

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A

*St. Martin's Lutheran Church Gladstone
Calvary Lutheran Church Rockhampton
Living Waters Lutheran Church Yeppoon QLD.*

"Story of Inability" Pastor Peter Noble

Romans 8:6-11

Brothers and Sisters, I bring you grace and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Story of inability.

I must be honest when I was looking for an analogy or story to kick this sermon off, at that exact moment I heard my three-year-old son August screaming from upstairs. His scream was one of such pain I had imagined his hand was caught in a door hinge or something worse. Instinctively, at the drop of hat I ran upstairs into his room and low and behold he had caught his finger in one of those plastic toy games called "Hungry Hippo". He had a small marble ball or dice that was caught in the mouth of the hippo and his finger was pinched in the hippo's mouth as he tried to retrieve it. He was stuck! With a quick squeeze and handywork I was able to release his finger and he was more than relieved. With tears present, and still in a state of shock, my son August collapsed into my arms so thankful to be rescued!

While this story is quite innocent, too often how awful and tragic is the story of many people chasing after something they desire only to be snared and caught by the very thing they had set out to enjoy. The very thing they wanted to master, they themselves had been mastered by *it*.

If I had a dollar for every time I heard of a person I knew who had fallen into the damage that sin causes, I would be a rich man. After I had moved out of home my mother would often ring me to tell me: this or that person I had grown up with in the Blue Mountains had tragically died. One young guy I went to school with overdosed on heroine, leaving behind his girlfriend and baby daughter. Another guy in my class at Katoomba high suffered depression and jumped off a cliff with no hope for the future. One of my brother's friends went on to have a successful career in real estate but suffered depression when his relationship with his partner broke down. So, distraught, he jumped in front of a train at Penrith train station.

What is it that drives a person to abandon all hope when they cannot attain that which they seek? And even when do receive it, it doesn't satisfy, nor is it long lasting.

This is like the context Paul the Apostle is writing into when he writes this letter to Church in Rome.

And he says these words.

*⁶ For to set the mind on the **flesh is death**, but to set the mind on the Spirit is **life and peace**.*

*⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is **hostile** to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it **cannot**. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh **cannot** please God.*

This is very strong language from Paul. In short there are two ways to live. In the flesh or in the spirit. and both have very different consequences both here on earth and eternally.

Let's unpack this a little bit.

1. Paul says living in the flesh brings "hostility": between God and man.

Hostile (Gk. **ἔχθρα , ας** f *hostility, ill will, hatred*¹)

In other words. When a person lives by the flesh or sets their mind on what is fleshly. Things of this world. Putting things before God. Idols. Breaking the first commandment. Such ethical behavior is "hatred" to God. It's behavior that doesn't put God first. And such a "mind" doesn't obey the Law of God. In fact, Paul uses stronger language than this. Paul presses on the inability of the unregenerate or unrepentant sinner who is "unable" to submit to God's law. Again, such a person doesn't have the capacity. They are unable to choose the things of God. Their will is bound.

v.7 οὐδὲ γὰρ δύναται 'for [it is] not able'

v.8 οὐ δύναται. 'cannot' 'does not have the ability'.

This is exactly what Luther says in the Small Catechism on the Apostles Creed. He writes:

¹ Newman, B. M., Jr. (1993). *A Concise Greek-English dictionary of the New Testament*. (p. 78). Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies.

I believe that by my own understanding or strength ***I cannot*** believe in Jesus Christ my LORD ***or come to him***, but instead the Holy Spirit has ***called me through the gospel, enlightened*** me with his gifts, ***made me holy*** and ***kept me*** in the true faith, just as he ***calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy*** the whole Christian church on earth and ***keeps it*** with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith. Daily in this Christian church the Holy Spirit abundantly forgives all sins—mine and those of all believers. On the Last Day the Holy Spirit will ***raise me*** and all the dead and ***will give*** to me and all believers in Christ eternal life. This is most certainly true.²

In other words. If a person is living without the Spirit of God – or in Lutheran terms we would say, if you’re not baptized – you cannot please God. And until we are baptized, we are at enmity with God. We are an enemy of God until he claims us as his own. The Bible says elsewhere “without faith it is impossible to please God”.

Hebrews 11:6

⁶And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. ³

Now let’s look at the opposite of hostility. This is—peace. Calmness.

2. Living in the Spirit brings “peace”.

Peace (Gk. εἰρήνη , ης f *peace, harmony*; often used in invocations and greetings; *order* (opposite *disorder*)⁴

Those who “set their mind on the spirit” it brings peace and life.

In Lutheran terms we would say, those who are baptized are pleasing to God.

Listen to what Luther writes in the Large Catechism on Baptism. Art. 1. para 49.

That the baptism of infants is pleasing to Christ is sufficiently proved from his own work. (**Infant Baptism** The Large Catechism: Of Baptism, [49])⁵

² Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (pp. 355–356). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

³ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Heb 11:6). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

⁴ Newman, B. M., Jr. (1993). *A Concise Greek-English dictionary of the New Testament*. (p. 53). Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft; United Bible Societies.

⁵ Kolb, R., Wengert, T. J., & Arand, C. P. (2000). *The Book of Concord: the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (p. 462). Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

In other words. Infants who don't do anything. Albeit—can't do anything to contribute to their salvation. They can't even so much as bring themselves to the font. If this isn't beautiful picture of the Gospel in it's entirety, I'm not sure what is.

God saves in baptism. God saves a child when baptized. And through baptism, the child even after salvation is given. The Spirit is received. Even then the child still won't fully understand what God has done here until they are much older.

You could say in all baptisms, in all cases of salvation. Both OT and NT. It is always grace *before* response.

It is always grace before we are able to respond with our hearts set on the flesh. Before we know God we are at enmity with him. Enemies of God. And yet God in his mercy, "...while we were still sinners, Christ died for us". (Rom. 5:8)

How Lutherans understand Spirit and Flesh. Left Hand and Right Hand Kingdom

Left and Right hand kingdom is a concept from Lutheran Theology. (*see footnote for more information*)⁶

Living in the left kingdom is inevitable. But you and I can actually see the right hand kingdom. With eyes of faith. As Lutherans we understand we live "in" the world, but we're not of it. We are in the "left" hand kingdom, but we belong in the "right". We are sinners in this world on the left, but at the same time we are saints in God's kingdom on the right through baptism. Our minds are in this world, but we seek to set out minds on the Spirit which is unseen. As Paul says:

2 Corinthians 4:18

¹⁸as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. ⁷

⁶ Two Kingdoms "The Concept that God instituted two modes or realms of divine rule through spiritual and secular authorities. Know also as the theory of the two swords, two regiments, or the two reigns, the latter increasingly is the more preferred English terminology. Martin Luther appropriated the theory from Augustine, but diverged from Augustine's in that Luther saw the kingdom of the left (the left hand of God), the secular kingdom, positively established by God. God was seen to exercise his rule through secular authorities to maintain civil order. The function of governing authorities was to punish evildoers, to uphold justice, and to protect the people. The authority of the kingdom on the right (hand of God), however as strictly spiritual authority, was not to be confused with that of secular order. The spiritual reign of God was exercised in the enhancement of faith through preaching of the Gospel and the faithful administration of the sacraments in the Church." (Gassmann, Günther. "Two Kingdoms." In *Historical Dictionary of Lutheranism*, pp. 333–34. Lanham, Maryland, and London: Scarecrow Press, 2001.)

⁷ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (2 Co 4:18). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

I've mentioned this before, when we pray the Lord's prayer we pray:
"Your kingdom come, your will be—done, on earth as in heaven".

God has a kingdom, and it is reigning unchallenged in the kingdom on the right.

When we live in this world, we want God's kingdom to come and reign here too, so we pray. And where do we see the kingdom coming into this world most clearly? Through the Means of Grace. The Word, Baptism, Lord's Supper.

Even now, through this Word proclaimed, the kingdom of God is breaking into this world, and you see it with eyes of faith. The Word is "proclaim". In communion, Christ is truly present in the same way he is present in baptism. In the same way he is present in the proclaimed word.

Gospel.

Paul's words in vv. 6-8 are like a theological statement, but then he turns to apply it to the Church in Rome's direct context when he says:

⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, **he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.** ⁸

In other words. Gospel proclamation.

God's Spirit raised Jesus. Which means after you die, so too will you be raised. God has rescued you. Like my son August unable to rescue himself, I had to come and save him. So too has God saved you through Christ crucified and you receive forgiveness of sin in your baptism. Because of your baptism and being joined with Christ in waters united in death. Meeting Christ in his death, the old Adam is gone, and the new Adam has come. The Holy Spirit now dwells in all God's children who are adopted in baptism, made heirs with Christ, and will be raised with Christ. On that final Day we who are baptised into Christ's death will be raised in new imperishable bodies. Bodies that will forever have their minds

⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Ro 8:6–11). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

perfectly set on the Spirit and no longer on things of the flesh. We will no longer be in decay. No longer slaves to sin on that Day. No longer battling the flesh. Not Saint and Sinner. But—Saint by Christ' righteousness and by faith alone you will live forever with him by his mercy and grace. **Amen.**

May the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.⁹

⁹ *Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement*, 29.