

The Key to Both
Romans 7:15-25

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Do you know one of the things I appreciate the most about the apostle Paul? I appreciate the way he was transparent about his struggles – with fellow apostles, with congregations, with individuals, and most importantly with himself. This portion of his letter to the Romans highlights the latter struggle, the internal one, and it is well-known to anyone familiar with Paul.

“I don’t understand my own actions. I don’t do what I want but the very thing I hate ... for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do ...”

This gives meaning to the phrase, “a divided mind.” But it’s not only Paul, it’s me and you. Which one of us has not struggled with the different aspects of our own minds in contention with each other? Interestingly the battle is often between two sides of the same coin.

The late physicist and Nobel Prize winner Richard Feynman once traveled to India (*The Meaning of it all*). When he was there he visited a temple and ran into a guru, a holy man. They pulled aside for a brief conversation and Feynman said that the Yogi shared one simple thought and then went on about his business. He said, “Each person is given the key to open heaven. The same key opens hell.”

At the time, Feynman related, that was a baffling little how-do-you-do. But it stuck with him and he thought about that through the rest of his life. It is indeed the same capacity that unlocks both good and evil, beautiful and ugly, and helpful and harmful. The same power opens opposites and the opposites are often related to one another. Paul receives the gift of life from his creator, the gift of revealed truth in the law and the gift of free grace through Christ, and yet he finds himself torn between competing desires and impulses. “Deliver me,” he says, “from this bondage of death!”

Isn’t that the case about the same key that opens both locks? Think about it for a minute.

The same radiation from the splitting of an atom can annihilate cities or treat cancer. A healthy patriotism can slide over into a nationalism of superiority. The strong person can easily become a bully. The compassionate person sometimes lets people walk on them. Persons with great powers of persuasion can lead others to greatness or over the cliff like a herd of lemmings. Great conviction can turn into a judgmental attitude toward everyone. The deeply spiritual person can become so arrogant about their spirituality that they are separated from God. The tolerant person can become so accepting that they fear speaking against injustice. Love and passion and desire can become twisted when combined with selfishness and power. Self-sufficiency can become an unwillingness to ask for help.

Truly, the same key that opens heaven opens hell. The same mind and heart can take us toward oblivion or toward peace and joy. We have minds that are often cluttered and conflicted.

In time most of us become aware of just how crazy our minds really are. They are like popcorn machines with random thoughts and emotions popping in every direction, depending on the heat and the number of kernels. We have these chaotic minds full of extraneous, random bits and pieces of thoughts, feelings, images, and memories. And if we fixate on all this random lint we are batted along like balls in a pinball machine, ricocheting from one edge to another. “Save me from this body of death” Paul says.

You might think that the way out of the trap is to focus on all of these pieces, to sort through them, rehearse them, and make some sense of them so you can put them to bed. But no, that only makes it worse – we become preoccupied with the jumble and are only tied up more. You know those people who tell the same stories over and over? It’s not only that reciting the familiar stories can feel good; they are trying to bring closure to the unclosed chapters of their lives. But that kind of attempt fails because it focuses on all the random bits and pieces which are the distraction to begin with.

95% of what jangles around in these minds of ours is unimportant. Alongside Paul we observe that what I don't want to think about, I think about, and what I do need to think about, I don't. What I don't want to do I end up doing, but what is really important I leave unattended. I sit in front of the popcorn machine of the mind watching it pop, but that's not the answer. No, *that's part of the problem.*

Let me give you an example. Whatever you do, while I am speaking DO NOT look at this ceiling fan. Okay.

So as I was saying, our minds are like popcorn machines ... WAIT! I said not to look at the ceiling fan! You see, that's what happens with our divided minds. We are attracted to and attached to the wrong material, like moths to the flame.

And here is the paradox of faith: When Paul cries out in despair that he can't free himself from the popcorn machine of the mind, the divided, firing, random mind, he calls out for deliverance in another direction.

“Who shall deliver us from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” As an act of faith he redirects his attention to the love and grace of God, to the one thing. You don't force it, you receive it. You stop straining and receive the gift. Then everything quiets. We've drawn near the quiet, mysterious center of everything.

As long as our minds are divided we will never quietly apprehend beauty, infinity, mystery, love. For those of you who love classic movies there are several turning point scenes in *Men in Black*, that whimsical saga of humans trying to manage the true illegal aliens on planet Earth. Every time that one of the agents who has struggled with maintaining this impossible task is ready to transition to a different kind of life they pause, look upward, and say to their partner, “They are beautiful, aren't they? The stars, they are beautiful.” Suddenly they let go of every preoccupation to see what had been missed but is the most important thing. And it *is* easy to miss.

When we trust, let go, and go with the flow of the one thing of God, everything takes its place.

One moment follows the preceding and we live with quiet minds and hearts. That's what living in Christ means, I think, that we are focused on the One and set free from the many.

You've seen novices paddling a canoe down the river, haven't you? Of course you have! You've seen them because you spend time avoiding them running into you!

Novices in a canoe take twice as long to go down the same river as an expert does; they zigzag from bank to bank, shouting at one another as they go. Hint: If you are a canoe novice, do not float with your spouse; it will not help your marriage.

An experienced canoeist follows the flow of the current, adjusting to the changes in the river as they go. They do not fight the current but flow with it, adjust to it. They become one with the river and often navigate with the tiniest of well-placed strokes.

As one spiritual master has said, "The way to God is more about subtraction than addition." Subtract the unimportant until you have everything you need.

Do your best without figuring everything out.

Do what you know is best in the world before measuring every consequence.

Taste the food or look at the rose without taking time to describe its properties; just taste and see. Sink into this moment without knowing what the next shall hold.

Trust the path, not what is to the right or left of the path.

Love without being sure if you are being loved back.

Send the popcorn machine of the mind on a long vacation, rest, pick up your oar and float the river of God, let go of what could be done or thought and simply walk one step in front of the other in the path of God. Or as Paul said at the end of all his struggles, "Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ our Lord!"