

Romans 7:15-25a The Uneasy Conscience

“Behold, I tell you a mystery, “Paul writes about the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, and he could have said the same about sin in Romans 7, when he wrote about the division within that threatened to tear him apart, and also threatens us.

You all may come to think that I watch too much television if I keep telling stories that come from what I see on it. You may also find me a little morbid from telling violent stories that come from the world of nature or folklore, like the story of the Piasa bird. But here is another.

I saw on the National Geographic channel a documentary about ocean mammals, primarily bottlenose dolphins and orcas, also known as killer whales. There was remarkable and astonishing video of a feeding technique that both of these species share, involving beaching themselves and eating off the land.

The dolphins team up to form a sort of net, trapping some fish just offshore, then using the tide to wash the fish up on the beach, and when they beach themselves, there are easy pickings. It must be seen to be believed.

The orcas feed on baby sea lions in much the same way, they hide just offshore and come in with a wave before the sea lions are aware of their presence. It *is* a bit risky, because they are the size of small school busses, and if they miscalculate they can get themselves permanently beached, bringing their death.

The reason why I give this illustration is because I felt sorry for the baby sea lions. There doesn't seem to be any moral consideration like there would be if human beings were involved. The whales are just acting out of some inherited-from-the-ancient-past instinct without the intervening complication of a conscience.

The Human Condition

Whatever else one may say about the difference between the animal kingdom and human beings, it is clear that human beings are not only saddled with a conscience, but are aware of it and can communicate about it. Much of the world's great art, literature, filmography, music, and other expressions address the fact of a struggling conscience, and here in Romans Paul addresses it in as plain a sense as one can imagine.

“I do not understand what I do, I do not do what I want. I hate what I do. . . I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the

good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing.”

“When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. In my inmost being I delight in God’s law. But there is another law at work in my members, and it is war.” He called it miserable, wretched.

What we see here is the kind of introspection most people try to avoid because it is too painful. We want to think more highly of ourselves than this allows us to think. Paul writes of the human condition.

His description speaks of the universal state of things and helps those of us not comfortable with this level of introspection to come to terms with the divided nature of our humanity. For better or worse, we have a desire to do good to which we are unable to live up. Guilt is the result. Paul says it is miserable way to live.

To be sure, not everyone experiences this struggle in the same way. As a matter of fact, sometimes the differences in the way we experience this struggle put us against one another.

These divisions represent the fallen nature of our existence. Paul uses the language of the “flesh” and the “spirit.”

I am reminded of Huckleberry Finn, who in Mark Twain’s novel said, “You can’t pray a lie.” He felt guilty because he was harboring a slave, which was in that time both and sin and a crime. He tried to pray for forgiveness, but the truth is he wasn’t sorry, because the slave he was harboring was also his friend and if he had turned Jim in, he would have felt guilty about that too.

Paul’s conclusion is that we are doomed in a way, involved in a “catch-22” in which there is no way to win, and there is no escape. One is right to wonder if intense manifestations of this struggle are not responsible for some of the emotional and mental illness we see so much all around. But Paul speaks in terms of gospel, good news.

Gospel

Paul is hopeful, not riddled with despair; and his letter to the Romans expresses not so much the depths of what it means to be human in the worst sense, as the heights of what it means to be human in the best sense.

The source of Paul’s confidence and optimism and joy *is* the gospel, that we have been rescued from this “body of death,” as he calls it, because of God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. The good news flips the

struggle on its head. Instead of a progression that leads to defeat because sin is at work in us, Paul finds a pathway to victory that not only involves our having been accepted despite sin but also our healing and transformation, because God is at work in us, so that by grace it is possible to accomplish a measure of goodness.

It turns out that we are redeemable! It is at this point where Paul could have said that the mechanics are, as in the resurrection, a bit mysterious. However it all works out, the struggle is not a bad, but a good thing. The real trouble is not an uneasy conscience, but an easy one.

The struggle itself is not awakened by sin, but by grace and it leads to salvation. The biggest problems we face in the world are not caused by those who show evidence of being conflicted, but by those who do not; the psychopaths and socio-paths of the world who seem to be able to go on like killer whales, without the intervening complication of a conscience.

Open yourself up to it, and do not be afraid. Work towards making yourself better. And, not because you are required, but because you are empowered, work for a better world too. Even if it is chaotic and unsure, forge ahead in faith.

Bottlenose and Orcas

I don't think anyone really knows what the ocean mammals are thinking as they entrap and deceive their victims. Nature seems to have its own morality. But we *can* and *do* think about what we do and seem to have a morality imposed on us from up high.

This thoughtfulness, this introspection, is good for us. Do not fear it, do not avoid it, because you have been accepted by the one who made you, the one who sets the standard high, the one who is the judge.

You have been accepted. And that acceptance *is* the last word. When it is apprehended by faith, a miracle happens, and there is a peace in the struggle, a cause for rejoicing and gratitude, thanks be to God.

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