

Rom 7:15-25 “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”

Mt 11:29-30 “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Launcelot Gobbo was in turmoil. He was the servant of Shylock the wealthy Jew in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. He had been deeply offended by his master and was struggling with the temptation to run away...

My conscience tells me not to run from the Jew my master. The fiend is at my elbow, and tempts me, saying, “Gobbo, Launcelot Gobbo, good Launcelot,” or “good Gobbo,” or “good Launcelot Gobbo, use your legs, run away.”

My conscience says, “No, take heed honest Launcelot, take heed honest Gobbo,” or as aforesaid “honest Launcelot Gobbo, do not run, scorn running.”

Well the most courageous fiend bids me go, “Fia!” says the fiend, “away!” says the fiend, “and run!”

Well, my conscience hanging about my heart, says very wisely to me, "My honest friend Launcelot" —for I am an honest man's son,— well, my conscience says "Launcelot budge not!"

"Budge!" says the fiend, "Budge not!" says my conscience.

"Conscience" say I, "you counsel well,— Fiend" say I, "you counsel well."

My conscience tells me to stay with the Jew my master; and to run away from the Jew I would be obeying the fiend. My conscience is a hard conscience to counsel me to stay with the Jew. The fiend gives me more friendly advice. I will run fiend, my heels are at your command, I will run!

Shakespeare must have read Romans 7 for his morning quiet time on the day he got to this point in the Merchant of Venice. On the other hand, it is a common enough experience to struggle with our conscience in the face of a strong temptation.

Paul starts with the statement "I do not understand what I do" describing the perplexity we often feel when we know perfectly well what we ought to do, yet still do the opposite. Our conscience can seem a hard task-master. The fiend gives pleasanter counsel. Anyone struggling to lose weight will be only too familiar with this scenario.

Paul analyses what is going on. He points out that when we want to do the right thing, even if we fail, then we do at least agree that the right thing is ultimately good. He calls this right thing the law. This law is the principal or value we are wanting to live by, even though we sometimes fail. So, he says, our problem is not with the law. When we fail to do what we know is right, we do not argue about the rightness of the law, we simply fail when it comes to obeying it.

This reminds me of a campaign we had in our previous village to get the speed limit reduced. The police said that they would not impose a speed limit that drivers were unwilling to observe. In other words, laws are not much use if the majority of people don't agree with them. Paul's observation is that our conscience shows us that we are in agreement with the law that we want to obey.

This clearly does not apply when we ignore a speed limit because we think it has been set too low. The struggle Paul describes applies when we are in agreement with our conscience, not when we think it unreasonable.

So how is it that we sometimes struggle to do what we agree we ought to do? Paul attributes this struggle to sin living in us and he differentiates that sinful nature from the "I" who knows and agrees with what is good. He says, "if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it."

I'm not sure how well this argument would go down in court! "I'm sorry my lord, but it wasn't me that stole the cream cake, it was sin living in me." Perhaps the judge would say, "Well if you can deliver your sin over to me we will lock that up, otherwise you will both have to go to gaol together!"

So who are these two beings? He says,

"For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members."

Paul identifies "I" with his inner being, his mind. It is the rational part of us. The sinful part he says works in his members, not in his mind. This sounds a little strange to us, but it was the way people in that culture thought about themselves. You might remember how Jesus used the same language when he said, "If your hand or eye causes you to sin, cut it off..."

Nowadays, we would not say our hand or eye cause us to sin, but that our emotions got the better of us. Where Paul makes the distinction between mind and bodily members, we would make the same distinction between our reason and our emotions.

So we might translate this passage as follows:

In my rational moments I delight in God's law; but sometimes something else is going on in my emotions, urging me to act against my reason. My emotions so often win the day, taking my

reason prisoner. It is only later when my emotions have calmed down that I regret what I have done.

Even when our rational mind agrees with God's good will for us, sometimes our emotions get the better of us, and lead us to act differently. And the struggle Paul describes is one in which the emotions win.

