



ANTI-ADDICTION DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, June 3, 2012

(See the important [Intervention Resources](#) list in the [Cultural Resource](#) unit.)

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Lection – Romans 7:14-25 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 14) For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. (v. 15) I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. (v. 16) Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. (v. 17) But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. (v. 18) 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. (v. 19) For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. (v. 20) Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

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

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Preachers can bring an Anti-Addiction Day message to liturgical life by crafting a rhetorical strategy that crosses all socio-political and socio-cultural boundaries. Drug addiction, for example, affects everyone and everyone's families and associates. Thus, preachers must develop illustrative or liturgical movements to help listeners to perceive that the story you wish to tell is a commonplace story that is recognizable in most African American's experiences.

There was a young couple in our congregation, and because of the wife's family, their social pedigree was respected. They had two precious children and as a family, they were admired; together, the family looked good. The husband, however, struggled with an addiction. Because of careful covering for the sake of the wife's family's reputation, few people outside of the family circle knew of his problem. The pimps, pushers, and crack-heads in the alleys—they knew. They laughed at him for trying to live a double life.

And, guess what happened? You guessed right. He was exposed and he spent 18 months in the local jail.

At the altar, the wife would pray and admit her struggle with love, faith, family, and forgiveness. Her husband was released a few months early for his good behavior. When he came back to church, he was physically healthier than when he left; he returned on fire for the Lord! I was cautious, however, as I noticed that he did not apologize or say anything. In other words words, I did not sense any contrition or repentance.

Eventually my greatest fear was realized. I heard it through the grapevine. The pimps, pushers, and crack-heads said that he was back on the streets. Soon, I saw him in the stupor condition; he was as high as a kite. He said, "Reverend, I am embarrassing my family, church and maybe even you. I know that I am embarrassing myself. Reverend, you are right—the drugs have got my body but they don't have my soul. In my mind, Reverend, I am just as Christian as you are; it's my body that has left the church, not me."

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Romans 7:14-25

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Addiction does not happen to "bad people"; addiction happens to people. Some of those people attend worship services regularly, and many are baptized believers! Others are

waiting for Christians to share the Emancipator's message because it is a holistic message of salvation, grace, mercy, and redemption. By redemption, I mean that we must encourage our parishioners to seek professional intervention such as the services that Kolmac Clinic provides for citizens in the Washington, DC area.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Part A (The Conflict)

William Shakespeare's Hamlet soliloquy "To be, or not to be: that is the question: / Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortunes / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles"¹ is similar to Apostle Paul's soliloquy in Romans 7:14-25. In fact, Shakespeare's rhetorical strategy closely parallels that of Paul's Roman passage where Paul presents the "The Conflict in Man":

- (1) "There is a fight that goes on in man,"
- (2) "There is a war inside us,"
- (3) "There is trouble within us," and
- (4) "There are divisions inside us."

These translations seem to focus on the obvious, namely that people struggle with two impulses—first, that of the spiritual, and second, that of the flesh.² I'll say more about this later.

In one phase of exegesis of a passage, preachers and Bible teachers ask questions of the pericope before they preach it or teach it. Some questions raised by Romans 7:14-25 could include:

1. Paul said he didn't understand his actions (v. 15). Would we accept that same response from an addict? Should we? Are there ways that they can be helped to understand their actions?
2. Does Paul, an apostle, saying that **he** "did things he hated" make us more compassionate toward those with addictions?
3. Did Paul have an addiction? If so, what might it have been?
4. If evil lies close at hand (v. 21), what does this suggest to families of addicts and churches?
5. Paul's wrestling with sin suggests that we will always have to battle sin. What would I recommend to someone wrestling to overcome addiction?
6. Do I know the most effective methods for overcoming addiction? Do I know someone who does?
7. Is my church equipped to help addicts? If not, is it working with programs that do?
8. Paul thanked God through Jesus Christ for rescuing him from his sinful body that could only bring him death (v. 25). How can addicts be rescued?
9. Will lessening addiction in my community require work to change any systems (political, economic, educational, etc.)?
10. In addition to pray, what am I willing to do to lessen the scourge of addiction?

Part B (The Right Name and the Right Solution)

Romans 7:13-25 is a complex text that takes the reader through a theologically thick maze. However, the reader who holds on tight through the twists and turns will eventually receive life-changing perspectives. A complex Scripture is needed to combat a complex situation like addiction.

People struggling with addictions—from alcohol and other substances, to online gambling and pornography, to binge eating and compulsive shopping—realize that addictions are complex. Loved ones of addicted persons who desperately want to help them sometimes utter phrases like “Just pray about your addiction.” While such sentiments are well-intended, they fail to address how deeply addictions can invade and corrode a person’s entire being. If beating addictions was as simple as saying fervent prayers, there would be few addicts. Overcoming addictions requires more than willpower, even religiously motivated willpower.

