

Today I would like to start my message with a couple of questions. Not important questions mind you, but questions nonetheless! For instance: Why do snooze buttons only give us nine more minutes of sleep? Why can't we tickle ourselves? Those big clocks in the parlor — why do we call them “grandfather clocks?”

It's unlikely that these questions have crossed your mind, but they've crossed *someone's* mind. The editors of a trivia magazine called Mental Floss have even included them in an article called “The 25 most important questions in the history of the universe.” In fact, the questions I just asked and more — like “Why does Hawaii have Interstate highways?” — are kind of like adult versions of the riddles we used to ask as kids. What did the sock say to the foot? You're putting me on. What do whales like to chew? Blubber gum. Why didn't the skeleton cross the road? He didn't have the guts to do it.

Questions intrigue us, even if they're trivial, or humorous in a grade-school sort of way. And then sometimes we get hit with questions that stop us in our tracks, conundrums that confuse us and paradoxes that perplex us. Like the dilemma the apostle Paul poses in our second lesson today: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” In fact, he seems to be so confounded by his thoughts that he repeats himself in verse 19: “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

So today we are given a mystery that matters, a riddle that rocks us! Why do we do what we don't want to do, and — the corollary question — why don't we do the good that we want to do? The answer to Paul's question can be found as we look more closely at his understanding of sin. In Paul's experience, sin is more than just a bad deed, an evil action, or a wrong decision. It's a power, a principle, a propensity, a predisposition — that pervades his inner self, something that dwells deep within him, programming his every move. As New Testament scholar Paul

Meyer says, it's the worm at the core of the apple. It's sin with a capital S. The action (sin), "What I do," is the outcome of the state of Sin within him. It's the poisoned fruit of the tree.

Paul's seems to think he has bad DNA; it's as if he's been baptized in a corrupted gene pool. St. Augustine calls it "original sin," and Calvin and other theologians call it "total depravity." It's a problem that corrupts his relationship with God and his neighbor. This predisposition causes him to do the things he hates, it prevents him from doing what is right, and it causes him to do evil. "Now if I do what I do not want," he concludes, "it is no longer I that does it, but sin that dwells in me."

I think it is safe to assume that we can most certainly relate to Paul's inner struggle. Sin is what causes us to gossip with our friends when we know we shouldn't, to cheat on a school assignment against our better judgment, to waste time on the job when we don't want to, to surf for naughty sites on the internet even if we feel shame while do so, to mislead our customers for a buck, to lust after our coworkers, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to snap at a friend or loved one, to covet wealth and material possessions, to turn a blind eye to the needs of others — all this and more, when we know full well what course of action we should take — but sometimes something holds us back.

The ancient philosopher Socrates, who argued that the unexamined life is not worth living, proposed that no one chooses evil, or chooses to act in ignorance. We pursue what is good, but fail to achieve it because of ignorance, or we lack the knowledge as to how to obtain what is good, or how to do what is right. In other words, we do bad things because we don't know any better!

Aristotle, a pupil of Plato, and another well-known philosopher, scoffed at the notion. Simple observation of human behavior, he said, tells us that an individual might know what is best, right and true, yet they will still do what's bad,

wrong and false. Moreover, if evil is never done deliberately or voluntarily, then evil is an involuntary act, and no one can properly be held responsible for the evil that is done.

Our own life and the times we live in, show us that Socrates got it wrong, and that Aristotle and the Apostle and author of our narrative today, got it right. So with Paul, we agree: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” Even worse, our best intentions are often thwarted by our own sinfulness. Sin would seem to play a corrupting role in practically every deed that we do. We do a good deed, for example, and we hope we’ll be rewarded for it. We work hard, and end up becoming workaholics. We make a sacrifice for someone else, and feel selfish pride about our selfless act.

The evidence of Sin is everywhere. From the schoolroom to the boardroom, from the home to the office, in business and politics, in communities and nations. Greedy goons raiding the pension plans in the offices of corporate America, people in this Country refusing to wear masks because they see them as an infringement on their freedom. Conflict and bloodshed all over the planet, children suffering from malnutrition when the world has the resources to feed everyone. You know the drill. Sin. It’s all over the place. Not to say that everything we do is completely sinful, but that every dimension of our life — personal, community, national, global — is tainted by Sin.

Psychiatrist and best-selling author Scott Peck puts it this way. “I think we’ve got things wrong,” he said in an interview with *Christianity Today*. “The predominant view in our culture is that this is a naturally good world that has somehow been contaminated by evil. It’s much more likely, I think, that this is a naturally evil world that has mysteriously been contaminated by goodness. And that the good bugs are growing and that indeed Satan is being defeated.”

So where does this leave us? What — or who — will get us out of this mess? Paul puts it this way: “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” “Thanks be to God,” he continues, “though Jesus Christ our Lord!” The only antidote to our total depravity is total grace, a grace that comes to us through our faith in Jesus Christ. Paul sees this as a *rescue*. And it is this perspective that is typical of those who see themselves as caught in an event, situation, or crisis that is now beyond their control.

Stories often emerged in the aftermath of all kinds of calamities and disasters in which people declare that if left to their own devices—they would have perished. They are alive today because of some kind of intervening agency such as: a search-and-rescue team, a friend or relative, an inspiring devotion or word from scripture, a support group like AA or NA.

After the Pennsylvania coal mine disaster several years ago, some of those who were rescued called it a miracle. They were doomed — without help from beyond themselves. Maybe some of you still remember Baby Jessica — the story that captured the headlines over 30 years ago.

Rescue! That’s what Paul — what we — are looking for. Good intentions won’t rescue us. More education, more money, more discipline, more time, more second chances. None of this will rescue us. Jesus Christ is our Rescuer! And it was quite costly for him, because he died in the “rescue” process. But that’s what makes it grace, and that was Paul’s startling discovery. As he was pondering his own riddle as he was struggling with the conundrum that sin causes in our lives, he came to the realization that through Jesus Christ the rescue has already taken place.

It’s our business now, to live as though it were true. That is to say, there’s no point staying in the coal mine when the rescue has been accomplished. No point staying at the bottom of a well. No point in clinging to a tree in the middle of a raging river. No point holding on to an old resentment. No point refusing to

forgive. No point in cheating, lusting, fighting, griping, stealing, lying — any of these things. It's not who we are!

Does this mean that through Jesus's heroic action on the cross that we have become perfect? Not quite. We're forgiven, not flawless. And Paul knows that there is always a war going on between the flesh and the spirit.

But the riddle is solved! Why do we do the bad we don't want to do, and don't do the good we do want to do? Because of the power of Sin that is activated when we "serve" the "flesh." But when we remember who we are, and whose we are... as baptized children of God, who we truly belong to, then we know what it means to be "rescued" and we can eventually begin to live the way God wants us to. Mystery solved! Thanks be to God!