

The Cruciform Self in Transformation

by Michael Flowers

The sermon explores the struggle between good and evil within us, and the need for God's help to overcome sin and live a new life through Christ.

Duration: 31:45

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Romans 7:24, Romans 8:2, Romans 8:11, Romans 13:12

Topics: "Transformation"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher reflects on the cry for liberation and the assurance found in Jesus Christ. He emphasizes that through participation in Christ, believers are set free from sin and death. The preacher also highlights the importance of putting sin to death and the absence of condemnation for those who are in Christ. The sermon concludes with a prayer for God's guidance and a reflection on the human condition and the mystery of the self.

Transcript

Lord, we have gathered here today for word and sacrament. Thank you for feeding us. May the words of my lips and the meditation of our hearts receive by faith the word engrafted in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God.

Amen. We just passed out of Romans six and we're just going to take a very, very scant consideration of Romans seven today, and we're going to call it the cruciform self becoming who you are. We're in a season of scripture reflection about the human condition and the human person.

What is that? What is the person inside of you? Have you figured that out? The mystery of the depths of the eye. Aren't you a mystery unto yourself sometimes? It's kind of like who on earth is this living creature that gives voice to words, the self, the human nature, the inner being, translated inner anthropos, inner human being, Paul, in Ephesians three, the ego. You see, Freud didn't make up the id and the ego.

He got that from Greek, which ego is the Greek word for I. And so we've got ego throughout this passage today. Right. I. Paul's talking about an I expressing the who of I am.

Who am I? What am I? This could be considered the search for our personal identity, and we're asking who gets to narrate the who of you. Who's going to tell you who you are? Right. But in order to find this out, we're going to consult a towering theologian, Dr. Seuss, and we're going to take a trip to Whoville.

That might be better than some of the versions out there, though, right? What who do you hear? Who do men say that I am? Jesus asked to know thyself written on the temple of Delphi there in the ancient Greek understanding stems from an ancient source that predates Socrates, even though he's attributed to saying that know thyself this quest to know ourselves can lead inward towards an endless introspective journey, mostly dark and murky. Right. Have you found those inner caves of your being to be somewhat dark and murky, sounding something like Roman seven at times, but mere subjectivity will not get us very far.

Just looking inside with our own means. Jeremiah knew this, he said in Jeremiah 17, nine, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately sick. Who can understand it? Who can understand the eye, the who, the the identity of what we've been created to be and who we are and what we are.

And from the history of interpretation of Roman seven, Jeremiah could have said the same thing about our conflicting interpretations, who can know it, who can understand this passage, perhaps an introduction and an indication of Paul's depiction of the conflict itself, trying to interpret this passage. For example, I'm just going to jump in to verse 17. So now verse 17, it's printed there in your bullet.

And. It is no longer I ago who do it. But sin that dwells within me.

It's almost like the devil made me do it. Right. Sin made me do it.

And it's not me doing it. It's sin doing it. And we talked about the power, the cosmic power of sin is beyond your individual sins.

Sin is something far greater and more sinister, and it cannot be wrestled down by any matter of will or attempts from human sources of power. It's done a very good job of corrupting and making the heart sick. Paul is describing this conflict itself, and he's saying 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.

Not talking about his physical body, but that state of being outside the grace of God. They that are in the flesh cannot please God. They that are in that old Anthropos before Paul says in Romans six, I have been ego.

My ego has been crucified with Christ. Galatians 220, I no longer live, but Christ who lives in me. That's a very different narrative than Romans seven.

I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. It is no longer I who do it, but sin who lives in me. 17.

For I have the desire to do what is right. I desire the good, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Now, if I do not do what I want, here it is again, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. We'll call this the conflict itself, that which desires the good, but utterly defeated and in the grip of sin's colonizing power. To whom is Paul addressing? Who's he talking about? Is it autobiographical? Is he talking about himself past or present? If so, is Paul describing his inner condition under the law before his baptism into Christ? Or is this Paul's inner life as a Christian? Or is Paul using a rhetorical device as origin thought.

To speak in the person of a weaker Christian. Is Paul addressing all of humanity and Adam or perhaps Israel under the law, apart from Christ, the quest goes on. There's so many interpretations here.

