

On Doing the Thing I Hate

Romans 7:14-25a

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“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.”

This passage can make us uncomfortable. That is evident from the fancy foot-work used by some interpreters to dance around it. Some suggest that Paul is not speaking autobiographically about struggles in his own life; rather, he uses the first person pronoun to give vivid expression to his point. After all, another sermon about sin can be about as soporific as a big lunch on a hot day.

You may recall the story about Calvin Coolidge attending his home church in Plymouth, Vermont, during his presidency. After the worship service, reporters, who had been waiting outside, asked, “Mr. President, what was the sermon about?” Silent Cal replied, “Sin.” Looking for more, the reporters asked a follow up, “What did the preacher say?” “He’s agin’ it.” No, a sermon about sin in general is not bound to electrify its listeners. But what if the preacher stood up and said, “Friends, I want to tell you about how I have struggled with sin in my own life.” No one is likely to sleep through that sermon. So, some suggest that that is what Paul is doing in this passage, using the first person pronoun to add interest to his general comments about sin.

Other interpreters suggest that even though Paul is using the present tense, he is actually describing his life before he became a Christian. After all, before Paul became a Christian, he was a Pharisee, a scrupulous keeper of the law, and by his own account, he was a good one. He struggled with knowing the law, and yet even he was unable to fulfill all its demands. Now that he has become a Christian, all of that has changed. Paul still uses the present tense, however, to add interest and a sense of immediacy to his words. Every writer knows that if you want to engage the reader more fully, use the present tense. So some suggest that is what Paul is doing here.

Notice that what these interpretations have in common is the belief that Paul cannot simply mean what he says—that life for him as a Christian is still a struggle, that his life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ did not solve all of his problems, that he still tussles with temptation, that he can will the right, but he cannot always do it. And it is hard to hear Paul talk about the continuing conflicts within his own soul. If even Paul struggles in this way, we’re tempted to say what Casey Stengel said when he watched his Amazin’ Mets take the game of baseball to new depths of ineptitude: “Can’t anyone out there play this game?”

We expect testimonies to follow the familiar pattern: Before I became a Christian my life was full of woe and temptation. But now that I have given my life to Christ, all of that has changed. Previous struggles have been resolved and old temptations overcome. Nevertheless, I don’t think you have to be a biblical scholar to conclude that Paul here is not writing theoretically or at a distance, but from the agonizing depths

of his soul. The words stumble all over one another onto the page, sometimes losing the clean line of logic somewhere along the way. They have the sense of immediacy of a report from the front lines about a battle that is still in full fury.

If we need any more assurance that Paul is talking about his own life as a Christian, all we have to do is look into our own hearts, for we know all too well from our own experience that the same heart that gave itself to Christ is not free from temptation. The same Jesus who helps us know what is right does not always prevent us from doing what is wrong. Is there anyone here who could not say on occasion, not with distance but with heartfelt immediacy, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do"?

All theology is autobiography, in part at least. Paul's words are an example and so is this sermon. I don't know how it is with you, but I'm tired of making the same mistakes over and over, frustrated with continually coming smack up against my same shortcomings, fed up with willing what is right but finding myself unable to do it. I don't know how it is with you, but I find myself confessing to the same things every Sunday. I don't have a hard time imagining how tired God must be of hearing those prayers over and over, because I am tired of them myself.

In one church I know, every week the worshipers are invited to offer their spoken prayers, and every week one gentleman says, "Lord, sweep the cobwebs from our souls." Week after week that would be his prayer. Then one week, right on cue, he said again, "Lord, sweep the cobwebs from our souls," and another voice in the other side of the church said, "Dear God, kill the spider." I know the feeling. God, just get rid of whatever it is that keeps me from having to come to you with the same confessions every week. I'm tired. And I'm ready. A parishioner in another church I served once said to me, "Martin, I'm tired of my same old sins. I feel like trading them in for some new ones." I know what he meant. Do you? After all, other people's sins are always more interesting than our own.

A month or so ago I came across a volume in my library that I almost forgot I had. The book is a beautifully bound volume with most of the pages blank. Karen and I bought it in 1978, our first Christmas as husband and wife. We intended to start a new family tradition. Each year we would pause and look back at the year just past and write down our "thanksgivings." We would then look ahead and write down our "covenants" for the coming year, things that we would resolve to do with the help of God and one another.

