

Doing What I Hate

Romans 7:13-20

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At times over the course of church history, a pernicious teaching in Christian circles has come in and out of popularity. It's known as perfectionism. Perfectionism says that it is possible as a Christian to grow to a place where you no longer sin. You have gained such a victory over all the besetting sins and temptations that you no longer sin anymore.

Anyone here arrive at that? Well we'll just ask your family about that. My pastoral hero of the past, Charles Spurgeon, ran into this teaching. There was a perfectionist pastor/teacher in London who very publicly claimed to have arrived at a place of complete sanctification and moral perfection. Spurgeon ran into him at breakfast out in the town and took the opportunity to pour a jug of milk over his head. Spurgeon later said he simply wanted to test the man's claim to perfection. Apparently, the man's response to the milk poured over his head left his perfection in serious question.

This is but one example of the tension between who we are in Christ and how we live as Christians. What difference does justification make in our goal of sanctification? How does our position in Christ shape our practice of following Christ?

We have already seen how the Apostle Paul in Romans 6 denies that salvation by grace is freedom to sin. That is an abuse of grace. Grace is not freedom to sin. It is, by the Holy Spirit's work in us, freedom not to sin. Freedom not to have sin as our master. The tyranny of sin is over. Christ is on the throne of our hearts.

We saw last week that sin is not merely doing something wrong. Sin is a force. A law. An enemy that remains within us. Known as indwelling sin or the flesh, it is the dethroned despot king of our life who wages a guerrilla war against God's work in us. As we saw last week, indwelling sin weaponizes God's law against us and uses the law to create desires not to obey the law. Paul is going to expand on that in verses 13-20, which is our text today.

"Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For 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 is good. So now it is 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. 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. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me." (Romans 7:13-20 ESV)

As I mentioned to you last week, identifying the "I" here is challenging. I'm personally on board with Augustine and other luminaries who believe Paul is describing his own struggle with indwelling sin. Apostles didn't get a free pass with sin. This echoes other confessions by Paul like Philippians 3:

"Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way..." (Philippians 3:12–15)

Spiritual maturity doesn't claim moral perfection, but it does press on. Toward what? What is Paul describing? ***Sanctification is a Christian's progressive growth into the spiritual likeness of Jesus.*** While a big word, sanctification is a key word in understanding living the Christian life. The root of sanctification is *sanctify* which means, "be made holy." Paul uses it often, most recently in 6:22, *"But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life."*

The gospel is not simply justification, not that justification is simple. It's not merely being declared righteous by God. Becoming a Christian is a starting point. Salvation has a miraculous beginning, but it also is a miraculous process of change. Change from who I was and I how I lived to my new life in Christ. A whole new purpose. A whole new set of moral priorities. It really is a new life. A far better one.

Change into what? What's the butterfly? Where's this metamorphosis going? *"For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."* (Romans 8:29) God is making us into Jesus Juniors. Conforming our lives internally and externally to the most amazing and wonderful human life that ever lived—Jesus Christ. For a Christian, this is wonderful news because Jesus is the most wonderful person we know. We admire him. We worship him. We love him. God comes along and says, *I'm going to do a makeover in your life. The ultimate fixer upper. I'm going to make you like Jesus.* For Christians, this is cause for celebration.

We are the ultimate wannabes. The world is filled with wannabes. They all wanna be like whoever their hero is. So, teenagers dress accordingly. They fuss over their hair and look. They talk with the latest slang words so they can look and sound like their hero. Athletes train accordingly to be the next Greatest Of All Time. How many say Lebron? How many say Jordan? Wannabes.

All true Christians are wannabes. We wanna be like Christ.

Except when we don't want to be like Christ. This is where the larger picture of what God is doing explains the internal tensions and contradictions of Paul and all the rest of us. Romans 7 sounds on the surface like Paul is an internally tormented individual. If Romans ended at chapter 7, we could conclude that. But don't forget folks, Romans 8 is on the horizon. Romans 7 describes the battle. Romans 8 describes the victory. But we aren't there yet. Let's do a bit of exposition of Romans 7:

"Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means!" (Romans 7:13) Or you could say it this way, *Did the law bring death to me? By no means!* There's that incredibly strong negative again. *God forbid!* The problem here isn't the law of God. The law didn't bring death.

