

Sermon for Sunday, June 24, 2012
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Caring for our Expectations
Romans 7:14-20

Romans 7:14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. 15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. 16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. 17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing. 20 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 21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 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. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Our theme today is pastoral: the need to get our expectations right – not too high, not too low. Several areas: Expecting to be good, expecting to be wise, to be healthy, to be trouble free. And what we expect of God.

We can begin with marriage. I like to check on newlyweds a few months into their life as a couple. How's it going so far? The most common answer is simple – "Good!" But, if we have time, the thread changes. "We heard that marriage is hard, especially in that first year. But we didn't believe it. We were sure *we would be different*. We're happy, we love each other. But it's true; it's hard. We're glad people told us. At least we know we're normal."

Debbie and I had the same experience. We heard it. We didn't believe it because we thought *we would be different*. But we weren't – and I'm glad someone told *us*.

It's good to be warned. Yet there is a danger in pessimism too. I recently read a series of essays entitled "I don't want to have children." They show the danger of unreasonably low expectations. One excerpt: "When one of my friends' five-year-olds recently asked me why I didn't have any kids, I told her that I didn't know what to do with them. 'You just take care of us,' she said... But considering it has taken me thirty-two years to understand how to take care of myself... I don't want to have children." Besides what if I'm a bad parent? What if my child is a terror? A sociopath? Never goes to sleep? What if I can't afford a good school? What if our child gets the worst parts of my husband and me?

What if everything goes wrong? But everything doesn't go wrong, even when marriage is difficult or a child is difficult. Couples can share a life and friends. We grow into maturity together. There are pleasures in reading stories, catching bugs, playing hide and seek with a child.

So we need to get our hopes right. Not groundless optimism or irrational exuberance. Not constant pessimism or irrational despair. We need sound expectations, which the Bible can give us. First – in what sense can we expect to be good?

1. Expecting to be good (Romans 7:14-20, Psalm 51:5)

There was once a great state that had entered the *decline* phase. Experienced visitors could see it in the capital city more clearly than people who had lived there for a long time. The leadership was corrupt. They lived for wealth and pleasure, not justice. In the streets, an underclass lived a miserable, dirty, hopeless life. Morals sagged. Entertainments were violent and corrupt. Too many people depended on government handouts rather than the fruit of their labor.

Christians were a minority but they had influence. Two of them, named Augustine and Pelagius, weighed in on the problem. They tried to find the root of Rome's corruption and of human corruption in general.

Pelagius was a pious layman, a persuasive teacher. His followers, the Pelagians, said humans can fulfill the law of God and He expects us to do so. We sin because we see bad examples, form sinful habits of sin. We're also lazy. But God's laws tell us how to live. The very fact that God *commands* proves that He expects us to obey and we can do it. Why would God command what we cannot do?

Pelagius is right that sinful habits, laziness, bad examples and harmful customs make it easy to sin. But he assumed that human nature is essentially unhindered by the fall. We can do right, Pelagius said, if we just have the will. For God has given us self-determination, so obedience is in our reach.

Pelagius said we must not think Adam's sin tainted human nature. Adam set a bad example, but his sin doesn't corrupt or impair us. We choose to sin and we can choose to stop – if we discipline ourselves, follow Jesus' example. The corruption of Rome is a choice – and reform is a choice.

Pelagius' teaching has an appeal in many lands, including America: Some say "You can do it! Get up, dust yourself off, and sin no more."

Yet every branch of Christendom has labeled Pelagius a heretic – Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox - because of what Pelagius, or his followers, denied. He denies the need for the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit. He denies the need for Jesus and Jesus alone. Though his ideas rouse action, they contradict Scripture:

Rom 7:14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. 15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... 18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 ...the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing.

These words are from Paul, a believer, a great apostle, speaking after twenty-five years of sacrifice and service to God. I think: If even Paul calls himself "a slave to sin" we should too. I admit that this interpretation of Romans 7 is debated. Some say the speaker in Romans 7 sounds too defeated to be a believer. This agony, they say, sounds like someone who feels guilty, but hasn't yet found the mercy of Jesus.

