



Sermon Transcript

April 25, 2021

50 Days of Spiritual Growth

Staying Out of the Ditch

Romans 7:13-25

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on April 25, 2021 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com

Sermon Text
Romans 7:13-25

13 Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. 14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. 15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. 17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Introduction

There is a familiar cry that comes out of Romans 7. In verse 15, Paul cries out, *“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”* I think we can relate to this common struggle we all have with our own sin. I saw a video this week that I think illustrates quite well what Paul is saying here. Here it is: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bLZW-kWr1F4>. That pretty much describes it, doesn't it? I love that it is a sheep, given that is the animal Scripture uses to illustrate what we tend to be like. And how many times have you found yourself shaking your head and sighing to yourself - “Why do I keep jumping back into this ditch?”

This morning we are in the middle of an eight-week series called **50 Days of Spiritual Growth**. And we are in the section of Romans (Romans 6-8) where we are talking about the doctrine of “sanctification.” When we use big and lofty words like “sanctification” it is tempting and easy to reduce this conversation down to theoretical and abstract concepts about spiritual growth. And to be honest with you, that is where Paul has spent much of his time up to this point in this section of Romans. Up to this point he has talked about good and lofty ideas regarding spiritual growth. He has talked about how through faith we are united to Jesus in his death and resurrection. He has talked about being dead to sin and alive to Christ. He has talked about the difference between living under the law and living under grace. So we heard him say last week that now that we are no longer under the law we actually *belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead*. And so practically speaking we ended last week with Romans 7:6 where we were reminded *that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code*. And all of this is good and helpful, but it is heady stuff. It can be hard to get your mind around these ideas, much less understand how they apply to our daily lives. That is why I find our passage this morning to be a welcomed change of pace. Our passage this morning gets down to where we all can relate. It gets down to what Paul describes in verse 23 as that *waging war* going on inside of us. We know the reality of this war and this daily battle we face with temptation and our own sin. This describes where we live every day.

I'm sure if you were willing to be transparent and vulnerable this morning, you could readily identify the “ditch” you are prone to jump into over and over again. Maybe the ditch you find yourself frequenting is a critical spirit and a sharp tongue. Perhaps for others it is a short fuse. It can be any number of things: worry, an unforgiving spirit that nurses a grudge, a lack of charity and a neglect towards those in need, a judgmental spirit and a lack of grace towards those who are different than you. It

could be something like pornography or any other kind of sin that becomes an addiction and you find yourself uncertain even how to get out of this ditch. This small sample size points out to us that we actually have more than one ditch we often find ourselves jumping in and out of on a regular basis. We can relate to the cry that often comes from these ditches, *“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”* Why did I jump back in here?

To put it simply, Paul is telling us in Romans 6-8, how to stay out of the ditch. The goal of my sanctification is to find myself jumping less often into the ditch. Now I feel like I need to say this up front this morning. When Paul cries out, *“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate”* . . . he is not saying that we are destined for the ditch. If there is anything Romans 6 teaches us is that we should not have a defeatist mentality that causes us to shrug our shoulders in defeat as if we all sin and there is no path for victory. Instead, Paul is encouraging us to not make peace with our sin, but to make war against it. And while Romans 7 indicates that this battle will be a life-long battle, we can find ourselves jumping less and less into the ditch. There is victory over sin to be had.

Before we look at the details of our passage, I would like to pull the lens back and give a simple overview of Romans 7-8. We ended last Sunday in Romans 7:6 where Paul says there are two ways to live. You can live according to the law or you can live according to the Spirit. He said *we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.* This verse serves as a heading for the rest of Romans 7-8. For the rest of Romans 7, Paul talks about *the written code*, the Old Testament law. Look at verse 7, *“What then shall we say? That the law is sin?”* Look at verse 14, *“For we know that the law is spiritual.”* Look at verse 22, *“For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being.”* In Romans 7, Paul is taking us to “law school.” He is teaching us what the law can do and what it can’t do. Do you know what the law can’t do? It can’t keep you out of the ditch. Well then, how do we stay out of the ditch? In Romans 8, Paul points us to the Holy Spirit. He said in Romans 8:13 that it is *by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body.* *By the Spirit* you stay out of the ditch.

So this morning, we are going to go to “law school.” The message coming out of “law school” and the message coming out of Romans 7 is that if you want to stay out of the ditch—if you want to experience victory over sin—you cannot rely on your own strength. Staying out of the ditch is not a matter of willpower or resolve or behavior modification or keeping rules or trying harder. Just like the law does not have the power to save you from your sin, it does not have the power to defeat sin in your life.

There are three questions I want to ask as we walk through this passage.

