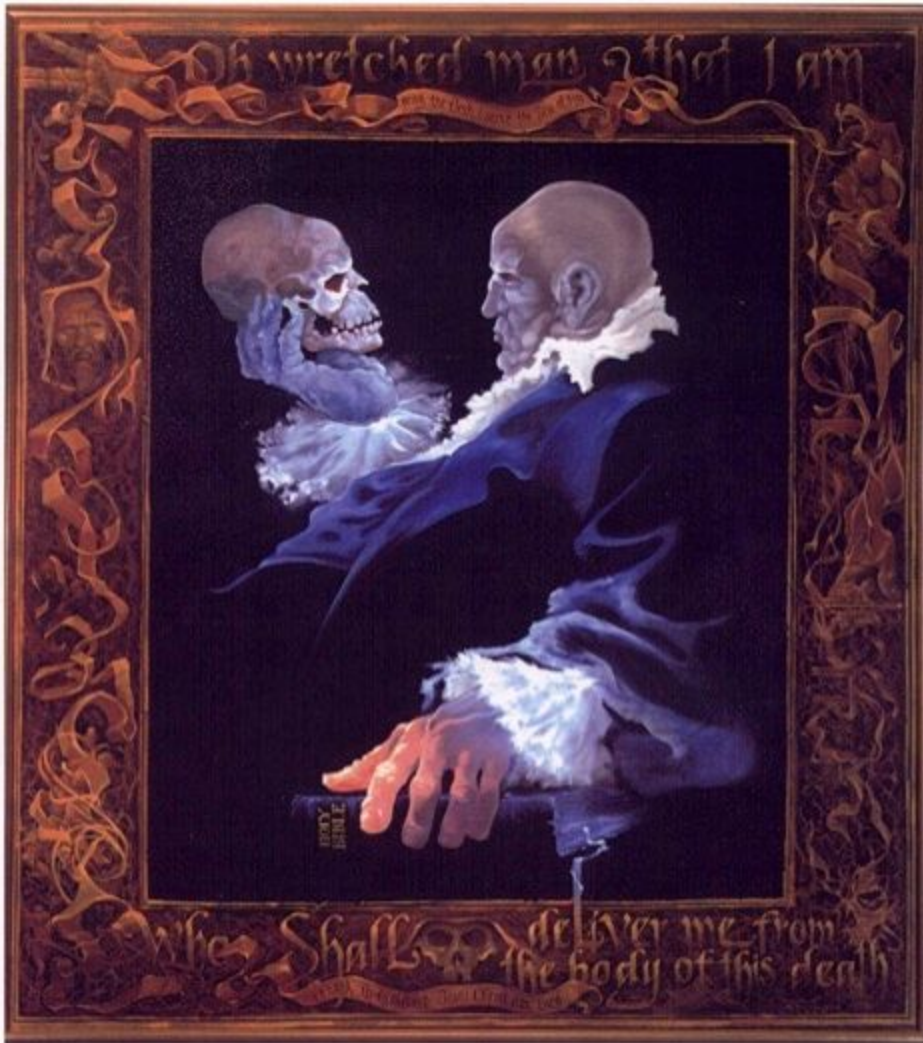


# The Grace and Glory of God

Romans 7:18-25

Look at this picture.



This painting is by Joseph DeVelasco, inspired by Romans 7:24 - ***"Wretched man that I am. Who will free me from this body of death?"*** I got to know Joseph's son, Keith, at our church in Chicago, and I'll share some of his story at the end. As a going away gift, Keith gave me a print of this painting - and that is what is on display in back today.

Can you see the age and weariness of this man? He is pale and exhausted. No wonder, he's old and obviously pretty overweight. And he's staring directly into the empty eye sockets of a human skull. Look at his hand - gray and skeletal. Even his face is somewhat reflective of the skull he is staring at. Do you feel the irony in the painting? He is wearing rich fabric, in a deep royal purple, with the frilly cuffs of a wealthy and prominent British aristocrat. Yet under that material wealth and success you can see his physical body is wasting away.

