



Roanoke, Virginia

February 15, 2026

## ***“Can Desire Be Converted?”***

*Romans 7:7-25*

**George C. Anderson**

Contrary to what some suppose, Paul has nothing against the Law. Think of the Law as any set of rules or expectations that sets good boundaries and directs behavior toward what is moral and ethical. When it does that, it tells us what is right and good. It names the beautiful life and is holy.

Take the Scout Law. Every scout, past or present, knows it. In fact, I’d like all scouts, past and present, to recite the Scout Law with me.

“A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent.”

I never made it past the 2<sup>nd</sup> Class rank, but I know the Scout Law. The list is easily remembered—and hard to obey. As helpful as it is to have these expectations spelled out, we know this description is aspirational. Even Eagle Scouts can’t fly this high. Always cheerful? Always brave? Always reverent? One can appear to be all these things in public, but in the inner recesses of the heart, even Eagle Scouts know they fall short.

Does that mean that the list is wrong, or the Scouts are hypocritical if they don’t obey it fully?

Paul would say, “By no means.” He would not abandon or criticize the list. However, in our passage, he diagnoses the human heart’s failure to keep the Law.

When I read the passage, it will sound like Paul is in a confessional state of mind and speaking only for himself. Indeed, he speaks for himself, but not *only* for himself. He is speaking for

us all, because all of us fall short of being who we really want to be—and who we hope others believe we are.

Listen to what Paul says.

<sup>7</sup> What then are we to say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” <sup>8</sup> But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law sin lies dead. <sup>9</sup> I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived <sup>10</sup> and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. <sup>11</sup> For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. <sup>12</sup> So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

<sup>13</sup> Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin that was working death in me through what is good, in order that it might be shown to be sin, so that through the commandment sin might become sinful beyond measure.

<sup>14</sup> For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. <sup>15</sup> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup> But in fact it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that, when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, <sup>23</sup> but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. <sup>24</sup> Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, with my mind I am enslaved to the law of God, but with my flesh I am enslaved to the law of sin.

You just heard Paul at his most vulnerable. He lays himself bare—and in doing so, he lays us bare as well. He takes us somewhere deeply uncomfortable.

And let’s hear him rightly. This is not Paul saying, “[I need to try harder](#).” This is not his vowing to *develop better habits* or be *more disciplined*. He does not even say he needs to get his heart right... have purer intentions. In fact, Paul admits something far more troubling: even when he truly *wants* to do what is good, he cannot do it.

His desire to do better has become itself a place of captivity.

That is why Paul does not end with advice or resolve, but with a cry:

“[Wretched person that I am!](#)

[Who will rescue me from this body of death?](#)”

Romans 7 leaves us there—not because God delights in despair, but because Paul wants us to see clearly that even meaning well will not save us. Notice his question. He does not ask, “**What must I do?**” He does not ask for clearer instruction or a better system. He asks, “**Who will save me?**”

If we want to receive what Paul is giving us here, that question nails it.

Several months ago, in a sermon called *The Neglected Virtue*, I spoke about Brian Zahnd’s book *Beauty Will Save the World*. Zahnd reminds us that Plato named three great virtues: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty—and he argues that Beauty is the one we neglect. I said then that the Gospel brings us to faith not by force, but by beauty—the beauty of grace, the beauty of a God who loves sinners.

I believe that.

But Romans 7 presses the matter further. What *we* find beautiful may not be what saves us.

The Gospels find something beautiful that many of us do not. They find beauty in Jesus forgiving those who nailed him to the cross. They find beauty in mercy triumphing over revenge.

But revenge is its own kind of beauty, isn’t it? Consider how many stories captivate us precisely because they deliver it. Films like **John Wick**, **Taken**, or **Kill Bill** entertain us because they are carefully crafted to satisfy our sense that someone must pay. When the credits roll, something in us feels settled. Justice has been served. The scales are balanced.

And then we hear Jesus say, “**You have heard it said, ‘An eye for an eye.’ But I say to you, love your enemies.**”

The beauty of Jesus is not always immediately attractive to hearts trained to admire power, payback, wealth and control. It is, in a sense, an acquired taste—not because it is weak, but because our desires are disordered.