You are fed up, or bored or stressed – these emotions may tempt you to eat a comfort snack. Your reason says, "It'll make you fat" but your emotion wins the argument.

You are offended by someone's remark; your reason says, "Don't aggravate things" but your emotions want to hit back.

You are tired and the phone rings. You see it is your hypochondriac sister-in-law. Your reason reminds you that you promised to speak to her today, but your emotions decide you are out. We are all familiar with these situations.

What Paul says next is the really important bit. It is the crux of the chapter. First he says, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

Paul is writing about the Christian faith in relation to the Jewish Law. And there are two serious problems. Firstly that we need forgiveness for our disobedience, and secondly, we need help to stop sinning in the first place. The Law has no solution to either problem.

The Law is not just the 10 commandments, but the entire 613 laws set down by Moses in the scriptures. The law provided for forgiveness where a person broke the law, but only for inadvertent, unconscious contraventions. And then a sacrifice had to be made at the temple in Jerusalem.

That really doesn't resolve the problem of sin. What about all our conscious sin where emotion wins over our rational mind? The Law had no solution to this problem. Paul says that the Law is good in that its regulations are good for us, but it provides no help in either

obtaining forgiveness from God, cleansing our conscience from guilt, or strengthening us against repeated sin.

That leads Paul to cry out, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” I am not only wretched because my life is messed up by sin, but also, and more significantly, my relationship with God is messed up by my sin, and I am justly subject to God’s wrath for my sinful behaviour. That is why Paul describes his body as a “body of death.”

Without Jesus in our lives that is the state we are in! Living in a body that will eventually be condemned to death! That is not a popular notion these days, where we all have to be politically correct. But the Gospel is not concerned with being nice, it is more concerned with being true. Jesus said again and again, “I do not speak my own words, or on my own authority, but what I have seen in the Father’s presence and heard from Him, that is what I teach.” (e.g. Jn 8:38 see 34-38 Jesus also says we are slaves to sin).

So, according to both Paul, and Jesus, we are slaves to sin and need a deliverer. We need deliverance from the penalty of our sin, and deliverance from the powerful temptation to sin.

“Thanks be to God,” Paul says, “through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Jesus is our deliverer on both counts.

That is where the chapter ends, but it is not the end of Paul’s explanation and we cannot stop here. We must venture into at least the first verse of Romans 8.

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (Ro 8:1)

Paul delivers one of the most wonderful statements of scripture: “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” If every Christian knew and believed this short statement, the church would be a happier place.

Jesus said (in our gospel reading) “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” Jesus said He did not come to condemn us but to save us from our sins. To forgive and

cleanse us; to set our guilty consciences free; to deliver us from the condemnation that the Law pronounces upon us. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

All we need to do to be "rescued from our body of death" is to come to Jesus; to put our trust in Him as God's Son who died in our place.

This is the first part of the solution to the problem Paul has highlighted. Through putting our trust in Jesus we are delivered from the penalty of sin, and from its nagging accusation of worthlessness. Self-condemnation should be a thing of the past for a Christian. God's forgiveness is a treasure we should take daily delight in.

The second part of the problem Paul raises is our weakness against temptation. Our gospel reading gives us the solution.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Wretchedness is not the way to respond to overwhelming temptation. It does nothing to clear our conscience and nothing to strengthen us against further temptation.

Our pathetic response to our own weakness is so often to do a kind of penance by feeling wretched for a suitable length of time – anything from a few minutes to a few days usually suffices. But this achieves nothing and does not please God.

The only effective way to respond to our weakness is to dare to rejoice in God's amazing grace.

Since God does not condemn us we should not condemn ourselves, but rather find rest for our souls in Him. And there, enwrapped in His love and knowing His forgiveness, is the place for us to repent of our sins, make restoration where we can, restore our relationships and live at peace.

Jesus can heal and restore our broken emotions. His yoke is easy, and His burden is light.