
Alright. Hey, what's up, Traders Point family? It's good to see everybody today. Want to welcome those of you gathering across all of our physical locations and those of you joining us online. We're really glad to have you today.

If you have a Bible or a device with a Bible on it, go ahead and meet me in Romans 7. That's where we are going to be today.

I want to start off this way. About two times a year I get together with a group of leaders from various places all over the country in what we call a cohort. And we get together in the spring and fall. We spend about a day-and-a-half together.

As part of that time we invite what I would call a sage to join us. A sage is somebody who is older and wiser and more experienced than any of us. And we sit down, usually around some sort of a fire in somebody's backyard—lots of good food is involved. We just pick his brain and pepper him with questions.

And he just kind of downloads all kinds of wisdom and knowledge and encouragement into our lives over the course of this day or so. It's always such a rich experience.

Back in the spring we did this. We were gathered at a house in southern California, and we invited a retired pastor to come and spend the day with us. This is a guy who has served faithfully over decades and what I would say is that he has finished well. He retired. There was no scandal. There was none of that stuff—not perfect but he finished well.

In fact, we have a tendency to hear a lot about the people, the leaders, who don't finish well. But we don't hear nearly enough about the ones who do, in my opinion. And this is one of those guys. So we're sitting around and we're just drinking from the firehose as he was sharing all kinds of nuggets of wisdom with us. And I'm filling up a journal full of all of the things that he is saying.

At one point he starts talking about preaching, which really interests me because I do this so much. And this is what he said, and I wrote it in my journal. He said, "Exegeting Scripture is one thing." Now the word exegete means to explain or interpret or to expound.

So he goes, "Exegeting Scripture is one thing. Exegeting yourself as a communicator, well that's difficult." And then he said this. He goes, "You really haven't preached, the sermon really hasn't come to life, until you have helped your people see where you are in the message."

Now, what he is saying is that preaching isn't simply reading the Scripture or explaining the Scripture or even applying or illustrating the Scripture. It's not just giving an outline. He said, "The

Scripture comes to life and connects when your people can see how God is working in your life through the message.”

So it’s not about me. I never want to get up here and make myself the hero of every story. I would never want you to think that I’ve got it all figured out or that I have all of the information.

But what I do want to do, even if it’s just at one point in the message, is pull back the curtain and say, “Here’s how God is working on me through this passage we are working through. And here are the objections that I have. Here are the questions that I face and the roadblocks that I have found.” I’m a work in progress as well.

It’s the realization that no matter who is up on this platform teaching and preaching, we are not up here because we have it all figured out or because we no longer struggle or because we have all of the answers. In fact, it’s quite the opposite.

One of my favorite definitions of preaching is I’m just one hungry beggar telling others where I’ve found food.

Now some of you might be like, “Okay, Aaron. Nice story. Why are you telling us all of this because I don’t anticipate preaching a message?”

The reason why I am telling you this is because as we come to chapter 7 in our study of Romans, this is exactly what Paul is doing. Paul is exegesis himself.

If you’ve been here for this series that we’ve been walking through now, I don’t even know what week we’re in, Paul has been unpacking the Gospel message. In fact, he has been—can I say it this way?—disrupting our lives with reality. He’s helping us understand what the Gospel message is.

And if you didn’t know any better, if you knew nothing about Paul, you’d go, “Man, this guy has it all figured out. He’s got all of the answers and he’s eloquently unpacking the Gospel message in the first five chapters.”

But last week in chapter 6 and this week in chapter 7, this is Paul pulling back the curtain and going, “Here’s where I struggle too. I am in just as much need of recalibration as anyone else. So let me put my life under the spotlight, under the microscope, to kind of show you this internal battle that I’ve got going on.”

In fact, Romans 6 through 8 is Paul at his most vulnerable in the letter, which is why it is so encouraging.

Now last week if you were here, you might remember me telling you that the first five chapters of Romans is Paul explaining to us what God does for us through Jesus. Chapters 6 through 8 is Paul explaining to us what God desires to do in us through Jesus.

And chapter 7—we're going to walk through the whole chapter today, 25 verses—is really a continuation of what he started last week in chapter 6.

Let me just kind of jog your memory. We talked about the challenge of personal and spiritual growth, meaning, "Why is it that once I give my life to Jesus, why is it that once I understand the gospel message, that personal and spiritual growth are so difficult?"

