

CGYG/LIFE 2010 Retreat
Monday closing session – Wretched Man That I Am!
Romans 7:14 - 8:4 and Luke 7:36-50
September 6, 2010

We've been thinking this weekend about the first and second Greatest Commandments, as summarized in Jesus' words in Mark 12:29-31:

“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

On Friday and Saturday, we thought about what it means to love God, and to love Him with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength. We saw that loving God isn't just about having some emotional feelings of love or affection for God. Certainly it involves our affections; but it means, more importantly, giving ourselves completely to him and obeying Him with all that we are and with all that we have. So for example, even though we can't completely separate the concept of heart from soul from mind from strength, we saw how loving God with ***all your heart*** means loving Him from that core of your being that defines who you are as a person; it means letting love for God be the defining factor that shapes your convictions, your will and ambitions, and letting love for God be what determines everything that you think and say and do. We've seen how loving God with ***all your soul*** speaks of loving Him with all of your emotional being, with all your affections, with your deepest desires and longings. We've seen that loving Him with ***all your mind*** means to have your thoughts and your intellect fully engaged in seeking after Him. It means loving His Word and letting His Word shape your every thought so that your mind is transformed through that Word and so that your every thought is brought into submission to Him and to His Word. And we've seen that loving Him with ***all your strength*** means loving Him with all of your energy – with an intensity and fervency that involves throwing everything you've got into following Him, into obeying Him, into serving Him.

And so loving God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength means loving God all the time with all that you are and all that you have. It means

that He takes first place in everything in your life, so that there is literally nothing and no one else in the world that you love more than you love Him. It means that you love Him more than you love your family or your spouse or your children or your boyfriend or girlfriend or any other of your friends; it means that you love Him more than your money, your possessions, or your career; it means that you love Him more than you love popularity or your own comfort or the pleasures of this world; and yes, it means that you must love Him even more than life itself.

Then yesterday we thought about what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. Sunny showed us how this commandment flows naturally from the commandment to love God. Sunny challenged us to think about how this command to love your neighbor sets no limits on who that neighbor is, but that your love needs to extend to all whom the Lord might bring across your path – even those who might seem hard to love... and not just that, but you are to love them as you love yourself. This means that not only do you take care never consciously to harm your neighbor, but that you actively seek his good with the same earnestness and intensity and zeal as you would seek your own good – and that you do this all the time.

I hope we've all found meditating on these great commandments to be good and encouraging. At the same time, though, I think if we've been honestly reflecting on our own lives and evaluating ourselves in light of these commandments, I think probably that the reality is, as Sunny also shared a little about from his own life yesterday, that all of us would find these commandments deeply convicting and challenging, and maybe even downright discouraging when we consider how far short we fall. I think that if we're honest with ourselves and with each other, we'd all have to admit that we're failures; that we don't love God with anywhere close to all of our heart or all of our soul or all of our mind or all of our strength, and that we don't love our neighbor anywhere close to the way we love ourselves. As much as we might want to, the reality is that it's a struggle. And when we are reminded of these commandments and challenged by them as we have been this weekend, yes, it moves us and stirs our hearts towards God, but at the same time we feel convicted or maybe even guilty because we remember those sins in our lives that we just can't seem to shake, or we're reminded of that brother or sister that we might be smiling at on the outside but that God knows and that we know we are really hating them on the inside... and so when we hear Jesus saying things like what we read in 1 John 2:4: "The man who says, 'I know Him,' but does not do what He commands is a *liar*, and the truth is not in him"; or 1 John 4:20, which says, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a *liar*. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, *cannot* love God, whom he has not seen";

when we hear these things and are reminded of them, we feel like that liar that John's talking about, and we feel convicted because we see in our own lives that we just aren't living up to the standard that Jesus Christ calls us to as His followers.

As we've been considering the Greatest Commandment this weekend, is this how you're feeling about your walk with God and about your love towards God – that even though you want to love God with all that you are and all that you have, that as you examine your life, you feel convicted because you find that just don't seem to be living up to that desire? Well, if so, you're in good company, because that's the sentiment the apostle Paul expressed about his own life and his own Christian experience in the passage we just read, Romans 7. We don't have time this morning to get into this passage in any detail, but I want you to get a flavor of this struggle that Paul faced in his own life, and that every true follower of Jesus Christ faces as well. Earlier on in the book of Romans, Paul talked about how all of us are sinful by nature, that is, that ever since Adam & Eve first sinned by disobeying God in the Garden of Eden, every person is born with a tendency to sin, and to rebel against God and disobey His commands. And here in this passage Romans 7, he talks about how followers of Jesus Christ have this struggle with this sinful nature, using himself as an example. Look at v.15. He says, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate to do." Then v.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. 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." Then v.21: "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 within my members." In other words, as a follower of Jesus Christ, Paul in his heart of hearts had the desire to do what is good and what is right; in his inner being, he delighted in God's law. But at the same time, he found that whenever he wanted to do good, his sinful nature was right there with him, fighting against that desire to do good and pulling him away from God and towards doing wrong, towards doing evil. And this was the constant struggle he faced; as he says in v.21: "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me." This struggle was so intense that Paul cries out in v.24, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

