

“When pastor is capable of murder.” Romans 7:15-25

“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So 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. For I have the desire to do what is right, 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 what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

My fellow pastor from Latvia told me this story. There was this old pastor, and if Lutherans practiced the worship of saints, pastor Robert Feldmanis would be as good a candidate as anyone.

He had devoted his entire life serving his Lord Jesus and serving God's people. He had suffered for his faith years and years in exile under Soviet regime, there are so many stories about him, he is a true legend in the Church in Latvia.

Sometimes in 1990s pastor Feldmanis was invited to give an address to inmates in high security prison. So, he went, at that time already in his eighties, this saintly, elderly man, he stood there before the murderers, rapists, robbers, the most violent men, and this is how he began his address:

“There is nothing that you have done, that I wouldn't be capable of in certain circumstances...”. He didn't say it simply to connect with the audience. He didn't exaggerate either, he simply echoed the same truth that Paul speaks about in our today's reading from Romans and elsewhere in his writings.

The same truth that applies to every single one of us – about the depth of our sinfulness. Just think about what Paul wrote, it is scandalous... **“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, 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.”**

This is Paul the apostle speaking. The saint Paul, the greatest of missionaries, the holy man of God, the wonderful teacher of the Church. That is how he describes challenges of Christian life. It's not what we would expect...

I would like to argue that no one can truly understand the Gospel and what it means to be a Christian if they don't understand what Paul is writing about in Romans 7. So, this is what we will do today.

We will reflect of some false ideas about what it means to be a Christian. Then we will reflect on what the truth about us, Christians, is, and what empowers us to live in a uniquely Christian way.

First, let's test some ideas. What is Christianity about? Christianity is about us being good and moral, friendly and caring – this one is quite widespread. Another one, pretty close to the first one – Christianity is about improving ourselves, about us becoming better people.

So, what do you think? True or false? I really hope you all recognized that these beliefs are ... false. They certainly are very widespread, and not only outside the Church, but also among those who identify as Christians.

This is why you can hear someone who doesn't belong to the Church saying that they may be better Christians than those 'church-goers'. These false ideas explain why so many would still insist that they are Christians.

If being a Christian is about being a nice and friendly person, you can understand why people get offended when someone doubts their Christian identity, for often they really are nice and friendly, concerned with self-betterment and willing to improve the world.

But Christianity is not about self-improvement either. Can you spot where the problem is with this one? Yes, then our focus again is on – me. How can I improve myself? How can I be better? The same old me... all about me.

But we like it. This is what we can understand. This is what all religions and philosophies teach. How to improve yourself... But, following Jesus isn't about self-betterment, it is about self-denial.

"Deny yourself, take your cross and follow me!" We could even say that Christians don't care much about improving ourselves, because – we don't look at ourselves. We will elaborate on this later.

Now, let's us correct these false beliefs and replace them with the Biblical truth. Being a Christian begins with honestly confessing together with Paul the apostle and pastor Feldmanis that we are not good, that we are – sinners.

That sinfulness is our very condition, not just something bad that we do. That the same sin that dwells in the worst of people, dwells in all of us. That in certain circumstances we all may be capable of committing terrible crimes.

These insights come from learning the holy and good Law of God. On the one hand, as Paul wrote, and that would be shared experiences of all Christians, **"I have the desire to do what is right..."** and **"I delight in the law of God, in my inner being..."**. This is so true.

If you are a Christian, you desire to learn the Law of God, His will for our lives, and that includes especially the first three Commandments, you delight in God's Law and you strive to live accordingly, but, on the other hand...

As Paul put it: “[But] **I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.**” This certainly rings true to me. If being a Christian was about being good and moral, then pastors should be the best of all.

Many of you would know that I love the Law of God. We just spent two years in our Bible studies learn carefully the Ten Commandments. Knowing all that I know, shouldn't I be perfect, or at least close to perfect?

However, whenever I go to private confession, there is plenty to confess reflecting on every one of the Ten Commandments. A few examples. I would like to rejoice in my God given identity, celebrating my unique value in the eyes of my Father, but instead – I keep toiling trying to prove with my own achievements that I am somebody, that I deserve to be appreciated.

I would like to put everything in prayer, but instead I keep acting as if I am in control, and if everything goes well... who can remember to say “thank you, Lord!” I would like to immerse myself in the Word of God, but too often I find that watching movies or surfing the Internet seems more exciting.

I really would like to be content with what the Lord has given to me, but somehow, I keep looking at what He has given to others and whinging – why not to me?! What Paul wrote is so true, so true... and it doesn't look good.