**The one bright spot** in the painting is his hand at the bottom that is resting on the Bible. The hand on the Bible looks vibrant, alive, even youthful - a stark contrast to the hand holding the skull that is withering away, cold and nearly dead. It's clear in the painting that the Bible can breathe life into this man, but sadly he isn't looking at the Bible, much less picking it up.

What a picture of "this body of death"! What a reminder for all of us that we came from ashes and will one day return to ashes. One day, every one of us - in terms of our physical bodies - will be nothing but that cold, empty skull. The death statistics are still right around 100%.

So let's learn from this painting and instead of ignoring the Bible, **let's look deeply into God's Word** and reflect intentionally on the Gospel in order to breathe in the life of God and feast on the truth of His Word. (As we get to know Pastor Colin Smith through his helpful Momentum Bible Study, here is an insight into his heart and background. This painting hangs directly over his desk in his office at church. When my friend's dad, a member at The Orchard, showed the painting to Colin he was quickly enamored with it and delighted to accept a copy to display in his office.)

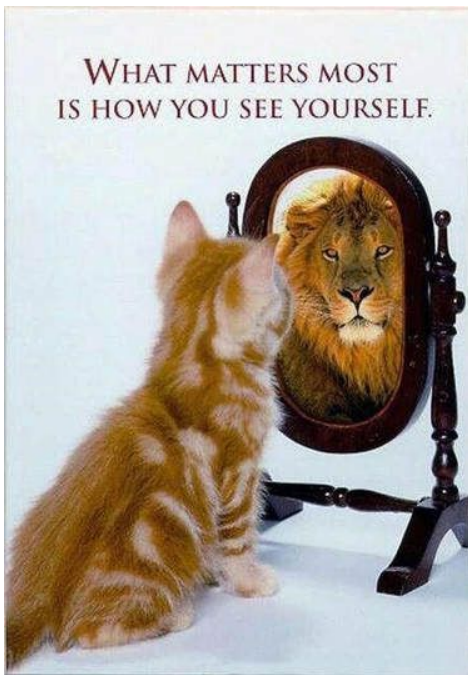
We are in a series called **Keep Moving Forward**. Last week we learned that the Gospel is our fuel to make progress in the Christian life. **The beatitudes give us a Road Map to growth and change.** And the church is our vehicle to move forward - we need one another. So even if you missed last week, please jump into one of our Community Groups this week to walk through the Beatitudes on this pathway to progress.

The lesson last week introduced the Road Map and showed **how the Beatitudes are sequential**, like a series of seven rings. You can't jump to number six or number seven. You have to swing through numbers one through five to reach number six, purity of heart. And step number one is "Blessed are the poor in spirit," - to acknowledge that I bring NOTHING of merit to the Lord; to admit our absolute poverty.

That is precisely what Romans 7 is about. "O wretched man that I am!" So if you feel that tension, if you wrestle with your own weakness - you are actually in the perfect position to take your first step toward real progress and growth in Christ. If you feel conviction and guilt and shame over how your heart is "prone to wander... prone to leave the God you love," then you are ready to take hold of that first ring of humility and swing to the second ring of repentance.

Last week we heard **the bad news** that we all deserve God's wrath and condemnation. Be careful not to insist on getting what you deserve. Don't ever think or talk in terms of entitlements when it comes to God. What you deserve - what we all deserve - is nothing but judgment, wrath, punishment, suffering, misery and torment forever. But once we begin to understand the fiery condemnation we deserve we can begin to appreciate the glorious deliverance God accomplished for us in Christ! Only then will we begin to realize the unimaginable agony He endured on our behalf - the magnitude of His sacrifice - the value of the price that was paid. Only when we understand the bad news of what we deserve in our sin can we appreciate the good news of what God offers us in Christ.

