

JULY 5, 2026

WHEN GOOD INTENTIONS GO WRONG

By Pr. Beate Chun

The Testimonies

Grace to you and peace
from the one who is,
and who was,
and who is to come.

Some of you may know
that in the late '80s
and throughout the '90s
I lived in Texas.

Houston, Texas.

Where the weather is always humid.

The people make wonderful BBQ.
Especially brisket.

And another feature of Texas
is that people talk about religion.

A LOT.

Questions like,
"Are you born again?"
are not uncommon.

People also like to share their faith stories.
Their testimonies.
And many—
not all,
but many—
go something like this:

A person gets trapped
in a cycle of bad habits.
Broken relationships.
Then comes
one, or two, or three strokes of bad luck.
Maybe they lose their job.
Eventually,
they hit rock bottom.
One night
they fall on their knees,
surrender their life to Jesus,
and from then on
their circumstances begin to change.

Not overnight.
Life is still not perfect.
But something is different.
Something has changed
for the better.
Turning to Christ
made all the difference.

Paul's Surprising Story

Today we heard a reading
from the seventh chapter
of Paul's Letter to the Romans.

And if you are visiting this morning,
or have not been here for a while,
let me briefly explain.

This summer
we are making our way
through Paul's letter to the Romans.

Each Sunday
we read another portion
of this remarkable letter.

Today we have reached chapter seven.

And there we hear Paul say,

"I do not understand my own actions.
For I do not do what I want,
but I do the very thing I hate."

And later,

"I do not do the good I want,
but the evil I do not want
is what I do."

And finally,

"Wretched person that I am!
Who will rescue me
from this body of death?"

When you hear those words,
you might think,

"Oh,
Paul's story
must be like those Texas testimonies.

First he struggled.
Then he met Christ.
And everything got better."
But actually,
the opposite is true.

Paul did not begin as someone
whose life had fallen apart.
He began with enormous promise.

Blameless—and Still Lost

We know quite a bit
about Paul's early life,
because Paul shares
many autobiographical details
in his letters.

He was born
in the city of Tarsus,
in what is today Türkiye.

It was an important city.
A center of trade.
A place famous
for learning.

Paul came
from a devout Jewish family.

He describes himself this way:

"I was circumcised
on the eighth day,
a member of the people of Israel,
of the tribe of Benjamin,
a Hebrew born of Hebrews."

While still fairly young,
he was sent to Jerusalem
to study under Gamaliel,
one of the most respected teachers
of Jewish law in history.

Today
it would be like saying,

"I studied
at Harvard,
MIT,
or Stanford."

His upbringing.
His education.
His discipline.
Everything pointed
toward a successful
and respected life.
And so Paul says
about himself,
"As to the law, a Pharisee.
As to zeal, a persecutor of the church.
As to righteousness under the law,
blameless."

Let me repeat that.

"As to righteousness under the law,
blameless."

Does that sound
like someone
whose life has gone off the rails?

Someone trapped
in destructive habits?

Someone beaten down
by misfortune?

Someone who needs rescuing?

And yet,
Paul did need rescuing.
He simply had no idea
that he needed it.

The Best Can Become the Enemy of the Good

All his sincere efforts.
All his desire to please God.
All his commitment
to living faithfully.
All his confidence
that he was doing
exactly what God wanted—
led him
to do terrible things.

Without realizing
they were terrible.

He became convinced
that the followers of Jesus
were dangerous.
That they threatened
true religion.
That they had to be stopped.
If necessary,
even killed.

All for the sake
of protecting God's truth.

And so
he participated
in the persecution of Christians.
He approved
of the killing of Stephen,
the first Christian martyr.

Then,
on the road to Damascus,
everything changed.

Acts tells us
that Saul—
which was another name
Paul used—
was traveling
to arrest followers of Jesus.
Suddenly,
a light from heaven
flashed around him.
He fell to the ground.
And heard a voice say,

"Saul, Saul,
why do you persecute me?"

He asked,

"Who are you, Lord?"

The answer came,

"I am Jesus,
whom you are persecuting."