Well then, what is its purpose? *"...in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure."* (Romans 7:13) Here is Paul's summary of the purpose of the law. It's not to bring death. The wages of *sin* is death. God's

moral law *shows* sin to be sin. God's law tells us about God, but by doing so, it tells us about ourselves. It shows us who we are in the categories that matter to God. Not wealth. Not power. Not fame. But holiness, righteousness, and godliness. And in these categories just The Ten Commandments are damning enough. The law shows us what sin is, and through the commandment we become sinful beyond measure. Measureless. This is often called depravity. It means that the law doesn't show us to almost make it, but just fall short. No. We aren't even close. How far short are we to the glory of God? Short beyond measure. I could say like jumping the Grand Canyon, but then technically they could measure the distance from your where your body lands to the other side of the Grand Canyon. We fall so short it's impossible to measure.

"For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin." (Romans 7:14) Here Paul gets personal. The law is good, but I am not. What is he talking about? Paul is analyzing his internal spiritual struggle with sin. The "I" is saved Paul. Spiritual Paul. Regenerated Paul. The enemy is "the flesh" within him. This is indwelling sin. The remnants of the old carnal Paul.

"For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (Romans 7:15) Does that sound familiar? We use language like, *I don't know what came over me. That wasn't me.* Or we try to blame shift. *The devil made me do it.* Paul does none of this. He owns it. He has committed sins of omission and commission. He fails to do the good that he in his Christian self wants. Paul wanted to act and think and speak as Christ did. But he says, I fail to do that.

But he also fails to *not* do what he shouldn't. These are sins of commission. He regularly does things that he hates. Things he knows that God hates. His carnal self loves these sinful things, but his true Christian self hates them. Hear the wannabe language? I wanna be like Jesus. And I hate what I see in me that isn't like him.

"Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good." (Romans 7:16) Even when I sin I still say the law is good and agree with what the law says about my actions.

"So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me." (Romans 7:17) Paul isn't blame shifting here. We can't blame the devil and we can't blame indwelling sin. No. We are still responsible for what we do. Paul is identifying the problem. It's not the law. It's me! Old me. Old sinful me still dwelling in me. All of us have it and anyone honest with themselves doesn't need a jug of milk poured over them to know this internal delight in sin.

Paul isn't comparing himself to others, he is comparing himself to the holy law of God. Sin weaponizes that law, creates desires to violate that law, and then uses the law to condemn us. It's worse than any betrayal ever. Worse than Brutus to Caesar or Absalom to David. And it happens within us every single day.

"Sin is pictured as having taken up residence in Paul. This is not the honored guest, nor the paying tenant, but the "squatter," not legitimately there, but very difficult to eject. Paul is personifying sin again; it is in some sense a separate entity, even though it is within him. But it is not external to him. This sin that lives in him, though it is not the real Paul, is what produces the acts which the real Paul hates so much. Sin is out of character for the believer, even though it is so difficult to be rid of it entirely." (Leon Morris)¹

¹ Leon Morris, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 293.

Doing what we hate. Part of our problem is that we don't hate sin enough. Sometimes after we commit it, we hate it. But in the midst of temptation to sin, indwelling sin deceives us into loving the very thing that we hate. Why else would we do what we hate?

"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. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me." (Romans 7:18-20) In that last statement, remember that "I" is spiritual Paul. What Morris called "the real Paul." Throughout this verse he bemoans how often his actions and attitudes are NOT the good his spiritual self wants. His summary lament is in verse 24, *"Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?"* (Romans 7:24)

That's what this is, it's an internal grieving by the apostle who wants so much to be holy and righteous—indeed sanctified—to be like Jesus.

The reason he hates his sin is that he loves Christ so much. You can measure how much you love Christ by how much you hate your sin. The more I want to be like Christ, the more I hate whatever doesn't look like him.

