

Basics of the Faith: Conflict with Sin
Romans 7:7-25
July 28th, 2002

Western literature is full of characters like you and me who wrestle with sin and guilt over our failures to measure up to God's law and our conscience. Much of it began with Augustine way back in the 5th century whose writings and influence over Western Christianity has been immense. Augustine's personal struggles in his young life with sexual desire probably provided the fertile ground for his later theology. These struggles and his mother's constant prayers and exhortations to him, as well as his readings in Greek and Roman philosophy, created huge tensions in the young man from North Africa. Roman writers had much to say about "self mastery", controlling the passions and desires through the command of will and mind. But for many, certainly for Augustine, such control was impossible to achieve. Try as he might, his lusts could not be cooled, even with the best of human philosophy and will power.

After he became a Christian Augustine continued to read a passage like the one before us this morning, Romans 7, as descriptive of his continuing struggle over inner conflict with sins. Romans 7 became in the history of interpretation Paul's personal tension between sin and law after his conversion. What is described in Romans 7, therefore, was looked on as normative and even encouraging for Christians. Luther also claimed comfort from this passage. He says, *...for this passage on to the end of the chapter, the apostle is speaking in his own person and as a spiritual man, and by no means merely in the person of a carnal man.*

In Nick Hornby's novel: ***How to be Good***, Kate is a doctor whose marriage is falling apart and she's ready to separate, but without warning her husband. Her husband David experiences some form of conversion, to what exactly we are never sure, except it's not Christianity. His personality changes from the ugly, cynical and angry man to one of a pleasant, loving, concerned human being. A sort of faith healer called appropriately GoodNews has healed David's sore back and transformed his attitudes to life and people. Eventually GoodNews moves into their home and starts David down a path of social reform on their street. This new reality drives Kate into near

madness and despair. The old David seems a much easier person to deal with.

Much later in the novel as these forces for good in David's life increase, Kate is forced to reflect on her own guilt and shortcomings. She feels guilty about having decided to slip out every night and sleep at friend's place without telling her two young children. She also feels guilty about the brief and meaningless affair she had with Stephen. She broke the marriage vows. Kate also feels guilty about treating her parents so coldly. She even feels guilty about work. She thinks of the many patients she is rude to, who she is unable to help, who she really doesn't care enough about. She feels herself a failure as a doctor, and that she's ill tempered, bored and sarcastic. She thinks about her growing list of sins: adultery, exploitation of friends, and disrespect for parents. She has broken at least two of the Ten Commandments. At the end of her private ruminations on her failures and sins she thinks this thought: *When I look at my sins...I can see the appeal of born-again Christianity. I suspect that it's not the Christianity that is so alluring; it's the rebirth. Because who wouldn't wish to start all over again?*

Kate is just like most of us. She has a conscience; she would like to be a better person and not a moral failure; she longs for happiness and wholeness; she feels her sins deeply, but feels powerless to solve her inner disquiet. Most of us have passed through messy times in our lives. Most of us feel the power of sin within us: anger, deceit, selfishness, lust for power and material comfort, apathy to the plight of the weak and powerless, and above all a sense, however dim, of rebellion against God when we feel cornered by grace.

I confess that I too have passed through messy times in my life. When you go through the rupture of a divorce, as I did about forty years ago, you experience all kinds of despair and guilt. I can never erase that moment when I left the door of our house for the last time, saying goodbye to my two children, one ten the other eight. However hard we try it's almost impossible to erase the pain and guilt of such a heartbreaking experience, even if time brings a measure distance and healing. Few of us escape the messy consequences of our propensity to lose the battle against moral failure. It is part of us from birth. But what I inherited from Adam doesn't excuse my sins. I think

this is what Paul is reminding us in this passage. He says: *For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (Rom 7:14ff)*

Yes, time does bring healing and I'm happy to say that my children share in my life and we have learned to forgive and heal. Equally so for the spouse I left that day so long ago. We too have learned to find healing and forgiveness. But for many years the discord and pain were crippling for us all.

What does Paul have to say to our plight? If Romans 7 is not in fact describing Paul's own experience as a Christian struggling with his sins and feeling the inner conflict between good and evil, if not his personal demons, what is he describing? Paul is certainly clear that God's law as disclosed in the Ten Commandments is holy and good. He says this clearly in the middle of our reading: *So the law is holy and just and good.* The law isn't the problem. It's sin that is the problem. The law tells us God's will for us, but doesn't give us the power to keep it. In a sense the law serves to emphasize our sins, setting them out clearly.

It's sort of like a child who for whatever reason decides to tease the life out of the family cat. She can't seem to stop doing it. Only when the child's parents tell her that she can't tease the cat does the deed become a disobedience of a command. If she continues to tease the cat, she is now not only wrong but disobedient. Paul says in Romans that the law brings a knowledge of sins. This is what Paul means when he says in our reading: *Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin... (vs 13ff)*

The law, in short, cannot heal the dangerous, destructive impulses that inhabit us. The way out of our moral dilemma is not found by knowing more about the rules, or by trying harder. Paul says here that living outside a relationship with God through Christ makes such an achievement impossible. The law never had the power to break the rule of sin in my life and free me to follow the commandments. Paul is describing in this passage the dilemma of all humanity to

follow God's will as disclosed in the Commandments apart from faith in Christ.

Trying harder to be good, engaging in self-improvement courses, eating the right foods, exercising properly, looking after my body and seeking to control my passions through meditation and prayer, all of which is noble and good for us, is unable to resolve our fundamental problem with sin. As Augustine and countless Christians discovered, the problem lies within each of us and it is called sin in the bible. This is what Paul is describing here in Romans 7.

A backward glance at chapter one ought to make this clear. From the Garden of Eden, the human family went on their own chosen path which had no room for God's rule in their lives. They made other things the gods they served. For this God gave them up to the natural consequences of their rebellion: *lusts of their hearts to impurity, to degrading of their bodies among themselves,...to degrading passions...to a debased mind...and were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness....*, the list goes on (Romans 1:24ff) This is a description of us! We follow Adam's rejection of God's rule. It describes those whom Paul says elsewhere are "without God and without hope in the world." These are not bad people. They, like us, simply follow our father Adam's decision to choose self over God.

This is the character who speaks in Romans 7:7ff, not Paul himself. He has already said previously that Christians are people no longer enslaved to these forces within us. We are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God.

Sin is no longer the dominating force in the Christians life, says Paul in the previous chapter. So obviously it is not the Christian who is the subject of chapter 7, but rather the human race outside of that relationship with Christ. There is no genuine freedom in such a life, but rather enforced enslavement to sin and despair.

These Roman Christians were attracted to Torah as a way of achieving self mastery. Paul is reminding them and us that the road to wholeness and healing and reconciliation with God is not found in trying to do our best. This is what you used to be like he tells them in

Romans 7, without God, without hope in the world. This is the struggle of all humanity who tries to please God through their efforts. But since the coming of Jesus the promise of the law as a means to life has been proven false. To rely on ourselves, on our attempts to keep the golden rule in order to please God, has been shown to be futile. Our condition as sinners requires some power from outside ourselves to break the vicious hold of sin over us. Paul breaks out at the end of this passage to say: *Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (vs 25)

Dear Kate never does find the key to unlock her dilemma. The novel ends with Kate looking out at the night sky behind her husband who is hanging out the window trying to clear the leaves in the gutter, and she sees nothing at all. The novel ends in hopelessness and darkness. And in a certain sense that's where Adam's trail leads all of us unless the light of Christ breaks into our darkened hearts. Jesus' invitation needs to be remembered right now:

Come to me, all you that 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 your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28ff)

Amen