From that day forward,
Paul was never
the same.
He became
one of the greatest preachers
of the Gospel,
traveling throughout
the Roman world,
telling people
about Jesus Christ.

Why Christians Still Struggle

Now let's go back
to our reading for today.

Paul cries out,

"Wretched person that I am!
Who will rescue me
from this body of death?"

Here is my question.

Is Paul describing himself
before the road to Damascus?
Or after?

The answer is:
After.
Romans was written
many years
after his encounter with Christ.

And maybe now
I can almost hear
the gears turning
in your heads.

*Is Pastor Bea saying
that before Christ
Paul seemed to have everything together,
and after Christ
he struggled
with guilt,
failure,
and inner conflict?*

Yes.

Although Paul
would probably say it
a little differently.

He might say,

"Before I met Christ,
I relied on keeping the law
to make myself
right with God.
And it seemed to work.
Because I did not yet understand
how deeply sin works.
I did not realize
that sin can take
our best intentions,
our deepest convictions,
our greatest acts of devotion,
and twist them.

Sin took my desire
to serve God,
and turned me into a persecutor.
Even into someone
who persecuted Christ himself."

Paul is careful to say
that the law itself
is not bad.
Quite the opposite.
The law is God's gift.

The problem
is not the law.

The problem comes
when keeping the law
becomes our religion.

When the Law Replaces the Beloved

Let me unpack that.
Because this is
a difficult idea.

Imagine two people
deeply in love.
They are separated
for many years.
So they write letters.
Beautiful letters.
Love letters.

Those letters
become precious.
They read them.
Memorize them.
Build a special box
to protect them.

Then one day,
they are finally reunited.
One of them
wants to sit together.
Talk.
Laugh.
Share a meal.
Embrace.
But the other
cannot stop
reading the old letters.
Over and over again.
The letters
have become
more important

than the beloved
who is standing right there!

Paul says,
that is what happened
to him.
He became so absorbed
with the law
that he lost sight
of the God
to whom the law
was pointing.

He could no longer see
that God
had come into the world
in Jesus Christ.
That God's love
was now standing
right in front of him.

The Grace We All Need

Sin does this to us.

That is why
it is not only people
whose lives
have obviously fallen apart
who need God's grace.

It is also - and perhaps even more so! -
the respectable people.
The religious people.
The hardworking people.
The sincere people.

The people
who honestly want
to do the right thing.

People like the young Paul.
And perhaps,
people like us.

Because if we are honest,
we know what Paul is talking about.
We have all experienced
that strange contradiction.
We want to love.
Yet sometimes we wound.
We want to be patient.
Yet we lose our temper.
We want to trust God.
Yet fear takes over.

The closer Paul came to Christ,
the more clearly
he could see the depth
of his need for grace.

That is not a sign
that faith failed.
It is a sign
that Christ's light
was shining more brightly.

And that light
did not leave Paul in despair.

Because his cry,
"Wretched person that I am,"
is immediately followed
by another sentence.

"Thanks be to God
through Jesus Christ
our Lord."

Grace Gets the Last Word

That is where
our hope lies.

Not in our ability
to get everything right.

Not in becoming
perfect people.

But in the God
who refuses
to let go of imperfect people.

Next Sunday,
Paul will take us
one step further.

He will begin
Romans chapter 8
with these astonishing words:

"There is therefore now
no condemnation
for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Today, we hear the struggle.

Next week, we will hear
the promise.

And both belong together.

Because the good news
is not that Christians
never struggle.

The good news is
that even in the middle
of our struggle,
Christ has already
claimed us.

And nothing,
not even our own failures,

can separate us
from the love of God.

Amen.

Sermon for Sunday, July 5, 2026 - Pentecost 6

Presented at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church San Francisco

The fifth in a series of Sermons on the Letter to the Romans.

Text: [Romans 7:15-25 NRSVue - I do not understand my own actions. For - Bible Gateway](#)

Tags: Romans 7 | Paul | Testimonies | Faith | Conversion | Sin | Struggles | Grace