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The Inability of the Flesh

Romans 8.7-8

Series: The Pure Gospel

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The Village Church

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I. Introduction

- A. There is a technique, a strategy, which we who have been involved in teaching and teacher education often use
 - 1. It's called incidental teaching
 - 2. It occurs when the teacher, apart from his or her lesson plan, uses an event or occasion that happens in the course of the day's activities as a teachable moment
 - a. The teacher takes the opportunity to teach a lesson that wasn't planned
 - b. But in the course of events, the lesson becomes that much more meaningful when the teacher takes advantage of the circumstances
 - c. And the children likely remember the lesson more fully because the occasion vividly impresses upon their young minds its significance and importance
- B. There are some incidental teaching experiences, especially in American education, that are ubiquitous
 - 1. That is – they are experienced by nearly every person who, as a child, has graced a classroom
 - a. That either first hand, or as a witness to the encounter
 - b. Everyone has experienced a particular episode
 - 2. One in particular I'm sure is one you can all remember
 - 3. It is the occasion when a child, who is clearly uncomfortable in his or her chair, raises the hand with urgency
 - a. And asks, "Teacher, teacher – can I go to the bathroom?"
 - 4. Whereupon the teacher, taking advantage of incidental teaching, and undisturbed by the child's urgency, replies, "I'm sure you can."
 - 5. Whereupon the student, frustrated with the teacher's reply, who obviously knew what the child meant, yet increasingly urgent about what is prompting the question, replies, "Ok, ok – I get it. Now *may* I go to the bathroom."
- C. We have all been subjected to lesson about the difference between "can" and "may"
 - 1. The word "may" is a question about permission
 - a. The "can" is a question about ability

2. And in spite of our having learned this lesson as young school children, I still find that even as adults have trouble with the concept
 3. And it comes out in our text this morning
- D. **Romans 8:7–8** (ESV) —
1. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God,
 2. for it does not submit to God’s law;
 3. indeed, it **cannot**.
 4. 8 Those who are in the flesh **cannot** please God.
- E. This is a statement not about what a certain group of people do do;
1. Or what a certain group of people may do;
 2. But what a certain group of people can do
- F. It refers to “those who are in the flesh”
1. And it refers to the minds of those who are in the flesh
 2. And specifically refers to what they cannot do

II. **The Flesh Revisited**

- A. Remember where we’ve been in Romans
- B. Romans is about the gospel
1. The gospel is the good news that God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself
 - a. Not counting men’s sins against them (**2 Corinthians 5.19**)
 2. But the gospel is only good news if we understand the bad news
 - a. And that’s the way Paul opened the book of Romans
 3. In **Chapter 1** he demonstrated how in unrighteousness, human beings suppressed the truth about God
 - a. That God had made plain through the creation to humanity His eternal power and divine nature
 - b. But that human beings, by nature, suppressed that truth
 - c. And neither glorified God for His creation nor gave thanks to Him
 - d. But their darkened hearts created for themselves all kinds of God-substitutes, or idols
 - e. And were, as a result, under the wrath of God
 4. This problem of human sin was shown in **Chapter 3** to be universal and pervasive
 - a. **Universal** – that it applies to every human being without exception
 - b. **Pervasive** – that every faculty of the human personality is affected by sin
 5. So that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (**Romans 3.23**)
 - a. And all human beings lack the righteousness God requires for His morally responsible creatures
- C. The good news is that God has made available in His Son, Jesus Christ, the righteousness that we so desperately need
1. And that Christ, in His death on the cross on our behalf, experienced the just penalty for our sin
 - a. And He did so in our place