I wish spiritual growth was up and to the right. But it's not. It's a series of mountain tops and valleys. It's a series of three steps forward, two-and-a-half steps back. It's victories as well as defeats and setbacks.

So why is it so hard? "I thought I had a handle on...." And you fill in the blank. "I thought I had a handle on my anger, my pride, my lust, my greed but yet it keeps resurfacing in my life and setting me back in devastating ways."

So Paul totally identifies with us in this chapter when he says, "I really don't understand myself. The things that I want to do, I don't do. The things that I don't want to do, I keep on doing."

Last week we sort of wrapped up by saying that there is a spiritual component to this, a theological understanding, and then there is what we might call a biological process.

What I mean by that is when you come to Christ there is this theological understanding. And here it is: you are saved by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus alone, period.

It is not your work. You don't bring anything to it. It is all Jesus, and He transfers His righteousness into your account. And some of us are like, "Man, that just seems to be too good to be true." But it is true. And it should be transformational.

So when you respond to this free gift of salvation what that means is that you believe, you confess, you repent, you're baptized because that is an external picture of what's happening internally—mainly your death, burial, and resurrection and this cleansing that takes place by what Jesus has done for you.

Now, that is a position of confidence and security. Meaning that because it was Jesus who did that for you, you don't fall in and out of God's grace. You still sin, but God's grace outpaces your sin.

Not in a way that says, "Here's a blank check," or the way I said it last week was, "Here's a divine Visa card. Just run up the sin balance as much as you want, God will pay it off in the end." It doesn't give us a license to sin, but to say, "Hey, I'm covered so now I desire to grow."

And that's the question of formation, which is the mega theme of this whole series.

It's a realization that every single one of us (whether you believe in God right now or not) are being formed into the image and likeness of something or someone, namely the people you hang around with and the content you consume. You're being formed into that image. And we want to be formed more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus. So we come to Him on a continual basis.

And the reason why personal growth is so challenging is the biological aspect of this. We have a tendency to carve grooves in our brain that develop addictions and habits and rhythms, and they are called neural pathways. And that will likely not change overnight. It's going to change over a series of decisions that we make.

It's sort of like a chiropractor. You get out of alignment, and you go to a chiropractor, and he snaps you back into place. And then you don't go, "Hey, I'm good. I don't need to see one ever again." No, you actually go through life, you go through more wear and tear, and you have to go back again.

This is the process of what we might call sanctification. We continue, by way of the Spirit, to come to God. The way the Scriptures say it is to keep in step with the Spirit. And that's going to be a process that we continually come back to God on.

Here's where I left off next week:

My character (and your character) is the collection of my choices.

It's the collection of our choices. So God's grace outpaces our failures but not to give us a blank check to keep on sinning. Now we strive to bring all of our (this is a key term) disordered desires under the Lordship of Christ, which is a process.

It's the understanding that God is not just concerned about getting me into heaven, but He's concerned about helping me to become the kind of person who is ready for heaven. And that comes down to our character. Now let me say this to jump in to chapter 7:

The work of sanctification is preparing my character for citizenship in heaven.

It is the question of formation. It is who or what is recalibrating my life? And we've simply said, as followers of Jesus, we want to recalibrate our lives back to True North, which is the voice of Jesus Christ.

And there are a lot of voices right now competing for attention and affection in our lives. We just simply want to be open and say, "I never, ever want to exchange the truth of God for a lie. So, Spirit of God, am I doing that?" Like, "God, I want to aim my affections not toward created things, but toward Creator God," which is the definition of worship.

This is going to require, potentially, a re-wiring of our brains. It is really, really important what we think about, and it's really important what we expose ourselves to, right?

So I say all of that by way of introduction. Now, as we jump into chapter 7, I just want to say this to you. I have a ton of content and it's really, really dense. So I hope you've had your coffee. I hope you have your thinking caps on.

First service I was up here going, "I don't know if you're getting this." I kind of felt like I was cramming a steak down everybody's throat, and they didn't have time to chew. I just want to acknowledge that right now. I'm going to move fast.

And I have to talk... some of you are like, "You talk so fast." It's because if I don't I forget what I'm going to say. I've got to keep talking fast so that way—I'm processing it as I'm talking. So I just want to acknowledge all of this.

