

“Personal Struggles”
Sunday, July 9th, 2017
5th Sunday after Pentecost

 **Romans 7:15-25a (NRSV)**

I do not understand my own actions.

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing
I hate.

Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law
is good.

But in fact, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that
dwells within me.

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.

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do
not want is what I do.

Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I
that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So, I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.

For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 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.

Wretched man that I am!

Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Thanks 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Thanks, be to God.

[2ND Service: Affirmation of Faith]

[MESSAGE]

OK, so back in January you made the decision to improve your health.

This might include losing a little weight, getting more exercise, and eating healthier.

To make progress in this endeavor requires that you make certain choices every day.

- French fries or kale salad?
- Fried chicken or baked chicken?
- Watch TV or walk around the block?

Each choice we make has an effect on our progress toward reaching that goal.

Well, we are now six months into the year, how are you doing so far?

I must confess that I am struggling.

“I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.”

Now, I’m fairly certain that Paul is not talking about the latest health craze in First Century Palestine; but, the principle is the same.

When one makes the decision to follow Jesus, they are required to make choices every day about how to reflect the image of Christ to the world.

- Recrimination or compassion?
- Revenge or forgiveness? Truth or lie?

I think that this text invites us to think honestly about how we deal with our own personal struggles as we make the choice to sin or not to sin.

Let us pray...

Lord, today we encounter a Scripture passage that challenges us to honestly reflect on our own life struggle. We pray that you will be with us this morning and guide us to better understand the choices we make. We come to your Word in Jesus' name. Amen.

Countless studies have been done, books written, and articles published on the subject of “*sin*.”

Recently, it seems as if many churches have stopped talking about sin in any specific, meaningful way.

When the word “*sin*” is spoken at all, it is often applied in general terms focused on societal ills and social injustice.

Corporate greed is a sin; genocide is a sin; slavery and human trafficking are sinful.

These are vague assertions that few would argue with and they let most of us off the hook because we have no direct involvement in these “group sins.”

It seems like “sin” has become trivialized inside such phrases as:

- **“We've all made mistakes”**
- **“We've all made some poor choices in life”**
- **“Nobody's perfect”**
- **“I'm just making a lifestyle choice.”**

Put another way: *“Pornography is sinful, but adultery is just a mistake.”*

I think we should be troubled by this trend to relegate sin to some larger, unseen group behavior in which we do not participate.

It is troubling because a society with no real understanding of the gravity of sin, will become a place where “*me*” is more important than “*we*”; *what I want trumps what you want*; and objective behavioral standards will disappear.

If we do not understand sin, we abdicate responsibility for our actions and become accountable only to ourselves.

Acknowledging and recognizing the reality of individual sin means accepting that there is a higher authority, God; and there is an absolute standard for good and evil.

Right and wrong are not determined by individual whim or self-interest; there are “*rules*” that apply to all of society.

The church plays an important role helping us discern these rules; we also have a big responsibility.

Our role is to help people recognize God in the world and acknowledge God’s authority.

It is not our role to judge others as they seek to know **God’s version** of right and wrong

Our responsibility is to realize and admit that we are sinners too, and we should focus on our own sin and not on the sins of others.

Ancient Greek philosophers maintained that virtue is knowledge, and vice is ignorance; the problem of evil or sin is best handled with intelligence and education.

St. Augustine wrote about this and concluded that the problem of sin results from man's uncontrolled will, not from an absence of thinking or a lack of education.

He was reflecting on today's text from Paul: *what reason dictates, the will often opposes; what reason wants to avoid, the will desires.*

Paul and Augustine both are telling us that our sin is not a matter of ignorance of the law or of the consequences of our actions; it is about our inability or unwillingness to control our free will.

Our honest reflection on this topic should lead us to try to figure out what sin really is.

Does the Bible speak of sin as merely a mistake, a wrong choice, a failure, or bad behavior?

No, the Bible defines sin as: any lack of conformity to, or violation of, the law of God.

This makes sin the most serious problem in the universe because it is more than just *disobedience* to God, it is **rebellion against** God who created the universe.

Combine this understanding with the revelation of Jesus Christ who tells us the greatest commandments are to love God and love others.

We begin to realize that how we look at sin in our lives should be filtered through the lens of love.

As I said earlier, every day we must make choices about how we will each reflect the image of Christ.

Each decision should consider how our choice will demonstrate, or not, our love for God or our love for another person.

Our use of free will determines whether we choose to honor God or indulge our own desire.

Paul paints a hopeless picture of human self-centeredness.

He argues that our relationship with God, like many of our personal relationships, tend to become self-serving.

We often try to manipulate the relationship toward what we want instead of what God wants.

Paul suggests that we simply cannot fix this.

We know what the right choice should be, yet we choose something else instead.

The harder we try to do what we should do, Paul says, the more frustrated we become that we can't have our own way.

In an odd way, this straining of our willpower 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!”*

In the same way, Paul says that the self by itself can neither enact its good intentions nor heal its relationship with God.

It can only be rescued from the outside.

In the end, Paul expresses the hope of humanity that comes as a result of the work of God in Jesus Christ.

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

It is this final experience of hope in Christ that allows humanity to look back on life and to see and admit the dire, hopeless circumstances that previously characterized the human experience.

If Paul’s bad news is that the self is trapped and cannot rescue itself, Paul’s good news is that God intervenes to rescue the self through Jesus Christ.

In some ways, Paul's argument is analogous to the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The human's cry of dereliction is the cry of "*bottoming out,*" of "**Step 1,**" admitting that he or she is powerless over sin.

The human's cry of exultation 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 "the self" back to God-centered salvation.

John Wesley taught us that God's grace, the free and unmerited favor of God, is available to all as God pursues us, no matter what.

Grace does not absolve us from the consequences of our actions, but it offers us salvation from our sin through Jesus Christ.

Grace allows us to recognize Jesus and follow his example for how to love God and one another.

Following Jesus leads us away from sinful behavior and into an eternal relationship with God.

St. Augustine's biography reveals that the will can receive God's grace, assert will power, change the course of a person's life, conquer sin, cooperate with God's Divine Providence, and love as God loves.

Created in God's image, man shares God's nature in the mystery of free will, full of surprises like conversion, and full of love, that knows no limit, and God's love for each soul.

Our personal struggle is between our desires for ourselves and our responsibilities to God.

We struggle daily to make the right choices.

We struggle to understand what God really expects from us.

We struggle to separate false teaching from God's truth.

We struggle to recognize the plank in our own eye,
as we try to pluck the splinter from someone
else's eye.

The relief from our personal struggle is found in God's
grace: ***“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ
our Lord!”***

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**