That is Paul’s confession. He cannot keep the Law, and even his desire to do so gets him into trouble. His heart is such that when the Law says something like, “Do not covet,” something in him awakens. The prohibition does not merely restrain him—it exposes him. It reveals that he is drawn toward what he knows is not life-giving.

We are not just people who occasionally fail to live up to our ideals. We are divided in our desires. We are conflicted. We are capable of admiring one thing publicly while craving another privately.

And that is why Paul does not ask for a better program. He does not say, “**Give me clearer expectations.**” He asks for rescue.

“**Who will save me?**” he asks, because the problem is not simply behavior. The problem is captivity of the heart.

A couple of Thursdays ago, in a Bible study with other ministers, Romans 7 was our focus. Rev. Donna Brit—whose parents, Clint and Nancy, worship here—asked the question that refuses to go away if Paul is right.

“**Can desire be converted?**”

If the problem is not just what we do, but what we want—can what we want be changed?

Or, in the language we've been using: "Can what we find beautiful be reshaped into what Jesus finds beautiful?"

Paul's answer in chapter 8 will be "Yes"—desire can be converted. But he won't give us a technique.

- Desire will not be converted by shame.  
Shame may force desire into hiding—but isn't good at healing it.
- It will not be converted by pressure.  
Pressure may repress desire—but is not good at renewing it.
- It will not be converted by better rules.  
Rules may control desire—but they rarely transform it.

So what converts desire? What teaches the heart to love what Jesus loves—to find beautiful what he finds beautiful?

In a word: *the Spirit*.

Not a program.

Not a method.

A relationship—with the living Jesus.

Now, hear this carefully. In chapter 8, Paul does not offer an altar call. It will not be a "Come to Jesus" answer. Remember, Paul is not preaching to pagans on the streets of Rome. He is writing to Christians—people who already belong to Christ, who have said they already know, love and follow Jesus. So, Paul is not saying, "Come into a relationship with Jesus"—though anyone overhearing this letter can hear that invitation. He is saying to individual Christians and to churches, "Don't forget your relationship with Jesus. Don't neglect your relationship with the one whose heart can change your heart for the better. Because when you ignore Jesus, your heart easily bends back to those who would have you mistake the ugly for the beautiful."

Paul is reminding them—reminding us—that we already stand in relationship with the One who can change what we cannot change ourselves. By remaining in relationship with the Jesus of the Gospels, we find over time not only forgiveness of our failures but a reshaping of our loves.

We know how this works—how relationships change us. Friendships shape desire. We begin to want what those we admire want. We care about what they care about. Love rearranges us.

Yesterday was **Valentine's Day**. Over time, people who are well bound to each other by love become people who learn to see through the other's eyes. The two lovers do not become identical—but they are no longer the same people they were. Love has done its quiet work.

Paul is saying something just as bold.

You already belong to Christ. He loves you. You love him. You already stand in communion with the One whose heart is aligned with the Father's.

Stay there. Even if you are well aware of how far short you fall, stay there! Don't have a spiritual affair with some other social, political or personal ideology. Stay in relationship with the Jesus of the Gospels. Because over time, remaining with Jesus changes you. His love changes how you love, and what once looked beautiful to you but is ugly in his eyes—begins to lose its shine.

- Revenge becomes thin.
- Reconciliation becomes radiant.
- Cruelty looks ugly,
- Kindness looks lovely.
- Power looks smaller.
- Peace looks stronger.

Desire is not converted by force. It is converted by fellowship.

And that is why Paul can move from “[Wretched man that I am](#)” to “[Thanks be to God.](#)”

This reshaping of the heart—this conversion of desire—is rarely dramatic. It is slow. It is relational. It is sustained. Which is why we must patiently remain in relationship—not only with Jesus, but with others who want to see and love as he does.

Which is a good reason why, beginning next Sunday in Lent, we are going to remain in a patient relationship with Peter.

- Peter knows what it is to want to be faithful and fail.
- He knows what it is to promise more than he can deliver.
- He knows what it is to discover that resolve cannot convert the heart.

But he also knows what it is to stay in relationship with Jesus. Over time—not all at once, not without missteps—love changes him.

Over the season of Lent, we will see how Peter's desire is not converted by willpower. It is converted by communion.

So, let's hang in there with Peter.

Even more importantly, let's hang in there with Jesus. Because the One who sees clearly what is beautiful in God's eyes is patient enough to teach our hearts to see it too.