And although the early Augustine maintained that Paul was speaking in the person of unredeemed humanity, he later retracted this view and argued that Paul was speaking in the person of the redeemed. And himself included. And throughout the centuries, Augustine's position has influenced some of the more prominent commentators on Romans, Peter Abelard, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Karl Barth and John Piper.

I've got him about five cases lower than those other I'm sorry, literally I did. I just couldn't put him in the same line up there. We love John Piper.

I know he's just not lived long enough and had enough impact like Luther in common. OK. All right.

Nobody's a saint until they're gone and nobody's a recognized artist until you're dead and gone. You can't enjoy the praise. Right.

OK. So it should be. Get proud otherwise.

Right. Moreover, this view persuades everyday readers like ourselves of Romans since we easily identify with this voice. Don't you identify with it? That inward struggle, that conflict, those daily decisions that we have to make when they put menus in front of us that are five pages long.

Yeah, that's Western struggle. There you go. But if the eye of Romans seven is the normal Christian life.

What Paul declares in Romans six and Romans eight has to be negated, for example, Romans six, six and seven Christians who were baptized. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you obey its passions, Paul saying in Romans six and then he's slipping in Romans seven here, which seems to contradict that and Romans eight.

There is now no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the spirit of life, right, has set me free from the law of sin and death. Can I get an amen? That's good news.

OK, yeah, that is good news. So here's my take. And it's a personal modification of Frank Matera's view, which I've been studying all of these ways of reading this afresh.

And Frank interprets the eye of this chapter, not as the present experience of the Christian, but as the experience of those who are not in Christ as seen from the perspective of one who is in Christ. OK, get that it's talking about a non-Christian experience as seen from the perspective of one who is a Christian such as Paul himself is reflecting back on the struggle to please God apart from the spirit, trying to obey the law. Now, Paul did not see the law in this way.

He was very, very advanced beyond most people. He said, I'm a Pharisee of Pharisees, a Hebrew of Hebrews. I was circumcised on the eighth day, advancing above my fellows.

And as far as righteousness, I am blameless. I am blameless. Whoa.

OK, don't mess with him. That's in Philippians, and I think it's in one of those experiences in thy light, we see light. If we take this interpretation that Paul in the light of Jesus Christ, in the light of that light coming to him, saying hello, falling to the ground and saying, Lord, who are you? Oh, I am Jesus, whom you're persecuting in light of that.

He sees that this is the real situation of all those who are not in Christ, even if they are not aware of it. And most times people are not. In thy light, we see light, and I would say only in thy light we see light.

OK, here's my little modification. I believe that this is Paul trying to convey the same interpretation. Yes, this is this is the former life of those struggling in the flesh trying to please God.

But. Due to the reality of living in between two advents of Christ in this present evil age, an age from which we are being rescued, Galatians one, this passage plays a powerful role in our personal identification, past and present. In such a way that we need to connect with our constant need of liberation and conversion and remember the who of Paul's cry of anguish at the end of this chapter, who shall deliver me from this body of sin? We can never forget that question and we can never forget the answer to that question.

And we are intimately aware that we as Christians remain vulnerable. To the power of sin. Am I talking to the right people? And we must be and must struggle to become who you are, we must struggle by the grace of God, a new source of power, not in our own means, not in our own strength, become who we are.

I find this to be true personally. Redeemed sons and daughters of God through faith and grace, growing in the likeness of Jesus Christ, becoming. Like Christ for the rest of our days until we meet him face to face, we're in a twinkling of an eye that would be great sanctification now, but it's not twinkling of an eye sanctification we must wait for Christ in you, the hope of glory.

And we have this great hope of the transfiguration for all of humanity, not just Christ, that's glorification for all of us in Christ. Amen, that's a good thing. Keeps our feet on the ground and our knees on the ground and our hearts humble before the Lord.

Yes, because this is the arena of faith, brothers and sisters, this life is the arena of faith, battles and blessings abound, battles and blessings abound. But we do not fight for victory. We fight from victory.

It's not our victory, it's his. It's a gift. Victory is a gift in Jesus.

We're not fighting for victory. We're not trying to get the victory. Christ has gotten us the victory.

Amen. And so we're fighting from that place in Jesus Christ with the hope of glory, even though we're fading away and this outward man is perishing inwardly. We're being renewed day by day.

And if nobody sees it, who cares? Because day by day, we're inwardly being renewed. Amen. Yeah.