2. This truth is not just a NT doctrine peculiar to Christianity
 - a. It is clearly outlined in the OT, in Isaiah – in the great passage about the Messiah, the Servant of the Lord
3. **Isaiah 53:5–6** (ESV) —
 - a. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions;
 - b. he was crushed for our iniquities;
 - c. upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
 - d. and with his wounds we are healed.
 - e. 6 All we like sheep have gone astray;
 - f. we have turned—every one—to his own way;
 - g. and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.
- D. And the good news is – the good good news – the best news of all
 1. Is that God has made this righteousness of Christ available to all those who will believe in Christ alone
 - a. For all who will trust in Christ alone for their salvation
 - b. And trust in nothing else or noone else
 2. **Romans 3:21–22** (ESV) —
 - a. 21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law,
 - b. although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—
 - c. 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe....
 3. **Romans 3:24–25** (ESV) —
 - a. 24 ... and are justified by his grace as a gift,
 - b. through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,
 - c. 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith....
 4. **Romans 3:28** (ESV) —
 - a. 28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.
- E. The great news continues to unfold in Romans where we learn in **Chapter 5** that having been justified by faith we have peace with God
 1. And not only peace with God, but access into God’s grace
 - a. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God
 2. We also learn that by faith in Jesus we are saved from the wrath of God
 - a. The very same wrath to which we were subject when we were, like the rest of humanity, suppressing the truth about God in unrighteousness
- F. We’ve also seen in our study of Romans that Paul takes two chapters – **Chapter 6 and 7** to anticipate objections to this gospel
 1. **Antinomianism** – the objection that if we’re saved by grace alone through faith alone, why don’t we just sin like crazy?
 2. **Legalism** – the objection that the Law of God must play a role in our salvation

- G. The answer to those objections is that having been saved by faith alone, we have changed
1. We've been born again by the Spirit of God
 - a. We're new creatures in Christ
 - b. We have, in our inner beings, died to sin
 - c. How can we any longer live in sin?
- H. And in those two chapters we were introduced to the concept of "the flesh"
1. The flesh is core constituent of the human being who suppresses the truth about God
 - a. It is the hard drive of the human's native operating system
 - b. It is the default setting of the human creature as they reject God's right to reign and rule over their lives
- I. We also learn in those two chapters that when we come to Christ by faith, a new principle of life is established in us
1. **Romans 8:2** (ESV) —
 - a. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.
 2. But in spite of that radical change, the flesh still rears its ugly head
 - a. So we find that we are in a battle between the new nature infused in us by the Holy Spirit and the "old man" or the flesh
 - b. We, as believers, find that we still sin
 - c. We still, from time to time, act like we used to act before submitting to Christ
 3. But ultimately, through the process of sanctification, our new operating system begins to prevail and we are able to have victory over our sin nature, our flesh, that still resides, operating mainly in our bodies
- J. But that old operating system, that flesh, is the only operating principle functioning in the person who has yet to trust Jesus Christ
1. And as we get to Chapter 8 we learn that the person who has not yet trusted Jesus as savior lives "according to the flesh"
 2. So two kinds of persons are set before us – those who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the Spirit
 3. **Romans 8:5** (ESV) —
 - a. 5 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh,
 - b. but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.
- K. And we learned last week that the ultimate outcome and destiny of such people is stark – indeed, a matter of life and death
1. **Romans 8:6** (ESV) —
 - a. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death,
 - b. but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.
- L. Our text this morning sets out five aspects of those who live according to the flesh
1. The thinking of the flesh
 2. The affections of the flesh

3. The will of the flesh
4. The inability of the flesh
5. The frustration of the flesh
- M. And it does so in terms that your grade school teacher would be proud of
 1. He does it in terms of ability
- N. **Romans 8:7–8** (ESV) —
 1. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God,
 2. for it does not submit to God’s law;
 3. indeed, it cannot.
 4. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

III. **The Thinking of the Flesh**

- A. **Romans 8:7** (ESV) —
 1. 7 For the **mind** that is set on the flesh...
- B. We’ve already seen how the mind is affected by the sinful nature of humanity
 1. All the way back in Chapter 1 we saw how the mind of humanity is corrupted by sin
 2. **Romans 1:21–23** (ESV) —
 - a. 21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him,
 - b. but they became futile in their thinking,
 - c. and their foolish hearts were darkened.
 - d. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools,
 - e. 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.
 3. So the human mind, in its corruption due to sin, concocts various idols – God-substitutes
 - a. Anything to avoid submitting the One true God
 - b. And it’s not hard to find evidences all around us
 - c. From the lying that is pervasive and nearly ubiquitous in our media
 - d. To the rejection of obvious truths about human nature – even to the distinction between men and women
 4. Human beings are more sophisticated than many of the ancients in the creation of their idols
 - a. Rather than attributing success and failure to various artifacts of human creation
 - b. Or deifying the creation itself
 - c. Today’s humans substitute the isms
 - d. Materialism and humanism and even scientism
 - e. And various political ideologies – also isms
 - f. Socialism, communism, nationalism, populism
 - g. Anything that pretends to occupy the pinnacle of human values is an ism – an idol
 - h. And all isms eventually become wasms
 5. They pass from human experience and all end up in the dust bin of history