I opened the book and began to read the "thanksgivings" for 1978, the only year represented. It is a long list, as well it should have been, for it covered the year of our marriage, the birth of two nephews, a widening circle of friends. As I read it, a warm flood of memories was released. My experience of reading the covenants was altogether different. There I did not feel as if I were walking through the past. Instead, it seemed about as current as today's newspaper. As I read the list, I was stabbed with the realization that if I were to write a list of resolutions today, it would look a lot like the list I made thirty years ago. Today I would still resolve to be a better correspondent, to try to lead a quieter, more deliberate life, to be less prideful, to have fewer material desires, to set aside more time to be with family, to be more open to other's needs, etc., etc., etc. I have not ceased to work on these things, but my continual efforts have not met with all that much success. "Dear God, kill the spider!"

Is it any wonder that that book lay on my shelf unopened for so many years?

I used to think that being a Christian was about becoming a better person—not perfect, perhaps, and not all at once. But I thought we could at least count on some marked progress. And there is a bit of truth to that, of course. I remember the story about the British novelist Evelyn Waugh, who was known for his biting wit. After one particularly caustic remark at someone else's expense, an acquaintance chastised him, "Mr. Waugh, you sound like a complete cad. I thought you were a Christian." "Ah, yes, madam," he replied, "and imagine how much more of a cad I would be if I were not a Christian." So, to be sure, there are ways in which the Christian faith can help us be better people.

But now that I am older and my firmest resolves seem to shrink continually before the harder realities of human weakness, I see it differently. Like Paul, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." And the reason, as Paul saw so clearly, is that sin is so much more than the sum total of human misdeeds. Our battle with sin is more than a battle against our own particular peccadillos. It is more like a cosmic battle between good and evil that is fought on many battlefields, including the battlefield of each human heart. Those misdeeds are merely symptoms of a larger and more persistent condition, symptoms of Sin, with a capital S, our state of alienation from God and our inclination toward rebellion against God. We may treat the symptoms and on occasion even meet with a bit of success, but the underlying and stubborn condition remains. And about *that* we can do nothing.

No wonder, then, that the penultimate line in our scripture reading is a question that borders on despair. Paul writes, "Who will rescue me from the body of this death?" But that question is not left to dangle in the air, taunting Paul, for he immediately goes on to affirm, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ!" In facing his own shortcomings, Paul is saved from despair through the affirmation that, even if he does not become a person free from the old struggles and temptations, he is able to lay claim to the truth that, through Christ, he is a forgiven person, with a forgiveness that is more persistent than our worst habits and inclinations, that this gulf of alienation may be too wide for us to reach across, but it is not so wide that God cannot reach out to us.

But let's not lose the surprising implications of that affirmation. Paul is saying that, in some way, Christ has come to him through his shortcomings. Were it not for a confrontation with his limits, as painful as that may be, Paul never would have needed Jesus. He could have done it all himself. If you can keep the law, who needs a savior? If you can keep every New Year's resolution by sheer act of the will, who needs redemption? If you are able to overcome sin by simply defining the problem, setting goals, and fulfilling them, then who needs Jesus?

But the fact that none of us can do those things, that we cannot deliver ourselves from the body of this death, as painful as that realization is, is a constant and powerful reminder that our need is greater than anything we can satisfy. In this way, our despair is nothing less than the gateway to the promise of new life. Many find that it is when they face their shortcomings that they can see the face of God. The recovering alcoholic understands this. The very first step to recovery is to admit powerlessness over alcohol, which sounds very close to despair. But it is precisely then, in the realization of powerlessness, that the alcoholic has an opportunity to establish a relationship with a higher power. The person who is struggling with illness often

discovers this. It is when all of our strength is drained from us that we can come to realize that our only hope is to lean on the presence of God. We can further realize that this was true all along, but for so long it was hidden from us by our vitality.

It is of such that Jesus says, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” After all, the wise and intelligent learn to rely on their own powers. They believe that they can solve their own problems. They have within themselves whatever it takes to fashion a full and meaningful life—until they come upon a problem for which they have no answer, or until they will what is right but cannot do it, or until their best efforts fall short, or until death takes someone they love, or until mounting challenges must be met with diminishing abilities, or until in some other way they confront their limits.

It is then that the wise and intelligent have a chance to learn something that is revealed to infants—that we are dependent on what we receive from another, that we cannot even get from today to tomorrow through our own efforts. Life will teach us all that lesson at some time or another, in some way or another. Life being what it is, we will all get to be infants again some day. We will all have occasion to cry out, “Who will rescue me?” For many that question on the brink of despair will simply hang in the air without an answer. But others will be able to say with Paul, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord,” and will say it with wonder and gratitude.