The mistake most people make today is ***thinking too highly of themselves***. The Disney message, "Believe in yourself" has been widely embraced and constantly preached. Google the phrase "**believe in yourself**" and 312 MILLION hits come up. This one is my favorite.



"What matters most is how you see yourself." Think about that. What matters MOST. Is how you see yourself. If you just believe you're a LION, the fact that you're a kitty cat doesn't matter - what matters is how you see yourself. Good grief. What matters most is knowing and believing and acting on the TRUTH - especially the truth about GOD and the truth about yourself.

Because ***the more highly people think of themselves the less they think of God***. God for most people today is a vestige of a bygone era and maybe a spiritual nicety for the high holidays; something to provide a little boost every once in a while. If it has ever been true, it is certainly still true today that ***"your God is too small."*** And the reason God appears so small is that we are so big in our own eyes.

So my goal last week was to let the Bible pound us back into our proper place. We need a strong and shocking dose of humility. We need to be reminded that **we bring nothing of merit to the Lord** - that we come empty-handed; that what we present to God in our own strength deserves only His wrath and condemnation for even our "righteous deeds are filthy rags" (Is. 64:5).

My prayer for today is to look at the other side of the coin and show **how very big God is** - how great, and gracious and glorious He really is. The less we think of ourselves the more we are in a position to see the greatness of God. And ***the more we see the majesty and supremacy of God the more clearly we will see our own weakness and sinfulness by comparison.***

We live in a dark world - we live in what truly is ***a 50 shades of gray culture***. So next to your hedonistic, materialistic neighbor or co-worker who drinks and parties all weekend, cheats on his taxes (and maybe his wife) and spends every dollar he gets (and more) on his pleasures - you probably look pretty righteous and holy. When one ant looks over at another ant he thinks to himself, I'm a little bit bigger, a little bit faster, a little bit harder working...

But next to the glorious, eternal, almighty, holy and perfect God of heaven - in the light of His wondrous righteousness, all of us look at ourselves and can say nothing except, "Oh wretched man that I am... who will free me from this body of death?" We are all tiny ants under the shadow of Almighty God - not even the big ones, much less the ones with wings or anything fancy - we are those little ones that climb and swarm all over each other, chasing after and fighting over the tiniest little clump of dirt.

So let's look at **three of God's glorious perfections** today - knowing that there are an infinite number, each of infinite value. Paul sums up the perfections of the Law in three words in Romans 7:12, so let's use those three words to meditate on the grace and glory of God this morning.

***"So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." Romans 7:12***

God - the giver of the Law - is holy, righteous and good. In direct contrast, you and I are unholy, unrighteous and evil. So as we look up at God in His perfection we will see the humbling reality of our own gross and deep seated imperfection - and that should move us to worship the God of grace and glory - filling us with gratitude for His wildly undeserved favor upon us in Christ!

First, **God is holy**. To be holy is to be set apart, different, unlike. That's how God is. We are of one kind, He is of another kind. Everything in this world is earthly and truly dirty or dirt-like in that sense. Even the first man was literally fashioned from the dirt. (That explains some things, ladies, doesn't it?) Everything in this world is of one kind for all of us and all we can see is twisted, corrupted and stained by the fall of Adam and Eve. Every human is born with a sinful nature inherited from Adam. And everything on earth is under the curse that should have fallen on him for his sin but that God graciously redirected to the ground.

But the story of the Bible is of God setting apart certain things and certain people and calling them holy. That's what ***the tabernacle and the temple*** were all about. You have normal tents you live in and set up for your marketplace - but then there is a special tent called the Tabernacle. It's not like any of your other tents. Later, they had regular houses and regular buildings - but then God showed them how to build a special building called the Temple. They couldn't even hammer out the stones at the temple site but had to custom shape each one so there was no noise of banging as the Temple was built. It was simply fitted together smoothly and quietly.

