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### Swimming in Systematic Sin

A little over 2,000 years ago, the Apostle Paul wrote the words that we now know as Romans 7:15-25a. They are, perhaps, the most wildly freeing words in the New Testament, if not all of scripture. “I do not understand my own actions,” Paul begins, “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” They are words that might not seem freeing at face value. Indeed, they are words that acknowledge, in a very real way, the power that sin holds over us. Yet when we speak of this power, it loses its hold. Over the next ten verses, Paul names the power that sin has in his own life and in doing so, he makes space for all of us to name the power sin has in our own lives. He allows us to be seen and heard.

Today’s sermon might feel a bit repetitive as it will deal with issues brought up over the past few weeks. Paul circles back to sin, over and over in his letter to the Romans. This circling back is ultimately what drives his argument forward. And in this passage, we get a glimpse of where Paul is heading: to the salvation found in Jesus Christ. But to get there today, we are going to first keep working with a definition of sin, then spend some time narrating the context of Rome (and our own context), before looking at how these words and the following verses can offer us freedom.

Over the past few weeks, Marv has offered a definition of sin that is defined by the Greek word *hamartia*, which roughly translates to “missing the mark” and happens when we act in ways that do not align with God’s intentions for us. Today, I want to build on that definition by thinking about it relationally.

When we look at the flood story in Genesis—that terrifying story where God tries to destroy the earth... the story that we love to turn into children’s books and nursery themes—we find it’s (and our) redemption in the Covenant God makes. God promises to never again destroy the earth and God makes that promise with Noah, with Noah’s descendants, with every living creature, and with the earth. This understanding of Covenant is rooted in relationships and it informs a relational understanding of sin. In the flood story, God’s anger is pointed towards the sin that was the result of people breaking relationships with animals and the land, with one another, with themselves, and with God. Sin was so deeply entrenched in all aspects of society, that God felt so hopeless that God decided to destroy the earth (and thankfully God realized that God was going to need to come up with a better plan).

But when we look at sin this way, we see it as something beyond individual choice. And while we all make choices that break relationships, we are also at the mercy of structures that force us to break relationships with the land, with humans and animals around the globe, with ourselves, and with God. I think this passage and this letter have often been interpreted as being about our individual choices and Paul here is read as feeling really guilty for everything he does. While anyone who has struggled with addiction or lived in cycles of destructive and abusive patterns may read these words in comforting solidarity, when we are not in that space and read it this way, we walk away thinking we need to be perfect or else we’re just sinners, and that is not really what Paul is getting at here.

Rather, Paul is writing about the “sin that dwells within” him that prevents him from doing the good and right that he wants to do. And he fully knows that when he does what he does not want to do, it is no longer him that does it, but sin that dwells within him. Paul knows that as hard as he tries to do what is good and right, he will continue to participate in brokenness. Paul is

talking about participating in sin that is so deep it dwells within his flesh. Paul is talking about existing in a world of broken relationships. Paul is talking about systematic sin and we're all swimming in it.

I want us to try an exercise in imagination. Close your eyes and imagine a world of debauchery and violence. Imagine a world where 90 percent of people are living hand to mouth or are one illness or injury away and 1.5 percent control between 15-25% of all wealth.<sup>1</sup> Imagine a world where violent strategies of conquest are normative and each person is required to pay taxes into these systems. Imagine a world where the leaders and the celebrities engage in violent and destructive sexual practices, and those practices trickle down into the households and the streets of the cities where they rule. Imagine a world of mass deforestation and extinction.

Now, open your eyes. Was the world you were imagining one defined by mud brick houses, dusty streets, tunics and sandals? Or was the world you were imagining one built of concrete and computers and defined by a red and white flag with a maple leaf on it? I think we like to think of Ancient Rome as Ancient History, or, if we see it as repeating itself, we see it as taking place about 150 kilometres south. What we don't like to think about, is the way it is being repeated in our own society.