You're probably going to need to go back and re-listen to this message six times to begin to get it, because it is dense. There's going to be a lot of cloud cover. Hopefully there will be a ray of sunlight by the end of this, alright?

So, Tim Keller outlines this chapter in this way:
verses 7-13 describe the battle we can't win
verses 14-25 describe the battle we can't lose; and
the first 6 verses give us an analogy to help us see the connection between the two.

So, we'll start off with verse 1. He says:
"Now, dear brothers and sisters—you who are familiar with the law—don't you know that the law applies only while a person is living?"

"For example, when a woman marries, the law binds her to her husband as long as he is alive. But if he dies, the laws of marriage no longer apply to her. So while her husband is alive, she would be committing adultery if she married another man. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law and does not commit adultery when she remarries."

Now this all sounds very, very confusing given the fact of where he was in chapter 6 and now where he is going in chapter 7, it kind of leaves you scratching your head going, "Paul, why are you talking about marriage here? This doesn't seem to make any sense."

What I want you to know is that he is using an analogy, just like he did in chapter 6. Remember the analogy in chapter 6? The analogy he used was slavery. He said that is an analogy to help us understand our connection in relation to sin.

Now, he's using the analogy of marriage to show us our connection to the law. I'll explain law here in a minute. So verse 4, he goes:

"So, my dear brothers and sisters, this is the point:" of the analogy, "You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are united..." remember that term from last week,

the horticultural term where we are connected to the vine as a branch, "... united with the one..." talking about Jesus, "... who was raised from the dead."

In other words, before Jesus all of us were married to the law. Now, what does that mean? Well, remember there are a couple of specific applications to Paul's writing here. With any Bible interpretation you have to always start with who wrote it and who he originally wrote it to. You've got to start there.

So we recognize that this is Paul writing (remember) to a very divided church in Rome—Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. Why were they divided? Well, the Jewish Christians got kicked out of Rome. They were allowed to come back in five years later, and when they did it was a very, very Gentile church. Meaning the Gentiles weren't paying any attention to the Jewish customs and laws.

And the Jews were upset about it. So they came in and they were like, "Why aren't you guys observing the Sabbath? And why aren't you observing the dietary restrictions. And why aren't you doing circumcision anymore?" And they were trying to hold these things over the Gentile Christians.

In other words they were saying, "Yes, you are saved by grace through faith in Jesus and all of these other things." We continue to do this today. So the broader application for the rest of us here is recognizing that the law (if you're taking notes) could also be shorthand for this: whatever standard you assume proves your worth or gives you acceptance.

And that's what we're all looking for, "I want to know that I have worth, and I want to know that I'm accepted by God and by others. And so, by a very early age we develop a standard and we are all looking to that. And Paul says, "Hey, whatever that standard is, whether you realize it or not, you are married to that."

What does that mean? Well that means that you've built your whole life around it kind of like when you literally get married to somebody else—you build your life around that other person. And he says that it is how you articulate your identity. It's how you reassure yourself that everything is going to be okay. And it formulates your worth.

This is why we often respond when somebody says, "Hey, tell me about yourself," with what we do for a living or what our talents and abilities are. It's whatever kind of props up our sense of worth or the standard by which we think we are accepted.

Go back to Paul's analogy in the first few verses. He says, "The law is the husband," or you could interchange that with wife, "to which you were at one time married." But he goes, "A death has occurred. You died to the law, which means that you also died to keeping the law as a basis of your acceptance, value, and worth. You died to all of that. And now you are united to Jesus by way of His death, His burial, and His resurrection."

Alright? Let's keep going. As a result, verse 4:

“We can produce a harvest of good deeds for God.” Remember the fruit of the Spirit. “When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced a harvest of sinful deeds, resulting in death.

“But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law,” by way of justifying ourselves, “but in the new way of living in the Spirit.”

So he says all of that and then check out what he says in verse 7. He goes:

“Well then,” and hopefully by now in our study you recognize that every time he says those two words well then, he’s getting ready to answer his own rhetorical question. He is anticipating the objections that the Jewish Christians in Rome would have had and maybe even some of us have. And here’s the question, “... am I suggesting that the law of God is sinful?”

Or we could say, “Am I suggesting that the law of God is bad or that it is irrelevant?” Here’s what some of the Jewish Christians would have been thinking as they read Paul’s letter to them. They would have been like, “You’re awfully hard on the law, Paul. It seems to us that you’ve got a thing against the law. What is wrong with the law, Paul?”