- a. Because only God is eternal and unchanging
 - b. Only God is supreme – standing over and above His creation
- C. So the mind of humanity is corrupted
 - 1. The mind that is set on the flesh sees and understands the world
 - a. But sees it upside down and backwards
 - 2. And the best way to expose the corrupted mind is not to argue
 - a. But simply to ask probing questions
 - b. Because pretty quickly you'll get to the internal contradictions of the “futile” human thinking and the “darkened hearts” behind it
- D. And the corrupted human mind is not related to intelligence
 - 1. You can have extraordinary intelligence and brilliantly manufacture all kinds perverse and destructive ideologies that destroy human lives and civilizations
 - a. Karl Marx conjured up his destructive ideology contemplating his vision of power relationships among classes of people sitting in the hallowed halls of the British Museum
 - b. Ideologies that ended up murdering millions of people in Soviet Russian gulags, in Chinese communist concentration camps, and in the killing fields in Cambodia
 - c. Ideologies that in spite of their history of destruction, continue to persist in American academia today
 - d. Friedrich Nietzsche postulated the death of God and the crisis of nihilism and developed his concepts of the Ubermensch – the superman – in rich philosophical inquiries
 - e. And resulted in ideologies which led to the rise of Hitler's Third Reich
 - 2. Ideas have consequences
- E. But the corrupt human mind is just as prevalent in ordinary human beings
 - 1. Like farmers, mechanics, teachers, or engineers
 - a. Who imagine from their own limited knowledge and view of the world
 - b. That they can conjure up a good course of action apart from the revelation of God
 - 2. **Proverbs 14:12** (ESV) —
 - a. 12 There is a way that seems right to a man,
 - b. but its end is the way to death.
- F. That's why we learned last week...
 - 1. **Romans 8:6** (ESV) —
 - a. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death...
- G. The thinking of the flesh is depraved and corrupted

IV. **The Affections of the Flesh**

- A. **Romans 8:7** (ESV) —
 - 1. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God...

- B. The posture of the human being who lives according to the flesh is antagonism to the things of God
 - 1. Antagonistic to God Himself
- C. Oh, they might not come out and express it openly
 - 1. But bottom line, the human operating according to the flesh can't stand the idea that God is in charge of the world
 - a. They chafe under the very idea
 - 2. When the very idea of the supremacy of God begins to encroach upon their best laid plans, their blood pressure goes up
- D. Paul expresses it in terms of hostility
 - 1. That's what makes the peace of God so compelling!
 - a. Those who are justified by faith have peace with God
 - b. Because we were formally enemies of God
 - 2. Not that God wanted us to be enemies
 - a. That's why He sent His Son on our behalf
 - b. In love!
 - c. By grace!
 - 3. But the resistance to such grace is legendary in humanity
 - a. Such that Joseph Stalin on his depraved death bed shook his fist in God-hatred
 - b. And however expressed, either overtly or covertly, the human creature, apart from the grace of God in Christ, hates God
- E. The affections of the flesh are affections of hostility
 - 1. And the only way those affections are dissolved is when we cast ourselves on His mercy
 - a. Accept His grace
 - b. Receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord
 - 2. And then our affections start to change
 - a. But in the meantime, the posture of the human being by nature is hostility to God

V. **The Will of the Flesh**

- A. And then there is the will of the flesh
 - 1. That faculty of humanity of purposeful action
- B. **Romans 8:7** (ESV) —
 - 1. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God,
 - 2. for it does not submit to God's law...
- C. The human creature will not serve God
 - 1. The human creature will not submit to God's rule
 - a. It's a matter of the will
- D. If you've had children, you know how this works
 - 1. Many children have as their first spoken word, "No!"
 - a. Submission to any other authority than themselves is out of the question
- E. Sometimes this willful rebellion is explicit and public