And so on the cross, Jesus overcame the powers of sin and death and restored us to life in communion with him. Paul tells us that we are saints, we're holy people. He calls his church, his glorious church, to be presented without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, Ephesians five.

And he also rebuked some of his own churches for being carnal. Well, here we go now, First Corinthians three, but I, brothers, after he had told them who they are in Christ in chapter one, he's saying, but I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people. But as people of the flesh, the old life.

As infants in Christ, I fed you milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you're not ready for it, for you are still of the flesh. You're you're still carnal and you're not supposed to be.

You're living in another age, another epoch. You're living in the old system of things. It's death and destruction.

Carnage everywhere. That's where you've planted your feet. That's not who you are.

Paul is saying you are still of the flesh. While there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? How else are we to behave fully human? Fully alive, fully in Christ, the new humanity. That's how we can behave out of that source of him.

And so what do we make of this? I believe that Paul in Romans seven is describing the inner conflict of those who live apart from Christ. Yes. Yet he wants us to read through having been given confidence and assurance and this massive like event in Jesus Christ in Romans six in our baptism.

We have been crucified with him. We have died to sin. We don't have to let sin reign in our mortal bodies anymore.

And yet at the same time, he wants us to hear and relate reading through this conflict that's not only within the eye of a person, but it's in the cosmos, this inner conflict of the power of sin sucking us back in, calling us back in, telling us who we're not, filling us with fear, filling us with anxiety, filling us with doubt. That's what's coming at us. It's like meteorites out there, they're just coming at you and we're having to dodge those voices of condemnation of false identities that want to name you.

You're just like your mother. So fearful. So critical, that kind of stuff, right, is that the real you? Is that the who of the real you? Is that the false self or the true self? We have to discern between the voice of the false self and the true self.

Well, if you're the son of God, why don't you get up there and throw yourself down? Jesus heard it. And he overcame it in the wilderness. For us and for our salvation, he wants us to hear this cry for liberation, though, because we are still living in this place that is dominated by present evil.

We're living on contended territory, battlegrounds, but the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof and all who dwell therein. That's what we believe. And the God of this world has no claim on this world because God sent his son to this world and he's the creator of this world, not this world cosmic system that's gone mad.

No. What is that cry and what does it sound like? I think this cry of, oh, wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of sin and death? I think Paul's been reading the Psalms. I think he's been reading the Psalms of lament all of his life and he gets it and he can talk to God like this and he can go into other characters and he can present other voices within the human condition and he can come back and he can say now I want all of you unredeemed and redeemed to hear this, oh, wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of sin and death? Thanks be to God.

It's through Jesus Christ, our Lord. There's the answer. Thank you, Paul, for the answer.

It's a lament. It's a cry and all the laments end in praise. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me, Psalm 13? How long, how long, how long, how long, how long, how long, how long? OK, I can't complain anymore, but I will praise you, I will bless you because you have been good to me.

That's how we end our rants with the Lord. Amen. Yeah, it's cheaper than therapy.

Yeah, it does the body good. The cry for liberation is answered in eight to the self enslaved by the law of sin and death in seven. Twenty four is liberated and given assurance through participation in Jesus Christ.

The body of sin has been destroyed by the body of Christ, not us, but his body hanging on the cross. Amen. His physical death on the cross did away with the body of sin.

So this lament must become our voice. Under trial, under temptation, in times of weakness and disordered desires. Oh.

Do you relate to that? Times of weakness. Disordered desires of all kinds. There's too many desires.

I wish all my desires were the good ones. We have been given a new status, but not only a new status, a new source of strength in Jesus Christ. There is now 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.

That's what we say when we get up in the morning and we don't feel like that. Right, because feelings and stream of consciousness and impulses and desires of all kinds. That's not your new self.

That's the echoes of Adam coming at you, sucking you back in so that you can be ineffective and you can call yourself a Christian. Oh, my gosh, this is where most of the church is at. Carnal.

Are you not carnal? Paul says, oh, yes, we are. We're very carnal because we identify with every twisted desire, impulse and image from our involuntary stream of consciousness. Who can know it? The heart is sick.

Don't listen to a sick heart. Sounds like a country song. Sick hearts.

