



WHY DO I DO WHAT I DON'T WANT TO DO?

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 7:14-25

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In the story, “The Little Engine That Could,” a little engine loaded with toys, food and goodies for boys and girls on the other side of a mountain broke down as it chugged up a hill. It was deeply disappointed for the children who wouldn’t get the goodies. Along came a sleek passenger train that was much too busy to stop and help. A freight engine came along but it had a lot of weighty matters on its mind. And then an old rusty train that could hardly move came by but he said he couldn’t help, either. People thought there was no hope to help the boys and girls get the goodies, until finally a little blue train came along. He said he thought he could help. The first train emptied all its goodies onto the little blue train and it went on its way up the hill. You know the refrain it made as it struggled up the slope: *I think I can, I think I can, I think I can*, all the way up the hill until it reached the top. And it did! And all the way down it said, *I thought I could, I thought I could, I thought I could*.

I don’t want to detract from the beauty of that little classic but, together with all the nice sentiments it communicates, it perpetuates the myth that while we can do immediately that which is possible, the impossible takes a little longer.

This, too, is a part of the American dream: given enough time, energy and gusto, nothing is beyond our capabilities. There are a number of things about us that we cannot change, however, irresistible forces that we cannot deal with. Certain passions, lusts and urges surge within us. Emotions, fears and angers dominate us. In the immortal words of Pogo, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

What can we do about the sin that so easily entraps us? In our studies in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans we have already looked at two wrong ways to deal with sin. The first is to let the flesh have its fling. In chapter 6 we learned that we can’t do that. The second response is to legislate against sin, resolving that we are not going to sin anymore. This is what some conference speakers advise. They lay out the five secrets of dealing with the flesh, and people return home convinced they would never again lose their temper.

Romans 7 declares that the law is good, whether it is Moses’ law or someone else’s way of dealing with sin. God’s law is holy, righteous and good. The problem lies with the material that the law has to work with. The Spirit may be willing but the flesh—our human nature—is weak. Flesh cannot respond to the demands of

the law. Furthermore, using the law to correct ourselves in that way is improper. The law was not given as an instrument to change our lives. All that the law can do is point out sin, identify it and reveal how sinful sin is. But it can’t change us. On the contrary, it condemns us. It stirs up sin, making us want to sin. That is the irony of legalism. It doesn’t stop sin, it arouses it.

Paul continues to elaborate on this theme, the weakness of the law, in the remainder of chapter 7. This particular section of Romans gives rise to all kinds of controversy. Here is where the theologians do battle. The questions that they wrestle with are as follows: Is Paul writing about his own experience or someone else’s? Is he writing about his pre-Christian experience (i.e., is this how he lived as an unregenerate man?) or is he referring to life after his conversion? I will leave the details of this controversy to those who are more gifted than I, but several things strike me about this passage.

1. It is clearly autobiographical. Paul uses the word “I” all the way through. Unless we want to debate what he means by the word “I” (a popular occupation these days), we must conclude that he is writing about himself.

2. Notice that Paul uses the present tense all the way through. This is a striking change. In the previous paragraph the verbs are predominantly in the past tense. If he were referring to his pre-Christian experience, he would say, “I was this way,” as he did in the previous paragraph. Thus I conclude that he is writing about his present experience.

3. One of the strongest reasons why I believe Paul is describing his Christian experience is his view of God and his word. He calls God’s word “good” (verse 16); he longs to obey it (verse 19); he delights in the law of God (verse 22). This isn’t the language of an unbeliever. Paul has a deep love for God and for his word. This doesn’t sound like the words of someone’s pre-Christian experience.

4. The last reason, and certainly not the strongest or the most important, is that I have to say that what Paul describes here is in accord with my own experience. Paul is speaking my language. He is talking about me. I have a deep love for God and I want to do his will, but I find myself doing things that I don’t want to do and not doing things I know I should do.

Before we delve into these verses I want to say that our understanding of this passage is critical to our ma-

turity as Christians. A genuine, humble admission of the evil of our flesh is the beginning of fruitfulness. Many of us struggle because we have too high an opinion of ourselves. But we will never cry for deliverance unless we come to terms with our wretchedness. The power of the Holy Spirit is discovered on the road to self-despair. Our only hope is constant watchfulness and dependence.

This passage, Romans 7:14-20, describes the struggle that we face every day. Paul states the same truth twice, first in verses 14-17 and again in 18-20.

For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. (Rom. 7:14-20, NASB)

Both sections begin with Paul's honest admission of his own sinfulness.