And it would kind of be like us today. I would say that there are probably two very general groups of people listening to this. Those of us who love the rules and those of us who don’t.

Some of us are like, “Man, what is wrong with the rules? Rules provide a standard. Rules are kind of like a warm security blanket. I love me some rules.”

And others of us are like, “Rules are made to be broken.” Or, if you’re kind of like me, “I’ll follow the rules as long as they make sense. But if they don’t make sense, I’m going to break them.” And I am married to someone who never breaks the rules. That’s how that works.

So Paul goes, “Hey, man. Is the law bad?” What’s he talking about? He’s talking about all 613 commands in the Old Testament. If you could follow all 613 of them, no need for Jesus. You’d be righteous. Nobody can do it. Take the 613, boil them down to the top 10, the Ten Commandments, nobody can even do that.

So what is the purpose of the law? Is it bad? He answers his own question. Remember this from last week:

“Of course not!” Romans 7:13 (NLT)

The strongest was to say no in the Greek. It’s like my teenaged daughters going, “Uh-no.” This is what Paul is doing. And then he says this. He goes: “In fact, it was the law that showed me my sin.”

And that is a great one sentence description of the purpose of the law. In other words, the law’s primary function is to show us how far short we all fall from God’s standard of goodness.

This is why when you say, “Good people go to heaven,” then you’ve just got to say, “By whose standard? Whose standard of goodness gets you in? How many acts of goodness gets you in?” The worst leaders in history, many of them thought they were doing good and the rest of us are going, “Nope. You were doing bad.”

So by what standard? And that’s what the law does. The law says, “Hey, here’s your standard of goodness. But, here’s God’s standard of goodness. And you can never get there.”

Here is what the law does, it defines, and it reveals sin. That’s what it does.

If I could use this illustration, I don’t know how many of you have seen this. It’s called The Mirror. I don’t know how many of you have this in your house. I’ve not used it or anything like it, but I’ve heard about it. Apparently, you look into a mirror, and you exercise.

So let’s just say that this mirror is the law. Let’s just say you have a full-length mirror in your house, and not only can you exercise with it, but the full-length mirror takes these measurements and knows your ideal build, muscle mass, and weight according to your age and all of that for you to be healthy.

And every time you look into that mirror there is an outline of what you should look like, and it’s not an outline of what you do look like. I don’t know about you, but I’m getting rid of that mirror. I ain’t going to look at that every day.

That’s the law. You look into the perfect law of God, and this is the standard by which you should live. It’s what God always wanted for you in a perfect world, but we don’t live in a perfect world. We live in a fallen world that is messed up by sin. And we look into the law, and we go, “Man, this just shows me that by God’s standard of goodness, I will never live up. I think I’m pretty good, but I’m actually not.”

This is why in the first couple of weeks in this series.... If the good news of the Gospel really doesn’t sound all that good to you it is likely because you really don’t understand how bad the bad news really is.

And Paul is not talking at us because right here, in the very next verse, he gives an example out of his own life. He says, “Hey, here’s where I am in the message.” He pulled back the curtain. “Let me put the spotlight on me.” He says:

“I would never have known that coveting is wrong...” coveting, which is the tenth commandment: Thou shalt not covet. “I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, ‘You must not covet.’”

Now what does he mean by that? Well, he means that coveting, which by the way has everything to do with internal motivations in your life—you can covet and nobody else will ever know—so he

goes, "I would have never known that coveting was wrong had the law not told me," because from a very early age that is just what we do.

How many of you have ever read a book on how to covet? How many of you have ever taken a class, Coveting 101? How many of you have ever had a mentor say, "Let me teach you in the ways of coveting?" Likely not. But how many of you covet? Please raise up your hands. We've all coveted.

What is coveting? Well it's like secretly going, "Man, I wish I had what they had." "I wish I had their kids; they seem so well behaved on Instagram." "I wish I had their car." "I wish I had their looks." "I wish I had somebody else's platform." That's coveting.

And he says, "I never would have known that was a thing because my heart just naturally goes there, if the law had not said: Thou shalt not covet." He goes on in verse 8:

"But sin used this command to arouse all kinds of covetous desires within me!" Now that I'm aware of it, I see it all of the time. "If there were no law, sin would not have that power. At one time I lived without understanding the law." Now he's actually talking about his days before Christ.