Brothers and sisters, isn't this the same struggle that all of us face as we seek to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves? As

someone who believes in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, God has poured His love into your heart through the Holy Spirit and has placed a genuine desire in your heart to express that love to Him and to others, and to obey Him with all that you are and all that you have. But like the apostle Paul, even though you have that desire to love and obey Him, yet at the same time you struggle with sin in your life that keeps trying to draw you away from Him, and that seems to prevent you from loving Him with everything. And especially when you think about those habitual sins in your life that you just seem to keep committing *over and over* again, and that you just can't seem to get victory over – pride or lust or anger or envy or pettiness or greed or any number of other sins – doesn't Paul's cry just resonate with you, when he says, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" In my heart I want so much to love God more and to obey Him in everything, but this sin just always seems to get in the way!

So what's a person to do? How do we get out of this rut? Well, unfortunately, one way that many Christians try is just by avoiding the issue altogether. They either downplay the seriousness of sin or they "dumb down" Jesus Christ's demands. Feeling guilty about sin? Don't worry about it! Don't get hung up on such old-fashioned concepts as "sin"... It's not really that big of a deal to God. Christianity is not about rules and regulations, it's about a relationship. It doesn't really matter what you do or don't do... God's forgiven you anyways... it's all just about loving Jesus. Friends, maybe that's you. Maybe what I've been saying here about the struggle with sin that every genuine Christian has makes absolutely no sense to you at all, because maybe you're going through life just choosing to ignore the sin in your life and thinking that as long as you have some warm feelings about Jesus once in a while, it's all gonna be OK, because after all, God would have to let you into heaven because you say you love Jesus and you're not that bad of a person, right? Friends, if that's you, the Bible says you're deceiving yourself, because as we've seen this weekend, Scripture says that those who do not obey Jesus don't love Him at all. God is dead serious about sin, and if you think otherwise, the Bible is clear that you will be very surprised in a very bad way on the day God judges the whole world.

So some people deal with the struggle with sin and the guilt that sin causes by trying to convince themselves that there is no struggle – that it doesn't matter what you do or don't do. But others would tell you that they way to deal with the struggle is just by trying harder –you just need to struggle harder. So you'd say, "OK, I'm going to grit my teeth and dig deeper and squeeze out more love for God and more love for my neighbor. If God says to give 10%, I'll give 11%; if he says 'Don't go down that street', I'll seal off the entire block; I'll put up fences, then I'll build fences around my

fences, so that there's no way I could possibly sin against God." Now, I think there is something to be said for struggling with all your strength, but in proper context. Scripture does tell us to exercise self-control and that we ought to struggle hard against sin with everything we've got; and Jesus does tell us that if our right eye causes us to sin, to pluck it out and throw it away; and if our right hand causes us to sin, to cut it off and throw it away. That's how serious we are to be in the struggle against sin in our lives. And yet, at the same time, I think that Scripture is equally clear that if that's all there is to it – that we just try harder – and that we are doing this all just in our own strength and in our own power, apart from the strength and the power that God provides, it gets us nowhere in the end, because God's standard is perfection; and we can never achieve that standard because we are innately sinful in our nature; so if this system is going to work, you're going to have to start lowering the bar... The Pharisees in the Bible were the best example of this... they kept lowering the bar until they came up with a list of rules and regulations that they thought they could keep perfectly, and so they could tell themselves that they were righteous and that they were loving God when in fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. If it's just about trying harder, it all just ends up as legalism, as it did for the Pharisees, and like people who say just not to worry about sin, you just end up deceiving yourself.

