

Our Inner Wrestling

by Linda Rex

July 9, 2023, Proper 9 | After Pentecost—One of the things I appreciate about the writings of the apostle Paul is his honesty regarding his own personal struggles in his walk of faith. Paul was frank about his previous persecution of those who followed Christ, and about his own weaknesses and frailties. He also humbly acknowledged the ways in which Christ lived in and worked through him, calling believers to follow him as he followed Christ.

In this Sunday's New Testament reading, Romans 7:15–25a, Paul sums up his previous summation of the need for both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) to be rescued from sin. He shows that even though the Jewish people had been given the law, they were unable to keep it, because their hearts were not right before God. The non-Jews, who had some idea of right and wrong, also did not live in ways that acknowledged God and were equally as guilty before God. In the end, both groups of people (i.e. all of humanity) were headed towards death, with no hope of salvation—apart from Christ.

During his time here on earth, Jesus understood the desperate situation we as humans were in. He knew this is why he lived and would die, so that we would be freed from our enslavement to evil, sin, and death. Throughout his brief life here on earth, Jesus intentionally prepared for and walked the path to the cross, because he knew that the only solution to our desperate dilemma was his life, death and resurrection.

So, as God in human flesh, Jesus lived the life we needed to live but could not. He wrestled in each moment as we wrestle, being tempted in every way as we are tempted, but without sin. Jesus, within his one being, held the two sides of his divine person and human person together, burning away the sin which so easily besets us as human beings. He, by the Spirit and in perfect union and communion with his Father, actively forged within our human flesh a new nature—a new way of being.

In the gospel passage for this Sunday, Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30, Jesus pointed out how he and John the Baptist were received by those who were exposed to their ministry. On the one hand, John was ridiculed and rejected because of his austerity and restraint while on the other, Jesus was ridiculed and rejected because of his warm reception of the despised and reject and his participation in their celebrations. Jesus' ultimate word to all those who were caught in this crossfire was, *"Come unto to me all you who are weary and I will give you rest"*. He called to them to learn from him—that in him they would find rest for their souls.

I really appreciate Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of vv. 25–30:

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly."

He shows that it is in our walk with Christ that we begin to learn how to truly live as image-bearers of God in Christ.

Looking at Jesus Christ, we see that our human experience will be of both our oneness with God in Christ and our human weakness and faultiness. Even though we have been born anew in Christ by the Spirit, we still wrestle with the evil, sin, and death that are a part of our human flesh right now. One day, when Jesus returns in glory, the truth of our existence—that which is hidden with Christ in God—will be revealed. Our true glory will be made evident, shining for all

to see. But in the meantime, we are—as Paul puts it—earthen vessels, cracked vessels, which hold the glorious eternal treasure of God’s Spirit, Christ in us.

Jeff McSwain, in his book “Hidden in Contradiction” explains how we find within ourselves two sides, which are in contradiction, in the same person. In his placemat theology, he shows how these red and green parts of our person are interwoven—both are true at the same time. This does not in any way alter our relationship with God in Christ by the Spirit—Jesus has made that secure in his person. What Paul is explaining in Romans 7 is our inner human experience right now. We struggle, we wrestle. But our assurance is in Jesus’ finished work. He holds us in right relationship with God, and it is there we keep our attention and our focus.

Elsewhere Paul says that we do not wrestle against flesh and bones, but against principalities and powers in the heavenly places. This is a spiritual battle which is fought with spiritual weapons. The armor of God Paul describes in Ephesians 6:12–19 is essentially Jesus Christ himself. It is Christ’s life in us by the Spirit that is important here, and which already is triumphant. This is our hope and our joy. This is why Paul, in Romans 8:1, can joyfully exult, saying, *“there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* What matters is not our ability to get it right, but Christ in us having already got it right, living that out in and through us by his Spirit. Thank the Lord!

Thank you, Father, for loving us so much, that you would give your Son to do this great work in our human flesh, forging for us a new human flesh to live eternally with you. Thank you, heavenly Spirit, for living in us and with us right now in the midst of evil, sin, and death, and working to transform, heal, renew, and restore. Grant us the grace to allow you full reign in our heart and lives, through Jesus our Lord. Amen.

“For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”
Romans 7:15–25a NASB

“This is how the sell-out to sin affects my life: I find myself doing things my conscience does not allow. My dilemma is that even though I sincerely desire to do that which is good, I don’t, and the things I despise, I do. It is obvious that my conscience sides with the law; which confirms then that it is not really I who do these things but sin manifesting its symptoms in me. (*Sin is similar to a dormant virus that suddenly breaks out in very visible symptoms.*) It has taken my body hostage. The total extent and ugliness of sin that inhabits me, reduced my life to good intentions that could not be followed through. Willpower has failed me; this is how embarrassing it is, the most diligent decision that I make to do good, disappoints; the very evil I try to avoid, is what I do. (*If mere quality decisions could rescue mankind, the law would have been enough. Good intentions cannot save someone. The revelation of what happened to us in Christ’s death is what brings faith into motion to liberate from within. Faith is not a decision we make to give God a chance, faith is realizing our inclusion in what happened on the Cross and in the resurrection of Christ! See Rom 3:27.*) If I do the things I do not want to do, then it is clear that I am no evil, but that I host sin in my body against my will. It has become a predictable principle; I

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desire to do well, but my mere desire cannot escape the evil presence that dictates my actions. The real person that I am on the inside delights in the law of God. (*The law proves to be consistent with my inner make-up.*) There is another law though, (*foreign to my design*), the law of sin, activating and enrolling the members of my body as weapons of war against the law of my mind. I am held captive like a prisoner of war in my own body. It doesn't matter how I weigh myself I just do not measure up to expectations! the situation is absolutely desperate for humankind; is there anyone who can deliver them from this death trap? (*The word ¹talaipōros occurs only twice in the New Testament—Rom 7:24, Rev 3:17—and both times it is translated wretched!? it has two components, **talanton**, which is the word for a scale of balance; that which is weighed, a talent; and **poros** from **peira**, to test as in testing the weight of something.*) Thank God, this is exactly what he has done through Jesus Christ our Leader; he has come to our rescue! I am finally freed from this conflict between the law of my mind and the law of sin in my body. (*In the Incarnation, in a human body exactly like ours, Jesus balanced the scales! He is the true measure of the life of our design—he revealed and redeemed the image and likeness of God in us as in a mirror! See Rom 1:16, 17 and 3:24 and 27.*)” Romans 7:15–25a Mirror Bible