

# SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

Roanoke, Virginia

March 2, 2025

## *“Daily Duties”*

*Romans 7:14-25*

**George C. Anderson**

The Sunday School Class I help lead just finished the book, *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most*. The book comes of a class taught by three Yale scholars; one of them a former Edmunds Lecturer, Miroslav Volf.<sup>1</sup> While the authors are Christian, they bring other faith traditions and sources into the conversation about what makes a life worth living.

The final chapter lingered with me and inspired this sermon. Before I get into it, listen to Paul’s perspective who writes this in his letter to the church in Rome:

<sup>14</sup> For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. <sup>15</sup> I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup> But in fact it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup> For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For *the desire* to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. <sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. <sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.

<sup>21</sup> So I find it to be a law that, when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup> For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, <sup>23</sup> 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. <sup>24</sup> Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Croasmun and Ryan McAnnally-Linz



That is Paul's honest self-assessment. A bit dramatic, but honest. I think many of us can relate to what he is saying... and it goes beyond our being Christian. We can relate because Paul's perspective *is so realistic, so human*.

Perhaps *the most relatable thing* that Paul says is that he has trouble living his best life. Most of us get that. Despite our best efforts, we can't seem to stick to the script that has been written by our best intentions. The Real fails to achieve the Ideal.

While Paul's self-assessment is human and relatable to many who don't share our faith, he says what he says with a Christian lens. Some may be frustrated because they can't achieve the best life they envision as someone making money, making movies, or being the world's best father, mother or friend. But those who pay attention in church, or have been raised by Christian parents, might share Paul's particular ultimate vision of what makes a life worth living. They are blessed- at the same time burdened- by his belief that living the best life means following Jesus. It means living a life where Jesus is its measure.

That's a challenge. It's an even bigger challenge than what so many people said this meant a few years back when they wore their WWJD bracelets to remind them to ask, "[What would Jesus do?](#)". That's a really good question. If I wasn't allergic to the material the bracelets were made of, I might wear one. But as good as the question is, it is not good enough for Paul because, on its own, the question is about actions, not about what we're thinking- what we're feeling. It is not about desires. It is not about loves. It is about doing, not being.

Paul used to think it was just about doing. He used to think that living a good, faithful, life was all about obedience doing what one thinks God would do. He describes it as living according to the Law. But then the risen Jesus stopped him in his tracks by appearing to him on the road to Damascus to persecute Christians and basically asked him, "[What are you doing? In the name of God, you're persecuting God?](#)" Paul's problem was not in doing what he thought God would do. His problem was in his thinking, his desiring, his believing... all colored by his self-righteous view of what it means to live the good life.

But it is different now. Paul no longer thinks the good life is knowing what to do and doing it... something that is hard, but with practice and stick-to-it-iveness, one can pull off sometimes..., well, at least be better at it than others. But Paul doesn't think that way anymore. He now wants to be the kind of person whose mind, heart and actions so line up with Jesus' mind, heart and actions that "[it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.](#)" Paul wants to have the mind of Christ, the wisdom of Christ, the heart of Christ, the will of Christ, the love of Christ- all of it- and be who Christ is in the world whatever the cost. Jesus has shown Paul what it looks like to live the life worth living, and Paul wants to live it.

It takes humility to understand that the content of one's character is more important than the accomplishments of one's resume, but Paul wants his character to be Christ-like. And it takes humility for people striving to be good to so honestly assess their life and character to see that they are never going to be good enough... and yet try to live their best life anyway.

People who don't understand Paul- and that includes some preachers- think that the whole point is to shame others into being good people. But shame is not Paul's motivation. When he says, "wretched creature that I am," he is speaking to his old way where people should be ashamed



if they don't perfectly follow the Law. That is not his motivation anymore. Now his motivation is *gratitude*.

I'll put it another way. Paul doesn't lose sleep over not being able to live his best life. He might be losing sleep about other things;

- being persecuted by the sort of people that he once was,
- silversmiths selling idols trying to get him killed because his preaching against false idols has cut into their profits;
- that thorn in his side that he never explains.

Paul lives a stressful life and stress can mess with one's sleep.