So how do we overcome in this struggle against sin in our lives, and how do we rightly deal with the guilt that sin causes as we strive to love God with everything? Paul gives us the answer in Romans 7. Going back to v. 24, he says, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" And what's the answer? "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Thanks be to God! God Himself has provided us deliverance from this wretched state that we find ourselves in, and He's done it through Jesus Christ our Lord! As Sunny shared at the end of his sermon yesterday, the answer is the Gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, that even though we are deserving of death and of everlasting punishment by God because of our sin, completely out of His love and His mercy, God sent Jesus Christ to come and live a life of perfect obedience to God but then to die on the Cross, not for His own sins (because he had none), but to take the punishment that *we* deserve for *our* sins, so that if we believe in Him and submit our lives to Him, He becomes our substitute – and the punishment for sin that He received at the Cross is counted as ours, so that our sins are forgiven. So as Paul goes on to say in Romans 8, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But not only are our sins forgiven, but His life of perfect obedience, His life of perfect righteousness is also counted as ours, so that when God looks at us, He sees not the sin that would separate us from Him, but He sees the righteousness and the holiness of His Son Jesus Christ; and so we are restored into a right relationship with Him. And so instead facing an eternity under His

condemnation and wrath, we instead will enjoy eternal life under His favor. And having saved us, He sends the Holy Spirit to live in us and to empower us with the power of God in our struggle against sin, so that we are able to live lives of obedience to Him. And so Paul says, thanks be to God! God is the one who delivers us from this body of death through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But this Gospel, this good news of Jesus Christ, isn't just something we preach to other people who haven't yet heard about Jesus Christ or who haven't yet believed in Him; it's not something you just believe and then move on to bigger and better things... no, the Gospel needs to be central to our lives each and every day; it's something that we as followers of Jesus Christ need to preach to ourselves each and every day, because it's only in that Gospel that we can ever have any hope as we grapple struggle against sin. And *especially* when we who have been given the Holy Spirit to live in us and to empower us – when we choose to ignore His guidance and His power and choose instead to sin against God; when we, knowing the good that we should be doing, instead do the exact opposite – what hope could we possibly have before a perfectly holy and perfectly righteous God? Just this: that Jesus Christ bore the penalty for *all* of our sins, and we are accepted by God not on the basis of our own righteousness, but on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness that has been credited to us who believe in Him. Our sins do not surprise Him; He knew from eternity past every single sin that each one of us would ever commit in our entire life, and He knew how great is the rebellion that's in our hearts... and still, in love, He chose to send Jesus to die on the Cross for us – for you, for me – that we might have life. And even though we have sinned against Him over and over and over again, yet Romans 5:20 says that where sin increased, His grace abounded all the more – His grace is so much greater than all our sin. And more than that, Romans 8:34 tells us that Jesus Christ, having risen from the grave and ascended into heaven, is even now at the right hand of God interceding for us. The One who died for our sins now lives and pleads our case before the throne of God.

This is great news and we need to be reminded of it each and every day of our lives, but especially so as we struggle with the sin that can so easily entangle us – that Jesus Christ has paid the price of *all* of our sin, past, present and future and that His perfect righteousness has become our righteousness, so that we have a right relationship with God. And so even though we struggle with indwelling sin in our lives, we don't need to despair, because Jesus Christ has dealt decisively with our sin at the Cross. We sang about it this morning:

“When Satan tempts me to despair and tells me of the guilt within, upward I look and see Him there who made an end of all my sin. Because the sinless Savior died, my sinful soul is counted free, for God the just is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me (!)”

When we come back to the truths of the Gospel day after day in our lives, it deals with the guilt that sin causes in our lives, as we are reminded that Jesus Christ has dealt decisively with our sin.

But the Gospel is not only the means by which we overcome the *guilt* of sin in our lives; it’s also the means by which we overcome the *power* of sin in our lives. It’s as we come back to the Cross day after day that the truth of the Gospel transforms us and enables us to overcome sin, and that it causes us more and more to love God and neighbor as we ought.

Now, that might sound well and good in theory, but how does this work out in practice? Let’s consider in the last few minutes this morning the passage from Luke chapter 7 (v.36-50) that was the text for the morning devotion and that Lien also read before the worship set. In this passage, Jesus tells us that the one who has been forgiven little loves little, but that the one who has been forgiven much loves much. Simon the Pharisee loved little because he had been forgiven little (or I think at this point in his life, probably not at all), and this showed in the way he treated Jesus – no water, no kiss, not even a little bit of oil. Now, this wasn’t because he was any less of a sinner than the woman – his sins were just less obvious – but because in his mind, he really wasn’t a sinner at all and so there was nothing to forgive. In his mind, he had no big debt to be forgiven, and so he had no love for Jesus. In contrast, the woman in the Luke 7 account was a sinner and she knew it. Her sins were obvious both to her and to everyone else; but her many sins had been forgiven, and so she loved much, and it showed in what she did. So Jesus says that the one who has been forgiven little loves little, but the one who has been forgiven much loves much.