"But when I learned the command not to covet, for instance, the power of sin came to life, and I died. So I discovered that the law's commands, which were supposed to bring life, brought spiritual death instead." Why? Because I can never live up to it. Verse 11:

"Sin took advantage of those commands and deceived me; it used the commands to kill me. But still, the law itself is holy, and its commands are holy and right and good. But how can that be? Did the law, which is good, cause my death?" Here it is once again, "Of course not! Sin used what was good to bring about my condemnation to death. So we can see how terrible sin really is. It uses God's good commands for its own evil purposes."

And that is how we get hypocrisy and legalism. Whenever we use God's good command for our own ends to kind of prop ourselves up and to say, "Here's how good I really am in relation to other people."

So what Paul is talking about here? Maybe you may remember or recall his story. If you don't, I'll just give you the CliffNotes version.

Before Paul was called Paul, his name was Saul. And before he was the author of a bunch of our New Testament, he was a prominent Pharisee and he thought he was pleasing God, he thought he was following after God, but he really wasn't. And his heart was largely unaware of just how far he had drifted from God.

And he says, "I prided myself on knowing the law better than anyone else and following the law better than anyone else." And he goes, "But it broke down when it came to the law of coveting."

Why? Because, let's just take the Ten Commandments. All of those have to do with external behaviors. Coveting has to do with internal motivations, which will nail us every time.

Here's how it went for Paul. Paul went down through the Ten Commandments. Thou shall not commit adultery. He's like, "I haven't done that. I don't steal. I don't kill. I keep the Sabbath. I tithe every dollar. Check, check, check, check, check."

But then he comes down to the tenth commandment and it messes everything else up because that one deals with internal motivations of the heart, revealing in a really, really sick twist that he'd been following all of the commandments for selfish reasons.

In fact, being super religious was actually fueled by his coveting heart. He wanted the respect and the admiration, and the affection of others more than he wanted the approval of God. And he said, "The harder I tried to keep the law and prove that I was a good person, the more my coveting flared up and I was aware of it. It was all fueled by my insecurity."

In Acts, chapter 26, Paul is recounting his conversion story. Some of you might remember it. His name is Saul. He's on the road to Damascus. God comes to him in a bright, blinding light. He falls down and over a series of days he comes to recognize how far he'd drifted, and he gives his life to God.

And in Acts, 26, as Paul is kind of unpacking this for us, he says something really, really peculiar. He says that God cried out to him by way of the Spirit on that day on the road to Damascus with these words, "Saul, Saul. It is hard for you to kick against the goads."

And I've never fully understood that. This is what he is talking about. A goad was a long stick with a pointed end, and it was used to guide livestock, sort of like a cattle prod. Obviously they didn't like it. And so they would kick against it, but when they did it was to no avail, and it only injured themselves.

This is what Jesus says to Paul. What's he talking about? He says, "One of the goads, so to speak, was this conviction that you keep kicking up against the conviction of the tenth commandment. And your complete inability to justify yourself. Would you stop trying to justify yourself and hold it over others? Would you just come to Me? This is a battle that you will never, ever, ever win."

Now, in the remainder of the chapter he's going to talk about the battle that we cannot lose. Look at verse 14:

"So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it.

"Instead, I do what I hate. But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good." That's called conviction. Verse 17, "So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it."

And right here, all of us should be able to resonate with what he is saying because he is describing this internal battle, the struggle, that goes on inside of all of us. The old man or woman and the new man or woman, the bad part of us and the good part of us, the shadow side of us, the flesh and the soul.

I said this last week, you're not just all body and you're not just all soul. You are a soul in a body, which means that you are still prone to disordered desires. And there is a battle going on.

This kind of reminds me of that book by Robert Louis Stevenson entitled Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Remember reading that book in school? Dr. Jekyll is a really good citizen, but he's really discouraged because he notices that deep down inside there is this shadow side of him that kind of keeps seeping out into the good part of him and kind of sabotaging all of his good intentions.

And he says this, "I am an incongruent compound of both good and bad mixed together." So he decides to do something about it. Dr. Jekyll, being a chemist, develops a potion that separates the two.

So only the good part comes out by day, Dr. Jekyll, and the bad part comes out by night, Mr. Hyde, whose name originates, by the way, from the word hidden or hideous. And he said, "Now they can exist without restraining each other or poisoning each other."

