

We only appreciate Good News when we understand how bad things really are

In St Paul's letter to the Romans we reach chapter 7:

⁷ What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead.⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived¹⁰ and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.¹³ Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.¹⁷ But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.²² For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,²³ but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, 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.

In the first 7 chapters of St Paul's letter to the Romans he has been outlining the bad news and by chapter 7 he reminds us, in verse 13, of the utter sinfulness of sin - "sinful beyond measure" (NRSVACE version) or "as sin shows its true colours and exercises its sinful power" (Lectionary translation). Sin contaminates everything in this world and in our lives. Sin produces in us every kind of wrong desire (e.g. coveting Ch 7 v17). God's law – that is all His commands, precepts, statutes, decrees that He has revealed to us in the Bible – shows us where we are sinning, remembering that most of our sin is in our thoughts, a lesser amount is in our words and an even lesser amount in our behaviour – and it is all controlled by our hearts and it's desires. St Paul also says that sin itself deceives us in many ways especially when we redefine what sin is using our definition not God's definition of sin. These are some of the ways sin deceives us:

1. Sin deceives us into thinking that outward obedience alone pleases God, whereas we need to please Him on a heart level
2. Sometimes sin changes its tactics and tells us that everything is hopeless, so that we might as well keep on sinning
3. Sin deceives us to presume on God's grace
4. Sin deceives us into thinking that it will bring true and lasting happiness, while holiness will bring us misery
5. Sin deceives us into thinking that we have a right to happiness, while we forget that we have a responsibility to holiness

6. Sin deceives us by getting us to discount the consequences of wilful disobedience
7. Sin deceives us into thinking that we've earned some "free passes to sin" because of all that we have done to serve God
8. Sin deceives us by getting us to swap the labels and call it something much more acceptable
9. Sin deceives us by making us think that we're normal when we sin and to think that holy people are weird
10. Sin deceives us by working by degrees, so that eventually that which would have shocked us is now accepted as normal
11. Sin deceives us by making us angry at the law, feeling that God is against us when He prohibits something
12. Sin deceives us by making us think very highly of ourselves
13. Sin tells us that the law is oppressive, keeping us from developing the gifts and talents we have within us
14. Sin makes righteousness look drab and unattractive
15. Sin deceives us by getting us to compare ourselves with other sinners, rather than to compare ourselves to God's holy standard

St Paul then reminds us that what he experienced we also experience – we have a desire to do what is good but cannot do it (v 18). Again we can be tempted to define "good" in our terms (or in the way the world defines "good") not in the way God defines "good". In v21 St Paul says "when I want to do good" (e.g. loving my neighbour) "evil is right there with me (close at hand)".

In Luke 11 v 13 Jesus describes all of us "if you, then, who are evil, know how to give your children what is good"; that is a sobering thought, Jesus says we are evil.

So even the good things we do are contaminated with evil so I can never say "I am a good person". Why is saying "I am a good person" so dangerous? It is Satan's lie that blinds us to the serious spiritual danger we are in because "good people" don't see the need to be rescued, and so see no need for a Saviour. They believe they are good because they obey the definitions they have created for what it means to be "good".

If that news was not bad enough, St Paul describes himself as a "wretched man" and so that is what we are, too. It would be so easy to feel disheartened at this point because St Paul has spent 7 chapters of this pastoral letter telling us just how bad we all are and how sinful, and how even our good words and actions are contaminated by evil. He concludes with: "who will rescue me".

Then suddenly the mood changes and he shows us, in v 25, what hope we have "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ Our Lord" who will rescue us. And that leads into chapter 8 verses 1-2: "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus for the law of the Spirit of life (God the Holy Spirit in us) in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" – from being slaves to sin (ch 6 verses 16, 17 & 20).

The Good News of chapter 8 is only really fully appreciated when we have understood and accepted the bad news of chapters 1 to 7. But the Good News gets even better – and you'll see that as you read on in St Paul's letter to the Romans.