Knowing your misery so that you can know Christ

Text: Romans 7:7-25

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**Scriptures:** Exodus 20:1-2, 17; James 4:1-3; Romans 7:7-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 138, 116, 455, 439, 525

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism

**Theme:** The righteous and good law of God both reveals and also provokes sin in fallen human beings

**Proposition:** God’s good law reveals our misery and points us to Christ, the only deliverer from death.

**Introduction**

It was almost exactly a year ago that I was experiencing some unusual and disturbing physical signs in my body. I woke up one night and couldn’t hear properly; like someone had put corks in my ears. Another night I was incredibly itching and found that I had a severe rash over my entire body. Then there was the excessive fatigue that resulted in me sleeping 20 hours a day. Swollen nymph glands and a descending mental ‘brain fog’ left me wondering what on earth was going on. I didn’t know, but it was clear that something was very wrong with my body. I was sick. Multiple COVID tests came back negative, so my GP referred me for a raft of medical tests which were looking for signs of cancer. Eventually, a blood antibody test showed conclusively that I had had COVID. Physical sickness can be hard to diagnose at times. Perhaps some of you here in this congregation have been through the roller coaster of medical diagnoses and treatments, at times being aware that you are not well but not knowing why.

I have begun this sermon by speaking of physical health, but our focus today is on spiritual wellbeing. God has made people like you and me as both body and soul. How do we know if our souls are healthy or sick? This is the subject addressed by our text from Romans 7 and summarised in the Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 2. The sad news is that naturally our souls are sick unto death. To live with sin and to be aware of sin is miserable, but it is through this misery that we come to know our need of Christ. Ultimately, it is only through Jesus that we can be cured of the sickness of sin and find comfort, belonging, contentment and joy forever.

Having begun pastorally with Christ, the only Source of true comfort in life and in death, the Heidelberg Catechism moves to the first of three main sections in the sequence: sin, salvation and service or as it is sometimes expressed guilt, grace and gratitude. So as we come to the start of the ‘sin’ section of the catechism, our focus is on the sickness of sin from our text in Romans 7:7-25 under three headings:

1. Sin revealed
2. Sin increased
3. Sin progressively removed
4. **Sin revealed (v7)**

God has wonderfully designed our bodies with warning signs to indicate when something is not right. Pain, whilst necessarily uncomfortable, is essential for our wellbeing in a fallen world, as authors Paul Brand and Philip Yancey explain in their helpful book titled ‘The gift of pain’. God has also built into our bodies other warning signs that indicate problems within, for example: skin rashes, high or low temperature, blood pressure changes, dizziness, fatigue, and at times weight loss or gain. Sometimes our bodily warning systems do not function correctly due to sickness or disability. Sometimes we do not know that we are physically sick unless a medical test reveals that truth. You yourself, or others you know, may have gone for a routine check-up with your doctor only to receive an urgent message to come to a meeting. As such a consultation you may be told that they have discovered a tumour within, a nutrient deficiency, or some other troubling abnormality.

Do people like us naturally know that there is a deadly sickness of soul within us? No. Why? Because we are conceived in sin (Ps 51:5), being naturally dead in ‘*our trespasses and sins*’ (Eph 2:1). Like a physical sickness that we are unaware of, the terminal sickness of sin is not known to us unless it is revealed. This is what the Apostle Paul writes to the Romans about in our text. At the start of verse 7 in Chapter 7, he asks two questions and then gives a response. *“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!”.*

Imagine that your doctor tells you that you have cancer because a biopsy (the examination of body tissue by a medical laboratory) has revealed this disease. Does it make sense to say, ‘well, the laboratory is at fault; the medical professionals are the ones who are sick!’ That’s ridiculous, assuming that the staff are well-trained and diligent in their work.

It is nota medical lab that reveals the sickness of sin, but the Word of God. The fact that the Law of God (accompanied by the Spirit) reveals the presence of sin within the soul to people like you and me does not mean that this law is sick, faulty or to be despised. In fact quite the reverse, without the law we would not know that we were spiritually sick and in desperate need of healing. This is what Paul says *“Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin”.* There are **two highly significant words** here that you are likely very familiar with, but which it is helpful to check that we understand what they mean here: law and sin.

