

July 5, Ordinary 14A (Romans 7:15–25a)

Paul may be the originator of the idea of an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other.

by [Kathryn Z. Johnston](#) in the [July 2026](#) issue

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When I was in high school, almost every night we were at the home of a different church friend who had a pool. Sometimes there were parties where the parents came, too. One of the adults who came to these things was a woman—a staff member at the church—who liked to push us into the pool. Now, in my opinion, the unwritten rule is that if you're going to push people into the pool, you must be open to the idea that you might get pushed into the pool yourself.

At one of these gatherings, I had to leave to go to work, and so I got out of the pool, changed, and came back out to say goodbye to my friends. As I was turning around to leave, I was blindsided and shoved into the pool. Did I mention that my work uniform included a white T-shirt?

Fast-forward a few weeks, and we're all hanging out together again, at one of those parties where the kids and youth were all swimming, but the adults were dressed nicely and basically staying away from the pool—except the woman who had pushed me in. She was very close to the pool. In fact, as I stood at the edge, I didn't even have to move, as she slowly came back toward me, all the while talking to someone else. In a split second, she was next to me, she still didn't know it, and she was poised at the edge of the water.

"I do not understand my own actions," says Paul:

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 who do it but sin that dwells within me.

Paul may be the originator of the idea of an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Sometimes we see the line and stay on the right side of it.

Sometimes we cross it before we even see it. And sometimes we defiantly step over it. (Reader, I pushed her into the pool.)

How have we failed despite our best intentions? How have we experienced the frustration of knowing the right thing to do and then doing something else anyway? How do we understand those actions and failures?

Are they simple mistakes? Or are they part of something deeper, something darker?

This passage in Romans makes it sound like Paul is struggling with his own personal sin. But that doesn't really line up with the Paul represented just about everywhere else in scripture. Many scholars think that in this passage Paul isn't talking about personal sin but is instead talking about corporate sin.

According to Paul, we've lost sight of the concept of sin. Sin is not just a mistake or a sum of our human misdeeds. Paul views sin not as the breaking of rules but as the distortion of the relationship between God and

God's beloved creation: humanity. Earlier in this letter to the Romans, Paul talks about us, God's creation, when he says, "For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened" (1:21).

This is sin. When we turn from God-centeredness to self-centeredness, when we don't trust God's love for us, so we try to secure our own acceptability through acquisition and possession and measure ourselves against earthly kingdom standards rather than heavenly kingdom standards—this is sin.

The distortion of our relationship with God—worshiping what we can accomplish ourselves as our own higher power, rather than surrendering ourselves to a higher power—this distortion is sin.

Sin is a force to be reckoned with, a force set against humanity and God alike. And only God can liberate humanity from such a force.

Grace is where we find God. Grace is shifting away from thinking about where we should be and instead considering where we are, how God is with us, and where God is inviting us to go next. Grace is trusting in the higher power and knowing that although we'll never measure up, we are still enough.

Grace is acknowledging our sin and receiving the words of assurance as a blessing and a charge on our lives moving forward: *Beloved children of God, the mercy of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.*

Our call as Christians is to receive this grace and walk the paths of righteousness and truth using the example we, as Christians, have been given: Jesus Christ.