

Series: Gospel-Centered Paradigm
#6: Preaching the Gospel to Yourself (New Identity)
Romans 7:14-8:2, 8:14-17
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I. Introduction

We're in a middle of a series, "Gospel-Centered Paradigm." We are talking about the reality that the gospel is not just a way to get into the Kingdom of God, but it is also the foundation of the way we live as a Christian.

Many of us have reduced the gospel only as a way to get into heaven and then, after that, it's just a religion just like every other religion. The gospel is like a "get-out-of-jail-for-free card." We discard the gospel after we become a Christian and focus on the more "advanced" stuff like God's rules and principles.

The main premise of this series is that the gospel is the advanced stuff. It's not just for beginners.

So, today, I want to continue to talk about how the gospel changes us.

If you're here and trying to figure out what Christian life is all about, I want to tell you that it's not what you would expect. I'll explain this further as I go on.

So, how do we change?

For the longest time, I was trying to figure out the answer to that question. Initially, I thought of it fairly simply. Just obey God. We just have to do what he says. There is no trick to it. Being a Christian is about trying our best to live the pure and holy life that God wants us to live. The problem was that I was having a hard time living what I believed. I was constantly struggling.

How many of you said that you would change, decided to change, willed to change, told yourself to change, told other people that you would change, but didn't? Why? How can we truly change?

That's the question today's passage answers for us.

[Read Romans 7:14-8:2]

Today's passage talks about four things:

- **Our condition,**

- **the cause of our condition,**
- **the wrong way to try to change our condition, and**
- **the right way to change our condition.**

II. So, let's start with our condition.

In Romans 7:15, Paul describes the essence of our condition: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.”

There're some theological debates on the issue, but I believe Paul is not just talking about the way he was before he became a Christian. The passage is in present tense and the context of the passage indicates that he is not talking just about his pre-Christian struggles. He is talking about the universal condition of humankind.

I think all of us can identify with this passage because we experience its reality in our lives. We know there are certain things in our lives we should stop doing and we try really hard to stop, but we can't seem to do it.

- Maybe it is your temper getting out of control;
- maybe it has to do with substance abuse or other addictions;
- maybe it has to do with sexual sins like adultery, lust, or pornography on the Internet—you know it is wrong but you feel like you can't stop it.

For some of you, the struggles are a little more nuanced but they are as real nonetheless.

- Maybe it is the selfishness of your heart—you don't do anything until you know how it benefits YOU;
- Maybe it is constantly needing affirmation from other people and feeling insecure if you don't get it;
- Maybe you have a hard time getting rid of bitterness against your spouse, ex-spouse, mom or dad, or someone else; or

It seems that knowing the right thing to do is not the problem. Most of us know what the right thing to do is. The problem is our failure to do them. The essence of Christianity is not about morality. Morality tells us what is right and wrong. Christianity is the power that enables us to do that right and not do that wrong. Many times,

knowledge of the right and wrong is NOT power. The fact is, we all know. But we don't do it. We are powerless. We are broken.

III. Now, what is the cause of our condition?

- Verses 17-18 say: “As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but **it is sin living in me**. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my **sinful nature**.”
- Verse 20 says: “Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is **sin living in me** that does it.”
- Verses 21-23 explain this a little more: “So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, **evil is right there with me**. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.”

The cause of your condition is described as “sin living in me” or “evil is right there with me” or “sinful nature.” The Bible says that there are two natures within us: the inner being that actually delights in God's laws (look at verse 22); and the old sinful nature that wages war against your inner being (look at verse 23). Now, what is this sin living in me, the evil with me, or the sinful nature in me? What does it mean? It means that there is something in us—the power of sin or tendency to sin—and we are powerless against it.

Even after we come to Jesus and accept him as our Savior and Lord, it does not mean our sinful nature is gone. It doesn't mean that we're going to live the way we want to live. It doesn't mean that we automatically declare victory over our sinful nature.

So, Apostle Paul cries out at the end of Chapter 7, verse 24: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

We may also be crying out to God, “What a wretched person I am! By whom and how can I be rescued from this vicious cycle of my sinful nature?”

Let's see how Paul answers this question.

IV. Now, there is the right answer and the wrong answer to the problem of our sinful nature. Let me first talk about the wrong way to try to change our condition.

The passage today tells us that we can't do this on our own. Paul says in verse 23 that the sinful nature has made him prisoner. He says he can't get out of this wretched state on his own. He's completely stuck. He calls out for help. "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Nonetheless, most of us think the only way to deal with this is through self effort or self help.

A lot of people think the answer is determination and will power. Just do it or just don't do it. "I can change my condition if I can conjure up enough will power to change it, if I have enough determination to change it."

Today's passage says this does not work. Paul says he has the desire to do the right thing--that he *willed* to do the right thing--but he cannot carry it out because the power of the sinful nature has overtaken him.

Richard Foster, in his seminal book, *Celebration of Discipline*, states:

Our ordinary method of dealing with ingrained sin is to launch a frontal attack. We rely on our willpower and determination. Whatever may be the issue for us—anger, fear, bitterness, gluttony, pride, lust, substance abuse—we determine never to do it again; we pray against it, fight against it, set our will against it. But the struggle is all in vain, and we find ourselves once again morally bankrupt or, worse yet, so proud of our external righteousness that "whitened sepulchers" is a mild description of our condition.

Sometimes, when we try to fight with our will power alone, it feels like the temptation just gets stronger and stronger.

- You can say, for example, I don't want to have lustful thoughts. No lust. No lust. No lust. You focus on it so much that that you jump at the first chance to satisfy your lust. By your focused will-power, you actually empowered your enemy.