That's a HOLY building program. I bet none of us have ever experienced a construction project like that. And that was the whole point. God set apart the tabernacle and the temple as special places on earth where the Ark of the Covenant - a holy and sacred container - could be housed. To care for these special items God set apart one of the twelve tribes of Israel - the Levites. And among the Levites God set apart the house of Aaron to be priests.

All of these examples give us an idea of what it means to be holy - but all they give us is a little hint of an idea. Because when we think about the holiness of God it isn't just that He is a little different from other gods or that we have given him a special place in our lives or our culture. To say that God is holy is to say that He is ***utterly unlike us or anything we know***. Absolutely and completely set apart. ***He NEVER does anything wrong!***

Everything we know is at least partially corrupted by sin and the fall - like the college basketball. It's pretty great and fun to watch, but there are scandals and criminals in it. Some things we

know are filled with sin and thoroughly corrupted - like the NBA - which is mostly scandals, corruption and criminals, and honestly not that fun to watch.

But think about this - God never has been and never will be even the slightest bit contaminated by sin. Not one little speck of evil can touch the Lord of heaven and earth to whom the heavenly creatures cry, ***"Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come"*** (Rev. 4:8).

My connection with the church in Chicago where Pastor Colin serves was Pastor Scott Lothery, who actually attended here at Oakwood back in the '90s when he was playing baseball with Athletes in Action. Scott wrote his PhD on sanctification and developed a really helpful chart that outlines the thirteen perfections of Christ. For the visual here I only show seven - the others are printed in the worship program and an explanation is on the church blog.



Think about the last big decision you made - to buy a house or car or change jobs or choose a school. If Jesus had made that decision it would have been 100% loving, perfectly rejoicing in God, totally at peace with God and others, absolutely self-controlled and kind and gentle, 100% wise and hopeful and humble and perfectly faithful, good, zealous and patient. All 13 categories would be 100% perfect without a single speck of selfish or prideful or sinful motives or thoughts or words or actions. That is how HOLY Jesus is.

And that connects with the second characteristic of God - not only is He perfectly holy (never doing ANYTHING wrong) but He is also **perfectly RIGHTEOUS** (always doing everything exactly right). God is not only utterly untainted by sin, but He is also fully and perfectly righteous. Is this helping you to see how very exalted God is and how very weak and wicked we are? "Oh wretched man that I am! Who will free me from this body of death?"

Think again about that last big decision you made. If you evaluated each of those 13 categories and assigned a grade to each one - how many A's would you get? How many B's? Were you as disciplined, patient, generous, loving and wise as you POSSIBLY could have been?

You can see how in every one of those categories there will be some degree of imperfection because ***we are not perfectly holy***. Everything we do is at least a little corrupted by our proud, selfish and sinful tendencies. And, like the NBA, some things are thoroughly and deeply corrupted.

In addition, ***we are not perfectly righteous*** so our efforts are not only stained by sin but they also stop short of accomplishing God's standard of what ought to be.

And here is the reality. It's not that God lives up to some external standard of what is right. He **DEFINES** the standard of what is perfect and righteous by His very BEING. ***We don't measure God by some standard, we measure every standard by HIM.***

Whatever ruler you use to measure the rightness of something - that is your true guide and true god. For most people today, they are their own measure. "This feels right to me," "This is what I think is best." Then they hold up that little ruler of "rightness" and analyze the being they think of as God, often determining that this being does not seem good or just or fair.

But the question when people say this is, according to what standard? On what basis do you - a human who has lived 40 or 50 or 85 years - claim to evaluate the God who created this whole universe? There is one man who attempted this - do you remember how that worked out?

