

Grounded: Struggling but Delivered

Trinity CRC, March 7, 2021 AM

Romans & Lent Series

Romans 7:7-25

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Congregation,

One of my favourite or fondest memories of growing up and working on a farm is watching the cows go into the field after they've been in the barn all winter. Now, cows are generally pretty contented animals. They just eat and drink, poop and sleep, get milked and repeat. Chewing the cud sort of gives a good picture of a cow's temperament. While inside all winter, they don't give any indication of frustration. But in the spring, we open the gates to let them graze in the fields.

The first few minutes are always a delight to behold. If you've seen this, you know what I'm talking about. If not, look at these few moments of a video showing this time on a farm.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uA8dAnID51o>

0:00 to 0:45

Isn't that fun! It doesn't seem to matter how old or young, but when the cows pass through the barnyard gates into the pasture, they take a few steps, look around at the open space and go nuts! They start jumping up and down, kicking their legs out, running in circles and maybe even mooing at the top of their voice. They welcome their newfound freedom with great fanfare.

What always surprises me is that almost as fast as the cows start out, fairly quickly they all settle right down and start eating grass, as if they've been free in the pasture all of their lives.

Work with me here now for a bit. Imagine you're a cow. All of you! Yes, even if you're more of a bull yourself, your gender in this story doesn't matter. So I'm just going to call us all cows.

I think the picture of the tension between the cow's life in the barn and a life out in the pasture is an example of what Paul is teaching us about Christians in Romans 7. Life under the pull of sin is life where you're stuck in the barn like a cow all winter. You don't always realize the burden of it because it's all you know. But then along comes Jesus. He breaks open the barn yard gates and welcomes us into a new life of freedom in his green pastures. This is life in the Spirit as Paul calls it in v.6. That's where he wants us to live as Christians.

In Romans 7, Paul gets really honest about his struggles—even as a Christian—he gets honest about his struggle with ongoing sin. He can't really figure out why the struggle exist, but he just honestly admits that it does. What about you? I know I totally get what Paul is talking about. I'd like to think that after a lifetime of living with Jesus, living by the Spirit, the pull of sin would be gone. But it's not.

Sanctification—drawing nearer to Jesus

A quick little theology lesson here about sanctification because this is what Romans 7 is all about. Maybe you recall Pastor Michael talking about justification. Pastor Hilary mentioned it in her Martin Luther vlogs. And I know I touched on it both in Romans 4 and Romans 6. Justification is God's work through Jesus to pay for our sin—paying our debt in full. Because of Jesus' perfect saving work, we confess that we are saved by grace alone. We can't do anything to save ourselves and we don't have to. Jesus paid it all! That's justification.

But once we're justified, we find ourselves in the area of sanctification. Maybe think of it as the time when the cow gets her freedom from the barn and enters into the pasture. Our whole Christian life here on earth is the area of sanctification. When we die, we receive glorification. Justification is God's gift to us of salvation through Jesus Christ, full and free. One time. Saved. Glorification is also once and done. You die and you enter glory, eternity with Jesus. Both justification and glorification are gifts of God earned for us through Christ.

Sanctification is a little different. It is also a gift of God earned for us through Jesus. In addition, it involves the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in us. It involves our faithful responses to what we learn in the Word of God as the Holy Spirit opens our heart and mind more and more to ways of God in our life. It's obeying the nudges the Holy Spirit puts in our hearts and minds—little prompts to say something encouraging to a hurting person or to drop off a meal to someone in need. It's the time when you push down your anger with your kids and instead respond gently and wisely. It involves how we do our work on the job or at school. It's living our whole life here on earth for God's glory.

In Romans 7, Paul describes how sanctification forces us to wrestle with the reality of our spiritual death, the pull of our sinful nature, the truth of the law and the power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Paul clarifies our relationship to the law. He reminds us that we need the law to help us see our sin. The law of God is still good, but we cannot be saved by obeying it. It does however still help guide our lives in the realm of sanctification. Quite honestly, I wonder if Paul could have explained this all a little more simply. Reading Romans 7 is a little mind boggling, in some ways. But we can't miss the struggle Paul reveals between the ideal Christian life and reality of not measuring up.