- Who is in the ditch?
- Why do I often find myself in the ditch?
- How do I avoid the ditch?

Who is in the ditch?

I am not sure if you are aware of this or not, but this is one of the most debated passages in the Bible. And there are good people on both sides of this debate. And furthermore, when you read the arguments for each side of the debate, it is very easy to be swayed from one side to the other.

The debate centers on verse 14 and the identity of the person speaking. Paul writes, *“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.”* Who is the “I” Paul is referring to? Well that seems obvious. It is Paul! It is Paul who is confessing, *“I am of the flesh, sold under sin.”* But the question is, which Paul is he referring to? Is he referring to Paul the Pharisee or is he referring to Paul the Apostle? Is Paul talking about himself prior to his conversion to faith in Jesus or is he describing the Christian life and his life after he came to faith in Jesus? I discovered a book that was written on this very topic and I loved the title of the book. The title was *The “I” In the Storm.*¹ Who is the “I” Paul is referring to?

Without going into every argument on either side, let me just highlight the key argument for each side. For those who think Paul is talking about his life before he came to Christ, they are quick to point out that what he says about himself in Romans 7 seems to be very different than what he says about himself in Romans 6. In Romans 7:14 he describes himself as being *of the flesh, sold under sin*. That is not how he refers to himself in Romans 6 when he talks about being raised to a new life in Christ. In Romans 6:6-7 he indicates that his old self was crucified with Christ and he is no longer a slave to sin. Instead, he has been set free from sin. But here in Romans 7, he gives an opposing picture of himself as one *sold under sin*. So when Paul says in Romans 7 that he is *of the flesh, sold under sin*, he must be talking here about his life before he came to Christ. Romans 7:5-6 captures this thought by first looking back and saying *we were living in the flesh* in the past . . . *But now we serve in the new way of the Spirit*. So in Romans 7, Paul is describing what we once were before Jesus came into our lives and then Romans 8 points us to the difference the Holy Spirit makes in our lives. Those who hold to this position do not deny the war that wages on in the life of the believer. They just don't think that is the point of this passage.

But then, Paul says some things in this passage that makes you think that he is talking about the Christian experience. He says things here that you would say could only be said about the believer. He says of himself in verse 16 that he *agrees that the law is good* and in verse 22 he states that in his inner being he *delights in God's law*. This sounds like the characteristic of the righteous as we see in Psalm 1 where David says that *he delights in the law of the LORD* and therefore he meditates on it day and night. Furthermore, starting in verse 14, Paul changes to the present tense all the way through to verse 24, indicating that this is his current reality as a follower of Jesus. I find these arguments compelling as well and they are obviously true to our experience.

So which is it? Is this Pharisee Paul talking or is this Apostle Paul talking? I like the way Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones handled it. He said, it is neither because it is not the point. It reminds me of when I was a candidate here for pastor 18 years ago and I was standing before the congregation fielding questions. The only question I can remember being asked out of all the questions asked that day, was perhaps the question of most interest and concern. "Are you a Yankee fan or a Red Sox fan?" How do I answer this in a way that satisfies everyone? I said I disliked them equally—keeping me in good graces with both sides. But that is not what Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones was striving to do. He wasn't trying to pacify both sides. Rather, he was intent on shifting the focus to the main point Paul was making. Paul wants us to see the inadequacy of the law to keep you out of the ditch. His argument was that no matter who you are, unregenerate or regenerate, if you seek to be sanctified through the law, it will slay you. You can't rely on your own strength to stay out of the ditch.

That being said, I believe that the "I" Paul is referring to is the Apostle Paul. I believe Paul is describing here the common Christian experience. When we come to faith in Jesus, he does give us a new heart and new desires, but we still have to fight our sinful habits that have been formed in our minds and we fight the sinful reality of the world around us. It is a constant battle. So yes, on one hand we are no longer dominated by sin (Romans 6). But on the other hand, we are yet to be fully dominated by righteousness (Romans 8). Instead, we are dominated by the conflict, the war that wages within us (Romans 7). Consequently, we often find ourselves often in the ditch. Who is in the ditch? You and I are in the ditch.

Why do I often find myself in the ditch?

There are two things that Paul says in this passage that tell us why we often find ourselves in the ditch. First of all, even though Christ sets us free from our slavery to sin,

sin still dwells within us. He says in Romans 7:17-18, “*So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.*” I still find myself in a battle with sin that dwells within me. Why is that? First of all, it is because we are of the flesh. We are human.