But Paul isn't wrecked with angst anymore about failing to be his best self. He has come to the liberating realization that he is not only saved by God's grace, he lives by that same grace as his companion. When he says, "[It is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me?](#)" he isn't talking perfection. He's talking about grace living in him as his constant companion. Paul can try to live his best life even falling short because his witness is not to his success as a good person. His witness is to grace. To paraphrase my father's charge that I love so much- which is OK, because my father was paraphrasing Paul when he wrote it, Paul

["can feel good about the good that he does and tries to do. He can feel the sweet breath of forgiveness for the errors he makes when he has it in his heart to do better. And in the way he lives, he can strive to serve the beauty, dignity and worth of every person and so be in Christ's company in the cause."](#)

Here is how I would, today, boil down Paul's perspective on how to live the best life in following Jesus, with falling short being part of the equation.:

- Be humble because you cannot be God,
- Be stubbornly grateful even in hard times (sometimes for the hard times),
- Be honest about yourself and accept, not deny, your flaws and mistakes,
- When you have wronged others, ask for forgiveness..., and be ready to forgive,
- Deal with others with the grace with which God deals with you.

I just gave a list, but it is not a To Do list. They are not actions that can be accomplished and checked off. They are attitudes and practices that are ongoing when you have grace as your constant companion.

The authors began the chapter that has lingered with me by offering one of the most famous examples of what I just said by telling the story of Bill Wilson. Bill W.'s story is so well known that I have never before told it as a sermon illustration. But it is so illuminative of what Paul is saying that I'll tell it now, briefly.

Bill W. was an alcoholic and knew that if he didn't quit drinking he would continue to slowly kill himself while harming those he loved along the way. He knew what he needed to do and... he



*could* do it. But even when he was sober, his addiction was close at hand (to use Paul's phrasing). He was successful in quitting. The problem was that he couldn't quit starting again.

His lasting sobriety didn't come until a friend, a recovering alcoholic, told him that he couldn't do it on his own. His friend couldn't stop until he asked God to do for him what he could not do for himself... which led to his being open and honest with all his family and friends so they could help him too. Bill believed him and at his lowest point when pride abandoned him, he asked for God to take over.

That was the beginning. Bill knew that he couldn't stay sober unless he continued to be honest with himself and others. So, with grace as his companion, he did a thorough inventory of all the ways his addiction and behavior harmed himself and others and kept him from living the way he wanted so desperately to live. Then, again with grace as his companion, he did what he could to make amends with those he hurt.

I want to pause the story here because I don't want you to miss something very important. Somehow, some have gotten the idea that to be saved by grace means leaving one's life behind and beginning another. Bill, like all of us, had only one life to live. He remained an alcoholic and he remained in relationship with loved ones he hurt. By giving himself to the repair of those relationships, he lived more deeply into the grace of God that was his life's companion. He lived daily with humility, gratitude, honesty and forgiveness.

Bill W. even embraced the truth of his alcoholism as a way to witness to the grace of God in the world. In humility, Bill W. baked what kept him sober into the 12 steps that became central to the Alcoholics Anonymous Program he co-founded. The steps made gratitude, honesty, forgiveness and graciously helping others... daily duties.

Bill was a Christian- Presbyterian even. But that the daily duties of AA have helped so many who are not Christian shows how practical and powerful are these disciplines of a humble life. And so you find these practices encouraged by other religions and philosophies- practices like Yoga and Mindfulness exercises- counseling, coaching and self-help guides. Sometimes the focus is God, sometimes the focus is one's family, work, or staying healthy and balanced in an often unhealthy and unbalanced world. Like I said, Paul wasn't just being theological, he was being realistic.

But we are worshipping in church, so I want to go back to that special blessing/sometimes burden that we share with Paul of having this conviction that living the best life means following Jesus. We can deal with falling short of that goal because grace is our constant companion. We know that achieving the goal of living according to the measure of Jesus is not in the cards, but we live toward that goal with God anyway with grace as our constant companion; practicing daily gratitude, honesty, confession, forgiveness and helping others as daily duties.

How wonderful it is that we have a place where we can practice, and a community we can practice with. We have this weekly opportunity to practice the daily duties through the liturgy of our worship- expressing gratitude, confessing our sins, accepting God's forgiveness, and hearing the charge to follow Jesus into the world. Within our community we show each other the grace God shows us. And together as a community, we join together in the cause of making a witness to God's grace in the world so that we can spread the realistic and transformative practices of being



humble, expressing gratitude, being honest about ourselves, seeking reconciliation, and helping others.

I will let you behind the sermon-writing curtain. I have intentionally been repetitive saying the same practices over and over again because these are not tasks to complete and check off. These are daily practices that come of having grace as a constant companion.

Today, new elders are being ordained and installed. I would say to them that their charge is to lead this church to maintain those daily practices so that we can live by them out in the world.

