

Romans 7:15-25a

Psalm 145

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

This Body of Death

Sermon preached by Daniel Sihombing

In her book published in 2015, titled *The New Prophets of Capital*, Nicole Aschoff, a sociologist from the United States, presents a chapter titled “The Oracle of O: Oprah and the Neoliberal Subject.” Oprah here is of course the famous Oprah Winfrey, a television personality who is likened to a prophet. Not the kind of prophets that we find in the Bible, for she is categorized as one of the twentieth century prophets of capital, whose vocation is about the creation and reproduction of neoliberal subjects.

In Aschoff’s words, “Oprah’s success and charisma undergird her core message that anything is possible. Her story is a real-life, rags-to-riches tale that inspires a belief that wealth and success are achievable if we open our minds.” One of the stories that she mentions in the chapter is about one of Oprah’s trips to Africa, where she told “a group of impoverished children who had been orphaned by the HIV/AIDS epidemic that with hard work and determination they too could be like her one day: ‘I grew up like many of you. No running water. No electricity, as a little girl. You can overcome poverty and despair in your life with an education. I am living proof of that.’”

How often do we hear this kind of message in the last few decades? About how the societal problems and solutions are ultimately rooted in individual mindsets. It’s all about perspective! Change your mindsets, and life will be different.

What a contrast to what we hear from Paul in our reading today, in Romans 7! For here Paul instead puts a lot of emphases on the inability of an individual subject to overcome the tide of sinful history by their own power.

Verses 15 and 16: “For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

The “I” that Paul writes about here actually knows what is right. This subject knows what is the right thing to do. They do not need to change their mindset. They know that the law is spiritual. They know that the law is good. In verse 22, Paul even writes, “For I *delight* in the law of God in my inmost self.” There is nothing wrong with the mindset.

And yet the same subject admits that “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (v.15). “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.” (v.18). So it is not just about the mindset. There is another factor at play.

And what would that factor be?

In Paul’s words, “But I am of the *flesh*, sold into *slavery under sin*.” (v.14). “It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” (v.17). “If I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.” (v.20). He also speaks about the subject being “captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” (v.23). “Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this *body of death*?” (v.24)

This body of death, where sin dwells within. This body of death, sold into slavery under sin. So there is another factor, something that dwells within us. There is another factor, something that enslaves us. Something that took over and control our body. Something that limits the efficacy of a transformed mindset.

It sounds as if what Paul speaks about in Romans 7 goes against the oracle of Oprah. It sounds as if what he tells us about the body of death is a counter-argument to the idea of the neoliberal subject. For sure, neoliberalism as an economic system haven't yet existed in Paul's lifetime. But hearing what he says for us in this time, it sounds to me that Romans 7 is a reminder that what is possible for us as individuals is always under the constraints of historical conditions, something that is located beyond our inner self, and that those historical conditions are often kind of negative forces, because history is under the power of sin.

How often do we feel the power of these historical constraints that limit our ability to do the good things? This is what happened when we pay for our taxes and so much of that money goes into the war machinery, even though we did not vote for the government in power. Are we complicit in this regard? And what about our position in the global relations of production? We probably think we only do our jobs, make an honest living, feed our family, but how does what we do in our job actually be part of a global chain that impacts people all over the world, especially those who live in the Global South. How does that impact climate change and environmental sustainability and the lives of the next generation, humans and animals?

This is where I hear Paul speaking about this body of death, "sold into slavery under sin." "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." "Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

Now, if we look at the context, the previous chapter, Romans chapter 6, is about dying and rising with Christ. The old self is buried, the new one is raised with Christ. But what is this new life in Christ? Is it a kind of a morally good life, where we can now fulfil a set of rules and practices? No! So Romans 7 is where Paul is trying to block this move, by saying that if you are trying to rely on your works, it will only reveal that your self, is actually not fully yours. There is a kind of power that rules over it. The power of sin. And then you would see that this body is the body of death. What he had in mind instead, is what he is about to say next in Romans 8, living in the power of the Holy Spirit, joining the new movement from God that radically transforms the world in the power of resurrection.

Joining the movement from God means that it's not about us, individuals, being able to overcome the constraints of historical conditions by our own works, through our change of mindset. It's not about being a neoliberal subject, preached by the new prophets of capital, that you can do and be whatever you like as long as you believe and put the work in, and solve the problem as an individual. It's not about us being holy and moral through our own efforts, as if we are not living under the historical conditions ruled by the power of sin. The gospel for Paul is so much more than that, as it is about joining the movement from God that radically transforms the world, the movement that is signalled by the resurrection of Jesus. May the Holy Spirit blow this power again and calls us all to join in. Amen.