Here is where it gets a little confusing in light of what Paul has said in Romans 6 about the freedom we have in Christ. And yet, there is something important to try to understand here. Will Timmins says that literally what Paul is saying here is that “*I am fleshly, having been sold under sin.*”² That is another way of saying that I am of Adam. I still have this fleshly “*body of death*” (7:24). When Paul says in Romans 6 that we are no longer slaves to sin, he is reminding us of our identity. He is reminding us of who we belong to—he is reminding me of “Whose I am.” So yes, we belong to Christ. But here, in Romans 7, Paul is referring to our capacity and he is reminding me of “What I am.” I am still of the flesh. I am still fleshly. Timmins said, “This is the painful reality—our bodily condition hasn’t yet caught up with who we now are in Christ. We’re no longer “in the flesh,” where we reported to slavemaster sin. However, now that we report to King Jesus we do so as those who are still “fleshly” people. We have new identities, but not new innate capacities. We remain irreparably (but not irredeemably) impaired people.”³

This is why Paul is able to say that on one hand he believes that God and his laws are holy and good and in his heart he wants to do what God calls him to do. Like he says at the end of our passage, “*I myself serve the law of God with my mind.*” We can relate to this. You are here this morning because in your heart of hearts and in your mind you agree with the law of God and you do want to live it out. When we come on a Sunday morning and sing songs of worship we are joining together and giving voice to our common belief and faith. We give our hearty “Amen!” to the things God says. That is what “Amen” means. We are in agreement with what God says. So then if that is the case, why do I keep finding myself jumping back into the ditch? It is because I am still fleshly. I am still connected to Adam. I constantly have to be reminded that I do not have the power in my own flesh to keep the law of God. That is what he says in verse 18, “*For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.*”

Do you know what the irony in all of this is? Every “advance” we make in the Christian life seems to feel like another step backwards. I don’t mean that in a bad way. I do not mean that in a way to discourage you. Tim Keller put it this way. “The more holy we become, the less holy we will feel . . . The holier we are, the more we cry about our unholiness.”⁴ There is actually a comfort in this because it is reality. It acknowledges

what we confessed in the first sermon of this series—Easter Sunday.

I am not what I ought to be
I am not what I want to be.
I am not what I hope to be.
But still, I am not what I used to be.
And by the grace of God, I am what I am.

In this comforting quote is the reminder that as I grow in Christ there becomes more awareness of the selfish roots of my sin. I see corners of my heart now that I never saw before. I see more and more signs that I am “fleshly.” In one sense, you could say we a “ditch dwellers.” We live in the ditch. Though I have the desire to do what is good, I can not carry it out. I do not have the power, on my own, to live in obedience to God.

So the second reason why we often find ourselves in the ditch is because Paul reminds us that there is a battle we face all the time. Paul says in verses 22-23, *“For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.”* So one hand, we should not be casual about our sin. It is a battle. We need to treat our sin like it is a cancer. What do we do when we find out that our body is fighting cancer. We go into high alert. We inject chemicals into our bodies that may cause us to lose our hair or cause us to feel nauseous because we want to kill the cancer before it does more harm to our bodies. We must treat sin in the same radical manner, because it is more deadly to us than cancer. So it is good to be on high alert when dealing with our sin.

But at the same time, the presence of the struggle we have with sin should not discourage us. I think it is easy to feel as though we are “terrible people” or “bad Christians” or “immature Christians” because of the wrestling we do with sin. I mean, here we are, right back in the ditch. It can be so frustrating to wrestle over and over again with the same thing. We all have these besetting sins that our personalities are predisposed to constantly wrestle with in our relationships. We know these things to be true about us and it seems like it is the same shortcoming—the same sin—that gets repeated often in our lives. But Romans 7 encourages us that even this battle—and even our relapse in sin—even our propensity to jump back into the ditch is consistent with being a growing Christian. You will never get so advanced in your Christian life that you no longer struggle with sin. I remember a saintly 90 year old widower in my previous church—who when he prayed you could tell that he was a man of deep

intimate faith—humbly confess to me his dismay over the fact that he still wrestled with lustful thoughts. I found his confession to be a wonderful gift to me and a reminder that this battle is one of the ways God grows us. It is one of the ways he reminds us of the “fleshly” nature of our sin and the inability we have in our own strength to overcome it. This is why we often find ourselves in the ditch. God does some good work in our lives when he meets us in the ditch.

How do I avoid the ditch?

In light of all of this, I do want to find myself jumping less and less into the ditch. When I asked Pastor Mike to grab this video for me, his comment after seeing the video was: “that looks painful!” That is true about life in the ditch. It is painful. Our sin brings painful consequences into our lives. In fact, this is my new definition for sanctification. “Sanctification is jumping less and less into the ditch and becoming more and more like Jesus!” But how? Clearly, the point of Romans 7 is that you cannot do it on your own strength. You are “fleshly!” But I think that is often how we respond to our sin.