Folks, the wrong way to do this is by the sheer force of our will power.

In Colossians 2:23 (in KJV), Paul describes our most strenuous efforts to follow rules in order to fight our sinful condition as "will worship." Worshiping anything or anyone other than God is idolatry. So, in other words, Paul calls this approach idolatry.

This is not to say that will power is always ineffective. A lot of times, that's how most of us do the right thing. But, unless there is an inner empowerment and transformation, this will power can only go so far.

V. Now, let's see what the Bible says is the right solution.

Let's read from Romans 7:24.

In response to the question, who will rescue me from this body of death? Paul says: "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord." I used to stop reading here and say, "Okay, Jesus is the answer, I know that; but I still don't get it; how is he the answer to this particular problem? I was very frustrated that he lays out a very real problem that we could all identify with and end up giving us such a pat answer. And then, I remembered that Paul never included Chapter numbers. We did. I started to read Chapter 8 more carefully, and I realized, he does explain the answer in a powerful way. From Chapter 8:1, Paul starts to explain the gospel: "Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." Now, what does this mean? The law, or the principles, of sin and death is sinful nature we have been talking about. He says the answer is the principle of the Spirit of life. And as we see in the verses that follow, what he means by the principle of Spirit of life is the gospel-centered life. There's a lot of stuff here, but I want to focus on one aspect of the gospel-centered life.

Let's go to Romans 8:14-17, {READ IT}.

The coming of Jesus, the death of Jesus on the cross, and the resurrection of Jesus (the gospel) enabled something: It changed our identity. It changed who we are.

Let's take this one step at a time.

Verse 16 says that the Holy Spirit testifies to us that we are God's sons and daughters. When the Bible says the Holy Spirit or God testifies, we've got to listen. The Holy does not just tell us; he TESTIFIES. It's like the Holy Spirit taking an oath under penalty of perjury and saying he's my son, she's my daughter. So, it's got to be right. (According to the Bible, not all men and women are children of God, although all of us were created by God. It is only those who receive Jesus who are children of God). Now,

God is the King of the Universe. And you are his sons and daughters. That makes you a prince or princess of God. That's who you are.

You say *abba* to God. This is an Aramaic word that is hard to translate. It literally means daddy, but it is not a juvenile word. It is the most intimate word of affection for a father. It means that the Holy Spirit is telling you that you are God's precious child. I have a seven year old daughter and four-year old twins, and let me tell you I love them with all of my heart. But, multiply that affection by a million times and you have the love of God for you.

God is not like a human parent. Many of our human parents have failed us. Many of our fathers have been distant and detached from us. God is not like that. When God identified himself to Abraham in Genesis 17:1, God said: "I am *El Shaddai*." The English Bible translates this as I am God Almighty. However, there's more to it than that. *El* means Almighty God. He is the creator of the universe, ruler of the universe, and the only omnipotent God. But, God is not only the Almighty God the creator who is way out there, but *Shaddai* as well. And *Shaddai* literally means breast (yes, you heard that correctly), implying that he is a nurturer, someone who cares for you and loves you as a mother cares for her young infant. He is not only God Almighty, he is God the nurturer.

Now why is the fact that we are God's precious and loved children important to defeating our sinful nature? The reality is that our identity, our *position*, is that of sons and daughters of God, but our lives, the way we are and live, our *condition*, is far from being like a son or daughter of God. Our condition is still messed up. So, how do we change our condition? It starts from a deep understanding of our identity, our position.

Let me illustrate.

Billy is a 13 year old pick-pocket. This is how he has survived. He doesn't know who his parents are. He grew up on the streets and he did whatever it took to survive. The king's men were searching the entire kingdom for the king's lost son. This king had everything but he did not have his son. This grieved him deeply. He was a man of broken heart. The king's men searched for many years. And finally, they found Billy. They carefully examined his birthmarks and determined that Billy was the lost prince of

the king. So, they brought him to the palace and cleaned him up and gave him the finest clothes and put rings on his fingers. He met his father, the King, and the overjoyed father told Billy that everything he had was Billy's. But Billy went around the palace pick-pocketing.

What is wrong with this picture? Why is Billy like this? I believe there are two reasons: he does not know who he is. Billy does not fully understand his position. He does not realize that he is really a prince. He does not know the rights and privileges of a prince. What would make Billy stop?

The key is to understand his new identity, his new position.

The gospel gives us a new identity, and this identity is not based on our works or our performance, but it is based on what Jesus has done for us on the cross. God came to us in the person of Jesus Christ and lived a perfect life, and on the cross he gave us his righteousness—his standing as an approved son of God and took our sins upon himself. That's why he died on the cross. That's why we have been adopted as sons and daughters of God. That's why we have a new identity and this identity is not based on our performance.

So, we need to constantly preach the gospel to ourselves. We know in our head, but we must know with our heart that God has given us a new identity as a prince or princess of God. Do you know what this means?

- You don't have to have power over people to know that you are somebody. You are somebody because you are God's son or daughter.
- You don't have to get approval from other people in order to know that you are somebody. You are somebody because you are God's son or daughter.
- You don't have to have a lot of money to know that you're somebody. You are somebody because you are God's son or daughter.
- You don't have to have gone to a great college and work in a prestigious company to know that you are somebody. You are somebody because you are God's son or daughter.
- You don't have to be physically beautiful to know that you are somebody. You are somebody because you are God's son or daughter.

You see, this reality that our new identity is given to us as a gift, not earned by what we do, is the truth that sets us free from our sinful nature.