection. And help us to remember that one day we will be fully renewed, fully conformed to the image of your Son.

We pray, oh God, that each one of us would look to you and seek you and follow you while we have the opportunity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.