

5 July 2020

Introduction

The mystery of God's ways is sometimes hidden from the wise and intelligent. Jesus associates with those often excluded from the religious community. Like Paul, we struggle with our own selfish desires and seek God's mercy and forgiveness. We gather to be refreshed by Christ's invitation: "Come to me, all you that are weary." Gathered around word, water, and meal, we find rest for our souls.

Prayer of the Day

You are great, O God, and greatly to be praised. You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you. Grant that we may believe in you, call upon you, know you, and serve you, through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.

Amen.

Romans 7:15-25a

Life captive to sin is a catch-22 existence in which we know good but do not do it and do things we know to be wrong. Through Jesus Christ, God has set us free from such a futile existence.

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ^{25a}Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

Jesus chides people who find fault with both his ministry and that of John the Baptist. He thanks God that wisdom and intelligence are not needed to receive what God has to offer.

[Jesus spoke to the crowd saying:] ¹⁶"To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another,

¹⁷"We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.'

¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; ¹⁹the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

²⁵At that time Jesus said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²⁷All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

Sermon

Grace Unbound

Even after his conversion on the road to Damascus, and his life of missionary zeal in Asia Minor and Greece, Paul reveals that God's grace continues to surprise him

There are lots of plain, ordinary moments in our lives.

Important, in their own way,
but not spectacular.

Breathing.

Eating.

Working.

Sleeping.

But from time to time we've all experienced pivotal moments.

One branch or another a crossroad.

A wound that leaves a lasting mark.

A sudden insight.

They shape our identity,
our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

The apostle Paul writes of one of those moments
in his own life.

Up to this part of his letter
he has offered a description of what became Christian orthodoxy;
official policy.

And as he laid it out it all sounded very easy.

When we believe that Jesus died for us,
and rose for us,
we can dismiss unhealthy thoughts,
control destructive impulses,
and refrain from sinful behaviour.

If we know, for example, that God made us,
we will naturally take care of ourselves – body, mind, soul.

If we know that God created other people
it will be as easy as pie to be good and honest with them.

If we know that God created the whole universe,
and this planet,
we will gladly keep air, water, land and all living things
clean and healthy.

And If we know Jesus conquered sin,
and that we are new creations -
Easter people -
we won't want to have anything to do with sin.
It's an old, dead end.

So in the chapters leading up to this one
it sounds, at times,
like Paul is asking the Romans
and us
to try harder,
to be better,
and to steer clear of sin.

But here, in chapter seven,
Paul confesses that it is both harder
and easier than that.

He had often tried harder.

It's the personality trait that led him to study and become a Pharisee,
to go off to Damascus to arrest heretics,

and to then to serve Jesus with such zeal as a missionary.
Paul was good at being good.

But it wasn't working.

Even if no one else noticed
Paul confesses, here,
that when he tries to do his very best,
in an effort to please God,
the temptation to do otherwise was always nipping at his heels.

And sometimes he gave in.

He blames it all on sin.

Overcome by Christ on the cross.
But still on the prowl here on earth.

So Paul finally admits that all the trying in the world can't prevent it.

He still does selfish, stupid, and hurtful things.

To himself, other people, creation,
and to God.

It's beyond his control.

Which means that asking others or himself to try harder and do better
is not where it's at.

Verses 24 and 25 are the key.

In his misery, what feels like complete failure,
Paul cries out, "Then who can help me?"

And in a pause that might have lasted a split second,
or weeks,
or months,
or even years of searching,
he recognises how simple God has made it.

And how good God has been.

Jesus has done what Paul cannot.

Even as sin pursues and overtakes him,
Jesus is the stronger.

No matter how often he stumbles
Jesus frees him from the pain of sin,
and its eternal consequences.

Even if he must, for now,
endure natural consequences
or human justice.

To the end God keeps saying I love you.
I forgive you.
You're my beloved child.

Serve others as you have been equipped, enabled.

And do not give in to the most treacherous of sins – pride.

Get it out of your head and heart and spirit
that your goodness will save you.

God's grace and mercy saves you.

So that you might engage with others in gracious and merciful ways.

All others.

Which is why, in another way,
it's so hard.

We want to be masters of our own destinies.
We want to save ourselves,
and have something to brag about,
and hold over the heads of others.

We want to compete, and win.
leaving a host of losers in our wake.

Our impulse is to judge.

And God asks us to knock it off.

To treat others and the world around us
the way that God loves and shows patience with us.

Amen.

Prayers of Intercession

Called into unity with one another and the whole creation, let us pray for our shared world.

A brief silence.

We pray for the church. Sustain us as we share your word. Embrace us as we struggle to find our common ground. Lift up leaders with powerful and prophetic voices. Free us from stagnant faith. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We pray for the well-being of creation. Protect the air, water, and land from abuse and pollution. Free us from apathy in our care of creation and direct us toward sustainable living. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We pray for the nations (*especially the United States and Canada, celebrating their nationhood*). Guide leaders in developing just policies and guide difficult conversations. Free us from patriotism that hinders relationship-building. Lead us to expansive love for our neighbor. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We pray for all in need. For all who are tired, feeling despair, sick, or oppressed (*especially*). Take their yoke upon you and ease their burdens. Give your consolation and free us from all that keeps us bound. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

We pray for this congregation. Bless pastors, deacons, and congregational leaders. Energize children's ministry volunteers, church administrators, and those who maintain our building. Shine in this place that we might notice the ways your love transforms our lives. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

We give thanks for those who have died in faith (*especially*). Welcome them into your eternal rest and comfort us in our grief until we are joined with them in new life. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Receive these prayers, O God, and those too deep for words; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Offering Prayer

God of goodness and growth,
all creation is yours,
and your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.
Water and word, wine and bread:
these are signs of your abundant grace.
Nourish us through these gifts,
that we might proclaim your steadfast love
in our communities and in the world,
through Jesus Christ, our strength and our song.

Amen.

Invitation to Communion

Friends of Jesus, come to the table.
Receive nourishment for your journey.

Prayer after Communion

God of the welcome table,
in this meal we have feasted on your goodness
and have been united by your presence among us.
Empower us to go forth sustained by these gifts
so that we may share your neighborly love with all,
through Jesus Christ, the giver of abundant life.

Amen.

Blessing

Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers,
nor things present, nor things to come,
nor powers, nor height, nor depth,
nor anything else in all creation,
will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.
God, the creator, ✝ Jesus, the Christ,
and the Holy Spirit, the comforter,
bless you and keep you in eternal love.

Amen.

Dismissal

Go in peace. Christ is with you.

Thanks be to God.