Persons are addicted precisely because their willpower is broken. When people’s willpower operates correctly, they can say “no” to things and situations that might destroy them. In other words, when our will is working, we know how to say, “I will not.” “I will not engage in behaviors that can destroy my well-being.” However, when our willpower is compromised, our ability to insert the word “not” withers away. In other words, “I will not” easily mutates into “I will.” Countless people have declared in the

brightness of morning, “I will not give into my addiction today,” only to collapse at midnight bleakness into the despair of “I will give into my addiction; and even worse, I must give into my addiction.” Addicted persons and those wanting to help them are confronted with a gripping question that should not be dismissed too easily: Can the death-like vice grip of addiction really be broken?

According to our text, one of the first steps to overcoming addiction is a willingness to raise and embrace hard questions. This text begins with a hard question, not trite, churchy phrases like “When praises go up, blessings come down” or “I’m too blessed to be stressed.” Listen to the hard question posed in the first part of verse 13: “Did what is good, then, bring death to me?”

Even after becoming a follower of Jesus, the Apostle Paul remained a Jew. As a Jew, Paul affirmed that the law, or Torah, was a good gift granted by God to bring Israel life. The law granted life by providing boundaries for what was right and wrong. Like God’s commandment to Adam and Eve in Eden not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the law was designed to keep us from death or from those decisions that could destroy us. But like stubborn children, Adam and Eve took God’s “no” as an opportunity for them to say “yes” to a subtle, sinister invitation from a slick snake that had slid into the garden.

The Garden of Eden was good. Adam and Eve were good. God’s commandment was meant for their good. Yet, the conclusion of that story in Genesis was so bad (Genesis 1-

3). It is really bad when a lenient landlord like God evicts people from paradise. In light of the tragic conclusion of the Adam and Eve story, Paul in Romans 7 contemplates whether the law, in some strange way, was responsible for Adam and Eve's downfall. Did what is good (the law), then, bring death to me?

Paul's resounding answer to this question is, "No!" The good purpose of the law is not responsible for the bad ending of that story. This is an important truth for people dealing with addictions. People don't set out on their life journeys to be addicts. No one wakes up one day and says, "My purpose in life today is to be an addict." On the contrary, people attempt to pursue good purposes and godly dreams, from starting families to starting businesses, from starting college to starting a community program, from starting a church to starting a movement to end AIDS. Then somewhere along the way those good purposes and godly ambitions are corrupted.

Addictions usually begin when snakes creep into our gardens and compel us, and those around us, to make deadly decisions. The snake is so slick because it makes us believe that our choices will lead to sweet life, when, in reality, those choices will lead to bitter death. Honey-coated poison is still poison. It starts out sweet, but it ends up bitter. "I'll take this one drink, or take this one puff, or have this one affair because I need some relief from the pressure." And, before we know it, we are drowning in the bottle, suffocating from the smoke, and picking up the pieces of the many hearts that we have shattered.

To overcome addictions, we must deal with the real problem—the snake in the garden! We often refer to the snake as "Satan." However, in Romans, Paul uses another name: "sin."

Too often in churches we use the term "sin" to shame people. Too many pious, pew-sitting church folk look down their self-righteous noses at people with addictions and say, "That's a sin and a shame." For Paul, sin is not about shame. Sin is about a struggle—a lifelong, heroic struggle to pledge our allegiance not to idol gods, but to the true and living God.

In the book Preaching Paul, Brad Braxton explores Paul's understanding of sin:

In Romans, Paul demonstrates that everybody is under the power of Sin—both the Gentiles and the Jews. Generally, in Romans, when Paul mentions Sin, he is not talking so much about sin as an individual act of disobedience or bad behavior. He is talking about Sin as a cosmic power. In other words, he is talking about Sin with a capital "S." Sin, as a cosmic force, is a tyrant that rules over the believer like a despotic monarch. Sin with a capital "S" is what creates sin with a lowercase "s."

In Romans, Paul declares that there is a wicked force in the world that willfully opposes the ways of God. Everyone has experienced this tyrannical force at one time or another. It whispers in your ear and tells you to lie to your spouse. It's that

internal voice that makes you jealous when God blesses other people in a different and seemingly better way than God blesses you. It's that voice that tells you that you are not gossiping when you talk about other people's business; you are just keeping your friends "informed." There is a malevolent force out there, and Paul calls it Sin.³

Paul's repeated use of the word "Sin" in Romans 7:13-25 indicates that Sin is the problem. Another key term in this passage is "flesh" (vv. 14, 18, 25). In Pauline theology, there is often a subtle distinction between the words "body" and "flesh." "Body" (soma in Greek) usually refers to our physical existence and is a positive or morally neutral term. On the contrary, "flesh" (sarx in Greek) is usually a negative term that refers to our physical existence when it is taken over by Sin. In verses 14, 18, and 25, Paul uses a form of the word "sarx" or "flesh."