**Firstly**, ‘law’. In the Old Testament, the word law (torah) means ‘instruction or direction’. It was used for the ten commandments, but included the whole law of God as given to His covenant people Israel. The Old Testament law (moral, civil and ceremonial) formed the terms of the covenant between God and His chosen people. In the 5th century BC, the word translated ‘law’ in our text became the written law of the polis (or city) in the developing Greek democracy. Paul and other New Testament writers (e.g. writer to the Hebrews and James) use this Greek word ‘law’ to refer to the moral Mosaic Law which remains binding for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike.

As New Testament Christians today the law of God includes **not only** all moral instruction relating to the Old Testament **but also** all the moral imperatives/commandments we find in the New Testament. Why? Because “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness*” (2 Tim 3:16). The Heidelberg Catechism in Q&A4 helpfully copies Christ’s masterful summary of the entire law of God from Matthew 22. Even for people who never hear or read God’s Word, His law has been divinely built into every human being by design, as Paul reminds the Romans in chapter 2 “*For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them*” (Rom 2:14-15).

**Secondly**, ‘Sin’. The word ‘sin’ literally conveys the idea of missing the mark as when hunting with a bow and arrow . Later this word came to mean missing or falling short of any goal, standard, or purpose. In the Bible it signifies a departure from God's holy, perfect standard of what is right in word or deed (righteous). It pictures the idea of missing His appointed goal (His will) which results in a deviation from what is pleasing to Him. Martin Luther put it this way “*Sin is essentially a departure from God*.”

Notice in our text, that Paul highlights just one of the ten commandments (the last one). He writes *I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” (Rom 7:7).* The Greek word translated ‘covet’ here means to have a strong desire to do or to secure something. This command is not one of external action, but inward heart motivation and points to the reality that underlying all of God’s commandments, first and foremost is an attitude of heart; a desire. James wisely pinpoints the problem with evil desire when he writes: “*What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel*” (James 4:1-2).

It is the law of God that reveals the sinful desires of the human heart. This is what the Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 2 question and answer 3 expresses in this pattern of sound words: ‘*How do you come to know your misery? The law of God tells me*’. Have you discovered this painful, but necessary, truth in your life? The misery of sin is revealed by God’s law, it also tends to increase in light of that law, as we’ll see in our second point:

1. **Sin increased (v8-11)**

We had an issue in a congregation I was previously pastoring. There were not so many people attending the evening service and those who did come tended to sit quite far back in the rather long and narrow auditorium. As a session we decided to put some ropes across to prevent access to the rear seats for our afternoon services and also explained in the church bulletin why we were doing this. Can you guess what happened? People – not the children but grown men! – climbed over the ropes so that they could sit in the ‘forbidden seats’! Not only that, some forcibly removed one of the ropes!

Now we might have different views about whether the session was wise in trying to rope off some seats, but what happened certainly illustrated a basic human heart condition. When faced with being told that we can’t do something, we may be naturally attracted to doing that very thing. For example, in the beginning, God had provided our first ancestors with a wonderful garden full of very good food. This is the description from Scripture: “*And out of the ground the LORD God made to spring up every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food*” (Gen 2:9). With the temptation of Satan, Adam and Eve were attracted to the one tree of which God had said "*You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die*." (Gen 2:16b-17).

You might have laughed at my story about the church ropes, but you have likely been attracted at times by something that you have been told you can’t have. Perhaps the last piece of cake on the plate?, something you really like the taste of in the fridge?, or your own way when those in authority have told you not to do something? How many of us have knowingly driven faster than the speed limit on a stretch of road because we think that no police are watching and that we will likely get away with it? There can even be a thrill in doing something that is forbidden. As the Proverb wisely says of the simple/foolish person: “*Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant*” (Prov 9:17).

The Apostle Paul describes the tendency within his own heart for sin to increase in the face of the law, he writes: *“But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness”*(Rom 7:8) . Now you might be aware that there has been considerable theological debate over what the state of Paul’s salvation was at the time he refers to in Romans chapter 7. Some have asked, ‘how can a saved, regenerate, person experience the kind of internal conflict that Paul expresses when he writes: “*I am of the flesh, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*” (v14b-15)”’? Paul also describes himself as a ‘wretched man’ (v24) who keeps on not doing the good he wants but the evil he does not want to do.