There is an old Bob Newhart skit where he plays the role of a counselor and a woman comes to see him because she has a terrible phobia that is consuming her. She shares with him her fear of being buried alive in a box. Bob Newhart said that he could “fix” her problem rather quickly. He looked at her and said, “Stop it!” I mean, who wants to go around being afraid of being buried alive in a box? “Stop it!” Problem solved!! I think that is how we try to deal with our sin in our own strength. Stop worrying! Stop being grumpy! Stop being impatient! Stop watching pornography! Stop nursing your grudge! Stop judging others! Stop wasting time! Stop thinking of yourself as being more important than others! Stop craving recognition! Stop it! Listen, I know I need to “stop it!” You don’t have to tell me that. But how?

Romans 8 is the answer to the problem in Romans 7. In Romans 7 Paul uses the word “I” over and over again. In Romans 8 it is the “Holy Spirit” that is repeated over and over again. So next week we will begin to see how through the Holy Spirit we are able to put to death the deeds of the flesh. But at the end of our passage this morning, we discover that the answer to avoiding the ditch is not “Stop it!” Rather, the first step to overcoming our sin is the gospel. It is the gospel that helps us avoid the ditch.

The ditch has a way of bringing us to the end of ourselves. And that is where you find Paul at the end of Romans 7. Look at his confession in verse 24. *“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”* The way we begin to crawl out of the

ditch with humble confession. It causes me to look outside of myself and flee to Jesus. This is important when we think of the topic of spiritual growth and sanctification. There is this faulty notion that plagues a lot of Christians. The notion is that I am saved—justified—by grace through faith. It is the gospel that confesses my sin and my misery and my total need for Jesus. But then when it comes to spiritual growth, we reduce the Christian life down to a bunch of rules to follow. And we forget that we need the gospel for our sanctification just as much as we need it for our justification. In fact, one of the themes you will see in Romans 8 is that our growth is the work of God in our lives. The good thing about the ditch is that it brings us to the end of ourselves and causes us to cry out for the gospel. It is the power of God to save us and it is the power of God to change us.

Then Paul says, *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* As Martin Luther said, “All our good is outside of us, and that good is Christ.” And so as I look to Christ, I am able to address my sin at its root. When I am consumed by worry, I can remind myself that God is working all things out for my good. When I am being impatient, I can remind myself of how patient Jesus is with me. When I am prone to judge others, I can remind myself that in Jesus God has withheld his judgment on me. When I am tempted with lustful thoughts, I can remind myself that every person has been created by God with inherent dignity. When I am tempted to think of myself as being more important than others, I can remind myself of how Jesus humbled himself for me. Do you see it! The power to stay out of the ditch is to cast your gaze upon Jesus and to rehearse the gospel.

This is the point behind *The Common Rule*. These are not rules to follow. The word “rule” means “regular.” What are the regular habits that keep the gospel in front of me so that I can jump less and less in the ditch. You now have four daily habits to help you keep the essence of the gospel in front of you.

- Kneeling Prayer 3x A Day—Frame your day in God’s love
- Share a meal with others—Relationship is the center of gravity
- Turn your phone off for 1 hour—Be present to God and others
- Scripture before Phone—Let God’s word form your identity and purpose

Conclusion

We are all in a battle. We all wrestle and struggle and we all find ourselves jumping from one ditch to the other. But that is part of it. God is at work in it and he calling us

to turn our gaze to Jesus. We don't have the power in ourselves to stay out of the ditch. But there is victory and growth to be had. The first step is to daily preach the gospel to yourself. *"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*

¹Michael Middendorf *The "I" In The Storm* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 1997)

²William Timmins "What's Really Going On in Romans 7" www.thegospelcoalition.org
July 2, 2018

³Ibid

⁴Tim Keller *Romans 1-7 For You* (The Good Book Company: 2014) 170

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COMMUNITY
GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Daily Habit #4 is “Scripture before Phone.” Discuss together the practice of daily spending time in Scripture. What are the lessons you have learned about this down through the years? What have been the joys and the struggles you have experienced with this discipline? What encouragement can you offer each other?

Diving Into The Word

Read Romans 7:13-25

2. How does the reality of Paul’s Christian life encourage you in your own life?
3. Discuss the difference between battling sin in your own strength and battling sin through the gospel.
4. Why is it liberating to be honest about your wretchedness, and certain about your forgiveness? What happens if we forget one or the other truth?
5. How does this passage change your love for Christ? Your desire to serve him? Your view of yourself?

Taking It Home

6. What is one thing you are taking from your discussion on Romans 7?
7. Share one “spiritual” prayer request that the group can pray for you this week.