

## THE WAY WE WERE

A college student once challenged the school's chaplain, saying, "Christianity is just a crutch," to which the chaplain replied, "Who says you don't limp?" While there may not be a visible, physical component to our faith, often there is emotional damage or spiritual scars detectable to those around us. Using an example from my own life, I want to speak to Paul's seemingly erratic conversation he had with himself in the letter to the Romans.

*"I don't know what I'm doing, because I don't do what I want to do. Instead, I do the thing that I hate. But if I'm doing the thing that I don't want to do, I'm agreeing that the Law is right. But now I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it's sin that lives in me. I know that good doesn't live in me—that is, in my body. The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can't do it. I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do."*

Maybe you've looked at these verses before and thought, just what is his point? If you love someone with mental illness you can likely relate to my story. My daughter suffers from multiple mental illnesses, many of which are controlled with medications but at times they rear up and create internal and external struggles for her. Her illnesses affect her mind like sin affects our conscience. She struggles with forces she cannot control and with behaviors and moods she does not want to exhibit or experience.

Medication can help her, but we can't medicate our sins away. Sometimes we may want to self-medicate but that often leads us into more sin and poor choices. Paul knew firsthand that even though the law of God had been accomplished through Christ, there is more at work within us than our salvation. Evil, as he said, is right there with us even when we want to do what is good. So if Christianity was just a crutch, then we are all lame in some form or another.

In 1886 Robert Louis Stevenson published a book whose proper title is *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. In it he explored the nature of good and evil that he believed existed in each person creating a character who chose to give free reign to his evil side through the use of a potion. Eventually the potion was gone but the evil side of Dr. Jekyll began to take over and ultimately Mr. Hyde became the dominant personality, leading Dr. Jekyll to end his misery by taking his life. It is speculated that Romans 7:20 was part of what inspired him to write the book.

Paul's was not the classic "the devil made me do it" argument. He knew all too well that while we may blame evil for our choices, the choice is still ours to make. This passage speaks to all of us who would choose to turn away from sin and lean on Christ as true disciples, yet in those moments when we fail we need to know that we are not alone. Saying I do the very thing I do not want to do sounds like someone who can't keep their hands out of the refrigerator or their eyes off pornography or their wallets out of the store. Everyone has a weakness.

Paul was not writing about the unsaved person who had no knowledge of the assistance of God. He was writing about those who believe, like us. In his day sin was easy to categorize

and easy to spot, and he did just that. In our day it has become something of a cultural taboo to even mention or suggest that someone is engaged in sin. It's been reduced to the equivalent of a slight mistake like serving the wrong wine with dinner. It's the same as making a poor choice, but nothing as serious as leading to death.

If we would avoid sin we have no choice but to recognize and acknowledge its presence in our lives. When Paul wrote, "I do not understand my own actions," he was not saying he had no idea where his behavior was coming from, but that he could not accept and recognize that it came from within himself, or rather, the sin that lived in him. Sin had not yet lost its grip. Like Jekyll and Hyde, it was as if there were two people inhabiting Paul's body and mind; one which chose to do right and the other which chose to do wrong. I know we've all been the victim of this internal conflict throughout our lives.

In Jewish theology, this problem was addressed by the naming of two natures residing inside each person. It was the Jewish conviction that God had made human beings like that with a good impulse and an evil impulse inside them. But the Jews were equally clear, in theory that no one need ever succumb to that evil impulse. It was all a matter of choice.

The following verses are from the apocryphal book of Sirach, not found in our common Bibles, but full of wisdom nonetheless: "*It was he who created humankind in the beginning and he left them in the power of their own choice. If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water, stretch out your hand for whichever you choose. Before each person are life and death, and whichever one chooses will be given . . . He has not commanded anyone to be wicked, and he has not given anyone permission to sin.*"<sup>1</sup>

What I like about this passage is that it so clearly leaves us without an excuse or an easy out when our behavior is less than holy. The choice is up to us. However, we may have an inadequate view of sin, or a mistaken idea of how we are to fight against evil, or an insufficient knowledge of our own personality and our lack of resources. Sigmund Freud believed we are driven by unconscious forces and to become well we have to get in touch with the basic component of our personality, what he called the id, which is Latin for it. This is the home of our basic desires and drives.

Paul would have told Freud that regardless of why we sin, what we need to get in touch with is the power of God to change our bad into good, our weak into strong. God did something eternally wonderful to break the hold sin has on us. He sacrificed the best that ever was, his one and only true Son. Jesus died on the cross because of our sin. In dying there he paid sin's penalty. In rising again he broke sin's power. Only when we abandon all attempts to justify

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<sup>1</sup> Barclay, William, *The New Daily Study Bible, The Letter to the Romans*, pg. 116

ourselves and throw ourselves entirely on Christ do we find deliverance from the magnet of sin.<sup>2</sup>

I see it like this: there is who I should be and who I am. If the two of them ever met they wouldn't have much to say to each other. Do you see what a burden we have place on ourselves by our own selfish behavior? It doesn't serve anyone to ignore bad behavior or say we can't help it. In trying so hard to justify ourselves to others or to rationalize our actions to ourselves, we are wasting energy that could be directed at taking full advantage of what Christ offers to us, which is Himself, His strength, and His knowledge.

*“Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Put on my yoke, and learn from me. I'm gentle and humble. And you will find rest for yourselves. My yoke is easy to bear, and my burden is light.”* What could be more encouraging? Do Paul's words not express brilliantly the hard struggle and heavy load of fighting against the sin in our lives? And yet, when we read these words of Jesus we somehow forget they apply to us.

Christ's humility and gentleness is much easier to deal with than the sternness and cruelty of a faith built on law. But you have to remember that God also has a law, and that is the law of love. This notion of taking on an easy yoke and a light burden is not a poetic and wistful way of saying Jesus takes care of everything and we can just breeze through life unaware of any of the dangers of sin or the obligations of discipleship.

Through Christ we are offered rest for our souls, not merely a rest for our bodies, but a rest synonymous with salvation. This rest is not inactivity, but a harmonious way of living with God in His kingdom which is here and now and yet to come. Jesus was likely thinking of these words from Jeremiah, *“The Lord proclaims: Stop at the crossroads and look around; ask for the ancient paths. Where is the good way? Then walk in it and find a resting place for yourselves.”*

You see, rest for the soul involves obedience of the heart and the will. This requires of us work, submission, compliance and change. It is for us a new way of life. As an ancient philosopher wrote, *“Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end.”* And so it is with us. We end our old life of slavery and death and enter into a new life of freedom and surrender.

There is no opting out of our sin nature. This is a difficult passage for us to swallow. The apostle John touched on it in his letters, as well, by saying that if we deny our sin we don't have Christ's word within us. I don't know about you, but for me that's a big problem. Whether Paul was just rambling about his own struggle or having a personal crisis that he chose to share with the Romans we don't know, but he did come to a grand conclusion in the midst of that monologue. There is an answer to the problem.

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<sup>2</sup> Dudit, Michael, editor, *The Abingdon Preaching Annual 1999 edition*, pg. 233

The answer is always going to be Jesus. When Paul cried out, “*I’m a miserable human being. Who will deliver me from this dead corpse?*,” he was comparing sinfulness to the Roman practice of punishing a murderer by binding him to the body of the one he killed and forcing him to live that way. Paul answered his own question with, “*Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then I’m a slave to God’s Law in my mind, but I’m a slave to sin’s law in my body.*” We have what it takes; well, we know someone who does have what it takes.

The late Oswald Chambers wrote this, “Never allow anything that divides or destroys the oneness of your life with Christ to remain in your life without facing it. Beware of anything that can split your oneness with Him, causing you to see yourself as separate from Him. Whenever anything begins to disintegrate your life with Jesus Christ, turn to Him at once, asking Him to reestablish your rest.”<sup>3</sup>

Allow me to share with you two lines from hymns, one that is not often sung and one that is a new take on a favorite hymn. The one we don’t sing is a great Wesleyan hymn called *And Can it Be*. Here is the last verse: No condemnation now I dread; Jesus, and all in him, is mine. The new song is called *In Christ Alone*, and here is the verse I want to share: No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me.

One more song and then I’m done. This one was written by the lead singer of Mumford and Sons in reference to the novel *East of Eden*. He writes, “And you have your choices, and these are what make man great.” I’m a big believer in the theology present in hymns and contemporary worship songs and even contemporary rock songs. When these words become part of us and inhabit our minds we have a duty to give heed to what they tell us about our relationship with Christ.

Jesus offers to trade our burdens and struggles in favor of His yoke; a way of living in right relationship with Him and with others. He made this offer to His disciples before He died and in dying satisfied the law’s demands in order to give us full access to His grace and glory. Paul then affirmed the wealth of freedom we have gained through Christ by declaring the end of condemnation for those who have a relationship with Him.

We have freedom but with that freedom comes responsibility, not to the Law, but to the one who fulfilled the Law through His death. We can’t explain it, we can’t create it, but we can obtain it and we can utilize it. We are not powerless if we have the power of God’s spirit and the wisdom of Christ’s teachings. He has not called us to Himself in order to have us continue to struggle but to find our rest in the midst of struggles and the occurrence of sin in our lives. If your life feels like a Jekyll and Hyde situation, you do have a choice of which one wins. The answer to the way we were versus the way we can be is always Jesus.

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<sup>3</sup> Chambers, Oswald, *My Utmost for His Highest*, August 19 and 20 entries