

**Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta**  
**“Who Will Rescue Me?” (Romans 7:15-25)**  
**July 5, 2020**  
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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There is an old expression that goes like this: “The Lord helps those who help themselves.” I remember hearing that as a child. It sounds good. It makes sense. But with all due respect to Benjamin Franklin and other proponents of this idea, when it comes to the gospel, it is totally wrong. The gospel is this: “The Lord helps those who *cannot* help themselves.”

Some of you may have a negative kneejerk reaction to this, but when it comes to our salvation, we are utterly dependent on God’s grace. We read this clearly in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

In the late fourth and early fifth centuries there was a Christian theologian named Pelagius (354-418), a brilliant and accomplished scholar, fluent in Latin and Greek, and a gifted and persuasive public speaker. But he taught that we save ourselves through our free will, that all we have to do is know what God’s law is and then by our free will keep God’s law and save ourselves. It’s that simple. It’s all up to us and our making the right choices. Similarly the influential nineteenth century philosopher and writer Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) put it this way: “Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny.” Again, it all sounds good doesn’t it? However, Pelagius’ theology about salvation was later deemed a heresy.

But there is more subtle, and in my opinion much more insidious, heresy called semi-pelagianism that is an attempted compromise between Pelagianism that we save ourselves through our own free will, and the gospel that we are saved solely through the grace of God. “The Lord helps those who help themselves” is a succinct and memorable expression of semi-pelagianism.

Semi-pelagianism advocates a team approach to our salvation—that we work together with the Lord to save ourselves. It appeals to our pride. It appeals to our self-determinism. It certainly appeals to our ego.

But semi-pelagianism is deadly and unbiblical. Ultimately while it sounds good, the idea that “The Lord helps those who help themselves” falls short, because our free will falls short. We can know what God’s laws are and how much better life would be for ourselves and one another if we followed them and yet we still keep doing the exact opposite and we still keep harming ourselves and one another. We can know what God’s laws are but still sow a mean thought that results in an evil action, that results in a bad habit, that results in a flawed character, that results in a tragic destiny.

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul describes in today’s passage from his letter to the Romans, a particularly honest and vulnerable passage:

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 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. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:15-24).

“The Lord helps those who help themselves” falls short. Pelagianism falls short. Semi-pelagianism falls short. Our free will falls short. And just like the Apostle Paul we come to a point when we realize that in fact we do not understand our own actions—that in fact often we do what we do not want to do, and fail to do what we actually want to do. Why did I speak angrily at that person I love? Why did I make that same bad choice again? Why did I make that poor decision when I knew better? Here I go again...

And the cry in our hearts is the exact same cry Paul wrote in today's passage,  
"Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me?"

"Who will rescue me?"—that is the cry of the human heart of those whose free will and self-determinism have fallen short, the cry of those who have come to the end of themselves and see things as they actually are, the cry of those who are finally ready to acknowledge the wretchedness in their fickle, duplicitous hearts.

A couple song illustrations...one from a 1965 hit often mistakenly attributed to Aretha Franklin but actually sung by Fontella Bass who pleaded:

Rescue me, take me in your arms  
Rescue me, I want your tender charms  
'Cause I'm lonely and I'm blue  
I need you and your love too  
Come on and rescue me  
Come on and rescue me  
Come on and rescue me  
'Cause I need you by my side  
Can't you see that I'm lonely  
Rescue me  
(From "Rescue Me" on her album *The New Look*)

While that song is more about the need for romantic love it certainly connects with our need for the Lord to rescue us, our need to know we are loved by the Lord, our need to know the Lord is by our side, our need for the Lord to help us when we cannot help ourselves.

Maybe you are not into 1960's R and B hits (although if that's the case you're missing out on a lot of musical gems). Maybe you like classic rock instead. Well, two rock legends, Bob Dylan and Bono (lead singer of U2) collaborated on a song for U2's 1988 album *Rattle and Hum* with the same plea to be rescued:

Love rescue me, come forth and speak to me  
Raise me up and don't let me fall  
No man is my enemy, my own hands imprison me  
Love rescue me...

And the sun in the sky makes a shadow of you and I  
Stretching out as the sun sinks in the sea  
I'm here without a name in the palace of my shame  
Love rescue me

“Rescue me...Love rescue me...”—that is the cry of the human heart—and every time you have prayed the Lord’s Prayer (and for some of you that is thousands of times) you have prayed “rescue me” because the Greek word for “deliver” (as in “deliver us from evil”) is the very same word Paul uses in today’s passage, “Who will rescue (deliver) me?”

“Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me?” Paul cries out, and then responds with the gospel... “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25). “Who will rescue me?” Jesus Christ our Lord, because the good news of the gospel is that indeed “the Lord helps those who *cannot* help themselves.” “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

We cannot rescue ourselves; we need to be rescued by the Lord—and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ the Lord does exactly that. The Lord responds to our plea, “Rescue me” by doing just that; the Lord answers our prayer, “Love rescue me” because God is love (1 John 4:16) and because “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8).

Scripture is clear that Jesus Christ is the one “who *rescues us* from the wrath that is coming” (1 Thessalonians 1:10); that Jesus Christ “*has rescued us* from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13-14); that it is Jesus Christ “who *rescued us* from so deadly a peril (and) *will continue to rescue us*; on him we have set our hope that he *will rescue us again*” (2 Corinthians 1:10).

So today for any of you who have realized that your free will has once again fallen short, that like the Apostle Paul you still find yourself doing what you don’t want to do and unable to do what you do want to do, may the Holy Spirit remind you anew that indeed the Lord helps those who *cannot* help themselves, and rescues all of us through the grace of Jesus Christ.

Amen.