

Message: “Potholes and Other Offenses”

A hotel on the shore put this notice in each room:

“No fishing from the balcony.” But every day, hotel guests threw lines into the water below. Then the management decided to take down the signs and guess what: the fishing stopped!

We are, by our nature, rebellious beings.

Not sure you agree? Then listen to this narrative from St. Augustine, the well-known theologian, who reflected on our attraction to the forbidden. He wrote, “There was a pear tree near our vineyard, laden with fruit. One stormy night we rascally youths set out to rob it...

We took off a huge load of pears. Not to feast on ourselves, but to throw them to the pigs, though we ate just enough to have the pleasure of the forbidden fruit. They were nice pears, but it wasn’t the pears that my wretched soul coveted, for I had plenty better at home. I picked them simply to become a thief... The desire to steal was awakened simply by the prohibition of stealing.”¹

Romans 7:15-25 shares a truth underlying these offenses:

Give us a law and we’ll see it as a challenge to break it. Thankfully, Jesus pardons us and sends the Holy Spirit to help us learn a new way to live. By grace and mercy, we can be transformed. We’re given the capacity to change so our greatest joy becomes bringing joy to God.

But it isn’t easy. Sometimes we feel like a walking contradiction as we struggle with sin. You want to do good but find yourself doing evil instead. Welcome to the human condition. Your internal struggle is something we all share and wrestle with.

This is why Paul cries out, “Oh, what a wretched creature I am!”

Did you notice Paul is writing in the present tense? His behavior is something Paul is wrestling with; not something resolved and done.

This is significant, yet unclear. Some people read this and see God as the actor and humans as the recipients. We can only depend on God to choose who will respond and in what way.

We might call this the “God hardens hearts” camp.

¹ https://www.preceptaustin.org/romans_illustrations-3

Some people see humanity as an actor, working with God. We have a part to play in our salvation. Being made in God's image means we have a conscience and so God gives us the capacity to choose how we will respond and in what way. God does the rest of the heavy lifting.

We might call this the “free will” camp.

John Wesley's encounter with the Moravians on board a ship in the middle of a storm showed him a new way to live. Rather than cowering in fear, they were singing songs to God. And he wanted that. So, he went and spent time with them, learning about free will. God's Spirit called and John listened and followed. This raises a question...

How would our lives change if we turned to God with an open heart and open mind, and then really, truly listened? Because I don't think Paul is just saying “do better” or giving us a reminder, like something we can tick off a list. This isn't a “pull up your britches” lesson.

“No,” says Paul. “You aren't listening. I'm not talking about a spiritual exercise program. This isn't about trying harder, digging deeper, climbing higher in your attempt to do good things, embrace good, to be good. This is about admitting there's evil in you.” There's a tension between the good and evil within you.

Whoa, hold on there, Paul. Maybe there was a time when that sort of approach worked. When you wanted to scare folks into faith, when you wanted to shame them into responding to an altar call.

We've gotten a bit more sophisticated these days. We use goal-setting and strategic plans. We use behavior modification, checks and balances. We use self-esteem raising and awareness training. We have rules explained and defined, boundaries clearly marked, and punishment delineated. We need self-help books: five days to be a better you, seven ways to total transformation.

Then Paul says, “*What you've needed and will always need is a savior. We need rescuing.*” We can't save ourselves. And while we hear it, it's hard for us to claim this truth. It's hard for us to live it every day. Yes, we might accept a one-time rescue or a hand up. But then we tend to live the rest of our lives with an “I got this Jesus, thanks anyway” attitude.

And the world doesn't help. We live in a world telling us we can be anything we want to be, which is true and false at the same time. It is true opportunities abound for many of us, but not all of us. And that's the tragic inequality of the world in which we live.

Even without this imbalance, the tension within us means we can't consistently choose the good. We can't will the right, live in the light. Sin isn't an act or even a pattern of behaviors we choose, or to which we succumb. It is a power and a presence within us. If it's there, our efforts might succeed for a time, but they can't last, won't last.

If we drive down a road riddled with potholes, we can't expect our car to drive smoothly or the steering wheel to remain steady. And yet, we expect to be able to go through each day paying little attention to being in synch with God. As Paul makes clear, it's one thing to want to be alive to God, and another to act it out each day.

How are we to live as believers if our very being is in tension?

