THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE, part 1

Psalm 1

Romans 7:14-25

January 16, 2022

Something is terribly wrong! How can a Christian be sold under sin? I mean sold under sin . . . that means completely, hopelessly, so under the power of sin that there is no chance of being free. As in, enslaved, like a slave in bondage to his or her master: sold over to, caught up by, without hope of escape from . . . sin.

John Calvin used language like “totally depraved.” *“Amazing Grace”* says, “How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” How many of you have real problems with looking at yourselves, or even worse, at your young children or grandchildren, and saying that they (or you) are totally depraved, wretches, sold under sin? I have good friends who just flat refuse to sing “*Amazing Grace”*  because they violently disagree with it. They are not a wretch! How dare it use that word?

Was not Adam created good along with all the rest of creation? Sure, sin crouches at the door and it gets in and wreaks havoc with us if we give it the opportunity. But don’t we also have the noble ability to turn it aside and push it out and rise to the best and most generous places of being that God envisions for us? We want to believe that. The electorate of this nation will not elect a candidate who calls the American people flawed, or sinful, or in need of repentance and restoration. I think Jimmy Carter shot himself in the foot about this one, huh? We want our candidates to tell us how generous and kind we are, how we Americans are good and decent people. We want to hear that. And I think you and I want to hear that, feel the possibilities of it. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard the TV preachers speak in those terms=-- that we are able to turn aside and push sin out and rise to the best and most generous places we can imagine.

But people, that’s not the case. The Bible says here in Romans 7:14, “I am carnal (that is, of the flesh, as opposed to of the spirit) ‘I am of the flesh carnal,’ Paul says, ‘sold under sin.’ Paul is depicting in his own experience the character and extent of the sinfulness of believers. You and I are basically, by nature, sinful, not basically good.

Now, good, Christian, faithful believers—should I say hopeful believers? – rail against this statement’s applying to them. “Paul affirms, “I am carnal (that is, a creature of flesh and blood) sold under sin.” But doesn’t this belittle the victory spoken of for the one who has faith in Jesus Christ? Isn’t this whole argument about flesh vs. spiritual, and sold under sin, and being a wretched human, doing what I don’t want to do a pre-conversion state? Aren’t we freed from the body of this death in Jesus Christ? Even if it’s not exactly pre-Christian , isn’t it a state of life which can be left behind in forgiveness by the grace of Jesus Christ?

Maybe, we hope, this shows a Christian life where the individual is still trying to fight the battle of life in his or her own strength? In the next chapter, Romans 8:2, says, “The law of the Spirit of life in Jesus Christ has set me free from the law of sin and death.” Maybe if I’d just be more spiritual, give my life over to Jesus mo0re completely, I’d be delivered from Paul’s dilemma?

No, folks. The fact is, you and I are carnal—of the flesh—and sold under sin even if we do have Jesus living in us. This is EXACTLY what I want us to see this morning, at the beginning of this new year in our lives. We do justice to the text of Paul and to our own faithful lives only if we hold this in tension, that the body of this death and the spirit of life in Christ are NOT two successive stages of a believer’s life. They are two aspects, two realities, yes, but they exist at the very same time in the normal Christian life.

And both, the body of this death and the spirit of life in Christ, both of these will continue as long as we are Christians in the flesh. If you and I gloss over our current and lively sold under sin-ness, if we gloss over our giving ourselves over to evil with abandon, it will be to our own undoing.

Today we need t forcefully hold it up in front of us and feel our own tension with the spirit of life. We Christans consider ourselves dead to sin, having linked ourselves to His crucifixion. And we are alive to God in Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead: alive that we, too, ourselves, might walk in the newness of life.

However, still, nothing good dwells within me. I can will what is right, but I can’t do it. I don’t do the good that I want, but instead the evil I don’t want, THAT’S what I do. Wretched human that I am. Let’s all say it together, “Wretched one that I am.” Do you feel the truth of It . . . for YOU? Wretched one that I am.

Have you ever wondered why we have a confession of sin near the beginning of every worship service? Or been impatient with it? It’s a recognition of the truth of scripture. We know what we ought to do, we even want to do it. But we’re sold under sin, and I’ll bet your experience is like mine: I was caught by some of those words I the Confession of Sin this morning. [ ]

Nearly every week it happens, huh? And sometimes we’re caught by the very same thing week after week. And not that we want to be, that’s for sure. Each Sunday morning you and I want to come to the Lord and turn our life around, offer it to Him upon the altar. But each week we are caught up for who we are. Wretched. Sold under sin. Delighting in the law of God in our minds, but captive to the law of sin that dwells in our members. I see the better things, the things of God, and I embrace them, but I always follow the worse. You too? That’s the condition the Bible says you and I are in.

So, from one point of view, this passage might be called a demonstration of inadequacies. i) It demonstrates the INADEQUACY OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE. If to know the right thing were to do it, life would be easy. But knowledge by itself doesn’t make anyone good. It’s the same way in everything we do, isn’t it? We may know exactly how golf should be played, but that’s a long way from being able to play it. We may know how poetry should be written, but that’s a long way from being able to write it. We may know how we ought to behave in any given circumstance as parents or spouses, but once more, that’s a long way from doing it. So much for human knowledge! I know what’s good. I affirm it. I just can’t do it.

The passage also demonstrates the inadequacy of HUMAN RESOLUTION. There is in our fleshly nature an essential weakness of the will. The Apostle Paul says, “I can will what is right, but I can not do it.” The Apostle Peter took a great resolution himself: “Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And we remember how that came out. If these examples of great faith were not able to follow through on their faith because of their sold-under-sin-ness, how much also you and I?

Here in Romans is also the LIMITATION OF DIAGNOSIS. Paul knew exactly what was wrong: “I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. Now, if I do what I don’t want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.” ‘Sin which dwells within’ taking the opportunity of this flesh we’re caught in. Perfectly diagnosed, but knowing exactly what’s wrong, Paul is unable to do anything about it. How very like him are you and I!

Wretche one that I am!

Who will deliver me from

This body of death?

The individual who makes this their cry—and I hope it might be you and me this morning—is the one who, knowing herself, knowing himself to be righteous by faith, desires from the *depths of their being* to respond to the claims of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the very clarity of Paul’s understanding of the Gospel, and his very love for God which makes his pain at continuing, intractable sin so sharp. I hope with a holy hope you and I are stabbed by the sharpness of our sin in the face of the Gospel of Christ, too.

Who will deliver me from the body

Of this death?

Thanks be to Jesus Christ!

The final, clinching key, the best and most pointed argument of all, for me, about our absolute wretchedness is that, if there were any possibility that our flesh and blood creatureliness was not absolutely sold under sin, then God’s Word, His law, and His good teachers, would have been enough to lift us and guide us to perfection.

But they were not.

That’s Paul’s whole argument in this passage. Read it again. So God had to come as a man, in the flesh, and destroy the hold of death in the flesh. He had to do it because as our loving Father, He saw how desperately we wanted to, but were must not able.

Part of the normal Christian life is the agonizing, hope against hope, the great longing, waiting for the redemption of our Bodies. While here we are, struggling and pained about this continuing sin we’re sold under. Thanks be to Jesus Christ! Thanks be to God who has given you and me the first first fruits of it in His Spirit!—first fruits that cause the very tension with that sin, huh? And especially thanks be to our Lord Christ who has given you and me the guarantee of His resurrection! We look for it in hope now, but also in the rock-solid confidence of its eventual truth . . . for us.

Amen.