

July 9, 2023

Romans 7:15-25

¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but 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. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Paradox seems to be the way we try to express and explain that which cannot be put into logical reasoning. Our faith uses paradoxes.

- Lose your life to gain it
- Love: the more you give it away, the more you have

Paul's words here in Romans are a paradox, in some ways. "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." He is saying he knows how God wants him to live in the world and he wants to live that way, but then he isn't able to live as he wants. The reason for this, he tells us, "if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me."

I have to smile every time I read this, because he is essentially telling us, in words that predate Flip Wilson and Laugh In, "the devil made me do it."

Struggling to understand what all this has to do with me, it came to me Paul is saying, "Damned if you do and damned if you don't."

These thoughts came to me as I struggled to deal with my own feelings of "white guilt". I was born into privilege. As many of you have heard me say, in our society and world today I am "top dog". I am male, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, college-educated with an advanced degree. I can't lose.

I try to speak out against the white supremacy in our world, but I feel guilty for how I benefit from it. I try to be an ally for minorities – Black, Indigenous, Brown, Queer, but my words, and sometimes my actions, betray my own privilege. How do I give up what is, essentially, me? Do I really want to disown myself?

Here is the paradox: I am ashamed of the white privilege I possess, just by being me AND I am proud of being a beloved child of God proud of who I am.

This isn't the only paradox I faced, as I struggled with Paul's words to the church in Rome.

I have always been left of center politically. I believe in a strong, central government that helps to care for the least among us. I have actively spoken out in favor to things like school breakfast and lunch programs, food stamps, Medicaid, basically all the social service programs that help the homeless and poor. Thirty years ago I believed such programs were the solution and salvation of the world. I believed we had the means to usher in the reign of God.

The truth is every action has a reaction; every action has unintended consequences.

I am learning that no plan is perfect. For example, I have worked, with others in the state, for over a decade to end the loophole in the law that allows PayDay lenders to operate in our state. When this loophole is removed, many people will be saved from these predatory lenders. However, there will be a few people in need of a quick, small loan and will not be able to get a loan from another institution. They will be hurt.

On a larger scale, I support freeing Ukraine from the Russian occupation, but what do I do with my faith in the radical pacifism of Jesus Christ? Do I practice this pacifism and let the Ukrainian people suffer? Or, do I continue to support “the spiral of violence”, which can only be broken by non-violence?

These are the conundrums, the paradox Paul was facing. His spirit, his mind was willing, but too often the results of his actions did not align with God’s will. “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

“Dammed if we do; dammed if we don’t.” What are we to do?

Paul’s response to this dilemma was: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Not much to go on, but I surmise:

- Yes, I was born with privilege, but in recognizing this I must try not to take advantage of this privilege
- Yes, a progressive political agenda will not be perfect, but we are a people of the empty tomb; of hope delayed, not dead. We must keep trying.

- It is not my work that will make someone whole, rather God
- Nothing is completely imperfect, if it is done in love.

Our job, then, is to seek to understand and try to live by God’s law.

But, this requires humility on our part. We are called to take a stand on lots of things in life; to be an ally; to stand up and speak out for the ideals we believe in. But we must never forget that there are probably (certainly) flaws in our plan; unintended consequences to our words and actions. And, we must be open to the “opposition”; we must listen with humility, accept criticism, accept the opposition might be right, and be willing to change.

The bottom line is this: whatever we do, must be done in love, God’s love – unconditional love; the love revealed to us in Jesus Christ. This love will conquer all, despite our best and worst efforts, which is why Paul states with enthusiasm: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Amen.