I'm going to share my very favorite illustration of sanctification. I'm going to do it with the understanding that I'm likely going to tell this same illustration many more times in our Romans series. Your indwelling sin will not like to hear it more than once, so please walk by the Spirit and be OK with hearing it more than once.

The Illustration of Marble Horse – whether this is a true story or not, I don't know. It doesn't matter. The story goes that there was a town in Italy during the Renaissance that was the hometown of a famous sculptor. This sculptor decided to give a gift to his hometown of a large sculpture for the town square. So, they made arrangements for a very large block of marble to be delivered to the town square. None of the townsfolk had ever seen such a large block of marble. All the townspeople gathered around and admired it and wondered about it. They asked him, "What is the sculpture going to be?"

He said, "It will be a giant horse."

They asked him, "How are you going to make a horse out of this giant block of marble?"

The sculptor replied, "Easy. I'm going to chip away everything that doesn't look like a horse."

Sanctification begins with our understanding that God, the Holy Spirit, is the life sculptor and we are the block of marble. God's will is that we are made holy, made like Christ. Justification is God declaring us a horse while we are still a block of marbly sin. That's his grace.

But God's not done with us by declaring us horses. For the rest of our lives he is chipping away at our character, our loves, our desires, our value, our attitudes, and our actions. He is chipping away everything that doesn't look like Christ.

If I may push the illustration a little further, as a Christian, the spiritual us is the horse inside who wants all this non-Jesus looking stuff chipped away. Romans 7 is the Apostle Paul lamenting how much of his personhood is not yet like Christ. He wants to be like Christ so much that he hates anything remaining in him that isn't like Christ.

The question is, how bad do you want to be a horse? Bad enough to dislike, even hate what is in your life that isn't like Christ? I think the problem many of us have is we don't hate enough. We don't hate what isn't like Christ and we don't love enough what is. I dare say,

few of us could write what Paul wrote here. We don't hate our sin enough. We don't hate it enough because we don't love Christ enough.

One of the things about my girls is that they desperately want to be big girls. Madeline has taken to recently saying that she wants to grow up, so she can make soup with Mommy. Where do they come up with these things? I don't know. They want to be like Mommy. Why? They love Mommy. The more you love someone, admire someone, worship someone, the more you want to be like them.

Might sanctification be a missing part of your awareness of what God is up to in your life? Many churches and Christians are really good about the beginning of the Christian life. The gospel is faith in Jesus producing forgiveness and eternal life. Evangelism.

But then what? Just wait to die and go to heaven? Then the trial comes. Then the spiritual sculpting and polishing begins. Some people mistake God's sculpting as God not loving them. Hammers and chisels at times don't feel good. Just ask the block of marble. Remember, God disciplines and sanctifies every son and daughter that he loves. The chipping sound in your life isn't God hating you, it's God loving you.

I'm no apostle, but I've been a Christian for a long time. I look back at varying things in my story. Many of them are regretful and embarrassing. I'm not a perfect person. My family especially sees me at my worst and the internal me is even worse than the observable external me. Despite all this, I serve you as a pastor and you are gracious to allow me to do so.

But here's the thing. Over time I've grown in my love for Christ. As you know, the beauty of Christ is deeply meaningful to me. The more I treasure Jesus, the more I can see as good for me even the trials and troubles required to chip away my pride and selfishness. Not good in the bad thing itself, but good in a sculpting way. If we could ask the block of marble, "How does the chisel feel?"
"Not good."

But as the masterpiece appears, Christ-like qualities are formed. Pride is polished toward humility. Self-service is sculpted toward agape love. The profane tongue is refined to speak truth and build others up. Greed moves toward giving. Hate turns into love.

Why is all this chipping away worth it? The beauty of Christ is revealed in his people. Did this past week have some painful moments of chiseling? Some sanding? Some polishing? I don't wish pain on anyone. But because we all wanna be like Jesus, we can delight in the product. Delight in the shaping. Delight in the goal. Delight in him.

"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25)

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