So as we’ve been considering this weekend what it means to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength, and what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves, why is that when we look at our own lives, it seems so often that we love so little, and that sin in our lives seems so to get the best of us so easily and keep us from loving God and neighbor? I think there are at least 2 possibilities. First, it could be that you’ve never actually been forgiven. As Jesus said, the one who has been forgiven little loves little. Maybe you’ve heard about Jesus and maybe you like hanging around Christians or even going to church or to fellowship; maybe

you even grew up in a church and have been attending church all your life, but you've never come to that place in your life when you're broken over your sin and come to the Jesus Christ to seek forgiveness and to commit your life to Him as your Savior and your Lord... and so you've never known and experienced the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. If that's the place you're in this morning, I'd urge you not to leave this place this morning without seeking Him out. I'd urge you to pray, and ask the Lord to forgive you your sin, that you might have forgiveness and reconciliation with Him, and that you might begin truly to love Him with all that you are and all that you have.

But I think there is also another possibility why we so often love so little and sin so much. For those of us who *have* believed in Jesus Christ and have been forgiven of our sins, the truth of the matter is that we have been forgiven so much more than I'm sure we could even imagine. But we love so little. Why? Because even though we've been forgiven so much, we don't really understand or appreciate on a personal level just how much we've been forgiven, and just how much we've been given in Christ. We don't really think our sins are all that bad, especially when we compare them to what other people might be doing. We don't think often and we don't think deeply about how great is our sin is – how absolutely repulsive it is to God. And when we do sin, we take it too lightly, because don't think enough of the greatness, the mercy, the beauty, the holiness and the majesty of God; and maybe we remind ourselves too quickly that our sins are forgiven in Christ... but we spend too little time considering what it cost Jesus Christ to forgive us. We think too little of the fact that He faced the fullness of God's wrath against sin even though He deserved none of it, so that *we* would never have to face that wrath, but that instead, we who were so deserving of God's wrath might know and enjoy the fullness of His blessing in our lives, both now and for all eternity. And so, even though we may know in our minds at an intellectual or a theoretical level that we've been forgiven, the realization of all that we've been given in Christ has never penetrated our hearts, and we have very little personal knowledge and very little personal experience of this love at work in our lives. And so even though the reality is that we've been forgiven much, because we think little of our sin and little of our Savior, our love will be little, it'll be weak.

Brothers and sisters, if we are ever to overcome sin in our lives, if we are ever to love God much – if we are ever to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength and love our neighbor as ourselves – the answer isn't to deny the reality of sin and it isn't just to try harder either. Rather, we need to come back to the Gospel, not just as an abstract concept, but as a living reality in our lives, each and every day of our lives... because it's only

as we experience the depth of Christ's forgiveness and know the depth of His love as a personal reality in our *own* lives that we will begin to treasure Him and to cherish Him for all that He is and all that He's done for us; and as we treasure Him, we will begin to love Him much. So, as Sunny also reminded us yesterday, we need to come back often on these great truths of the Gospel, thinking about them, meditating on them, and letting them soak deep into our minds and deep into our hearts so that begin to shape and transform our lives. As we do, our thoughts, our desires, our motivations and ambitions will become more and more grounded in love for God, so that we begin to love Him more than we love our sin, more than we love the things of this world; and so that more and more, we are motivated no longer to think and act in ways that are contrary to what the Holy Spirit is trying to do in our lives, but instead we are motivated to struggle with all our strength against sin in our lives, and to do this in the strength and in the power that the Holy Spirit provides as He takes the Gospel and applies it to our lives. And as a result, more and more, the sins that used to dominate us will start having less and less hold on our lives.

Now, this isn't to say that we won't ever have setbacks or that we'll ever get to a point in this life when we will never sin again. This process of overcoming sin and of growing in love for God is a lifelong process and a lifelong struggle. But we can take heart and give thanks to God, because Jesus Christ has already overcome on our behalf. And when the Gospel of Jesus Christ is central to our lives, even when we do sin, God in His infinite wisdom and His sovereign goodness will use even that sin for our good, to draw us nearer to Him, because we will love Him all the more as we experience and know His mercy and His forgiveness in our lives all the more.

As we draw this weekend to a close, let's be striving to love the Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul with all our mind and with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Let's not lose heart in our struggle against the sins in our lives that seem so often to get in the way; but let's be living out the truth of the Gospel each and every day of our lives, and as we do, let's be giving thanks to God for all that He's done for us in Christ.