The problem was, as many of you know, that the evil part of him was far more evil than he ever thought. He's like, "Whoa, this isn't just a guy who was a little mischievous." Mr. Hyde is selfish, spiteful, angry, hateful, and he even killed people. He goes, "I was 10 times more wicked than I imagined."

Stevenson, speaking through Dr. Jekyll said this, "I discovered through this process that man is not truly one but two. It wasn't that I was a hypocrite because both sides of me were completely sincere." Stevenson, by the way, was a believer, which makes me wonder if Romans 7 inspired the writing of that story.

Now watch how Paul turns up the dial big time before kind of bringing this to a resolution. Verse 18, he goes:

"And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature." What is he saying here? He's not saying there isn't anything good within you. You've been made in the image of God. There is goodness in you because of that alone. But he goes, "In my sinful nature? Nothing good."

"I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it."

Now, I think it is important to point out that Paul is explaining here the spiritual reality of this fight that we are all in and he's not making excuses for bad behavior. This is not the lame line, "Well, you know. Satan made me do it."

Satan can't make you do anything. Satan will not force himself on you and force your actions any more than the Spirit of God can force your actions. He'll tempt you. He'll throw some stuff in your path. And then you've got to make a decision. That's why we said this last week. There is a difference between temptation and sin.

There have been some moments in my life as I've journeyed through this and wrestled with faith and wondered if God was real and whether the Bible can be trusted—there have been moments in my life when I have experienced such temptation and allure from Satan, trying to pull me away from the Spirit of God. They reaffirmed my belief in a good God. In irony, it's actually the intensity of Satan's temptations that reinforced my belief in God, if that makes sense.

There is this kind of sinister nature within all of us where we have to check our motives. Here's why. You can do the right thing for wrong reasons.

I was talking to a friend of mine a few months ago and she confessed to me that God was exposing some pride in her life. And it really surprised me because I'd never once, in all my interactions with her, ever, ever thought that she was prideful. I never had that thought. And so I told her that. I said, "I've never, ever thought of you as prideful."

And here's what she said. It rocked me back on my heels. She said, "Well, Aaron. That's how sinister pride can be. I can actually pretend to not be prideful and it's actually pride that is causing me to do that."

It's this idea, "I want others to notice me. I want others to think well of me. I want to work my way up or whatever. So I'm going to serve, I'm going to come across as just having a servant's heart. But it's not because I really want to make a difference in the lives of people. It's not because I want to be obedient to God. But honestly, it's because I want other people to think highly of me." That's pride.

And that's how sinister our hearts can be. And there is this internal war that is going on in all of us. Look at what he says in verse 21:

"I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong." That should be my life verse. Verse 22:

"I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?"

Paul says it so clearly here. He says, "There is a war going on in my mind." And I can't help but notice. It's what is going on all around us. There is a plague right now just sweeping through society of mental health issues: anxiety and depression and suicide are all through the roof.

And then we come to a passage like this that says that there is a war in our minds. And I'm not trying to over-spiritualize this. I'm not necessarily talking about demon possession (although I'm not necessarily ruling it out either) what I am saying is that the real battle exists in our heads.

So if you want to get through this you've got to recognize that your thought life is so important. We just underestimate that, "It's not such a big deal. I'm just thinking it." No, it's a huge deal because that is where behavior, where rhythms, where habits come from.

So if your thoughts are so important then you've got to say, "Well, my thoughts don't just appear out of thin air." Your thoughts are a product of the things you consume. The material you read. The things that you watch. The people who you interact with. And we are either helping in this by placing ourselves in a position of watching what we consume, or we are our own worst enemy.

One of the earliest dreams that I ever had, I've never forgotten it. I don't remember how old I was, but I was a little kid. I have a tendency to remember most of my dreams. And I remember having this dream.

The first house that we lived in was a house that was in the woods, and it had a long, gravel driveway that went through some thick woods.

And I had this dream. It was after dark. I'm walking down the gravel driveway, but the thing is that I was actually behind me. I was walking behind me. And I had a flashlight or a spotlight, so I was walking behind me.

It was really weird. I was creeping up on myself. I was getting ready to attack myself. And right when I got up behind me, me turned around to look at me, and I had this terrified look on my face as I attacked myself and I woke up.

That was terrifying. What in the world was that all about? I had this impression from a very, very early age, "Aaron, you are your own worst enemy. You are just one or two decisions away from just completely sabotaging your life."

There was this battle that was going on within me. This is what Paul is talking about. This war in our mind, which means don't give the enemy any sort of a foothold.

Let me finish up the passage and then I'm going to make a couple of words of application and I'm going to finish up on time—maybe. Verse 25:

"Thank God!" Oh, man. That is so great. "Thank God!" Can you sense the relief in this? "The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God's law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin."

It's a battle I can't win. But Jesus gives me the battle I can't lose.

So let me give you two primary takeaways before I wrap up. Here's the first thing:

Following Jesus means you will face an ongoing war in your mind.

It's never going to go away. And it's actually an opportunity to be formed more and more into the image and likeness of Jesus. To reform the grooves in your brain, your neural pathways, to look more and more like Jesus. This right here is a reoccurring theme all through the New testament.

Galatians, chapter 5: "The desires of the flesh and the promptings of the Spirit oppose each other to keep you from doing the things that you want to do."

Colossians 3 urges us, "Hey, man. Put off the old self with its practices. Put on the new."

Ephesians 6: "Put on the full armor of God."

It's understanding that when you give your life to Christ, the old self doesn't go away, the old self doesn't even lose any strength. It is still there. It is just not in the driver's seat anymore. This is what Lordship means. And I'm not going to move over one inch otherwise it will push me out, grab the wheel, and run my life into a ditch.

Guard your mind.

You read the Bible and you listen to worship music and all of that not just because that's what good Christians do, not because God is pleased when you do that, but because you are filling your mind with things because you know that that is where the battle is lost or won.

So can I get really, really practical right now? The real church right now in America is our screens. It almost feels like I am spitting into the wind when it comes to any sort of a difference I can make because I know that there are multiple hours that you are spending on your screen right now, taking in all kinds of content that is running in direct counter to what God's Word says.

And they say that you are committed if you are in church once a month. So a 35, 40, sometimes 45-minute message in comparison to multiple hours on a screen, that's your church. You are being disciplined by the talking commentary heads on whatever news media you look at. I am just an addendum. And I recognize that.

So here's the thing. The ball is in your court. You've got to ask yourself, "What is coming into my mind on a regular basis?"

Here's the test. Whatever you're filling your mind with, if it is not leading you to the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control but it is leading to fear, anxiety, and anger you need to stop eating it.

I was in New York City this past week for one night. I had a board meeting on Tuesday. And so I got up really early in my hotel room and I'm just doing some stretching. And I turned on the TV just to have some noise on in the room. Shouldn't have done that. Because what was on TV was not a news channel, but it was one of those bright, cheery morning talk shows, which is just so fake.

I wasn't fully listening to it. It was just on in the background. But they were talking about the storms in the east and the storms in the west. And they were talking about the virus, and they were talking about politics. And they were talking about all of these issues and problems. And then the commercial breaks were all about politics and people smearing each other and all of that.

After about 35 or 40 minutes, I started to feel anxious and I started to feel gross, and I was like, "What is wrong with me today?" And I was like, "Oh, I'm eating that."

It's like whenever you eat junk food, how do you feel? You feel gross afterward. It's the same thing with content. So can I just say this? If the battle is fought in your mind, you need to ask yourself... if, on a consistent basis, your feeling angry, fearful, or anxious then you need to stop consuming some of the things you are consuming.

Some of you have the news on, whether it's CNN or Fox News—whatever church you go to—all day long. Why? "Well, we want to keep touch with what's going on in the world."

You can get that a different way. Read the headlines five minutes a day. You don't need to have the news on all of the time because that's discipling you, that's creating this sense of direction in your life. So we've got to watch what we watch.

Here's the second word of application:

Recognizing the victory Jesus won for us changes the way we see the fight.

So we're just under this recognition, "I am a wretched man." "I am a wretched woman." "There isn't anything that I can do to justify myself before God and others. Jesus has won that victory for me. And now I have this freedom to begin to pursue Jesus in every area of my life, and become more and more like His image because I've been set free by grace. Therefore, grace should be exuding out of my life."

I had a mentor say this to me when I was in college. He goes, "Man, if you are saved by grace, that ought to make you gracious. And if you ain't gracious, you probably haven't been saved by grace. You're trying to justify yourself by the law."

