The blame game: Romans 7:15-25a

by [William R. O'Brien](#) in the [June 28, 2005](#) issue

"Do not touch." "Do not taste." "Don't walk on the grass." What is it about me that wants to do exactly what signs instruct me not to do? The warnings are probably for my benefit. The signs are not evil. So why do they bring out the worst in me?

Flip Wilson had American audiences in the palm of his hand during his comedy run from 1970 to 1974. He creatively portrayed stereotypical characters such as the money-laundering Reverend Leroy and Freddy the Playboy, both of whom could be offensive. But his most popular character was Geraldine. "She" wore designer clothes along with chartreuse stockings; her hair was always perfect, and she demanded respect from her listeners. The one-liners Flip put in her mouth became national household sayings. "When you're hot, you're hot!" explained Geraldine. The favorite Wilson quip, however, was one used when Geraldine was rationalizing bad things she'd done. Then she'd suddenly look demure and explain, "The devil made me do it."

We all have a little Geraldine in us. "Don't accuse me." "I'm not the one doing those bad things, like touching, tasting and walking on forbidden soil." I use the finger-pointing, blame-casting, attention-diverting practices to deliver myself from any personal responsibility. This is not a new tactic produced by a postmodernist mind-set. It is "premodernist." Our first human ancestors got into the blame game: Eve blaming the serpent for her disobedience, Adam blaming God when he accusingly commented, "The woman *you* put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

On the surface one might think that the apostle Paul was the Geraldine of his day. He could blame the devil (sin) for all his problems. Paul was trained to obey the law. The law was not sin. The law was holy, righteous, good and spiritual. But he had to confess that he was unspiritual and sold as a slave to sin.

Paul's own words reflect the problem: "In my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:22-24).

Paul's dilemma is the human dilemma—all of us struggle in the battle between good and evil, right and wrong choices, thoughts and actions. Long before Paul's time the Roman writer Horace reflected: "I pursue the things that have done me harm; I shun the things I believe will do me good" (Epistles 1.8.11). In *Metamorphoses* Ovid put words in the mouth of mythological Medea: "I see the right, and I approve it too, / Condemn the wrong—and yet the wrong pursue."

Christianity and Western civilization do not fight an isolated curse. Other faith systems attempt resolution for the conflict within the human soul. Islam identifies this struggle as *jihad*. The Arabic root for *jihad* means "strive, effort, labor." *Lesser jihad* defines the kind of struggle justified in defense of oneself, for example, in military action. But *greater jihad* is the fighting of evil in one's own heart. This is an inward reformation—a spiritual and moral struggle that leads to victory over ego.

All religions provide a way to engage in this struggle, some by works and some by asceticism. Perhaps down deep in each soul is an echo of Paul's lament: "Wretched man that I am, who can deliver me?" Is this the cry of a spiritually bipolar person—a walking civil war? What or who can free us from this miserable state?

Late in World War II a large number of American and British soldiers were languishing in a war camp deep inside Germany. Some had been there for many months. A high barbed-wire fence ran across the center of the camp, isolating the two sets of prisoners. They were not allowed to go near the fence or communicate with each other. But once a day at noon the British and American chaplains could go to the fence and exchange greetings, always in the company of the guards.

The Americans had put together a crude wireless radio and were getting some news from the outside world. Since nothing is more important to prisoners than news, the American chaplain would try to share a headline or two with his British counterpart in the few moments they had at the fence.

One day the news came over the little radio that the German high command had surrendered and the war was over. None of the Germans knew this, since their communications system had broken down. The American chaplain took the headline to the fence, and then lingered to hear the thunderous roar of celebration in the British barracks.

An amazing thing happened. For the next three days the prisoners celebrated, waving at the guards—who still did not know the news—and smiling at the vicious dogs. Then, when they awoke on the fourth day, there were no guards. Apparently they had fled into the forest, leaving the gate unlocked behind them.

That day the prisoners walked out as "freed men." But they had really been set free four days earlier by the news that the war was over. As the British chaplain telling the story said, " That is the power of the gospel—it is news, not advice."

Isn't that the difference between the power of a code and the power of a person? Little wonder that Paul could answer his own question as to who could set him free. "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord."