

Romans 7:15-25a (NLT)

I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power* within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is wrong with us? Do you wonder that sometimes? I know I do. Paul's text from Romans today captures so well what I'm curious about. Usually, as you know, we use the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, but this week I wanted the New Living Translation because it is so much clearer.

Listen. Paul says, I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead I do what I hate. Now, the fact that I hate what I do means I know what is right. But I can't do it. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. And the more I want to do what is right, the more likely I am to do what is wrong.

That's it in a nutshell, the sheer perversity of our human existence. As many of you know, Linda and I have a new puppy, Samantha. This puppy is so cute, just adorable. But every so often, she is overtaken by the "Devil Dog." You can see, her eyes get a little wild and kind of glaze over and she just starts biting away, at Maggie, our older dog or at us, whatever is nearby. And when she does, you just have to put a toy in her mouth and let her chew on it until the devil dog fit passes. Now, I know she's going to grow out of this. Maggie was the same way when she was a puppy and now she is a wonderfully respectful companion, a person's best friend and very patient with Samantha. It's just a phase, I know she'll grow out of it. Cats never grow out of it, that's just the way cats are. No, really I know she'll grow out of it.

But in some ways, people are just the same. I mean, think of the things we do. Smoking. Starting smoking was the worst thing I ever did. It took me years to quit. Please, please, please if you don't smoke, don't ever start. It's awful, you poison yourself, you smell bad, just don't do it. Why do we ever start a habit as ridiculous as that?

And there are so many addictions. Drinking, drugs – why do we do these things? What is the matter with us? You know, the bulk of my pastoral counseling is that people come in to me and say, "I just hate it when I do x or y or z," and I say, "Well, don't do that."

Since it is a Presidential election year, it's worth thinking about how many hopes we have for the new President and the new administration. It's also worth thinking about how mean-spirited and vindictive our political process is, and how it is that we can expect new visions and new dreams to emerge from it. And I ask myself, what is wrong with us?

Paul thinks he knows and I think he may be right. There is something inside of us, at war with our best intentions. Our own

“Devil Dog,” if you will. No matter what we do, the Devil Dog wins, at least some of the time. In Paul’s view, we simply cannot rule ourselves. In fact, he goes as far as to say that it isn’t really him that does wrong, it’s the sin inside him. This is the biblical version of the “Twinkie” defense. We can be ruled by sin or we can be ruled by God in Christ, but that’s really all the choice we have. In fact, we may not have even that choice.

Paul says very little about sins, in the plural, but a lot about Sin, capitalized and in the singular, because he isn’t really interested in our sins, but he’s very interested in Sin, the power that rules this world. Sin uses God’s law by pulling us toward what God’s law tells us not to do. Coveting, killing, stealing, whatever God tells us not to do, that’s the first thing on our “to do” list. Jealousy, hatred, envy, gossip, oh boy, oh boy, that’s for me.

God’s law, Paul tells us, is good, is wonderful, in fact. It is God’s good gift to us, it teaches us how to live. But we aren’t able to follow that law consistently and furthermore, when we do follow the law, then we usually use our good behavior to lord it over people who aren’t able resist behaving badly.

I don’t think we realize how deep this self-estrangement is. I love God’s law, God’s justice, God’s dream for the world with all my heart. I think all of us do. So why is it that we so frequently do just the opposite. Instead of building up, we tear down. Instead of speaking well of people, we gossip about them. Instead of cherishing God’s creation, we mess everything up. Instead of loving the things and people we are given to love, we’re always looking for more and different and better. We are literally self-estranged -- we are strangers to ourselves.

Now, here it is, Independence Day weekend, the big July 4th weekend, and here I am, declaring that we are not independent, not by any stretch. In fact, we are terribly dependent. We love the idea of choices, but the truth is that we’re not very good choosers.

Mostly it seems like what we choose is bad for us, rather than good.

In fact, it is pretty surprising that after Paul recites this bleak catalogue of our failures and admits what a miserable person he is, that he winds up with “Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.” Where does he get this idea? What does he mean by it?

It’s important to remember that what we see as a kind of an inconvenient inconsistency, the fact that we don’t do what we say or what we want, that we can’t consistently follow God’s law, Paul sees this as a cosmic battle between God’s will and the power of sin. Because it isn’t just me or you or our individual failings. It is the fate of all of fallen humanity to fail to do what we know is God’s will. And what has happened in Paul’s view is that with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God has intervened decisively in history on our behalf, breaking this curse for all who live in the Spirit, in the body of Christ. Now, it may not be obvious yet, but in Paul’s view, the victory is won, not by us, never by us, but by God in Christ.

Now, it’s fair to ask, then, the following question – is Paul’s description of our inability to live into God’s will, the description we just worked through, is that still true of us, or are we redeemed, somehow freed from this ancient curse? And the truth is, Paul doesn’t say, exactly. I think it is probably fair to say that the world in its current form has gone on longer than Paul expected it would. Remember that Paul expected the end, or the beginning, but in any case a new age, to happen within his lifetime. And the real question is, did it?

Well, not completely, just because we can all recognize ourselves and even our cats and dogs in Paul’s description of the utter futility of our own human efforts. But at the same time, we also see wonderful acts of selfless service, our young people taking a week to learn about and help people who need help, our

chaperones leading and guiding and teaching them about what it means to put themselves and their lives in God's hands and to become God's hands in this world.

So, we walk on the road between "already" and "not yet" and we see both how good we can be and how bad we can be all around us. Sometimes we are discouraged by this state of affairs and sometimes we are inspired, and there is evidence supporting both feelings. But in the long haul, we know that the decisive blow has already been struck, the victory is ours, not by our doing but by Christ's. We know that the Devil Dog part of us is on the way out in God's good time and for that we can say with Paul, "Thanks be to God."

Amen.