

I assume that when you heard the second Bible reading from Paul's letter to the Romans it was one of those many texts that leave you baffled and confused. Except, of course, unless you are on a diet. Then it makes perfect sense. When you have fought off the desire to eat a donut all day long and then you finally give in to your cravings, knowing that the whole day's worth of self-denial is now gone to waste, the phrase, "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate," suddenly makes perfect sense.

This is another one of those texts where I could spend the whole sermon and then some wading through the complex meaning of the words. If I did that I might be given credit for being intellectually thorough, but your eyes would glaze over rather quickly. And so let's take a different approach.

This approach starts with a dirty word in our world today - the word "sin". In our politically correct world the word "sin" carries unacceptably negative connotations. It suggests that there is something truly wrong with a person. Of course we no

longer believe there could be something wrong with a person. We say that person is just acting from fear or ignorance. Proper education and support should be able to turn the person around again into something productive.

“Sin” sounds too medieval for many people’s ears. It conjures up ideas of demon possession and little devils running around. In our rational world where everything has to be explainable the hint that some ‘thing’ or ‘force’ or ‘conscious’ exists that is committed to destruction sounds superstitious.

The word “sin” belongs to the world of religion, which if you are any sort of person of intellect at all you know cannot truly exist. Oh yes, it is okay to believe in God or a higher power, and it is even okay to belong to a church; but none of these things are seen as concretely relevant to the day to day operation of the world. Corporate executives are not going to be swayed from a profit making scheme by being told it is sinful or going to cost them their salvation. They’d laugh at the idea. And yet sin is where we must begin if we are to understand Paul’s words to the Romans.

Sin can take many forms. I'm guessing that when you hear the word sin the first thing that comes into your mind is some personal action you would do that was either naughty or mean. You think of the kind of thing that if we were Roman Catholics you'd confess to me in a confession booth. (Thankfully we're not Catholics and you don't have to feel the need to tell me your every dirty little secret and I don't have to listen!) But let's take sin to a bigger level, the level Paul is talking at. This is sin as a state of brokenness that you are powerless to do anything about.

Here's what I mean. Have you ever noticed that every human attempt to fix a problem just creates another problem? We work hard to provide food and water for starving people. That's a good thing to do, we'd all agree. And yet when we do that good thing we are only contributing to global overpopulation - an environmental disaster becomes inevitable. We see a third world country and discover resources in that country that could raise them out of poverty. It sounds like a great idea, but the results are disastrous. Do you think there'd be unrest in the Middle East if it weren't for oil? If there was nothing of economic value there I'd bet the region would be peaceful.

I remember when the internet was just beginning. I was proud to be an early adopter of this new technological revolution as a student at Penn State with my email address. You couldn't access the internet from a personal computer. You had to go to a monitor connected to the university's mainframe computer. And there was no color. Just green letters and symbols on the screen. There were rules for how to communicate so that this new and pure form of communication would remain pure and clean. You were supposed to put a little smiley face after everything that you intended to be funny so no one would be confused. You were supposed to be fair and write appropriate things. So much for that idea! It didn't take long before the internet was host to countless computer viruses, hateful speech, pornography and all sorts of exploitative material.

Let's say you are an extremely loving and giving person. You don't have a selfish bone in your body. You work hard and do your best and only keep the barest minimum for yourself, denying yourself every comfort so you can give more to others. And so you give and give and give. That sounds like a sin free life, doesn't it? Isn't that what God wants? Isn't that person embodying Christ and therefore far from sin?

It doesn't take long for someone else to see what you do and figure out how to exploit your goodness. Now that person is lazy and you are an enabler, unwittingly contributing to their destruction.

My point in these examples is this: No matter how perfect your intentions, and no matter how selflessly loving you are, sin is always close at hand ready to make a mess of everything you do. You can't escape it. I don't care how perfectly you think you have discerned God's will and lovingly carried it out, sin is right there too. What does Paul say in verse 21? "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand."

He goes on, "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." Paul recognized that there was no escape. He was hopelessly trapped in sin's web. No matter how hard he, perhaps the greatest Christian missionary of all time, worked he couldn't escape sin's presence with his every action. And so he

says, "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

You know the answer, it is right there in the very next verse. But do you see the hopelessness he felt? Do you see the hopelessness of our own lives too? We can't fix anything in this world. Every good we try to do brings about a bad. The law of physics which says, "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction," goes for sin too.

Paul cries out, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" And he gives the answer, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" It is Christ who rescued Paul. And it is Christ who rescues us.

We are trapped in a vicious hopeless situation in this life. Secular humanists who don't like talking about "sin" don't want to agree with this situation. They want to say that good human intentions can fix things. But this isn't true. Only God can rescue us - and God has promised to do just that.

So then, what do we do? Do we quit everything because we know we can't fix anything - or that our every fix just creates another problem? Certainly not! We keep working, but we know that our own efforts aren't capable of the fix. And we always proclaim hope - the hope of our Lord who does rescue us. Salvation is more than just getting to go to heaven. Salvation is being set free from the bondage of this life where there is no escape. Always do the most loving thing you can, and let God take it from there. Only by God's work will any good ever come. Amen