1. But sometimes it is covert, subversive and manipulative
- F. We've had two children
 1. And with one you knew exactly when and how the rebellion was taking place
 2. But with the other it was more like passive resistance
 - a. And that was more difficult to discern
 - b. But it was just as rebellious
- G. Bottom line, the person who lives according the flesh will not submit to God's Law
 1. Their thinking is corrupt
 2. Their affections are hostile
 3. And their will is in rebellion

VI. **The Inability of the Flesh**

- A. So why is this description of the human condition in its native form so grim?
 1. The answer is really very simple
 - a. The human being, by nature, simply is not able to function the way human beings were designed to function when they were created
 2. They can't think in the way God intended
 - a. They can't have emotions that are loving toward God
 - b. And they can't have wills that submit to God
 3. Human beings don't possess the moral equipment for any of those fundamental human faculties
- B. **Romans 8:7** (ESV) —
 1. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God,
 2. for it does not submit to God's law;
 3. indeed, it cannot.
- C. The human flesh is unable to submit
 1. Unable to feel positive affection for God
 2. Unable to think in ways that correspond to the mind of God
- D. Humanism makes much of the human will
 1. Human beings are said to have free will
 - a. And certainly, we have to define what we mean by free will
- E. Human beings have free will
 1. Which means that human beings are free to do anything that they want to do
 - a. Given that they have the requisite equipment to do it
 2. I might want to fly unaided by modern airplanes
 - a. But I can't
 3. But there are many things I can do, and as long as I want to do them, I am free to do them
 - a. I have free will
- F. But, dear friends, I only have the freedom to will that which I want to do
 1. And by nature I don't want God

- a. By nature, I don't want anything to do with God
- b. By nature, I can't stand the thought of God ruling over me
- c. By nature, I don't want to submit to the Law of God
- G. "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, **it cannot**.
- H. Yes, we're free!
 - 1. We're free to do anything we want
 - a. But the problem is in the wanting, isn't it
- I. But when we come to Christ, that's what changes
 - 1. Our wanting changes
 - a. Our desires change
 - b. Our dispositions change
 - c. Our wills change
 - d. Even our thinking changes
- J. If you haven't trusted Christ for your salvation, you need to come to the end of yourselves
 - 1. And realize that you don't have it in you
 - a. And you need to cast yourself on Christ
 - b. And say to Him, "Oh Christ, do in me what I cannot do of myself"
 - 2. Be honest with God
 - a. Tell Him, "I don't have the desire for you; the heart for you; the will for you"
 - b. Tell Him, "Oh God, save me; give me the faith to believe"

VII. **The Frustration of the Flesh**

- A. Then we have in the text the frustration of the flesh
 - 1. **Romans 8:8** (ESV) —
 - a. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.
- B. There is no way we can please God by operating in the flesh
 - 1. Some of you may have struggled with a parent who was impossible to please
 - a. That's so unfortunate
 - b. Maybe you're still struggling with it
- C. But I'm here to tell you, there's no way, operating in the flesh, that you can ever please God
 - 1. But God is pleased with a contrite heart and a humble spirit
 - 2. **Psalms 51:17** (ESV) —
 - a. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.
 - 3. Come to God by faith in Christ
 - a. Cast yourself on His mercy
 - b. Call on Him while He may be found
 - c. Confess that you are a sinner – that you have rebelled against Him
 - d. That you have hated Him or hated Him by ignoring Him
 - e. But that you long for the forgiveness of God that Christ provides

- D. In the flesh you cannot please God
 - 1. That, again, is a statement of human inability
- E. But if you cast yourself on His mercy in Christ your fleshly frustration is dissolved
 - 1. And you find the loving Father that you never imagined was possible

VIII. **The Ability of the Christ**

- A. All of our human inability
 - 1. In our thinking
 - 2. In our affections
 - 3. In our wills
- B. Is contrasted with the superceding ability of Jesus Christ
 - 1. Whose thinking is the mind of God Himself
 - 2. Whose affections are the embodiment of love itself
 - 3. Whose will was always submissive to the Father's
- C. And because of Christ's ability
 - 1. By faith we receive Christ Himself