Surely a ‘super-saint’ like the Apostle Paul, inspired author of so much of the New Testament, would not struggle with sin in the way that he clearly did at the time of his life he refers to in Romans chapter 7. If Paul had clearly prefaced his personal description of his spiritual struggle with sin in our text with the statement that he was looking back to the time before he was regenerated by the Holy Spirit then I would have to agree with those who think that Romans 7 describes that state.

Yet there is no such indication in God’s Word. In fact the whole book of Romans seems clearly to be written from Paul’s perspective as a saved disciple of Christ. When Paul writes that he was ‘*once alive apart from the law*’ (v9), he does not mean here that he possessed spiritual life at that time, but rather that he thought of himself as being right with God. This is what he describes in Phil 3:5 as being his pre-conversion state ‘*as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless*’. At that time Paul had been spiritually dead until he was dramatically converted on the road to Damascus.

Paul acknowledges in our text that as the law of God has worked in his heart, he has become more aware of his sin and also his own inability to rid himself of that sin. His sinful nature came more and more clearly into light when faced with the good commandments of God. I find this portion of Scripture deeply encouraging because it resonates with my own experience. How about you? I would even suggest that if someone hasno sense of an internal conflict between their old sinful nature and their identity in Christ as a new creation then they lack some evidence of saving faith.

If you think that by trying hard enough you can perfectly obey the good law of God then you are wrong, as the Apostle Paul was before He came to Christ. God’s Word says, “*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*” (1 John 1:8). This is reflected in Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 2 question and answer 5: “*Can you live up to all this (the good requirements of God’ law)? No. I have a natural tendency to hate God and my neighbour*”. So then, are we to remain at least partly miserable? The answer brings us to our third point:

1. **Sin progressively removed (v24-25b)**

I think that I have recovered from my Covid infection last year, but I am not sure if my healing is complete. I still need to sleep more than I used to pre-Covid. It’s hard to know for sure what has caused my need for more rest, because I am also suffering from another physical condition – one that affects each one of us here: aging😊 Even if we fully recover from a physical sickness, ultimately, we know that everyone will physically die one day, unless the Lord returns first.

Spiritual sin is a bit like physical cancer in remission so that in this life its’ effects in life are progressively reduced by God’s grace through the work of His Word and Spirit. In theological terms we call this process ‘sanctification’, defined in the Westminster Shorter Catechism this way: “*Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God and are enabled more and more to die unto sin and to live unto righteousness*”. This is God’s ongoing work of conforming us to be like His perfect Son Jesus (Rom 8:29). Observable and discernible in this life, but never completed.

We do not completely shed our sinful natures in this life. Paul laments this reality when he writes in both suffering and blessing, in despair and hope: “*Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (v24-25b) The gospel is good news, but it necessarily contains bad news. Just like a medical diagnosis of a terminal sickness is never good news, but the good news that there is a permanent cure is the best news for those who know that they are sick, so it is with the gospel. Jesus Christ is the cure for our misery, our desperate soul sickness, our sin. The Apostle Paul knew this, and we know it too because God has spoken the truth to people like us.

The penalty of sin has been completely removed by Christ from all who trust in Him. When we die our soul separates from our body and our soul goes to be with the Lord. The soul is then completely healed from the sickness of sin. The time is coming when Christ will return, and we, who believe savingly in Him, will receive new bodies which will never be physically sick or in pain. Then we will be glorified (Rom 8:3) and live this way forever. This will be the fullness of eternal life in Christ.

Notice as we close the contrast in our text between death and life. Paul has been saying that the law of God, whilst it is holy, righteous and good (v12) by itself brings death, not life (v10-11). “*The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me*”. This is why legalism, a false ‘gospel’ of salvation by works, is such a deadly doctrine.

Remember how Jesus described the Pharisees as being ‘*blind guides*’ (Matt 23:16,24)? It is not the law that progressively removes sin from us until we are one day perfect in the New Heavens, it is God’s grace alone. God is gracious and kind towards us in showing us our misery so that we can know Christ His Son as our Saviour. Misery leads to comfort in Christ for all who come to Him in repentance and faith. So have you come? Can you say from your healed and yet being healed soul:

*God of grace, amazing wonder, irresistible and free; oh the miracle of mercy – Jesus reaches down to me. God of grace I stand in wonder as my God restores my soul. His own blood has paid my ransom – awesome cost to make me whole*.

AMEN.