

## **Congratulations, You're a (Forgiven) Sinner!**

**By Cathy Russell,**

**Based on Romans 7:15-25a, July 3, 2011**

When we hear scripture written thousands of years ago by very different people in a very different time and place, to a very different audience, our first reaction may be- How does any of this have anything to do with how we live today? On the other hand, there are some scriptures that leap out at us because they seem so current, so insightful so universal and timeless. For the contemporary person, Paul's words from his letter to the Romans sound as though they could have been written yesterday.

Is there anyone who cannot identify with his statement "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." I know I can. Paul names in very simple terms one of the great struggles of the human condition, the struggle between good and evil, *both* inside the human heart and on a cosmic scale.

The words 'the struggle between good and evil' sound very elevated and abstract, and yet we can all relate to it. Anyone who has tried to lose weight or improve their physical condition has had a small taste- pun intended, of this struggle. And whatever the magazines and infomercials may promise us in the way of quick fixes that involve little or no sacrifice, we know that the way to get to the good we want is to make changes in our lifestyle- to eat a healthier diet- more vegetables, less evil fat and sugar, and to have a regimen of regular exercise. We know it, we have heard it a million times, we have we been warned of the possible consequences if we don't take these steps, and yet somehow- we just don't follow through.

We tell ourselves we'll go for that long walk tomorrow, or that just one piece of cake won't hurt. My best friend in university used to say "Hey, let's go get ice cream!" And I'd say "No, I can't eat that." And she'd say "Oh come on, you're not going to get fat- all that's in ice cream is milk and a bit of sugar."

The battle to lose ten to fifteen pounds is not the end of the world of course, but there are other individual struggles where far more is at stake. Addictions-an overwhelming need for a stimulant, depressant or a behaviour which overrides every other consideration- work, family, marriage, even one's own continued existence is an extreme example of this kind of struggle. A struggle that may begin as a choice, but becomes an irresistible compulsion.

Popular novelist Stephen King has written very frankly about his own struggle with addiction. He describes the moment when he realised that he had a drinking problem. He went into his garage to deposit some empty king sized beer cans into the recycling bin. When he saw how many cans had accumulated since the last time he was in the garage he thought to himself “Wow, I have a drinking problem.” The very next thought he had was not, “Well, I better try to quit” or “I need help.” His very next thought was “Well, Steve, you better be really careful and make sure no one else finds out.” He explains that as an alcoholic, even as he realised that he was caught in the power of an addiction, he could not *even imagine* ever getting out of its grip. He puts it this way- “Trying to tell an alcoholic to stop drinking is like telling someone with the world’s worst case of stomach flu not to use the bathroom.”

I doubt Stephen King, who is no fan of organised religion, would be very familiar with the words of St. Paul, but they certainly fit his own life situation of recognising the problem, and at the same time feeling completely powerless to change it.

But what about when we don’t recognise the problem in the first place? What about when we don’t just knowingly do bad when we know what is good, what about when we do bad even when we think we *are* doing good? It’s *that* kind of scenario that lays bare the true power and danger of sin. Two Canadians of whom we are rightly proud, Nelly McClung and Tommy Douglas, were also proponents of eugenics- the forced sterilisation of those deemed to be of low intelligence or morality. These were not evil people- *far from it* and their intentions *were* good. And yet their good intentions led, in Nelly’s case, to the creation of an Alberta eugenics board which approved close to 5000 forced sterilisations from 1929-1972. And McClung and Douglas were hardly alone- eugenics remained on the social agenda, even on the *progressive* social agenda until the nightmare of Hitler’s so called Master Race exposed its true evil.

How right Paul is – we are truly captive to sin, even, perhaps *most especially*, when we are trying to be righteous. And as a righteous man who loved the Law given by God, so much that he felt he had to protect it from these blasphemers known as Christians, he should know.

One day a student came up to my theology professor Dr. David Demson, disturbed by his lecture on sin. David is a big man, with a big deep voice and a brilliant intellect, and he can be pretty imposing. Anyway, the student approached David and said “Dr. Demson, I don’t like to think that I’m a sinner.” His reply, “Hmph, Neither do I! What’s that got to do with anything?” Whether we like it or not, we are all caught in the net of sin, we have all inhaled its intoxicating vapours, we all test positive beneath our skin.

