

I'll bet there is not one among us who can't relate to the Apostle Paul today: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want [to do], but the very thing I hate [I end up doing.]" Paul, when using the word "I," is probably referring to himself, but I suspect that the "I" is the universal "I," all of us. We are the "I." We sometimes don't get our own action. We end up doing not what we want to do, but the very thing we don't want to do. It's the universal condition.

Talk to the alcoholic. "I made a promise that I wasn't going to drink. I know what it did to me. I ended up in jail. I put other people's lives in jeopardy. I lost jobs, ruined marriages, lived a lot of my life not knowing what was going on. I'm never going to drink again, I said to myself. Oh, maybe just one. And then all of a sudden one turns to ten. It's not what I wanted to do."

"For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." "I said I wasn't going to live life condemning and criticizing everybody. I said I was going to hold my tongue. And then all of a sudden, I let it rip. I'm saying things that I never meant to say. I'm critiquing people I never meant to critique. I'm blasting people I never meant to blast."

"I said I wasn't going to keep putting all this food in my mouth. I know what it does to me. I know the weight I am putting on, the stress on my joints it causes, the way that weight causes me to turn inward, to do less, even sometimes to stay away from people. But there I go again."

"How many times have I said that I wasn't going to be run by my sexual impulses? I wasn't going to turn people into objects for my pleasure and gratification. I wasn't going to jump into a relationship because of my need for pleasure or for a relationship in general. But I did it again, and I am up to my neck in a relationship I don't know what to do with."

“I said I wasn’t going to be the people pleaser that I tend to be am, an approach to living that causes all kinds of problems for me and my family. I said I was going to learn to say ‘no.’ But I did it one more time. Once again I am, we are paying the price.”

“I swore I wasn’t going to use my religion to manipulate people or make them feel guilty. And man, I am at it again.”

“I promised I wouldn’t be so needy any more. You know, looking to other people to make me feel good about myself, thinking that they are responsible for my happiness, waiting for them to invite me, to talk to me. Said I wasn’t going to be that way. But here I go again, sulking in my little corner, feeling sorry for myself.” “The good that I want to do, I do not do!”

It’s a challenge being human. I don’t know why I do what I do. Paul says it’s because sin has a hold on you and me. For Paul, sin is not some moral impropriety, some little indiscretion, some naughty thought or action. No, for Paul, sin is a power—a power that takes charge of us, a power that is remarkably *powerful*. “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” Sin gets ahold of me. Sin imprisons me.

Many of us who hear this respond with “O good! It’s not my fault. The devil made me do it.” That’s not Paul’s intention. Elsewhere, he makes it clear that we are not free from being responsible for our sin and its consequences. But Paul in Romans today is thoroughly honest about the human situation, about the difficulty in doing the good that we want to do.

The topic Paul is addressing in today’s reading from Romans is the law and the power of the law to get us to do what we know we ought to do. While Paul is not opposed to the law, he thinks that it has a limited ability to enable us to do the good. For him, the law is good and right in that it helps label our wrong. I think that’s what he means when he says today, “Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.” It’s right in assessing the problem. But Paul is convinced that it doesn’t have the power to enable us to do what we want. And

that's because for him it doesn't deal with the inside struggles. It doesn't deal with the powers that are at work within us. There is a war going on within us, Paul is convinced, and sin takes its prisoners. The law isn't able to stop the war. It is not able to free us from the things that enslave us. There is a major gap between what we will and what we do. And the law, Paul believes, doesn't have the power to bridge that gap. The law doesn't have the power to move you from willing to do something to actually doing it.

As Paul faces the limitations of the law and thinks about the seeming human inability to do what is right, he cries out in what sounds like desperation: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" It's the kind of response that people who figure out that they so often are unable to do the good that they want to do have. "This seems like such a mess. How am I going to get out of it?"

The response sounds a bit pathetic. But trust me. It's the right response for all of us. Often, not until we *get* that we are incapable of addressing the complexity of our lives on our own do we start to really address our lives in a way that brings healing. The first step in AA reads: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable." The first step to getting better is to realize the mess that you are in. The first step toward wellness is to open up your arms and say, "Wretched person that I am! Who's going to help me?"

Now you have to understand that for Paul the mess that we are in is not a mess without a response. We are, as Zechariah says today, "prisoners of hope." We are not only imprisoned to sin; we are prisoners to that which takes us out of our sin. We live constantly with hope, which is why Paul responds to his comment about his own wretchedness with "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" We are not left in our sin. We are not consigned to the mess. We are not people without resources.

Stand up friends! Hold your heads high! Freedom is our song! Alleluia! Freedom is our song. Alleluia!

The mess is real, but there is freedom in the God met in Jesus. In that God we meet the love and the grace that truly have the power to set us free from this imprisonment in which we live. The law, the pointing finger, the list of the do's and don'ts, the frequent trips down Guilt Lane or Shame Avenue do not have the ability to set us free. It is only love that sets us free. It is only grace that has the power to move us beyond the imprisonment that sin brings us. In the God of Jesus, the God whom the cross reveals shares in the worst consequences that sin brings upon the world, we receive grace upon grace, love heaped upon love. In the God of Jesus, met most fully at the cross, we discover a love that embraces us in spite of our messed-up-ness, a grace that receives us even though there is a war at work in our members. In the God of Jesus, before anything else is said, love is spoken. And truly it is love that has the ability to reproduce love. It is love that will be able to change us. It is love that can free us from our compulsions, which often are rooted in our own sense of unworthiness, our sense that we are not loved, that we don't measure up, that who we are is not good enough, which is why we have to change who we are.

It is love that can free us from the alcohol that we use to cover up, to alter our consciousness. It is love that can free us from the food that we use too often to fill deep hungers and to address deep emotional struggling. It is love that can tame our tongues, which frequently are the means for us to justify ourselves and to prove ourselves. It is love that can free us from our neediness, which obviously is rooted in our lack of comfort with who we are. It is love that frees us from our religion that we use to manipulate or beat people up. When it is about love, why would religion that often is often about performance and rules be allowed to reign? It is love that can take away our perfectionism, our need to please, to control, to dominate. When we've got a place, why would we need to earn it, prove it, establish it.

It is love that stands at the center of our lives and acts like Lady Wisdom from Proverbs in inviting us to "Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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 [all that you are]. My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Isn't it a wild paradox that you and I live in? We're imprisoned, often to ourselves, to the deep inner struggles within us. Life is burden and challenge. But life in Christ is also amazingly light and free. We don't have to be busy proving ourselves, earning our way, establishing our place. The burden of Jesus is light. In the God we meet in him, we find rest for our souls.

Stand up, friends. Hold your head high. Freedom
is our song, Alleluia. Freedom is our song, Alleluia.

(Text: Brian Wren; music: David Haas)