

Hope for a “Lost” Cause

Romans 7:15-25

July 9, 2017

INTRODUCTION – THE GOSPEL

I grew up in a Christian home but we never went to church often. My parents loved reading and studying the Bible but they never had much use for the Church.

We **never** went to church around Christmas or Easter because they didn’t want to be associated with **those** Christians – the C&E ones who showed up only twice a year.

All that changed one evening after we had moved from Montreal to Brampton. The minister was visiting. As my mother told him why we didn’t go to church as much as we should, he came back with, “*where else should hypocrites go?*”

We got the message. Was he calling us hypocrites? Perhaps, in a nice way. But he was reminding us that we have **all** failed to live up to God’s laws. Christianity teaches that we are **all** sinners – sheep who have gone astray – and that Jesus came specifically to seek us –the lost. Where else should the lost be found except in Church?

We started going to church every week. I wish I could say we never missed again but, of course, we did. We have our reasons:

sleep – work – sickness – vacation

The simple fact was that, while we might want to go to church, sometimes we just didn’t ... which brings us to our New Testament lesson, the reading from Paul.

MESSED UP PEOPLE

I used to hate Paul’s letters. Reading them in the King James’ version, I found them convoluted and confusing. Who knew what Paul was trying to teach?

Then one day, I picked up a different translation. Paul’s **long** sentences had been broken up into **shorter** sentences by adding a few periods here and there. **Suddenly, I saw that Paul wasn’t always trying to teach anyone anything – sometimes, he was simply thinking out loud. He wasn’t always teaching Christian fundamentals; he was building a case and laying out his arguments!**

For example, in today’s passage, Paul is sorting through some problems connected with what it means to be a Christian and how to live a Christian life.

I do the things I don’t want to do and don’t do the things I do want to do.

Love it. That’s something I understand – and probably you do as well. Paul has just captured the problem with living our faith as Christians that so many of us have.

How many of us have made New Year’s resolutions on January 1st, only to forget them or break them by the end of the week? We make promises:

- to lose weight – I’ve gained this year –
- to eat healthier meals – still working on that
- to exercise more regularly – does once a week count?

How many of us actually do?

How many of us try be patient and understanding, loving and considerate in our dealings with others? We do the best we can, but find ourselves losing our tempers or ignoring others when we’re busy, overstressed, tired, or just plain fed up. **So much for good intentions.**

The same thing happens with our faith. We believe in God – in Jesus. We want to do the right thing. We know we should be coming to church every week. We know we should be praying and reading the Bible every day. We know we should be coming to Bible studies and taking advantage of opportunities to deepen our faith ...

We **want** to be good Christians. But, we sleep in, run late, have too much to do – and **forget to spend time with God**.

It's not that we're bad people. We're not. We don't try to be hypocritical where our faith is concerned, but we are. We're **imperfect human beings**.

Paul being Paul, he had to try to figure out what was going and why he couldn't will himself to do the right thing all the time.

We see in today's lesson Paul talking about sin at work in his life, and about the struggles between his flesh and his spirit.

Certainly, those are possible explanations. If we go back to Adam and Eve and the apple in the garden, we see how human beings have often made bad choices and the consequences of those choices.

- Christians often talk about **original sin** – we were created to be perfect human beings but, as a result of bad choices, we fell from grace. We're now imperfect human beings and suffer accordingly.
- Judaism doesn't have the concept of original sin. They see God creating imperfect human beings from the beginning – and giving us the task of finishing the work of creation – of perfecting ourselves.

It doesn't matter. Either way we look at it, we realize that we're not perfect. We make mistakes. We will continue to make mistakes, and have to deal with them. It's called **being human**.