I'm so glad that Romans 7 is in the Bible. But it has caused a lot of discussion among Christians over the centuries. Some say Paul is describing his pre-Christian life. What else could we make of some of his self-hating statements in the chapter, like "what a wretched man I am!" Should a Christian say something like that? Well, what do you think? I agree with those who dig deep into the text and conclude that Paul is walking us through the struggles of what we call sanctification.

Some might describe sanctification as the road we travel from justification until glorification. And that's true. But I want us to think about it as the pasture

Jesus invites us to live in. The place where we grow in faith and learn to walk more closely with our Saviour, until he calls us to heaven.

Sanctification: Humble Self-Reflection

In my estimation, Romans 7 teaches us that sanctification includes humble self-reflection. To go back to our cow-self, Paul is reflecting on all the times he has gone back into the barn. He's baffled by his own weakness to resist sin. He's troubled by the ongoing pull of sin that lives in him. He's wondering out loud why in the world he would leave the lush pastures and return to the barn.

Maybe it'll help if I paint a picture of a barn for you. I grew up on a dairy farm for the first 12 years of my life. It was relatively small. We milked about 30 cows. I carried milk pails from the cows to the dairy while my older brothers did the milking. My parents sold the farm around 1975 and then 25 years later, my sister and her husband bought that same farm.

Now, the man who farmed it after my dad was apparently not too ambitious. If I recall correctly, when my sister and husband bought the place, they discovered that the cows had been literally walking in the barn on a meter or more of hardpacked straw and manure. Their backs were actually scratching the ceiling joists at places.

As I describe that, I'm now picturing Tom, a former dairy farmer in our church, sitting right now at his farm and saying to Tina, "That's crazy! Who would treat their cows like that?" Am I right, Tom? Thankfully this kind of mistreatment of cows is an extremely rare. But for our purposes this morning, it's a helpful picture.

Imagine being a cow again. Paul is wrestling in himself with why he freely chooses to go back to that barn with the manure piled high when he could instead live in the pasture. The door to the pasture was torn open by Jesus for you and me. The pasture is abundant and delicious. We can eat day and night. But it also provides us cows with fresh air and comfortable bedding. But, crazy us, we choose to go back to the place where the air is foul. We end up cutting our backs on rough lumber in the barn. We even end up sleeping on someone else's poop!

This is Paul's dilemma in Romans 7. He's baffled with himself. And so Romans 7 is the part of sanctification that calls for the kind of humble self-reflection we get from Paul. I don't think I'm oversimplifying it when I say that Paul wants us to understand that as Christians we live in this constant battle between life in the barn and life in the pasture. It baffles Paul how much the barn has a pull on us even after we are redeemed by Jesus.

That's Paul's struggle. And that's our struggle. The bottom line in this chapter is that true and honest self-reflection drives us all the harder to Christ! When Paul cries, "What a wretched man I am; who will save me from this body of death?" he's driving himself to get closer to Jesus. It's like he's singing "Jesus Loves Me". He's saying to himself, "I am weak but Jesus is strong! I wish I was a

better Christian, but sin has such a natural pull on me. Every single day I wrestle with my own sin and it reminds me of Jesus. It reminds me that I need Jesus more than I fully appreciate. I'm too weak to obey the law and, besides, the law can't save me. In fact, it helps me to see that I will never measure up in my own strength and power. That's why I look to Jesus and why I seek the Holy Spirit's power to stay in the pasture!"

Paul, struggling with the pull of sin is his humble self-reflection which drives him to Jesus. It leads Paul at the end of chapter 7 in v.24 to ask:

Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Then he shouts out in v.25:

Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

And if we skip ahead to chapter 8:1, we hear the still greater sigh of relief:

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

That's a sermon for next week. But it's where Paul's humble self-reflection, his honest struggle within himself leads him: back to the power of Jesus who overcame our sin for us and in whose power—the power of the Holy Spirit—we can make progress in our sanctification. Thanks be to God for the saving power of Jesus and his daily grace to us.