In Sin's DNA, there is a genetic disposition to grab, to snatch, and to take stuff over. Sin is greedy. Sin, disguised as a harmless garden snake, takes over the law and causes Adam and Eve to fall from grace. Sin, disguised as a holy thing like pleasure, hijacks pleasure and handcuffs us, thereby making us prisoners to our passions. To be in the "flesh" is to be a passenger on a plane plunging at breakneck speed straight to hell.

Sin is so potent and pervasive that it takes over not only our bodies but also our minds. Sin will literally make you lose your mind to the point that you will say, as did Paul, "I do not understand my own actions" (v. 15). How many of us have known in our minds what is right, and yet we are drawn by an eerie compulsion to do the very thing that we know can, and will, destroy us (vv. 18-19)?

Sin, like a malicious computer virus, completely corrupts the operating system of our moral will, such that every time we boot up our computers, Sin has already taken control of our system. Sin monitors the keystrokes on our keyboards and knows our deepest desires. Sin brings tailor-made "pop-up ads" on the internet of our integrity, seducing us with a menacing meticulousness. In the midst of such an onslaught, we will holler out in hopelessness, "Wretched man that I am!" or "Wretched woman that I am!" (v. 24). When Sin and the addictions it enflames finish with us, we feel like "wretches."

Paul takes twelve verses to discuss the problem so that we never forget how complex the problem is. Yet he presents the solution in one verse (v. 25): "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" This one statement in verse 25 is like a computer zip file, where data is compacted for ease of transfer. Contained in this one statement are gigabytes of God's grace and transforming terabytes for our triumph. When Sin tries to act like our Lord, we need to remind Sin that Jesus Christ is Lord! Christ does not simply remove the malicious virus. Christ also gives us a brand new operating system that sets us free. Paul unzips the fullness of our freedom in the next chapter, Romans 8:1-5:

- (v. 1) There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- (v. 2) For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.
- (v. 3) For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh,

could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, (v. 4) so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (v. 5) For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

Through our own willpower, we cannot overcome addictions, and our systems will eventually experience a fatal crash. However, when we relinquish and let God rescue us through Jesus, God gives us a brand new mind. A mind set on the things of the Holy Spirit is our new operating system. This is why Paul declares in Romans 12:2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” God’s perfect will is for all God’s children to be free and unfettered to enjoy God’s love.

Celebration

The Spirit is a firewall blocking the hellish hackings of Sin. To be sure, Sin will continue to attack, but once we are in Christ, no crash is ever fatal. We can always reboot and make better choices for righteous living. We can start again, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39). Nothing—no drug, no drink, no dreadful decision—can separate us from God’s limitless love and fathomless forgiveness. In those spaces once occupied by our addictions, love can live. The songwriter James Rowe said it this way: “I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore...but love lifted even me... When nothing else could help, love lifted me!”⁴

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details evoked by this passage include:

Sights: Men and women with skin ruined by alcohol and use of drugs; believers doing things that they know are wrong; families crying over addicted family members; addicts in rehab; addicts incarcerated; the Law of God; outward acts of sin that indicate sin within;

Sounds: Cries of mothers and fathers whose children have died due to addictions; families pleading with addicts to end their habits; children crying when abused by addicted parents; churches counseling addicts; preachers leading funerals for people killed because of drug activity; and

Colors: Clear alcohol; yellowish alcohol; white crack; the many colors of prescription drugs; the gray walls of jail cells; and the color of tears cried by the addicted and their families.

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

- See the Sober Recovery Community’s website and read a sermon preached by Pastor Elaine Hewes of Redeemer Lutheran Church, Bangor, Maine. The sermon was delivered at St. Luke’s Cathedral October 21, 2007. Online location: www.soberrecovery.com
- Contact drug and alcohol treatment facilities for your congregants like Kolmac Clinic, a place for a drug and alcohol intervention and counsel. Their website provides information to help you find a similar facility in your geographical location. Online location: www.kolmac.com
- Read the manuscript, “Palm Sunday with Jeremiah Wright” in The Report from Washington by Ellis Washington. His commentary appeared in WorldNet Daily Commentary. Online location: www.wnd.com. Ellis cites one of Wright’s sermons preached in 2003, where Wright said, “The government gives them the drugs, builds bigger prisons, passes a three-strike law and then wants us to *sing ‘God Bless America.’ No, no, no, God damn America, that’s in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as [though they are] less than human[;] God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and [that] she is supreme.*”

What is of import is Wright’s belief that drugs, prisons, and state and local laws are an unholy trinity that trap people in an unforgiving but profitable system.

Notes

1. Shakespeare, William. The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Online location: <http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/hamlet/quotes.html>
2. Newman, Barclay M., and Eugene A. Nida, A Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Romans. New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1973. pp. 127–143.
3. Braxton, Brad R. Preaching Paul. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004. p. 142.
4. Love Lifted Me. By James Rowe. African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, 2001. #504