Can a Christian say: "I am of the flesh, sold under sin... Nothing good dwells within me... I have the desire to do what is right, but I cannot do it" (7:14, 18)? Does the cry of near despair contradict Paul's earlier statement that believers are "set free from sin" (6:17-22). He said we have peace, joy, freedom, and hope due to our justification (5:1-5). People ask: Where did his confidence and joy go?

Yet, I think every believer *feels* defeated at times. We cry, "I hate what I do" (7:15). We ask, "Why can't I do the good I want to do?" Why can't I stop my self-destructive actions? The first reasons to believe that Paul *does* describe a believer is simple – believers identify with the report, the feelings of Romans 7. We *can* say, "I hate what I do" (7:15). We do wage war with ourselves and say, "The evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing" (7:19).

We also believe Paul describes a believer because the speaker loves God's law, as believers do. The Psalmist says, "Oh, how I love your law" (Psa. 119:97, 163). Paul says "I delight in the law of God in my inner being" (Rom. 7:22). Unbelievers don't delight in God's law: "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so" (8:7).

Third, Paul speaks in the present tense - as a believer: "I do, I want, I know." In fact, the *very struggle* with sin is itself a sign of faith. A Christian sins, but she fights it, hates it, tries to change. Sin makes her miserable. Unbelievers tend to be complacent and satisfied with themselves. The irreligious person typically thinks he is a good fellow. He has a reason for everything he does.

Third, the speaker longs for Jesus. He groans, but expects Jesus to deliver him. His cry is full of desire, not despair: "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Jesus will! This is the attitude of believers, "[We] groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (8:23).

So Paul describes his present experience: I am... a slave to sin... I do not do what I want to do (7:14-24). A disciple loves the law, hates sin, and knows Jesus as deliverer. Yet we don't live as we *want or expect*. The struggle may not be normal – following God's norms - but it is *common*. We groan from unwanted desires and repeated sins. We live in two worlds. We're free from domination by sin, united to Christ. Yet the flesh still torments and subverts us.

This is the testimony of all Scripture: "No one is righteous... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:10, 23). Or hear David cry for mercy in Psalm 51:1-3 after he sinned: "*Have mercy on me, O God... according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me... I was sinful at birth, from the time my mother conceived me.*"

David doesn't say this to excuse himself: "Of course I sinned. I've been a sinner since my mother's womb. What do you expect?" No, he means, "My *sinfulness* is the origin of my sin. It's been mine from the womb, and I've been consistent in it."

The label for this biblical teaching or doctrine is original sin. Original sin means mankind had a representative, Adam. When he rebelled against God, his sin, guilt, sinful tendency became ours. We inherited it. We are born with sin, rebelliousness, and are in misery. We have a native tendency to sin. We all face recurring temptations. We are predisposed toward certain evils all of our lives: selfishness, anger, pride, promiscuity, criticism, manipulation, even foolish fears.

Does this sound defeatist? It's true and illuminating. The doctrine of original sin explains why we act as we do. Consider Steve Jobs. Jobs had a transcendent talent for design, for grand dreams, for communicating his vision to others, for enlisting talent and pushing people to do things they never thought possible. But he insulted and humiliated people routinely. He distorted reality and manipulated friends. He could pout and cry, literally, if he didn't get his way. He abandoned friends and, for a while, his first child. Yet he made the world a better place and most people who worked for him were glad in the end.

There aren't many people like Jobs the inventor, industrialist, LSD acolyte and Buddhist. But, like Jobs, we all have beautiful and painful traits. When people sin against us, when we fail ourselves, it's helpful to know that this is *common*.

Young pastors, my former students, scattered everywhere, sometimes act shocked when the church treats them badly. A committee doesn't understand their goals and won't support them. A man befriends the new pastor, but he soon realizes that the man is recruiting for a cause – a cause he doesn't share. When the man realizes the new pastor doesn't share the cause, he stops talking to him, starts criticizing him, even his wife and family. So the pastor reports.