Spirituality isn't a one-time act. It's about committing our whole being to a daily body-mind-spirit alignment. We can't rely on our human understanding or effort alone to enable us to deal with problems in a way that honors God. My spiritual steering wheel is still jerking in my hands if I align myself by using willpower or Bible study or works of service or even singing "Jesus take the wheel."²

Even when we don't engage in sinful acts, Paul says, sin still dwells within us. And the gridlock goes on. No one is strong enough to overcome the tension on their own. We may hold out for a while. We may want the good and not the evil, but, says Paul, but...

Maybe the metaphors don't work for you. That's okay, too. At the center of his struggle, Paul claims he's able, even in his wavering self, to see the goodness of following God. But he doesn't have the will to embrace it fully. Paul doesn't have the courage to claim this way of living, this way of being. It's beyond him, he writes.

² Kelly Clarkson, "Jesus Take the Wheel"

“Who will rescue me?” This is the key. It’s a cry of faith. It follows the cry of despair, *“Oh, what a wretched creature I am!”* In a world without hope, it’s the final cry. Praise God, there’s another cry which follows, *“Who will rescue me?”* The Lord of life, that’s who.

This lack of will within us can be replaced by Christ within us.

This is God’s promise. We can be transformed from the inside-out. It can be instantaneous, but more often it’s a lifetime of inviting Christ to come and take up residence within us each day.

This implies there’s a struggle either way. We’ll either struggle against the sin threatening our existence, making us ill-equipped to live in community, maintain relationships, or be truly content. This is what it means to live life knowing we’ll ultimately lose, which is stressful.

Or we struggle against our own will which doesn’t want to be given over to a loving God who can remake us into what we really want to become.

This struggle was described by the late songwriter Rich Mullins in the song “Hold Me Jesus.”³ I invite you to close your eyes and listen to the lyrics: *Surrender don’t come natural to me / I’d rather fight You for something / I don’t really want / Than to take what You give that I need / And I’ve beat my head against so many walls / Now I’m falling down, I’m falling on my knees.*

When we finally fall to our knees, when we finally surrender, when we embrace a delight in following Jesus, then we’ll find a new strength. We’ll find a new support network. We’ll find new possibility. We’ll find the sun still shining even though the clouds rolled in. We’ll find hope instead of despair. We’ll find joy instead of shame. We’ll find goodness within us and all around us.

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!

³ Written by Richard Mullins, Lyrics © Capitol CMG Publishing

Moment of Forgiveness

Originally, the message ended here for of our time of reflection.

But as I sat with the scripture and reflected on my own struggles, I was struck by the teaching of one of my mentors, Rev. Dr. Lynn Reece, who always asks, “So what?”

What do we take away from our message? Perhaps our faith will deepen and grow. Perhaps we’ll find a little peace knowing our inner struggles are shared by the people here and those we meet in our lives. Then again, it may just feel like intellectual exercise.

How does God’s grace in this moment shape our lives? One thing comes to mind: forgiveness. It’s what Christians are to be known for. After all, Jesus forgave us from the cross. Can we do any less to those who offend us? Or to ourselves? We know the tension is present and powerful. Maybe we can create a space for forgiveness to happen.

Rather than struggling with frustration, perhaps we can admit the truth to ourselves. We need to be rescued. With contrite hearts, we can go to God, asking for forgiveness. Then we can forgive ourselves, without excuse or blame, seeking mercy with humility.

Next, we can ask for, or offer, forgiveness to those in our lives, family, friends, neighbors, even strangers. Forgiveness isn’t something we can demand. It’s a bridge which brings us back together.

Let’s spend a minute in prayer. Ask God & yourself a few questions:

- What do you need forgiveness for?
- Who can you forgive?

Please spend time in prayer and listen to God.

Forgiveness sets us free to joyfully extend mercy and grace to one another, respect healthy boundaries for living, and receive from each other the love and wisdom we need to grow as the community of Christ.

Let us pray ...

Romans 7:15-25a (CEB)

I don't know what I'm doing, because I don't do what I want to do. Instead, I do the thing that I hate. But if I'm doing the thing that I don't want to do, I'm agreeing that the Law is right. But now I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it's sin that lives in me. I know that good doesn't live in me - that is, in my body. The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can't do it. I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do. But if I do the very thing that I don't want to do, then I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it is sin that lives in me that is doing it.

So I find that, as a rule, when I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me. I gladly agree with the Law on the inside, but I see a different law at work in my body. It wages a war against the law of my mind and takes me prisoner with the law of sin that is in my body. I'm a miserable human being. Who will deliver me from this dead corpse! Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!