Verse 14: For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

Verse 18: For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh;

Even though Paul is an apostle, chosen by God for a special task, he confesses that he is an unspiritual man. Notice that he doesn't say that he is unconcerned about spiritual things. On the contrary, he is very concerned about them. But even though he is a Christian, the flesh dwells in him. It assaults him; he is no match for it. Left to myself, says Paul, I am its unwilling slave.

Paul had habits that he couldn't conquer. Maybe he lost his temper or had problems with lust. From time to time he felt enslaved by sin. It encourages me to know that others struggle with sin. It doesn't make me happy, but it comforts me. Unfortunately, many evangelicals who revere the Scriptures engage in what Ray Stedman used to call a "conspiracy of silence." We have agreed that we are not going to admit our sin so we hide behind a façade, acting as though we are doing well. We have problems at home, we struggle with compulsive behaviors, but we never talk about these things. Meanwhile, everyone else thinks that they're the only ones who struggle with sin. But here Paul says, "I am of flesh. I am not spiritual. From time to time I am enslaved by sin." Knowing that there are people like the apostle Paul who struggle with sin in their lives is a comfort to me.

Both middle sections, verses 15-16 and 18-19, vividly describe our inner conflict. Paul brings two problems to our attention. Both are stated in verses 15:

For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do,

Everyone can identify with Paul's yearning. His whole being longs to do good. For our part, we long to spend time in the Scriptures and in prayer; to be more courageous in sharing Christ; to be a more caring person; to be a better husband or wife. But when we try to act this way, at times we find we are unable to do so.

but I am doing the very thing I hate.

This is the flip side. We don't want to slander others, but when someone shares information about another, we find ourselves going right along. We don't want to be bitter and unforgiving, but we react sharply when someone hurts us. Like Paul, we know we shouldn't be doing those things but we do them anyway.

Paul says the same thing in verse 19:

For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.

David Roper explains:

This is the law of inertia in the spiritual realm. This law states that bodies in motion tend to stay in motion and bodies at rest tend to stay at rest. When we are at rest it is hard to get going. We know we ought to serve but it is hard to get up and do it. The other problem is that bodies in motion tend to stay in motion. When we are sinning it is hard to stop.¹

That is what Paul is talking about.

This is the conflict that every Christian man or woman knows all too well. Paul continues:

But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good.

This is a mark of Paul's conversion. Deep inside of him he not only knew God's law, he wanted to do it. So we agree that the law is good. The very fact that we do not do the things that we know we should do bothers us. It underscores that we are committed to the truth. We want to do what is right. If we sin it is contrary to what we think, contrary to our will. That is the conflict.

Then each section ends with an almost identical conclusion. Paul says in verse 17:

So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me.

And again in verse 20:

But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

He seems to be saying, "The real me knows that God's law is good, and the real me wants to do it. But I find there is an alien intruder living inside me, and eve-

ry time I want to do something, this alien intrudes.” Paul says this isn’t really him, it is something inside of him. The real Paul wants to do what is right, but the moment he wants to do it, this intruder takes over and he finds himself doing something wrong.

David Roper puts it well:

There is a certain dynamic that is quietly, insidiously working away inside. We are not even aware of it until we decide to do something good. We may resolve to read through the Bible in a year, so we set our alarm for 5:30 A.M. in order to get up and read for half an hour. We do that for a few days, but one night we get home late and fail to set the clock. Weeks go by and we realize that we haven’t spent any time with the Lord, and we wonder why. We aren’t always aware of this dynamic going on inside us until we try to do something good. There is an evil, an alien intruder, that we always have to reckon with: sin is at work in our members.²

In these verses Paul is attempting to expose the corruption of our flesh. He plainly states in verse 18: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.” He stops and has to qualify his remarks. What he is saying is, it is true that Christ dwells in me, but in my basic humanity, apart from Christ, there is nothing good to be found. Society today places a lot of emphasis on feeling good about ourselves. That is a good thing in itself. But we are not supposed to feel good about the sinful part living inside. We ought to feel very good about the fact that we belong to Christ. We are God’s children, completely forgiven and greatly loved. But we should not feel very good about the flesh, because it is corrupt to the core.

So Paul has been describing his condition and the conflict that every believer struggles with. In verses 21-25 his analysis goes deeper. Here he expresses it almost as a philosophy, in terms of laws and principles at work.