But we always want to look good in the eyes of those whose opinion matters to us. See how hard we try to behave well and look perfect when we are with people, whose sympathies we would like to have. We do as much as we can to hide our dark side, or imperfections, our weaknesses and faults.

So, how can we, Christians, freely admit that we are far from perfect? How can we freely confess our sins? What gives us the power to honestly admit what is wrong with us, and then still live cheerfully? The Gospel...

It changes everything. You know how liberating it is when that person, whose opinion matters the most, says to you: “I know you, I value you, and I love you as you are, and nothing will change it.” No need to hide, no need to pretend.

This God, Jesus Christ welcomes everyone as you are. He hasn't come to look for good people, He has come to invite sinners. It doesn't matter what you have done, your past doesn't matter, He welcomes you and He will change you.

Such powerful love does change us and we desire to do whatever we can to please the One who loves us with such devotion. With our whole being we are drawn to such person and we desire to respond accordingly.

As Christians we don't boast in the fact that we are sinful, but we rejoice in the fact that our God knows exactly who we are to our very core, we can be open and honest with Him, for He already has accepted and embraced us as His beloved children despite our sinfulness.

For us to confess our sinfulness and our particular sins is not about focusing on our badness and drawing some perverse satisfaction from it. No! It is about trying to remove anything that stands between us and our God.

It is a joyful and liberating experience, purifying and humbling, when you confess to your Lord and Saviour that you have failed Him ... again, and then to hear His comforting voice, when He say directly to you: "I forgive you all your sins! Peace be with you!"

To understand our sinful condition is the first step towards understanding God's grace. If we don't make the first step, we can't make the second. If we are not clear about what wretched creatures we are, we won't be able to fully appreciate what Jesus has done for us, and we won't thirst for the Gospel.

If we believe that we are fine and can improve ourselves as needed, then what's a big deal with this Jesus? Why bother? If we think we have done only a few bad things, and need only a tiny bit of forgiveness, we can't really rejoice in the Gospel. We feel no need for it.

But if we begin to see that in our old selfish nature there is nothing good, that all our thoughts, desires, emotions, dreams, and so on are tainted by sin, that there is nothing that would compel Jesus to sacrifice Himself for us, or even to care for us, then we start realizing the incredible extent of God's grace.

He reveals His love to you by laying down His life for you, while you still reject Him with prideful hostility. He creates a new heart, a new life in you, when you are still dead in your arrogance and ignorance, indifferent to all things God.

He daily sustains this new life by His Spirit indwelling in you, even as we keep disappointing Him and letting Him down again and again. The more we realize this, the humbler and more grateful we become. God's grace transforms us...

Then, we begin to forget about ourselves and instead our attention is constantly turned to our gracious God, marvelling at His goodness, and to our neighbours, as we want to serve them to please our Father in heaven. Because we don't need to worry about our goodness.

For we already are valued and accepted. Instead, we can delight in all the gifts and blessings that the Triune God so richly pours over us. We look at Him and rejoice and give thanks for all the gifts of creation, for our daily bread.

We rejoice in our new identity as children of God, as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. We marvel about our worth and significance – that our Lord was ready to pay with His life so that only we may be His own.

And then we look at our neighbours and focus on their needs. We don't worry how good we are, what we worry is – "how can I allow my dear Lord to use me, with all my gifts and talents, to serve those lovely creatures that He has places right before my eyes?" Can you see how different this is? It is not about me!

Christians don't need to focus on themselves. The funny thing is that the more we focus on our God with praise and gratitude, and the more we focus on our neighbours with selfless care, the better our Lord makes us... and we don't even notice it, for that is not important for us.

For we know that we, sinful and unworthy, already are loved beyond our wildest dreams. That we are in the hands of someone, who can take much better care of us than we could ever hope for, His commitment to you is unshakable.

Concluding... **“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”** Every Christian experiences this struggle between our new self, and the sin that dwells in all of us. It will remain so till the end of our lives. Sorry...

There is no final deliverance in this age. But the new age is about to dawn. This is the promise on which we keep our eyes fixed. The day is near, when Jesus Christ will return in glory and give us new resurrected bodies, free from sin.

Then we will be made like Him, holy and perfect, beautiful and amazing creatures, and our desires and delights will be in full harmony with the Law of God. Then we will live and reign with Him, with our Father and Jesus Christ forever and ever in everlasting blessedness and innocence.

This is most certainly true.

Amen.