

**Wretched Person, What Are You to Do?**  
**By Reverend Litton Logan**  
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**Scriptures:**

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

<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup>But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. <sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>21</sup>So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup>For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>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.

**Sermon:**

The Apostle Paul, writing to a diverse Jesus-community in Rome, makes his case that Israelites and pagan God-fearers alike need to move beyond their traditional social or ethnic identities, as important as they are, and see themselves as members of a greater body of God in Christ. It is also appropriate to note that when Paul addresses various aspects of the Mosaic Law, he is addressing the Israelites constituents in the church at Rome in the main.

Paul patiently, but boldly, has and will take to task the rigid Judean Christ-confessors as well as the more Hellenistic Israelites and their various understandings and interpretations of the Mosaic Law. I might mention here that some NT scholars maintain that Paul radically and totally rejected the Mosaic Law, even its moral dimensions in favor of the Law of Love, which he outlines in 1 Cor. 13, as far more comprehensive and binding. I tend to come down on a sort of middle ground in this matter. A topic for a class.

In today's scriptures, Paul's speaks in the rhetorical "I", meaning any and every Israelite of all time and humankind from Adam to himself and beyond - to explain to his audiences why this reality or world created by a good and loving God seems to be ruled by the forces of evil, death, and decay. Throughout Paul's writings there is an underlying tension between his understandings of God as Creator/Sustainer, God's faithfulness and love for God's people manifested in the Law while he makes his case for a divine shift in people achieving righteousness and salvation through God's grace in Jesus Christ. For Paul, prior to Moses and Mount Sinai, sin, the anti-force to life and God, simply wreaked its effects on people and nature in measures of pain, destruction, suffering, loss, and death, including on the descendants of Abraham. However, after Moses and Mount Sinai, Paul understands that a more virulent aspect to sin was revealed - its eternal, alienating effects from God and others. In a sweeping generalization, let me say that from the Sinai covenant onward, at least in the collective mind of Israel, sin took on what Paul implies is its spiritual dimension.

So, it is out of a tension between Law and Grace, that Paul speaks. Paul, as a very learned and previously a devout Hellenistic Pharisee, saw himself as once having been an exemplar in keeping and understanding the Mosaic Laws and its requirements. Yet, his encounter with the risen Christ and his message that people's acceptance before God was predicated upon God's love and their response in kind caused a radical change in Paul's thinking.

Not only did Paul understand that the Mosaic Law made people more aware of the things that caused alienation from God and others by outlining things they were not supposed to do but it exposed them to the demonic stress and anxiety of always being unable to comply with all the Laws all the time. Let me give a little more clarity: if someone had not told me what was sinful, I would have just suffered the consequences of my actions, but not feared for my soul. (Growing up if my preacher hadn't preached about it, it would have never occurred to me to do it.)

Paul pushes the envelope of people's inability to comply with the Law and its requirements beyond lapses of memory, willfulness, or social reasons. Therefore, I believe we trivialize Paul's understanding of sin and people's failure to comply with the Law's life-giving and life-blessing dimensions, if we simply equate sin just to a list of moral infractions or even lapses in religious or doctrinal adherence. For Paul, sin and the will to sin is a fundamental principle or power that dominates this reality. Think of sin and the will to sin, as all human nature and all reality as being inhabited or possessed by an anti-life, anti-God spirit, or demon, and you will begin to grasp Paul's context.

Let me give another metaphor, although don't push it too far, to explain further how I think the Apostle Paul understands our human nature and sin. How does a worm get inside an apple? You think the worm burrows in from the outside. No, actually the worm comes from inside. An insect lays an egg in the apple blossom. Sometime later, the worm hatches in the heart of the apple, then eats his way out. Therefore, the penchant to sin, i.e., to do life our way independent of God's revealed will and time-honored moral and ethical precepts, especially to love others as the self, begins in the heart or our self-centered wills and works out through a person's or a people's thoughts, words, and actions. And, as we know, the heart is metaphorically the center of the self and its values. And, Paul says that subsequently all humans are the inheritors of this inclination because they are of this world.

With the idea of possession in mind, the Apostle Paul says it is impossible for a person to keep the Law unto salvation or achieve total righteousness before God because humankind is driven by a force or spirit they can't control or don't fully comprehend. (Sort of like the comedian Flip Wilson's Geraldine said, "The devil made me do it honey.") One may truly desire and seek to mentally ascend to and love the Law but the force of sin in their nature is greater than their corrupted or underdeveloped will. This force of sin then works paradoxically in intensity to one's intentions because their sinful behaviors are not really theirs but the effects of the force or presence of sin that dwells with them. Now in the desire to give one's self over to the Law of God totally in such an understanding causes a person to enslave themselves in Law-keeping efforts and they find themselves between a rock and a hard place because they are already slaves to a sinful nature, which rules their passions, desires, etc. - one cannot serve two masters at the same time, one will either love the one or hate the other. Thus, we hear Paul say, "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." (Ro. 7:25b)

To this dilemma, Paul asks the rhetorical question, who or what will rescue him, them, us or humankind from this situation? What must or can we do? His answer will be absolutely nothing, it has been done for them, him, and us by God on the cross of Jesus Christ, accept it, live by, and within it. People, lay down your demonic, religious strivings, and Law-keeping that paralyzes and alienates the self-from-self, self-from-others, and from God. A person can't buy it,

earn it, or steal it - acceptance before God is a gift, an act of unmerited favor; that is, God "righteousing" all those who seek relationship to God in Christ.