This might sound like bad news- and sin, our inclination to turn away from God and our neighbour *is* bad news. But at the same time, there's an upside to the diagnosis of original or universal sin. Sin is the great leveller, the great equaliser, because there are none who can will themselves- out of its power, no one who has not fallen under its spell. And that means that the pretence of moral superiority is exposed, the weakness and fragility of *all* is revealed. If nothing else it releases us, or at least it should release us from the burden of having to pretend we are perfect when we know all too well that we are NOT.

Commentator Shantea Monroe of Plymouth United Church of Christ writes the following out of her own experience in her congregation:

“we invest wisely, dress appropriately and worship discreetly. Illness, failure and loss are source of shame, and are therefore private experiences... One of the reasons my parishioners are so reluctant to confess their failures and face their sins is that each person believes he or she is the worst offender. Then along comes Paul, like some sort of psychic who actually diagnoses the state of every soul. Yes, we are a mess- but so is everyone else- Hallelujah!”

Paul may know the diagnoses, but he also knows there is only one treatment that can free us from the universal scourge of sin, from broken relationships. And it's not an exercise routine, it's not a pill, it's not even a 12 step program, and it's certainly not a self-help book. The treatment that leads to freedom is to admit that we cannot help ourselves, we can only ask for help. We cannot heal ourselves, we can only reach out to be healed. To admit that we alone are powerless in the face of the power of sin, but that because of God in Christ we do not have to live under its thumb anymore.

Stephen King has been admirably frank and forthright about his own powerlessness over his addiction to alcohol and drugs, and about the powers- his wife and kids, Alcoholics Anonymous and his higher power that saved his life. Paul is being admirably frank about our powerlessness over sin, and about the power of God in Christ that can save our lives. I don't like to think I'm a sinner either- but to admit I'm a forgiven sinner, I will happily cop to that label every time, in fact I have to.

We are all forgiven sinners. How powerful, how freeing, how wonderful it would be if the church, instead of a place where we were afraid to confess and face our sin, was a place where we could drop the charade of moral superiority. If we could admit that we *are all* forgiven sinners- if we could be, not Forgiven Sinners Anonymous but Christians *Onymous*-friends of Jesus who aren't afraid to say “Hi, I'm Cathy and I'm a forgiven sinner.” What a powerful step

that would be- a lifechanging step, the first step of a whole new life, and whole new relationship with ourselves, and with our neighbour. And that miraculous first step is all made possible by the sponsorship of Jesus Christ. Don't be afraid to take it, after all you're in pretty good company. Thanks be to God, AMEN.

Loving God, Ever faithful, ever forgiving, hear the prayers of your people- our praise and thanksgiving, our longing and our hopes, our petitions and our needs.

We pray for our Christian family around the world. For all those forgiven sinners who seek to follow in the way of Christ, even in the face of tremendous odds, and great personal sacrifice and risk.

We pray for our neighbours to the south as they prepare to celebrate their own national holiday. We pray especially for those still in the terrible grip of the flooding of the Souris River, and all those offering whatever help and comfort they can.

We give thanks for this wonderful nation of Canada, a country of peace and prosperity, a country rich in so many resources including all the cultures of the world and First Nations peoples. Help us to uphold and live out the ideals of equality, freedom, democracy and inclusion we espouse for all the people of our land, and in our relationships with our neighbours.

We pray for all those in our national, provincial and local governments, all those who have given themselves to the great responsibility of leadership. May they remember their responsibilities to hear all voices and represent all the people. May we remember that we too bear responsibility for this nation that we love.

We pray for all those who serve in our armed forces around the world.

We pray for our congregation of St. Matthew's. For a Spirit of Co-operation and trust. For a desire to serve the gospel first and foremost before our own needs for recognition or our own desire for comfort.

We pray for all those known to us who are in need of your healing and consolation. We name aloud this morning

Loving God, we offer all these prayers as those who trust in your mercy and grace, and through the name of your Son Jesus Christ, our redeemer, Lord and friend. Thanks be to God, AMEN.

Assurance of Pardon

Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The body of Christ, renews our bodies and frees us from sin.