Your involuntary thoughts are not your true self. You know what I'm talking about? Involuntary thoughts. I mean, you can be sitting there and these images will just come through while you're eating the best meal and you're talking to your wife and an image will come through and a plane will come through and a rocket will come through your head and you're going like, where does that come from? That's vile, it's wicked, it's terrible.

That's not you. Now, that's what you have to believe, because if you agree with that kind of stuff coming in from the cosmic consciousness of who knows where. You'll forever be in Romans seven as a wretched man.

And not giving the thanks be to God, that's not me. I've been liberated through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Now, people get stuck in this, theologians get stuck in this and denominations get stuck right there and then they give a false narrative of what Christianity and human beings are like.

And we have more options now than male and female. We are in the transformation. And so Christianity is all about trans.

It's all about trans. But there's some forms of transformation that is really mutilation attempting to be transformed because we all have a hunger inside of us to be transformed. So this is not getting any kind of judgment on the motives or the pursuits of trans community.

That is definitely not what I'm saying. I'm saying that there are many counterfeits to the destiny that we have all been thrown into in Jesus Christ and on the way. In this realm of sin and death, you can get

picked off, the deceitfulness of sin can happen, or you can start listening to the inner murky recesses of the heart that's dead and sick.

Who can know it? And you can form different opinions about what human beings are and what this world is all about and what church is all about. I left a denomination that does this. This is big stuff, because if you've read the news this past week, you know, the Catholic world is just in an uproar right now.

Our blessed Catholic brothers and sisters. I know many of them who are 300 priests. The report came out that are pedophiles.

And they have the names of a thousand people, carnality converging on us, brothers and sisters. The story of Bill Hybels in The New York Times, it's not just the Catholic world, it's all of us, you see, two out of six pastors that I've worked with or had as personal pastors fell into sexual sin. And I was a teenager when the first one happened, so I'm very familiar with this life, this parking lot filled with glass and, you know, shrapnel.

We're all having to walk through this, you guys, brothers and sisters, we're having to walk through this together and we we just want to join hands and go like only the love of God is going to pull us through this. So what does it look like to be set free from sin and death? What does it look like? Because to the very community in Rome that Paul is talking to that don't let sin reign in your mortal bodies, you put sin to death in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There's now no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Chapter eight. Well, he bumps up to chapter 13 and he has to tell people who have been baptized, who are God's children and in whom there is no condemnation, this verse 11. Besides this, you Christians in Rome know the time that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep.

For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone, the day is at hand, so let us cast off works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the daytime, not in orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality, sensuality, not in quarreling, not in jealousy, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh.

Augustine heard this being read on the other side of the wall when he was struggling in that Roman seven place and he heard that and he was converted. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires. This is the mastery of sin that was talked about in Genesis four.

Right. Sin is crouching at the door and you must master it. How do we do that? Not not Roman seven style.

You know, it's I, but not I, it's sin dwelling in me. You see, that's not the Christian life, but we relate to that because we're coming still out of that in our conversion. That's why the echoes of that I, but not I, but sin is dominating me.

Too many Christians are under the domination of sin. Still, we know this Hebrews defines the Christian life that we read the day Hebrews 12 in your struggle against sin. You've not yet resisted to the point of shedding innocent blood.

Yeah, I'm just here to redefine the Christian life. We wrestle not with flesh and blood, but with principalities and powers and heavenly places, therefore, put on the armor of light. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires, as Jesus said in the gospel today in Luke nine.

If anybody wants to come after me and follow me, he must deny himself. That's the I self-denial daily co-crucifixion. That is the crucified self.

That is the self in Galatians two twenty. I have been crucified with Christ. That I that wants to do its own thing, that I that wants to think fearful thoughts, that I that wants to like be embroiled in anxiety and fear and doubt and whatever else.

That thing has been crucified with Christ, I that thing no longer lives, but Christ who lives in me. This is it. This is it.

This is the Christian life. The I no longer lives, but Christ who lives in me, the exchange of death for life, the exchange of condemnation for Christ, the exchange of just trying to do all of this in our own power for the strength of God. Thank you, Father, for the gospel of Jesus.

Thank you that you've called us to be soldiers, to be warriors, to fight this spiritual battle by the grace of God in the armor of light. For the sake of Jesus Christ and his church throughout the world, help us to stand firm in the scriptures and in the sacraments. Lord Jesus Christ, and offer grace to this world and offer it to each other as we do today in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

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