"You're surprised at this? I understand that you're hurt. I'd be hurt too. But don't be *surprised*. Let me remind you of the first vows for membership: Do you acknowledge yourselves to be sinners in the sight of God and without hope for your salvation except in His sovereign mercy? Do you believe in Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners and depend upon Him alone for your salvation?" The church is full of sinners. You have to say 'I'm a sinner' to join! And trouble surprises you?"

For most of us, interesting work is hard work. You want an easy job? Hand out towels and pick up trash at the pool. Teenagers hate jobs like that because they're boring. Whatever our work may be, the people are essential to the thrill and the misery. They are funny and boring, encouraging and unfair. They pay rich compliments and make absurd demands. Work is hard, because of sin. People sin against us, and we sin against others and hurt them too.

Marriage is hard for the same reason. Many of us never sin so much as we do at home, with family. We do things we know to be wrong. Sometimes we deny it or hope our spouse will forget it.

Sin even pollutes the way we address the painful results of sin. Kevin DeYoung says, "In our hyper-therapeutic culture, we all need to realize that sometimes being in touch with our pain and.. real about our doubts and authentic about our struggles is a form of narcissism and self-absorption rather than maturity." We could all use a little less complaining and a little more gratitude. We want a magic pill to make the pain go away. That would be a "Stop sinning" pill, which we don't have. The Belgic Confession says: By the disobedience of Adam and Eve original sin has been spread through the whole human race. It is a corruption of all human nature—an inherited depravity... Sin constantly boils forth as though from a contaminated spring. Nevertheless, it is not imputed to God's children for their condemnation but is forgiven by his grace and mercy... The awareness of this corruption might make believers groan [to be] free from the body of this death.

Two theologians had a debate on the corruption of art. One said, "Popular culture corrupts high culture." The other said, "Sin corrupts all culture." I agree with number two. I recently saw a "good" movie: good writing, acting, cinematography, a redemptive theme. There were ten characters in the movie and everyone was good, or trying to do good, or slowly getting better, except the wife in the sole marriage. The story led viewers to root for every relationship except the marriage. That had to die. Why? I don't know, but I'll guess that the writers knew that they were writing a story of redemption, but didn't want to look too moral or spiritual. They wanted to be rebels, even as they presented a story about virtue and redemption, so they scrubbed the story clean of any notion of God or biblical morality.

So let's expect people to rebel vs. God and to sin vs. us, at times. Don't be shocked. Have thick skin. And expect that you too will sin. Be ready to turn to Jesus for grace, and turn to the Spirit in prayer for holiness.

2. Expecting to be wise (Jude 1:10-12)

I read Jude recently and noticed a contrast between his message and a common message in popular culture. Today, we constantly tell people: "Follow their dreams, follow your heart, follow your compass. You know where you need to go."

But Jude warns about people who rely "on their dreams" (Jude 1:8). They trust their instincts, which they watch closely, but they don't realize that fallen human drives aren't trustworthy. When we follow dreams we may be rejecting God's authority and follow the crowd (Exod. 23:2). Many dream of self-indulgence and follow their sinful appetites and passions (Jude 1:7-10, 16-19).

Others grumble and criticize. Jude compares his *dreamers* to Korah, who dreamed he was just as good as Moses, maybe better, so he should lead Israel. So Korah rebelled against Moses. Jude says dreamers like Korah are rebels. They refuse God's order and reject both divine and human authority (1:8, 11).

At the church's love feasts, they "feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves" (1:12). Literally "they shepherd themselves." As long as they eat well and feel good, as is well. They take care of themselves. No one else will shepherd them, for they stand under no authority. Yet the Bible says that even authorities need to have authority over them.