Job 38 - ***"Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, 'Who is this who darkens my counsel with word without knowledge? Dress yourself for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me..."*** Job 38:1-2

Then God goes on to ask Job a series of questions:

- "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding..." Job 38:4
- "Have you commanded the morning since your days began and caused the dawn to know its place?" Job 38:12
- "Can you send forth lightnings, that they may go and say to you, 'Here we are'?" Job 38:35

- “Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars and spreads its wings toward the south?”  
Job 39:26

God pauses in chapter 40 v. 2 ***“Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.”***

Job is stunned into silence and says, “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further.” Job 40:4-5

God goes on to challenge Job to finish the contest he initiated. If you dare to question the God of heaven, you better be prepared to see the job through. Don’t shake your fist at the justice of God and then try to jump back into your little hobbit hole. If you dare to question the righteousness of the Lord, you better go all the way to tell him how you would do better - how YOU would be a better god than He is. Here is God’s challenge to Job:

***“Adorn yourself with majesty and dignity; clothe yourself with glory and splendor... Look on everyone who is proud and bring him low and tread down the wicked where they stand... Then will I also acknowledge to you that your own right hand can save you.”*** Job 40:10,12,14

Then God describes two massive creatures - one a land animal and one a sea creature, almost certainly what we would call dinosaurs if we saw them - and said to Job, “Go ahead, take these two home as pets - I’d like to see you try.”

If we can’t even tame the CREATURES of this world how dare we defy the CREATOR of this world?

Job’s final answer is the same answer everyone will have once they stand before God. There will be no self-defense, no accusations against God’s judgment. Only this:

***“I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eyes see you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.”*** Job 42:3,5-6

**What is your ruler of what is right?** Maybe it’s a 12 incher or maybe yours is a yard stick - because you are extra special and intellectual. But the only true measure of what is holy and righteous and good is God Himself - and His yard stick reaches beyond our earth’s atmosphere, beyond our galaxy and beyond the farthest reaches of space. He is perfectly holy and righteous beyond our comprehension and it will take all of eternity to even begin to experience His glory and worship Him as He deserves.

God is holy. God is righteous. Finally, **God is good**. Come back with me to Romans 7 as we tie all of this together. Romans 7:7 shows us the question Paul is dealing with - "What then shall we say? That the law is sin?" Since God has provided a new law of the Spirit to replace the old law of Moses does that mean that the Law of Moses was sinful or evil or deficient in some way? Paul's answer is an emphatic NO! God's law is holy, righteous and good - for it is an expression of His very being.

But the nature of God's law - being perfectly good - is that it exposes sin for what it is. God's law shines the light of His goodness onto the evil in this world. And, because of the twisted, evil and corrupt nature of our world and our hearts, the result is that by shining light onto sin, it awakens sinful desire in the heart of sinful people. We see something we shouldn't have and though we didn't care about it before, suddenly we long for it.

***"If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me." Romans 7:7-10***

***The fact that the light of God's law awakens sin does not prove that God is evil or that His law is evil - it actually proves the exact opposite.*** It proves that sin is so pervasive in the hearts of men that ***just to see something forbidden is to desire it.*** This is how the first sin happened. Just by saying that there was one tree from which Adam and Eve could not eat - a perfectly GOOD and righteous command - temptation was awakened, even in their sin-free hearts! "Did God really say...?"

**Haven't we all experienced this?** What does a diet do? Don't eat sweets... What's the only thing you can think about? Reeses Peanut Butter Cups. Ever tried a low-carb diet? All you can think about is fried shrimp and cheddar bay biscuits at Red Lobster. And regardless of what you were thinking about before - those glorious items have now awakened sinful, gluttonous desires in your heart. I am sorry - but it proves my point.

The fact that there are these selfish, self-indulgent desires lurking in our hearts even when we've been eating nothing but salad and quinoa for two weeks proves two things: 1) carbs are delicious and 2) we are weak and wretched sinners. Of course we should eat only perfectly natural, highly nutritious plant life. But just seeing the light of those perfections fills us with desire for high fructose corn syrup and all kinds of chemically processed confections.

So we have come full circle. If we see ourselves accurately and realize how weak and selfish and sinful we are, we are in a position to appreciate how holy and righteous and good God is by

contrast. After all, only the most loving and merciful and gracious being in the universe would sacrifice His only Son to redeem miserable, carb-eating, NBA watching sinners like us.