I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. (Rom. 7:21-25)

Paul has been describing our present condition and conflict, now he brings it down to a basic principle which he states in verse 21. He says, “I find.” John Stott explains:

This is the philosophical conclusion to his experience: “I find this principle, *that evil is present in me, the one*

who wishes to do good.” He breaks down that principle into two laws, two forces which are in opposition to one another: *the law of my mind*, and *the law of sin*. The law of my mind is a force in my inner man that loves the law of God; but the law of sin is a force in my members that hates the law of God. This is the philosophy of our Christian experience. Our experience is that we do not do the good that we want to do, and we do the evil that we hate to do. The philosophy behind this is these two laws that are in conflict, the law of my mind and the law of sin; or, more simply, my mind and my flesh, my renewed mind and my old, unrenewed, unrenovable flesh.³

On the one hand I have the will to do what is right; on the other hand there is the sin in my body that emerges at the most inopportune times, enslaving me, leading me on, ruining my life and my family and business relationships. None of us feel that we are ever going to get on top of this thing. “Miserable, wretched man that I am,” cries Paul, “who will set me free from the body of this death?”

Larry Crabb is one of my favorite authors. During one of the lowest points of his life he became deeply aware of his own sinfulness and selfishness. Out of the struggle of those circumstances he wrote the book, *Finding God*. Listen to his struggle:

During the day on Sunday, March 17, I felt restless, uneasy. That night, I couldn’t sleep. At midnight I slipped out of bed, reached for my Bible, and headed for the privacy of my study. For reasons still unclear, within seconds of my sitting down the dam burst. Tears gushed from my eyes and poured down my face. I sobbed, I wailed, I heaved for perhaps twenty minutes, without one recognizable word coming from my mouth, just the groaning of a soul in wrenching pain. I felt an unspeakable sorrow beyond any I had ever known. With terrible clarity I realized that I, along with everyone else, was out of the garden of Eden and had no way back in.

And then words began to come, out loud, subdued at first, then with the intensity of a scream. I cried out to the Lord, ‘I cannot endure what I know to be true. Life is painful. I am selfish. Everything is intolerable. Nothing satisfies. Nothing brings relief. Nothing good is certain. There is no rest. Sorrow outweighs joy. I cannot go on without knowing you better.’ Then, as suddenly as they had begun, the tears stopped. I sat quietly, aware that I was doing business with God, that my deepest being was engaged with him. He must be pleased, I thought, with my zealous longing for communion with him.

I felt good for perhaps a minute. And then, with the impact of a battering ram, the realization hit me: ‘I am preoccupied with me! I’m not even close to touching God. He’s not on my mind, I am!’ The tears flowed again, this time with even greater violence.⁴

What a powerful, brutally honest admission of one man's inner struggle to do the right thing, only to find selfishness instead!

Let me state again what Paul is emphasizing here. An honest and humble admission of the hopeless evil of our flesh is the beginning of fruitfulness. Many of us struggle for the simple reason that we have too high an opinion of ourselves. But we will never cry for deliverance unless we first see our wretchedness. That is when we cry out, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*" But we are not left with that cry. There is an even greater cry, a cry of victory: "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" That isn't even a sentence; it is a declaration of praise.

In chapter 8, Paul will expand on this theme and describe the basis on which he can thank God. But we must realize that it takes Christ to live a Christian life. That is why there is no mention in this passage of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. Paul wants us to understand that we cannot live the Christian life without Christ. It takes Christ to make us Christian.

We will always struggle with what the apostle calls the "law of my mind" (our hunger for goodness), and the "law of the flesh" (sin in our human nature which from time to time engulfs and enslaves us). There will always be conflict, hurt and pain and struggle, but in the end, there will be victory in Jesus.

There are no shortcuts to maturity. Our flawed personalities resist change. We are in recovery, gradually being delivered from evil. God is working even now for that distant end. We are becoming today what we will inevitably be.

Goodness is a job for God. Whatever conformity to goodness we achieve is the fruit of his doing. Fruit is exactly the right word, suggesting some hidden element quietly at work. Augustine said: "There is no true virtue without a miracle. Any progress we make toward authentic goodness is the product of our association with him. We must again and again come to him with our desires and lofty ideals and lay them at his feet." We must bring our weaknesses, shame, compulsions, doubts, fears, misjudgments, weariness and staleness, and ask God to complete us.

Time is on our side. God is wonderfully patient. He will never give up on us until his work is done. He is working even now toward that distant end. We are becoming today what we will inevitably be. And so

*Wait for God's silent molding,
Wait for His full unfolding,
Wait for the days to be.*

—Francis Havergal

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1. *Contradiction Within*, a sermon by David H. Roper (Cole Community Church, Boise ID, 1/10/1998).
2. Roper.
3. John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 77.
4. Larry Crabb, *Finding God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 24-25.