There should be no such thing as a mean Christian. Imperfect? Yes. But mean? No. Because you realize what you have been set free from.

It's kind of like the great preacher Tony Evans. He described it this way. He is talking about canines; he's talking about dogs. He goes, "Man, you can tell the difference between a grace dog and a law dog.

"A law dog has his tail tucked between his legs. It cowers when the master comes into the room. It's unsure how to please the master, unsure where it stands—law dog.

"Grace dog, oh man, everybody loves to be around a grace dog—tail's wagging, jumps up on you, licking you, wants to please the master, just happy to be around you because there is a relationship that is there."

Now, unfortunately, there is no correlation with cats. This analogy totally breaks down with cats. We love you, cat people. You are welcome here. Just do not email me.

He says all of that to say this, "Hey, God wants grace people not law people." The fact that you have a relationship with Him, grace exudes into the lives of other people. And God sent Jesus so that you might have that.

I want to wrap up with this. Some of you might recognize the name Adoniram Judson. He was a prolific missionary born in the late 1700s. Even though he grew up in a Christian home, he actually rebelled against God, became a deist and a skeptic of Christianity. But as a young man he had a genuine conversion and gave his life to Christ.

He went to seminary. There he had a group of missions-minded friends who really influenced him. And he became convinced that Asia was the place he needed to move because that was the place of greatest need in the world for the Gospel message at the time.

So he and his wife set out for India, but due to political reasons there got forced out. From there they went to Burma. That's where he served out the remainder of his days. And he set the goal of translating the Bible into Burmese. It was an amazing accomplishment. Many of us haven't even read the Bible all of the way through. He wanted to translate the whole thing into a different language.

And that's when life got really difficult. He went through all kinds of experiences of suffering and hardship. And what seemed like little fruit for all of his effort. After 12 years of serving there they had only led 18 people to Christ.

He spent 17 months in prison. His first wife died of disease, as did their third child. He remarried to an American missionary. She also died of disease. At the age of 61 he developed an illness that forced him to head back to the United States, but while he was on the ship, he died. It just seems like one setback after another.

However, after nearly 40 years of ministry, listen to this, he left behind a fully translated Burmese Bible, planted over 100 churches, and led over 8,000 people to Jesus.

His son, Edward Judson, was born in Burma but moved back to the United States. He became a pastor of a Berean church in Manhattan near Washington Square, later renamed Judson Memorial Church.

Here is what he said:

“Success and suffering are vitally and organically linked. If you succeed without suffering, it is because someone suffered for you; if you suffer without succeeding, it is in order that someone else may succeed after you.”

Now there are all kinds of principles that we can glean from that quote that apply to life and parenting and leadership, but I read it to you today to make this application.

Jesus suffered for you so that you might have success over the old you, that you might have success over that Mr. or Mrs. Hyde within you that just keeps sabotaging your life, so that you may no longer be subjected to earning your approval, status, or position because that inevitably leads to crushing despair or incredible pride. But you can find freedom and rest in Christ.

So today, here’s just the very simple application: ask God to fill your mind with thoughts that lead you to be more like Jesus.

And that may mean that you need to take some steps, getting away from screens. Some of you may need to say, “You know what? For a day, for a week, for a month I’m just not going to watch the news. I’ll get the major headlines, just the stuff that I need to be aware of what is going on in the world so I can pray and know how to live my life. I’m going to stop scrolling and comparing myself to other people.”

What are you filling your mind with? And it’s this place right here today where you say, “God, I want to allow You to fill my thoughts because I don’t want to be this person anymore. I want to prepare my character for citizenship in heaven. And I want to be an ambassador right here in this dark world to make a difference for all of eternity.”

That is a battle you can never win when you try to do it in your own strength. It’s a battle that Jesus fought already for you.

Let’s pray together.

Father, in these remaining moments that we have together I pray that Your Spirit would feel at home in this room and that You would work on each one of us. That You would help us to see the application that we need to make for our specific lives today. The battle is won or lost in the mind.

So, God, we want to declare right now, today, that we not only give You our hearts, but we want to give You our minds. We pray that we would fill our minds with things that inevitably lead to living more like You, because You have died to give us success over that internal battle we all continue to face.

So, God, meet us in this moment. Encourage us. Convict us. Motivate us so that we might follow after You in every area of our lives. And we ask this right now in Jesus' name. And everybody says: Amen.