And this is ***the final proof of the goodness of God*** - that in spite of our pitiful weakness and wretched sinfulness God sent His perfectly righteous Son to pay the price for our sins. We look at ourselves and say "O wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" And God looks down on us in His grace and says, Jesus will if you let Him. And so Paul shouts his joyful acclamation - "Thanks be to God through Christ Jesus our Lord!"

***The final proof of God's goodness is the Cross of Jesus Christ.*** If you ever question the justice of God - consider the INJUSTICE of what Jesus suffered for you. If you ever question the holiness of God, consider the sins of mankind that covered Jesus as he hung on that cross. If you ever question the righteousness of God, consider the obedience of Jesus who did not stop short of giving up his very life. If you ever question the goodness of God, consider what you deserve from Him - which he poured out on Jesus on the cross - and then consider what God offers you in Christ. Then you will sing in your heart, "God is so good - God is so good - He's so good to me!"

And here is ***the sign that you are beginning to see God properly*** in all of His goodness and grace and glory - that ***your heart will be filled with GRATITUDE.*** Just as Paul, wrestling with the sin in his own heart, cried out "Wretched man that I am!" You will wrestle with those same desires and temptations. But then like Paul, once you've experienced the grace and mercy of God, you will shout to the heavens, "THANKS BE TO GOD through Christ Jesus our Lord!" Your heart will overflow with gratitude and joy.

Let me close by sharing a little about **my friend, Keith** - whose Dad painted "O wretched man."

Keith was raised in a Christian home - as you can see from his dad's artwork. But like many young people today, Keith was distracted by life and responsibility and challenges, and spent many years away from God and the church. When a long-term relationship with a woman ended, Keith found himself struggling to hold the pieces of his life together.

He had attended The Orchard Church in the past - he had even met Colin a few years before. So Keith decided it was time to come back to church. And since my job was to follow up with newcomers to the church, I was blessed to start getting to know Keith, who eventually ended up in my morning men's Bible study. (Some of you have been drawn into that vortex here - so if you ever meet Keith you can compare notes on the fellowship of those sufferings. Any other guys who are looking for a men's group are welcome to join us here at church at 6:15 a.m. on Wednesday mornings - it's an open invite, the only cost of admission is the early hour.)

Keith knew the Gospel - he knew Jesus had died for him and rose again. He knew salvation was a gift of God's grace. He knew the right answers. But since he hadn't been walking with Jesus for a

while he felt that he had to make some things up, to pay some things back. So even though in one way he felt broken, powerless and lost, in another way he was looking to himself as his own savior and Lord.

This is how it often is for people. On one level they seem to be humble and to even think too little of themselves. But on a deeper level the truth is that they are still trying to save themselves, to pay some things back, to earn some of God's favor, to make themselves a little more worthy of God's grace. Do you see how this is just a different way to exalt yourself? To see yourself as stronger and more capable than you are?

One of the things that really helped Keith break free from this and start moving forward again with the Lord was this Momentum Bible study. The light of the Gospel began to shine again into the darkness of his heart and suddenly he had hope again. His cold heart began to be warmed by the goodness and grace and unconditional love of God. He came to embrace his own weakness and inability - the first ring - admitting, "I bring nothing of merit to the Lord." And in taking this step he suddenly felt free for the first time in a long time.

The burden wasn't his to carry anymore - he didn't have to fix himself! Jesus had set him free!

Keith was baptized this past November to show his fresh commitment to Christ and the joy and gratitude he has to stand in the grace of God even as he continues to strive for growth. We were texting the other day about God's grace and Keith wrote this: "It's all laid out in the Bible - people just have to study, and trust it, trust in Jesus, not in man, not in works."

We all feel the tension of Romans 7:24 - ***"O wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death?"*** But we can also feel the relief that Keith experienced and that Paul celebrated in the next line: ***"Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"***