We live in a country where the top 20% of households own 67.9% of the country's wealth and the bottom 40% hold 2.6%.<sup>2</sup> While this certainly leaves more of a middle class than ancient Rome, for every \$100 of wealth that has been created over the past decade in Canada, \$34 have gone to the top 1% and \$5 have gone to the bottom 50%.<sup>3</sup> Billionaires are collectively increasing

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<sup>1</sup> Scheidel, W., & Friesen, S. (2009). The Size of the Economy and the Distribution of Income in the Roman Empire. *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 99, 61-91. doi:10.3815/007543509789745223. Pages 84-85.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/230331/dq230331b-eng.htm>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.wealthprofessional.ca/news/industry-news/for-every-100-of-wealth-created-in-canada-34-went-to-the-top-1/372878>

their wealth by 2.7 billion per day (this is a global statistic) and only 4 cents of every tax dollar comes from taxes on wealth.<sup>4</sup> This year, the CEO of Loblaws (Real Canadian Superstore) who is the third wealthiest man in Canada with a net worth of \$8.7 billion was given a \$1.2 million dollar raise.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, as of last December in Manitoba there has been a 50% increase of food bank usage since 2019.<sup>6</sup>

On top of this, there is a whole lot of generational finger pointing. My generation likes to point at your generations and say, “look at the mess you left us in.” And, once or twice (not from anyone here) I have heard from older generations that my generation is just lazy and spends our money on expensive coffee and that’s why we can’t afford homes (and I say this from a point of privilege as George and I do own our home). There probably is a little truth to both of those statements—the economic climate has changed drastically over the past 50 years and consumption of unnecessary expenditures has also become normative—but this finger pointing serves as a distraction to the real issue. And that is that, across time, the working class (and now I include white and blue collar workers in that group) have struggled as a whole to meet their basic needs while the wealthiest of the world keep getting richer. **Right now, in Canada, if wealth were distributed equitably among Canadians—if the top 20% did not hold almost 70% of the wealth compared to the bottom 40% holding 2.6%—the average Canadian would not be struggling to cover the basics of food, housing, and transportation and the bottom 40% of Canadians would not be living paycheck to paycheck or unhoused.**

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galen\\_Weston#:~:text=Weston%20and%20his%20family%2C%20with,Forbes%20magazine%20\(June%202019\).&text=Galen%20Weston%20Jr.,-Relatives;](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galen_Weston#:~:text=Weston%20and%20his%20family%2C%20with,Forbes%20magazine%20(June%202019).&text=Galen%20Weston%20Jr.,-Relatives;)

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/business/grocery-executive-compensation-1.6802091>

<sup>6</sup> <https://winnipeg-sun.com/news/local-news/food-bank-usage-has-doubled-in-winnipeg-since-2019-report>

This is our context and it was also the context into which Paul was speaking. Paul watched as food and money was taken from the rural areas of the Roman Empire and funnelled into the hands of the elite. Paul saw the environmental impacts of the emerging city-state where forests were cut down and fields were amalgamated to keep the wealthy warm and fed. Paul watched as lions and tigers and bears went extinct in Europe to be killed for entertainment. Paul witnessed the violent expansion of the Roman Empire that plundered, killed, and enslaved as it conquered. Paul saw the horrible and abusive sexual practices of the Roman emperors and the way those practices trickled down into households and the streets. Paul watched as disease spread through towns and villages and most severely impacted the poor who lived in close proximity to one another. Paul saw massive wealth inequality, environmental destruction, species extinction, climate change, colonization, pandemic, and sexual violence. When Paul looked around, he saw what we see when we take the time to look.<sup>7</sup>

And Paul, who clearly did not want to, participated in these violent and destructive systems just as we participate. His tax dollars went to the wealthy and to the rampant military campaigns of the Roman Empire. His food and shelter came from destructive agricultural and environmental practices. Like any Roman citizen, Paul would have been forced to watch the “games” and executions where people fought one another and wild beasts. Paul likely had slaves. And we like to think, based on his writings and who his letter bearer to the Roman’s was (hint: it was Pheobe, a woman) that he had pretty healthy (or non-existent) sexual practices, but even so, he would have been witness to the damage of what went on around him.