Sanctification: A Call for Help

One point of application that I think this chapter highlights is our need for help on the sanctification journey. As cows, we need some help in staying out of the manure in the dirty old barn and living more in the comforts of the pasture. As Christians, we need to tap into the power of the Holy Spirit and the various means that he uses to help us grow in our walk with Jesus and to stay away from the pull of the sinful nature.

First of all, what Romans 7 makes clear is that we can trust the standards of the Bible. This is Paul's point when he reminds us that the law is good. God has given us standards to live by. If you go back to Romans 1 you can read about how people make up their own standards and end up far from God and his good plans for our lives. So sanctification requires believing that God and his standards are good for us. Then we seek to live by them.

And living by them almost always requires help. Some sort of encouragement and accountability.

I don't know how many of you are familiar with the Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias who passed away last year. I had so much admiration for that man. He was so articulate in how he explained the truth of the Bible. The motto of his radio program was "Helping the thinker believe and the believer think." He knew the Scriptures, he understood philosophy and our world. He could help skeptics see the reasonableness of the Christian faith. He was so winsome and convincing. And I think he was used by God to bring many people to Jesus.

But shortly after he died, several revelations came to light that have now been confirmed to be true. Ravi was living a double-life for many years. On the one hand, he could preach the gospel with great conviction and effectiveness. But he was secretly meeting with many different women over the years. They would engage in immoral behaviour and then he would pray with them and thank the Lord for their time together. It's pretty twisted. So very sad. My heart breaks just thinking about the pain he has inflicted on all those ladies as well as his own family. It seems that all the good he was able to do with his words is erased by his terrible actions. But we'll leave that to God.

The problem which is clear now is that Ravi never had any accountability. None whatsoever. Everyone in his family and his organization trusted him fully. And he couldn't handle it all. His sinful nature was not being held in check. In public he portrayed one image but behind closed doors he was a different man. He talked the life of cows in the pasture, but he lived in the manure pile of the dirty barn every chance he could get. So wrong and so sad.

But this is precisely the reason why I'm so thankful the Apostle Paul in Romans 7 gives us a look at his own struggle with sin. Paul never for a moment thinks that he is beyond being like Ravi was. Paul would probably say as others have, "There go I but for the grace of God!"

If the Apostle Paul knows that struggle, we all can be honest and admit that we need the God-given help he has provided for us. For me, my number one accountability partner is Patsy. You all know that I love cracking jokes about her. And she's great about it. But I would hardly dare to be in ministry if it wasn't for her solid support which includes accountability. She knows where I've been and who I've seen most days. I don't break confidentiality but I need her to know what I've been up to and to hold me accountable. If I would lie to her, she'd see through me like a sheet of glass.

The point is that we all need someone to walk with us in this life as a Christian. We can be humble enough to admit that we can't follow Christ all by ourselves. Romans 12 talks about the need for us to be part of the body, the church. We all need to remember that. We function best in community and part of community is accountability. We need it in our marriages. We need it in the church. We need it for our life as singles. We need it as kids, adults and seniors. The Holy Spirit's gift to each one of us is fellow believers who walk with us and help us stay in the pastures, rather than returning to the manure piles of life.

Whenever we fall into sin, we need our accountability people to call us out on it so that we can run to Jesus again. Accountability isn't about lording it over someone and saying, "I can't believe you did that!" It's about helping one another find our strength in Jesus. It's about seeking the power of the Holy Spirit to keep us on the narrow road or out of the dirty barn and in the lush pastures of Christ's grace.

Friends, Romans 7 is the good news of a reality check. Don't ever think to yourself, "I would never do what so and so did!" Instead, be honest about the ongoing pull of sin. Sanctification is a lifelong process. By God's grace, with the help of the Holy Spirit, including fellow believers, we find the life Jesus has won for us. We live more and more in the pasture, rather than slunking back into the dark and dirty barn of our old sinful nature.

Thanks be to God. Jesus saves us and will continue to walk with us—failures and all—until he gets us to heaven.

Amen