

**The Rev. Dr. Robert MacSwain**  
**Thankful Memorial Episcopal Church**  
**Chattanooga, TN / Diocese of East Tennessee**  
**Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 9 / July 9, 2023**

*Genesis 24:34–38, 42–49, 58–67*

*Psalms 45:10–17*

*Romans 7:15–25a*

*Matthew 11:16–19, 25–30*

Sometimes there is a clear and coherent theme to the assigned Scripture readings, and sometimes there just isn't. Today is one of those "isn't" occasions. Our Old Testament lesson tells the charming story of how Abraham's unnamed servant went back to where Abraham himself grew up to find a wife from his kindred for his son Isaac. And Rebekah not only generously fulfills the prayer that the servant makes to God in order to find the right woman, but she willingly goes with him to marry Isaac. In a poignant concluding note we are told that Isaac loved her and was comforted after his mother's death. And our psalm's account of an ancient Near Eastern royal wedding does fit nicely with the Old Testament lesson, as both of them focus on the perennial themes from this culture of arranged marriage and procreation and having many descendants.

But then we get to the Epistle and Gospel, and any connection between the previous and subsequent readings seems hard to find. In regard to our famous New Testament lesson from Paul's Letter to the Romans, Biblical scholars disagree as to whether Paul was describing his own *current* experience of moral impotence in the face of sin—that is, at the very time he was writing the letter—or whether he was describing his *past* experience—that is, before his conversion to Christ. So when he says, "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," is this still a present-tense condition that Paul thinks is characteristic of the Christian life, or is it the past-tense condition from which he and presumably all Christians have been delivered?

While this is an interesting and important question for Biblical scholars to debate, in the final analysis what matters here is not *Paul's* experience, whether past or present, but our own. And for many Christians, Romans, Chapter 7, perfectly describes their ongoing and even daily experience of struggle against sin, especially those sinful patterns or habits that are traditionally called "besetting sins," that is, those sins that we find almost impossible to eradicate from our lives, no matter how long and hard we try.

For some their besetting sin is laziness or sloth, for others it is gluttony, for others it is lust, for others it is resentment, or gossip, or doubt, or anger, or envy, or pride, or greed, or...pick your poison. And for some people their endless struggle against a particular sin or set of sins is so exhausting and demoralizing that they are tempted by yet another sin, namely *despair*. But when we feel like this we need to look back at what Paul wrote here, for regardless of when it will happen, whether in this life or the next, Paul says that the one who rescues us from the power of sin is “not we ourselves,” but Christ. Indeed, that’s Paul’s whole point: that we are powerless against sin without divine assistance. Without Christ, we can will what is right, but we just can’t do it. That’s why we need a savior.

Finally, our fascinating Gospel lesson from Matthew is itself a hodge-podge of different themes, ranging from the parable of the children in the marketplace, to Jesus’ claim that God has revealed himself not to the wise and intelligent but to infants, to the well-known conclusion in which Jesus says: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” While these words are meant to be comforting, many people do not find the path of Christian discipleship to be “easy” and “light.”

But terms like “easy” and “light” are always relative: “easy” and “light” compared to *what*? Given what Jesus says elsewhere about how those who follow him must deny themselves, surrender everything they have, and take up the cross, I don’t think he means that these things are easy or light in and of themselves. Otherwise there would be no challenging cost of discipleship. No, I think that Jesus is here telling us that his yoke is easy and his burden is light compared to *other* alternatives, alternatives in which we try to do everything on our own, or set out on paths that are ultimately unfulfilling and even self-destructive. Jesus is saying that if we want to have rest for our souls, we will only find it in him. And, whether or not the path of discipleship seems easy and light, finding rest for our troubled souls in the presence and promises of Christ is something to which many Christians can attest.

So let us pray: “O God, you have taught us to keep all your commandments by loving you and our neighbor: Grant us the grace of your Holy Spirit, that we may be devoted to you with our whole heart, and united to one another with pure affection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.”