

Two Ways of Life

Romans 7:15-25a

¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³ 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. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

There is something about this passage from Romans that sounds like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. "Hi, my name is Paul, and I'm a sinner."

"Hi, Paul!"

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (v. 15). After six chapters of complex theological teaching, suddenly Paul speaks in the first person and describes the inner struggle of every heart. "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (v. 19). We are shocked and relieved by this risky bit of self-disclosure. Paul can seem so perfect, so demanding, so holier-than-thou. Finally, he has put all his cards on the table; he is a flawed and failed person, just like the rest of us.

But before we get too excited, some scholars believe Paul is not speaking for himself here. The "I" may be the voice of Adam, or the voice of all fallen humanity before experiencing God's grace. So, the "I" is Brenda or any other name you want to place there. Certainly Paul has no illusions about his own moral perfection, and he is a Pharisee when it comes to knowing the law ([Phil. 3:6](#)). So, whether he is speaking as Paul or as Adam, or as me, he lays bare the state of the human soul when it comes to sin: try as we might, we cannot help ourselves. Unlike small

children, who cannot be held responsible for their actions due to ignorance, we are fully capable of distinguishing between right and wrong. We know what to do; we just cannot seem to do it.

What is worse is that the closer we get to choosing the right, the greater seems the temptation to sin. Paul says, "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand" (v. 21). These days, the landscape is littered with public figures (politicians, entertainers, and religious leaders) who have feet of clay. We even take perverse pleasure in watching the righteous get their comeuppance. It cheers us to see the proud publicly humbled.

Maybe that is why this passage reminds us of an AA meeting—the humility. Many churches provide space for AA groups that meet in their building throughout the week, and in some cases church members participate "in the program." There seems to be nothing magical about the AA model; it is really quite simple. You admit you are powerless in the face of your addiction. You surrender yourself to a higher power. You confess your mistakes and find welcome and support in the company of others. Small victories are celebrated, and life is lived one day at a time. As a gentleman, now twenty-five years sober, puts it, "I'm not going to drink today. Tomorrow, I might, but not today."

In some ways, AA does church better than the church does, especially when it comes to Christian humility. In many congregations, we are heavily invested in perfection—or at least the illusion of perfection. We invest wisely, dress appropriately, and worship discreetly. Our children, like our homes, are well maintained and do us credit. For some, illness, failure, and loss are sources of shame and are therefore private experiences. Looking at ourselves on a Sunday morning, we appear as people who embody the motto "Never let 'em see you sweat"; but God knows the truth and so does Paul: we are all sweating.

That is the power of this passage. In eleven short verses, first Paul assures us that doing the right thing apart from God's grace is a losing battle. It is not that we are simply weak or lazy or not trying hard enough. There are forces at work in us with which we cannot contend. The will may be strong, but the flesh rules the day.

Paul assures us that we are not alone in this struggle; everyone is engaged in the same hopeless battle. It was the same with our parents and our grandparents and our fore parents before us. It appears that one of the reasons we are so reluctant to confess our failures and face our sins is that each person believes he or she is the worst offender, that everyone else has discovered the secret of the holy life but me. Then along comes Paul, like some sort of psychic, who accurately diagnoses the state of every soul. Yes, we are a mess, but so is everyone else. Hallelujah!

Some of you may be hoping this would be a wonderful time for your preacher/teacher to tell all...after all, Paul's words invite a spirit of confession, and it is appropriate for the preacher to lay down a few of her own cards, showing that she too knows what it is to struggle against temptation and fail. Just let me say that I am in the same group that has cheated our brothers, envied our sisters, and eaten with the pigs. **Shawnthea Monroe**

Each of us have "issues" and have developed laws of our own lives from our understanding of Christian virtues, family values, or any number of definitions of the good person. We too share a confidence in human potential to do the good, once it has been recognized; we understand sin to be acts of commission or omission by which we fall short of our own ideals; we believe that resolving the conflict between our good intentions and our actual deeds is a matter of trying harder. So Paul's language—"It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (v. 17)—reminds us of Geraldine's "the Devil made me do it" on the old *Flip Wilson Show*. But Paul views sin not as the breaking of a rule but, rather, as the

distortion of a relationship. As Paul Minear says, Paul's understanding of sin can be traced back to Romans 1:21:

What does the apostle see as the deepest, most stubborn root of sin, the root from which all sinning springs? What leaves [people] without excuse? How do we all become fools with darkened minds? What is it which brings God's wrath against all the ungodliness of [people]? Why does God give them over to the lusts of their hearts? How do [people] suppress the truth? The answer to all these questions is the same.... "They did not honor him as God or give thanks to him."

This idolatrous distortion of our proper relationship with God, this turning from God-centeredness to self-centeredness, introduces a darkening of mind into the very center of our being (Rom. 1:21-25). We desire to secure our own acceptability through our own action and our own possessions rather than through trust in God's love. As Gregory of Nyssa writes, the self's trying to affirm itself is like those who scale a sandy slope (i.e. the one many of us have climbed at Sleeping Bear Dunes). Even if they look as if they are traversing great tracts of ground on foot, they tire themselves to no avail. Each time the sand slides to the bottom, in such a way that there is a great effort of movement but not progress.

As a consequence, we can no longer understand our own actions. Our inmost self can still intend the good (vv. 18, 19, 20, 21), but it cannot execute its good intentions, because it is overpowered by an insatiable power of self-assertion dwelling within (v. 17).

Paul then reminds us that we can't fix what is wrong on our own. ***Wretched man that I am!*** The self cannot heal the distorted relationship, cannot cure its self-centeredness by yet more self-assertion. The self's very apparatus for converting its good intentions into good deeds is infected by the futility of self-centeredness, and, in a curious way, straining at the levers of willpower just draws us further away from God.

In the film *A Beautiful Mind*, the brilliant but psychotic mathematician John Nash assures his psychiatrist that he will deploy his analytic skills to cure his own illness. "You can't reason your way out of this," his doctor replies, "because your mind is where the problem is in the first place!" Just so, Paul says, the self by itself can neither enact its good intentions nor heal its relationship with God. It can be rescued only from without.

Paul turns us toward God's grace. If Paul's bad news is that we are trapped and cannot rescue ourselves, Paul's good news is that God intervenes to rescue us through Jesus. Paul's argument is in agreement with the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Our human cry of "*wretched man that I am*" (v. 24) is the cry of "bottoming out," of "step 1," admitting that we are powerless over sin. The human's cry of "*thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord*" (v. 25) is the cry of "step 2," coming to believe that "a greater power than ourselves could restore us to sanity." God's grace "restores us to sanity," drawing us back to God-centered salvation. **Harold E. Masback III**

Paul does not simply diagnose the sin-sick state of our souls; he names the cure. While it is liberating to confess our sins, true liberation comes from embracing the Savior. **Shawnthea Monroe**

My brothers and sisters there really are two ways of life...our way and God's way. Which will you choose?

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