- Some people talk about Satan or demons outside of us tempting us – and tell us we have to hold onto our faith even harder.
- Some talk about the need to deny our flesh – that's why you should be celibate or beat yourself or punish yourself in some way – enjoy life too much and you're giving into the flesh, and denying your spiritual self.
- That's why older Presbyterian churches have pews that are only half as wide as they should be – to make sure we don't get too comfortable in church and fall asleep.
- That's why the Protestant Work Ethic developed – we have to work for God – have too much fun and we're giving in to our fleshly desires.
- **In the end, however**, all we have are theories. We'll never know the answer for sure – at least not in our lifetimes. All we know is what we started out with – *we do the things we don't want to do and don't do the things we know we should*. **It is part of being human – the human condition.**
- **HEART OF THE GOSPEL**
- Paul's passage ultimately brings us to the heart of the Gospel.
- Years ago, I was teaching World Religions at Sheridan College, and had a Muslim student who thought Christianity was a cop-out religion. She said, "Christianity means you can do whatever you want – get drunk, kill, steal – go to church and get forgiven. That's not a religion worth following."
- **She's right**. A religion that lets you do whatever you want and says that it doesn't matter – you'll go to heaven regardless – isn't a very inspirational religion.

- **But she was also wrong.** There's a big difference between **permitting** us to do whatever we want and **recognizing** that we'll fail to be as good as we should be.
- Christianity has rules. We are called to be God's people, God's body and God's ambassadors on earth. We are called to do what Jesus did – to love others and treat others as Jesus did. We are not permitted to just do whatever we want or choose to do, regardless of right and wrong.
- Rather, Christianity teaches that we are imperfect and will fail – we will fail others; we will fail ourselves; we will fail God – but **nothing** we can do will ever shock God or drive him away from us.

This is the message that differentiates Christianity from other religions and this is part of what we offer.

- **In other religions**, people spend a lifetime – and many lifetimes if they believe in reincarnation – trying to improve themselves and become more Godlike.
- There are any number of practices: prayer, discipline, austerity, rituals, meditation, activities, - etc.

In Christianity, however, we say none of that matters. We cannot earn God's approval or God's love. We don't have to try to be good 24*7 * however many days there are in a year – and if we did, we would fail.

Christianity says – God is love. God already loves us unconditionally. Those initiatives and practices in other religions have it backwards. God loves us as we are. It's because God loves us that we are able to love others.

How do we know?

How can we be convinced that God loves us – no matter what?

The answer is the Gospel. God loved us so much that he came to us as Jesus. He saw us at our best and our worst. He loved us so much that he allowed us to kill him on the cross. The heart of the Gospel: **Jesus died for us on the cross while we were sinners** – not *once we became perfect*.

ACCEPTANCE & TRANSFORMATION

But the message doesn't end there.

Jesus didn't stay dead but was resurrected – God raised him from the dead and transformed him so that he still lives today even if we don't see him...

Just as Jesus didn't stay dead but was transformed and resurrected, so are we.

That's what the Muslim student misunderstood about Christianity. No, we don't have to be good to get into heaven or earn God's love. God's love is a given.

But, once we open ourselves up to God and invite God into our lives, we know that we will be changed. God works in us to make us into the people he wants us to be.

Our life as Christians begins with accepting Jesus, but that is only the beginning. It is a journey of faith and growth. It involves many of the practices that we find in other religions – prayer, meditation, study, rituals ... coming to church – but not because we want to *earn* God's love but because those are ways God is already working within us.

It is a journey of transformation. The more time we spend with God – the more room we make for God in our lives – the easier it is for God to work in us ... and through us ... to change and transform us. And when we forget – he'll still be working in us and through us to change and transform us ... but at a slower pace.

As Christians, we've already accepted God's invitation. We can be sure that God will keep his promises to us – to be involved in our lives – because he isn't a flawed human being. He's God.

CONCLUSION

No, we are not perfect, but we don't have to be.

We may not be the people we want to be. We will make mistakes. We will hate ourselves at times and wish we could things back or undo whatever it was we did wrong. **We may think of ourselves as lost causes.**

But we don't have to worry. We're not. There's hope for us.

God loves us as we are. And with God's grace working in our imperfect human lives, amazing things can happen. In us. And through us, in our world. With God's help.

AMEN.