Does this sound like you? Do you give your dreams too much authority, or do you let your friends help you sort it out? Some aspirations are noble. So many inventions started with a vision, but we need to test our plans. No one is wise all the time. So, "in many counselors there is safety" (Prov. 11:24). I ask: are you shepherding yourself, or do you have accountability?

3. Expecting to be healthy (Psalm 103:13-15, James 4:13-15)

When I was forty-two, I had a significant sports injury that wouldn't get better. I had a friend who had just turned fifty. He said, "You know, if you're 50 and you feel no pain when you get up in the morning, it means you're dead – or in heaven." It was a subtle way to say: You live an active life and you're surprised your body hurts? Give thanks for your vitality, expect some pain, and quit complaining.

James says it this way, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (4:14). We are frail. We can't master our destiny, because our lives are as wispy and fleeting as the morning mist on a lake. It settles in after mid-night and disappears by mid-morning. We can't even guarantee your existence for one day.

Of course, God still cares for us – and offers us eternal life by faith, but we must expect this life to be short. Psalm 103:13 says, "*As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; 14 for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. 15 As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; 16 the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.*"

This is no counsel of despair, for he continues, "But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those who fear him" (103:17).

4. Expecting a trouble free life (Psalm 90:9-10)

So, compared to eternity, our lives and plans, are as ephemeral as morning mist. Although Moses lived 120 years, Moses thought about the troubles of this brief life. He says God existed "before the mountains were born... From everlasting to everlasting you are God." He is "our dwelling place" but He also sees our "iniquities... our secret sins." While Moses lived to 120, he says, "the length of our days is seventy years — or eighty, if we have strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away" (Psa. 90).

Again let's ask what we expect. Many of us are ready for trouble, but others are surprised by illness, pain, disappointment, and sorrow. I understand – it's painful, even a shock, when we face serious illness, when work goes bad, when a relationship sours. But we should expect some troubles.

Take health and our increasing capacity to monitor ourselves. Will it make us healthier if we detect anomalies before they become illnesses? One doctor said: Data is not information. Information is not knowledge. And knowledge certainly is not wisdom. If we judge ourselves sick, we will try to intervene. But intervention, whether with drugs or surgery, has risks.

Instead we should be thankful for every day we're healthy and whole, and remember that we have seven to nine decades, full of graces and woes.

5. Great expectations rest in the power and grace of God

Yet there is another class of expectations, God-centered. First, God remains with us, come what may. God's promises are sealed, yes and amen, through Christ. He says:

- Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ....
- The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want... Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil....
- Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.
- Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

These promises don't lead to happiness in a straight line. Besides it's possible for life to get better without getting easier. I had a crucial conversation with a daughter one day who said, "I wish I weren't quite so smart. If I had a less ability, I wouldn't have to work so hard in all these AP classes." I replied, "True, if you were less intelligent, you wouldn't take AP classes, but if you were less gifted, regular classes would seem just as hard to you."

That was my "Dad" answer, but she also set me thinking: "I wish I were bad at some things too – like funerals, and marriage counseling." Life would be easier if word spread: "Dan's a good fellow, but don't let him do the funeral if you love someone. What a disaster."

I wish that because funerals, like counseling sessions, are sad and hard. But in a way, it's the very pain, the capacity to share the pain of others, that lets pastors, counselors and doctors and others help people. If we "grieve with those who grieve, we both suffer and do good. A lot of life is like that. That's what Jesus life is like. He suffers and does good. His very willingness to face the woes of life led him to offer his help.

So let's not expect life to be easy. But it can be hard and good, if the hard things are important and we can grow through them.

One more point: we do make progress. Romans 7 leads to Romans 8. *1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. 3 For what the law couldn't do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son... to be a sin offering.... 4 that the righteous requirement of the law might be met in us, who live according to the Spirit.*

That means we make incremental progress through this life – if we know God and yield to his Spirit. Then one day the increments will end, when we pass through death from this life to life with our Lord. Then all our expectations will be met, our happiest dreams, our best hopes, with the Lord Jesus, the Risen Redeemer.