

SERMON JULY 5 AND 8, 2020

Pent 5a Romans 7:14-26 “Transcending Good Intentions”

As I look back on it now, I realize that my heartfelt desire, my lifelong pipedream, to be skilled enough at the game of golf to be seen by millions of people on telecasts of Senior Golf tournaments, ain't happening.

I started caddying at the Dubuque Country Club when I was 11. I got the bug to play and so I watched and learned and began to try to replicate the high arcing shots you'd see professional players hit on T.V.

Over the past 50 years I've spent an incredible amount of time and money and always, kept hope alive that one day I'd make a good living as a 60 something year old golf pro.

I've bought instructional videos. I purchased nicer equipment. I've listened patiently as golfers of various ages and skill level passed on pearls of wisdom.

So now that I'm almost 61 and my skill level has never surpassed that of a hacker, I'm forced to admit that my sincere, lifelong desire to be a pro golfer won't pan out.

St. Paul had spent most of his adult life chasing a similarly delusional pipedream: trying to walk righteously before God by obeying His commands.

He scrupulously followed even the minutest details of the Law that he'd been taught by teachers of the Law.

In one of his letters, Paul says that in regard to obedience to the law, he was blameless. No doubt if you asked him, Paul would tell you that his utmost desire and his every waking ambition was to walk righteously before God by obeying God's commandments perfectly.

Paul would've been exhorted others to follow the Law. No doubt, he'd passed on many pearls of wisdom on the finer parts of that Law.

What Paul didn't understand at the time was that the Law hadn't been given to lead us to righteousness, but to show us the hopelessness of becoming righteous before God by what we do. Paul didn't understand grace.

In the same way, you too are familiar with failed intentions, aren't you? If you honestly examine your life, you'll find that for the most part, you've failed to follow through on some of your most sincere commitments, and in the process, betrayed yourself and your God.

Raise your hand if you've ever given God a solemn promise that if He did A, you'd do B. (***Wait...I thought so.***)

You promised that you'd be more faithful, less judgmental or to stop drinking or smoking. You've vowed to spend more time with your family.

You've committed yourself to spend more time in the study of God's Word. You've pledged to set aside more alone time with God, time for prayer and meditation.

And yet, all too often we end up regretting the fact that we've broken our commitments, violated our vows and failed to make good on our promises.

We've learned that no matter how sincere our feelings are at the time and no matter how much conviction we bring to bare on our problems, our promises are often not worth the air we used when opened our mouths and spoke them.

When you **really** and truly understand the truth that for all your efforts, you're nothing but a no account rascal then and only then can you truly relate to the words of our text.

Only one who, **despite their earnest intentions and expressed desires has had their hypocrisy, shortcomings and utter sinfulness exposed** by the Law, can relate to Paul when he says, **"Oh what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from his body of sin?" PAUSE**

As anyone I've played with recently will attest, the sad truth is I'll never make it on the senior tour.

The equally sad truth is that we'll never be able to become righteous before God by what we do or don't do.

Yet as we read our bibles and hear God speaking to us in worship, we also learn the happy truths of what God's love has done for us in Christ.

We hear how Jesus has made us his new people and given us new power, the power of the Holy Spirit, given to us through the waters of Baptism.

The Holy Spirit shows us the truth and grants us the faith necessary to be saved. And He gives us the power to translate good intentions into good works like these,

"As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, have compassionate hearts, put on kindness, humility, meekness and patience, forgiving each other as the Lord has forgiven you...And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father through him,"

Paul is saying that faith in Christ should inform all our attitudes and should control our values and actions.

Faith in Christ gives us a whole new perspective on the world; instead of focusing on how we can get ahead, how we can bring fame and fortune to ourselves, the Spirit is constantly pointing how we can serve others by working together with our fellow saints in the church. **PAUSE**

We all KNOW that there is a gap between what we intend to do and according to the Law ought to do, and what we actually DO as Disciples of Christ.

Everyone present this morning ***should*** be able to relate to Paul's words in today's epistle, **"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to care it out.**

I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see my body another law waging war against the law of my mind...Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Like Paul, when we hear God's word encouraging us let our light shine by making a positive difference in the lives of the people around us, we happily say, "Amen".

We ***want*** to be more considerate and cooperative, more open and less critical.

We ***want*** to be tolerant of others opinions and more patient of those who disagree with us.

We ***try our hardest*** to get along with the person who irritates us.

We want to worship more regularly, be more helpful and contribute more to the congregation.

After hearing a sermon that particularly targeted some of our chief failings, we make solemn promises that from now on things are going to be different.

But somehow it's so much easier to fall back into old patterns of behavior than it is to change. **PAUSE**

If you find yourself nodding to what I've been saying, if you've broken resolution after resolution, then the same St. Paul, who diagnosed our common sickness of sin, provides us with the cure, faith in Jesus and his righteousness.

The same Paul who the Spirit used to write all those exhortations to godly behavior, points you to Christ.

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ my Lord. That's classic law and gospel.

First Paul is slain by his weakness, his inadequacy, his inability to do what he truly wants with all of his heart to do.

Rightfully concluding that he is nothing but a lost wretch; Paul searches for a Savior from sin and the Spirit points him and us to the perfect one.

He holds out Jesus' adequacy, Jesus' righteousness, Jesus' strength and His perfect sacrifice in our place.

According to Paul, the fate of our immortal souls depends on something only Jesus could do; obey the will of His Father perfectly.

And the good news is that he did just that. And so, the answer to our spiritual dilemma is Jesus Only.

Only Jesus was able to fulfill the Law's demands.

Only Jesus did what he intended to do 100% of the time. Only Jesus never gave into the temptations of the world, or failed to see through the devil's lies and distortions.

Only Jesus had no split between his mind and his heart. Only Jesus was never hypocritical.

The good news is that by the faith first granted to us in Baptism, Jesus perfect righteousness is credited to us.

By grace through faith, our failures are hidden in Christ and our sins are covered by the blood he shed for us on Calvary. **PAUSE**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, to be honest, I'm not truly surprised that I never achieved my goal of being a pro golfer.

In the same way, we shouldn't be surprised when our best spiritual intentions don't work out. In the final analysis we can beat ourselves up about our failures to follow through on our good intentions, or we can ask the Holy Spirit to point us to Jesus' victories.

So let us thank God that in Christ we're are forgiven for every inadequacy, every doubt, and every failure to do what we know we ought to have done.

And thank God that, in and through the Spirit's power, we get to make a new beginning each and every day.

Thank God that, in the Spirit's power we are slowly but surely being recreated that we might become of vessels of God's grace to others

Therefore, in Christ, today can be the day that we break out of the old mold in which our good intentions never amount to anything.

In Christ our faith can be the kind of faith that Martin Luther talked about.

Faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, so that it is impossible for it not to be constantly doing what is good...without any arm twisting a person is willing to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything for the love of God and to his glory.

And so, we pray: Lord, create in me a hardworking, vibrant faith, to serve You and my neighbors with a heart full of devotion and a joyous, unflagging spirit.

Holy Spirit empower us to stop talking the talk of faith and begin to serve others as Christ first served us and loving others as first Christ loved us. **AMEN**