Like Paul, we do not always do the good that we want, but we do the evil we do not want. It is sin that dwells within us. Our tax dollars go to a government that makes financial choices

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<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh, *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019).

that do not always align with our values. The land that we live on, was land that was stolen and the people from whom it was stolen have suffered immeasurably from policies that did everything from demand their scalps to steal and abuse their children. Our food and shelter and transportation come from exploitive and damaging agricultural and environmental practices. We (and I am no exception) find entertainment in the macabre (Criminal Minds, anyone?) We flock to stories of suffering. And to untangle ourselves from all the messages we get about sexuality, about how we should look and who we should be attracted to and how we should treat our partners and ourselves, sometimes feels like it takes a lifetime to untangle as we learn to re-root all aspects of our being as beloved children of God.

There was a moment this week, when I stood in the candy aisle in the Steinbach Superstore and grumbled to myself. I remember paying, very distinctly, full price for a bag of m'ns sometime pre-pregnancy to Brian (because I ate handfuls of this bag when I was pregnant with him) I paid then, what I knew I was going to pay as a sale price when I got in the checkout line. The biggest difference, however, was that I was paying that sale price for 800 grams of m'ns instead of 1 kg. Knowing that this was shrinkflation, and that the CEO of Loblaws is making ridiculous money off of all of us paying more at the store and purchasing less, did not stop me from adding them to the cart (when the heart calls for monster cookies, the heart calls for monster cookies). But in that moment, I again felt the weight of what it means to participate in broken systems. In systems of exploitation and sin. When I think about what those who made sacred treaties and trusted our government in good faith have continued to go through as I have settled on this land, as I think about my tax dollars going to rebates for the rich instead of the healthcare that you and I need, as I meditate on my fossil fuel consumption as I commute to Grunthal to take Brian to daycare and then to Winnipeg, I know that the m'ns are but a small

sin. Yet as I eat them by the handful, I know what Paul means when he says “nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.”

Yet as disheartening as Paul’s words can be, at the end of today’s lectionary reading, Paul offers us wild, incredible hope. “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Paul writes, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

In Romans 7:15-25a, Paul names the pervasiveness of systems of broken relationships with ourselves, with the land, with other living creatures, and with God. Yet he does not end there. Paul takes us, full send, into hope. I want to close today, by offering a reflection on the hope Paul offers that comes through the work of Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat. I had the pleasure of reading their book, *Romans Disarmed*, and taking a course taught by Sylvia this past fall. In the book and in the class, they take Paul’s work--which is often interpreted as a very dense systematic theology—and they make it concrete and tangible. Their work has deeply informed today’s message, and I want to offer my gratitude. But my favorite part of what they do, is imagine how Paul’s Letter to the Romans would have been read by different social classes in the Roman Empire. Building on that model, I want to end today’s sermon with a bit of creative reimagining.

In *Romans Disarmed*, Keesmaat and Walsh ask how these words might have been interpreted by a slave girl living in Rome, who was always at risk of being a victim of physical and sexual violence. In that context, what freedom could come from hearing, “if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” What freedom comes from hearing that Jesus Christ is Lord, instead of Caesar?

So what would these words mean to a homeless woman on the streets of Winnipeg who is sometimes forced to trade her body for a safe place to sleep and always at risk of sexual assault

simply by existing on the streets? What would these words mean to a youth in Myanmar who so desperately wants peace but picks up arms after watching friends and family killed by civil war? What do these words mean to those of you who came as refugees and made your homes on stolen land? What do these words mean to all of us who benefit from a government that attempted genocide on indigenous people? What do these words mean to me, a young mom who does not always make the environmental choices I want as I navigate family life, work, and school? What do these words mean to all of us who live in a society that exploits and extracts natural resources and functions on consumption instead of creativity?

What Paul leaves us with, and gives to us in full detail through the rest of the letter, is the grace that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord. It is the grace that comes from finding our identity in the one who loves us unconditionally, who guides us to live in rightness in all our relationships, and who picks us up again each time we stumble and fall. It is the grace given to us, without question, at the moment we are born and moves with us until death. It is the grace that is in all and through all and just waiting to be seen. It is the grace of God. Glory be to God. Amen.