



July 5, 2020

The Good We Want to Do

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Psalm 145:8-14; Romans 7:15-25a

"I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand." The law of the Old Testament shows us what sin is, so that we can avoid it — which sounds good at first glance. But here is the problem: We cannot avoid sin on our own. So the law is bad in the sense that it reveals the problem, but does not supply the solution. It is somewhat like someone diagnosing a disease, but not offering a course of treatment, or like someone telling you that you have a leaky pipe, without doing the plumbing repairs.

If we were to rely on the law only, then we would be imprisoned in a state of the opposite of grace: judgment, with no way out. But when we rely on grace as found in Jesus Christ, we are set free from that same prison.

For example: Seat belts are good. They protect us. They keep us secure and safe in the event of an accident. But this happened: We had a new car when our kids were still in elementary school. They were securely fastened into their seat belts. When we got home, it was time to get out of the car. The only problem was, one of the seat belts had malfunctioned. It had locked into position and would not budge. The release button would not let go of the buckle. And so our child was trapped in the seat. What was meant to be a help had become, instead, a matter of harm.

That is what it is like to be under the law. The law is there to show us what sin is, so we can avoid it. It straps us into place and is there to protect us. And it all works well, until it doesn't. And then, it is a disaster. The law then becomes that which reveals the problem but does not offer the solution.

How do we solve this dilemma? How did we solve the dilemma of the seat belt that had imprisoned our child in the car? You have probably guessed what we did. We went into the house, and we found a pair of scissors. Then, we went back to the car and cut through the woven part of the seat belt, in order to set our child free. Jesus in His grace is like that pair of scissors who cuts through the problem of the law, and offers the means of grace. Paul says that every attempt to follow the letter of the law is bound to fail. We can be set free only by Christ our Lord. I cannot say it any clearer than that.

When bound by sin, Paul found himself as locked into place as our child was. There was no escape. The law, which was fashioned for his well-being, had become that which immobilized him. He puts it in a way with which we all can identify: *"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."*

In chapter seven of Romans, Paul is baring his soul. It is the first time in the letter that he uses the pronoun "I." He is getting personal — very personal. He is setting his own experience before the Romans, as an example. Not as a good example. We might say as a bad example — but, better yet, as a realistic, honest example. The apostle found himself so very far short of perfection, he wanted *them* to know that *he* knew what it was like. He says, "I have been there. I have been there more than I would care to admit. But I shall admit it, so that you can benefit from what I have to tell you."

As John Calvin says: "Paul ... sets himself before us as an example, since he has been regenerated, and in whom may easily appear the strife of the Spirit and the flesh, and therefore of the law of God, and our wickedness."

We do not often use the word *regenerated* — and what is that but: **Renewed** — like a promise or vow, that has been forgotten, and is newly remembered. **Restored** — like a house that was left to neglect, and then found and brought back to its potential. **Revived** — like a drowning person, rescued, resuscitated, who can breathe again. **Redeveloped** — like a run-down community, that is transformed into a neighborhood. **Reinforced** — like a crumbling foundation that is given strength, support, and security. **Restarted** — like an old jalopy, that was abandoned in a barn long ago,

but, in the hands of a skilled mechanic, can run and move forward again. **Rebooted** — like a computer that had been caught in the spinning wheel of death. And **rejuvenated** — like dry and parched land that has the new gift of living water. Regenerated, says John Calvin. Renewed, restored, revived, redeveloped, reinforced, restarted, rebooted, and rejuvenated — in the grace of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Paul talks about the coexistence (and mutual opposition) in his life of the “flesh” and the “spirit” — they are there, in the same renewed person. It isn’t that once Paul becomes a follower of Jesus, he no longer is prey to sin. It is that, once he becomes a follower of Jesus, he has a remedy — a way out of that sin. Something that cuts through what has a hold upon him, and, sharp as scissors, sets him free. That something is the grace of Jesus Christ.

The inner self, the better nature, our spiritual being, approves of and delights in the law of God. This is the part of our being that “wills to do good,” as Paul says in verse 21. Paul also says it is all-too-often overcome by evil.

Do you see what Paul is getting at? He wants us to remember: Saying “no” to sin is difficult. Saying “no” to sin runs against our human nature. Saying “no” to sin requires help. But saying “no” to sin is also the prerequisite to saying “yes” to freedom, love, and goodness.

Christians stand with one foot in the kingdom of this world, and the other foot in the kingdom of God. What a tension there is between these two worlds! At baptism, we die to sin and are resurrected to new life (6:1-14), our sanctification is not instantaneous but is instead a journey that, once begun, continues throughout our lives. And it shall be fully realized on the day of resurrection. Until then, no wonder we find ourselves in the same boat as Paul: not understanding our own actions (v. 15); failing to do what we want and doing what we hate (v. 15); willing what is right, but failing to do it (v. 18); and doing the evil that we do not want to do (v. 19).

It is like standing on a dock, with one foot on the dock and one foot on the boat — and the boat is about to leave the dock. There is a struggle going on within us (v. 23), and sometimes, we stay on the dock. At other times, we get in to the boat. Sometimes, sin holds us captive (v. 23). At other, better times, we go forward into freedom, love, and goodness. You cannot be on the dock and in the boat at the same time. You cannot go east and west at the same time. Nor can you go down and up at the same time.

If the Old Testament law were the end of the story, we would always lose. Sin would always win. But the law is not the end of the story. The grace of Jesus Christ is the end of the story and always wins in the end. No wonder Paul says: *“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*

I have to mention, sometimes some people take a different tack than Paul does here. They mention themselves as good examples. They hope others will emulate them, and thereby do good, also. Paul does not say that here in Romans. Instead, the only person mentioned who is deserving of being the role model for the very best human conduct is Jesus Christ. Christ alone sets a constantly perfect example. We cannot go wrong for long, when we follow Him.

It is possible to see the ongoing warfare within Paul as a sign of spiritual health. Sin continues to assault him. Like a deadly virus, it tries to take over Paul’s life; but sin’s victory is not complete. Sin’s victory is not permanent. The war between the grace of God and sin may rage within and trouble us.

It “troubles” Paul. Even so, Paul remains confident about the outcome. Paul will go on to say in Romans 8, *“The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death”* (8:2). Paul will proclaim: *“If the Spirit of Him who raised up Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised up Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you”* (8:11). As long as we live, the Lord will engage in this dialog in our lives: reminding us of grace, when we have sinned; calling us back, when we have strayed; keeping us close, when we have drifted; and troubling our spirits, when we need reminding.

As songwriter Susan Werner sings:

*“My Lord will trouble me
In the whisper of the wind, in the rhythm of a song
My Lord will trouble me
To keep me on the path where I belong
My Lord will trouble me.”*

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