It would be so easy to try and psychologize these passages from the Apostle Paul on the Law, from within the framework of modern theory of paradoxical intention made famous by Victor Frankel, which simply states that the more you tell someone not to do something the more inclined or tempted they will be to do what is forbidden. I have come to see this modern psychologizing or existentializing as a gross miscarriage of Paul's understandings of human nature and God's redemptive work in Christ.

To be true to Paul's, and I think to our own reality and the solution to our ultimate anxieties and concerns over the eternal consequences to sin, we must stay with Paul's basic premise; which is, it is humankind's nature to seek self-realization, comfort, security, life-maintenance, pleasure, meaning, etc. from within our own understandings, our will and ways, independent of anything unseen as greater than ourselves regardless of its sources. Many argue that we only submit ourselves to the laws of nature and the laws of the land out of self-interest; wherein, we understand that doing and supporting the greater good is in fact our good, the fear of punishment, or the consequences of breaking the laws of physics. However, absent a greater and more immediate view of the kingdom of God, which Jesus and Paul try to convey, and concrete examples of the eternal consequences our actions, we tend to stick with what is in front of us, what we know, or whatever everyone else is doing. This unwillingness of an individual or a group to seek relationship with the Holy, the Spiritual, and its ways, often will put people on Paul's treadmill of hopeless, religious strivings, seeking either to abate or cure, if you will, a fundamental anxiety and driving force in life that is corrupted by sin. That force being, to achieve some sense of control or power in and over the unknowns of life, death, and ultimate meanings for our lives.

To compound this tragedy of trying to secure our lives solely through our own efforts does not lie in the little or larger acts of immorality or misdemeanors, but in our failure to rise to the creative purposes of God in our lives or as Paul understands it the "glory of God." This failure is the essence of sin for the Apostle Paul. (Romans 3:23)<sup>1</sup> The glory of God [or honoring God] for Paul is not heaping more religion upon more religion but living life in the grace of God made known in Jesus the Christ.

In our modern understandings, one can either agree with Paul and say human nature is infected by an evil spirit or we can say that humankind in its ongoing evolutionary development has not yet reached the point where we are fully aware of and attuned to the spiritual dimensions of this universe and its laws. Regardless of one's perspectives on such matters, the consequences and conditions are the same; that is, sin, the anti-life-force dominates this world and the world needs to be converted to the ways of life if creation, creature, and all humankind are to experience what I believe was and is a primary objective of God; that is, we are to enjoy life and it more abundantly. I believe the ways of life revealed in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, when rightly understood; that is, when stripped of those historical, institutional trappings that subvert the Law of Love, we will find the answers we need.

Therefore, I have a question I would ask certain segments of modern Christianity. How can you talk about Jesus as a manifestation and measure of God's grace independent of human sin? You can't any more than you can talk about death without life or beauty without ugliness.

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<sup>1</sup> WRIGHT N. T., "The Letter to The Romans, Introduction, Commentary, And Reflections", Vol. X of the New Interpreters Bible. Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1994 online, Ministry Matters.

Acknowledging God's grace without acknowledging human sin is a religion designed by simpletons.

God's grace restores divine-human and human relationship in either individuals or collective acts of sin. Grace is not, was not, a preprogrammed, automatic response to human sin, it was in the fullness of time that God made a willful choice to respond to and restore divine relationship with individuals or peoples, who in truth seek a relationship with God. And, God's grace and forgiveness should motivate a person to take responsibility for their actions, struggle to curb the forces or influences of nature, socialization, culture, and community, and not seek to excuse them. Yes, there are extenuating and mitigating circumstances to consider in an individual's or corporate acts of sin. However, those considerations are relevant only to punishment and restitution, not to the facts or acts of sin before God and others.

Grace is an ever-present divine potential, it is as pervasive as the air we breathe, but it does not exert its healing and motivating power in a person's life until activated by contrition, repentance, and a fervent request for its presence and power. Yet, it is truly free to all those who seek it.

Many modern Christians don't like talking about personal sin because it is considered to be judging, categorizing, excluding, discriminating and politically incorrect. However, no matter how we label it, sin is still here, still reaping its effects in the lives of people. As a rose by any other name would smell the same as does an outhouse by any other name will smell the same.

So, let's review Paul's understandings of sin, its death sentence or ultimate alienation from God and others, and its solution:

<sup>24</sup>Wretched ~~man~~ [person] that I am! Who will rescue me from this body [*with its innate propensities to sin and its consequences*] of ~~death~~ [*eternal separation from God*]? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.

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