

*13Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.*

*14For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. 15I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 21So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23but 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. 24Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.*

In the small town of Hettinger North Dakota on Main Street is K. B. Jewelers. Many years ago Alida Lacy worked there. In all of Hettinger only she knows the story of the Christmas carousel.

One Christmas a customer came into the store. He went straight to the back where a Christmas music box with figures that went round and round was gathering dust. Since Betty had ordered it years before, no one had decided to spend the 100 dollars to purchase it.

Until this customer. "Here's is the money," he said. "Wrap it, deliver it to Betty. Never tell her who bought it for her."

He knew that this was a gift that would please Betty, for many times he had heard her say how she wished she had the money for the carousel.

The gift was delivered just in time for Christmas.

Each Christmas Betty would watch to see who in the church was without family to spend Christmas day with. She and her husband were wonderful hosts. It was the delight of my family to be invited to their house that Christmas day.

First of all Betty showed us the Carousel. She guessed out loud who might have been the giver of the gift. Only Sue and I knew she was wrong for together we had chosen to give the gift. We gave to her for all that Betty gave to us, and to the church - to bring her joy. She would never know we had given.

It all worked out just the way we hoped until a meeting some weeks later.

Betty was a new member of the board that was concerned with worship. She criticized the service I had been using in Lent. She spoke of how much better Lent had been when a former pastor was there.

I was hurt. After the meeting I walked the two blocks to her house, knocked on the door, and when she answered I told her just how she had hurt me. I told her if she wanted to criticize me I'd appreciate it if she not do it in public. I walked away.

Never again did we share Christmas. For years she would not even greet me on the street. I went to visit her, apologized. Nothing helped. The friendship was broken.

Paul wrote, "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, it is no longer I that do it but sin that dwells within me."

I wanted to give a gift, a free gift, a no strings gift.

Like the gift a wife gives her husband in doing the little things - the special meal that takes extra time - the table set just so: a gift, a free gift. But then he's late for supper - or has a drink too many before he arrives. And special love turns into shouting, bitterness.

Like the Father who works late to provide the very best for his family: a gift, a free gift. But the children don't realize the cost. They complain that there is not more. Love turns into shouting, bitterness.

Like a brother who stays at home to give the best of his time and his work for the Father and finds the family celebrating his irresponsible brother's return with a bigger party than he has ever had.

Every one of them begins to give a good gift, a free gift. Every one of them ends up with a heart full of bitterness.

Paul is not writing about not being quite good enough - trying our best and failing. Paul speaks of how we get twisted in our hearts and we do not do the good we want, but the evil we do not want is what we do - especially when it comes to serving God.

Ask believers why they give and serve and sacrifice and they will tell you it is for the love of God - their thankful gift to God. God has given me everything. In gratitude I give a little back.

But what if the sinners get ahead of me in life - the greedy have plenty while I go without? What if the house of the unbeliever should be high and dry while my home is swept away in the flood? Might I remember what I have given and become bitter?

The gifts were all given to bring greater love between my God and me. And yet it is not love that is the last result.

For the gifts were no gifts at all. My mind says, "Freely given, no strings." My heart remembers, thinks God has an obligation. What should belong to life, brings death, instead.

"Wretched man that I am," says Paul, "who will deliver me from this body of death?"

There was only one place that Betty and I met. On the street she could turn away and ignore me. For years she never came through the line after worship. Only one place - as she served communion she handed the bread to me with these words, "The body of Christ given for you." With the wine she said, "The Blood of Christ shed for you."

Neither of us deserved the one we shared but God gave God's Son with no strings - no conditions. Jesus was a free gift to each of us, then and always. In him we were one, then and now and forever. More precious than my little gift was the gift she handed me - all the love of God given for me.

"Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ."