

The Gospel as it Really Is: *Romans simply Explained*

Sanctification (5) It's a real struggle!

Romans 7:7-25

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I didn't get through all the books in my summer holiday reading list, but I did read the life of A.N. Wilson, entitled "Confessions". Some of you may have of him because through his biography of C.S. Lewis.

One thing that struck me in this book, sad to say, was the tragic marriage of his parents, Norman and Jean. The childhood atmosphere of the house was so poisoned by bitter marriage rows that A.N. Wilson came to the conclusion, I quote,

"Seventy years on this planet has taught me, by observation and experience... that this cherished tradition (marriage) ... is... an arrangement of life that is utterly destructive of the human soul." (p.51)

When I read those words, not only was I sorrowful, I thought—since I was preparing to speak from Romans chapter 7 today—if Norman and Jean had been converted to Christ, their marriage, over the years, would have been totally transformed by God's word, his power and his grace. Husband and wife would be sanctified, individually and so too their relationship. A Christian marriage, by the grace and power of God, should become sweeter as the years pass by.

Is that true of your marriage, may I ask every Christian married couple here today? Christian husbands are you seeking, increasingly, to love your wives as Christ loved the church (Ephesians 5) And Christian wives, are you seeking to submit to your husbands in everything? It is God's will that his people should grow and bloom in holiness, and that includes our marriages.

We return this morning, from our summer break in the Psalms, to Paul's letter addressed to the Christians at Rome— and to Christians in every other city and age...

-Paul spent two and a half chapters proving that everyone in the world is a sinner, Jews and Gentiles, "good people" and "bad people", "All have sinned" he says in Romans 3:23.
- ...then Paul explained the Good News, the Gospel, which is this: God offers the free gift of righteousness to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ! We have no righteousness of our own, so we all stand under God's judgement, but because he is rich in mercy, God has provided a righteousness for us, free to all who will believe, earned by Jesus Christ, earned by his perfect life and by his suffering-for-our-sins death!
- ..this salvation which leads to eternal life, is offered free to anyone and everyone who will believe!

That, in a nutshell, was the message of Romans 1-5. The big word there was “Justification”, we are justified—“declared righteousness in God's eyes”—by faith in Jesus Christ.

Do you believe in Jesus? Many of us will say “Yes, I believe the Gospel” - but what about those of you who do not yet believe? What hinders you? Is it an intellectual hurdle? Talk to me or an older believer; there are very good answers to all the questions you may have! That was one of the things I explained in my “God and Science” talk in the USA. Don’t allow doubt to rob you of the greatest blessing anyone in this world can enjoy!

You know the saddest thing in the biography of A.N. Wilson, was not the marriage of his parents, but the tragedy of a life of seventy some years, lived without God. An empty, vain life. AN Wilson had lots of religion in this life, but the Gospel and the love of God and the glory of God are tragically absent from the story of his life. Don’t let life pass you by like that!

Since you have been given the gift of righteousness, since you have been justified, now we’re on to Romans 6,7 & 8, live a changed life! The big word for these chapters is “Sanctification”, the lifelong process of becoming more pure, more holy, righteous, loving, and more Christ-like in thought, attitudes, words and behaviour. God wants us to be S.

Paul has lots to teach us about sanctification!

He's told us already, that we can't be sanctified by the law, by trying to obey the ten commandments. You wake up each morning, read the 10 commandments and say to yourself, “today I am going to obey them all.” That strategy is doomed to failure, not because the law is bad, the law is good. It's doomed because all the commandments will do is stir up your sinful nature:

Verse 8 - “Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment produced in me every kind of covetous desire” (Paul’s thinking of the 10th commandment, do not covet)

If you try to be sanctified by obeying the ten commandments, says Paul, you’ll end up sinning more, not less! The commandments, were not given to sanctify us, but to show us what sin is:

Verse 7, “I would not have known what sin was except through the law.”

So Paul rules out trying to obey the ten commandments, as a strategy for sanctification

“verse 6, “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.”

We are sanctified by the work of the Holy Spirit who works within our hearts and Paul is going to explain how this happens in chapter 8; we’ll have to wait! Today in chapter 7, verses 7-25, he explains the shadow-side of lifelong sanctification. In a nutshell: it’s a real struggle! Prepare yourself, becoming holy is tough!

In one of the most honest segments of the whole Bible Paul explains his battle with sin—and since Paul was just like us, he is describing our own battle with sin. And from Paul we must learn one truth and three applications (so there are four points to this sermon):

(1) Recognise –we must recognise and accept that while we are in this world, we have an old sinful nature. And because of that sinful nature, the Christian life will be filled with:

(2) Lament – sorrow for sin

(3) Battle —against sin, but also

(4) Hope!

Recognise, Lament, Battle, Hope.

(1) Recognise—you have an old sinful nature

Everyone is born with a sinful nature. This explains all the wrongdoing in our lives and in the world. While I was in the US, a young man shot through the windows of a church building in Minneapolis killing two children and injuring many more. Hear story over hear? Where did such hate come from? The shooter was born with a sinful nature. In this past few days, China has put on an enormous display of war machinery. Where does war and war-mongering come from? The sinful nature of the human heart.

Before we were converted, we had a sinful nature. But after we are converted something wonderful took place: “born again” by the power of the Holy Spirit, we we’re given new hearts, with new desires:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The Spirit of Christ lives inside us, and we can truly, sincerely, sing:

*What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought,
Since Jesus came into my heart!*

But—and this is Paul’s main anguished teaching today! Please listen! We still have an old sinful nature about us, which he describes with words like “unspiritual” (v.14) “sin living in me” (17 and 20), “evil right there with me” (21) “a law of sin at work within my members” me” (23) “body of death” (v.24). The old sinful nature which stays with us is rooted in these old bodies of ours.

This is the sad truth every believer must recognise and accept: while we live in this present world a Velcro sinful nature is attached to us every moment of every day! You could say that the Christian has become *a divided self!* Before he was converted he had just a single nature, a sinful nature—but now he has a new nature from on High, which loves God and loves good—plus that old sinful nature!

Christian friends, do you and I recognise and humbly accept this truth?

There are two errors to avoid here.

The first is *“triumphalism.”* Triumphalists virtually deny they still have a sinful nature, they think they are really good people, they deceive themselves.

“Defeatists” at the other end of the spectrum admit they have a sinful nature but sink into despair thinking they’ll never make progress in holiness! *“I’m always going to be bound to my sin!”*

The truth we need to adopt is Paul’s *“Realism”* which fully acknowledges our sinful nature, for example verses 15 & 19. But recognises that by the mighty power of God we can grow in holiness, we can be sanctified!

Have we all understood the fundamental teaching of these verses, brothers and sisters? Christians born again by the Holy Spirit - have new hearts—praise God! But on account of their dying bodies they also possess an old sinful nature that follows us around every day of our earthly life! And because of this fact, our next three words: first Lament: because of our sinful nature every believer will find themselves sorrowful over their sin:

(2) Lament—over your sinful nature and your sin

“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (24)

This is a sign of a spiritual health, brothers and sisters. Throughout the Scriptures, when God’s people fall into sin, they are distressed, from King David’s lament in Psalm 51 to Peter’s bitter tears, Luke 22.

Before we were converted our sin did not trouble us, - except if we were caught out! But now sin troubles us!

A heart softened by the Holy Spirit often laments *“What a wretched man I am!”*

(3) Battle—wage war against sin

Note the language of battle in verse 22 and 23:

“For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind..”

Paul is going to talk more about how we can wage war against sin in chapter 8, by the power of the Holy Spirit, suffice it for this morning to note that our new nature is in mortal combat with our old nature:

“the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other....” (Galatians 5:17)

True believers not only lament their sin, they do battle with their sin!

Am I speaking to a believer, who is conscious of a besetting sin in your life, but over time you have come to overlook it, to ignore it, even to accept it? May the Spirit of God convict and quicken you this morning, so that you resolve to engage in mortal combat with that sin!

Battle is not the last word, Hope is!

(4) HOPE—the battle is not forever

By Hope I mean two things, One, that it is possible for sins to become history in a believer's life. There are many believers here this morning who could stand up and testify that a sin that once seemed to hold them in vice-like grip has now, praise God, glory to God, *disappeared* from their lives! Can I hear a loud holy Amen? “God breaks the power of cancelled sin, he sets the prisoner free.”

And by hope I also mean that one day, when we have new resurrected bodies, sin will be a thing of the past! Praise God! Paul is looking forward to that future victory when he writes in verse 24:

“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (verse 24)

One day "by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, Jesus will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." writes Paul in Philippians 3:21.

One of the many things I forward to in heaven, is to be rescued from this body of death; so did Isaac Watts:

*“Sin, my worst enemy before
Shall vex my eyes and ears no more
My inward foes shall all be slain
Nor Satan break my peace again.*

- **Recognise** that while you are in this world you will have a sinful nature, alongside your new nature
- **Lament**—sorrow over your sin
- **Battle** with your sin
- And live in **Hope** that one day the battle will be over!

May the Lord sanctify us by his truth today.

