



THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – March 15, 2009

I Do Not Understand My Own Actions
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Ecclesiastes 6:1-2, 7

The Frustration of Desires

There is an evil that I have seen under the sun, and it lies heavy upon humankind: ²those to whom God gives wealth, possessions, and honor, so that they lack nothing of all that they desire, yet God does not enable them to enjoy these things, but a stranger enjoys them. This is vanity; it is a grievous ill.

⁷*All human toil is for the mouth, yet the appetite is not satisfied.*

Romans 7:15-25a

¹⁵*I 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!*

Has this ever happened to you? You are reading a book, your eyes gliding along the page, when suddenly you come upon a sentence that you just know is true down to the very marrow of your bones. The sentence grasps you. It takes your breath away.

I had one of these moments of truth 20 years ago when I first read this sentence at Romans 7:15, “*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*”

I’ve since learned what Paul meant by that sentence. Paul’s Judaism taught him that God had revealed

everything required of humanity in the Torah, the law handed down to Moses. Once Paul had learned what God required of him, it was Paul’s responsibility to do it. After all, Judaism taught that if you can know the good, you should be able to intend the good, and if you can intend the good, you should be able to do the good.

This Torah was the law of Paul’s life. He would be a good person, he would be “OK,” he would be significant, he would be acceptable to his God, to his neighbor, to himself, if only he would perform the law. So, for decades Paul tried his best to perform the law, and Paul’s best was pretty darn good. You see, Paul wasn’t just a Jew, Paul was a Pharisee – one of the most rigorous of the Jewish sects. And Paul wasn’t just a Pharisee, Paul was one of the most zealous of all the Pharisees.

And yet, Paul found that no matter how hard he tried, he could never fully comply. He always came up short. So Paul peered into the depths of his soul and discovered one of the deepest truths of his life or of any human life: “*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*” Paul could know the good, and Paul could intend the good, but Paul could not always do the good.

Now I am not a follower of Torah, and neither are you. But I have a law of my own life, and so do you. We all do. Whether we think of it this way or not, we each cobble together the law of our own lives from all kinds of sources: those things told us by our Mom that still pop up in our minds (and sometimes in her own voice!); things taught us by our Dad, by our favorite teacher, our first boss, our spouse. They all add up to a law of our own life - this composite idea we carry around in our head of what it means to be a good person, OK, significant; acceptable to our God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

And I’m not Jewish, and neither are you, but we are each children of the 20th century. Whether we think about it or not, we were each shaped by our Western

culture, by our educations influenced by the 18th century Enlightenment movement. And just like Judaism, our Western culture and Enlightenment thinking have a certain confidence about human behavior. If we can know the good, we should be able to intend the good, and if we can intend the good, we should be able to do the good.

So there I was in Washington, laboring year after year to live up to the law of my own life. I would be a good person, I would be ok, I would be significant; I would be acceptable to my God, my neighbor and myself, if I would just be a good husband, a good father, an ethical lawyer and a devoted servant of the public good. And like Paul I tried hard, I tried really hard, but after 17 years of New Year's resolutions, and fresh starts, and self-help books and to-do lists, do you know what I found? I found that I wasn't that good a husband, and I wasn't that good a father, and I wasn't that ethical a lawyer and I wasn't that devoted a servant of the public good. I could know the good, and I could intend the good, but I just couldn't always do the good.

I did not understand my own actions. What in the world happened when I decided to be home in time for dinner with my family every night? How come I could not do it? Who or what was stopping me? Oh, sometimes there were unavoidable business trips or emergencies; but sometimes, well, sometimes I just got carried away with my work. What happened when I decided I would stop taking on too many assignments. How come I could never do it? Who or what was stopping me? What happened when I decided to cut down on expenses? Who or what was stopping me? Who or what was conspiring against me so that whether I made \$20,000 or twenty times \$20,000 I always just happened to need three or four percent more?

And then I read Paul's line "*I not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*" My pulse jumped, my face flushed, I caught my breath and I realized, for the first time: This book knows me better than I know myself. I don't stand over this book picking and choosing interesting ancient truths, this book stands over me, showing me the way things really are. Our fancy, oh so modern ideas don't surpass this old book, they tell us a lie

about ourselves. This book tells us the truth about ourselves.

Luther called Paul's Letter to the Romans the "purest gospel," and I think Luther thought so because of the way Paul peered down into the deepest springs of human behavior, and into the deepest dynamics of the Christian Gospel, and told us the truth. Paul not only saw the pain of the human predicament, but he also saw the cause of our predicament. And Paul not only saw the cause of our predicament; but he also saw the solution to our predicament.

Paul saw that the cause of our predicament is a split mindedness, a division within our very being. It is as if there are two decision making powers inside us. He wrote, "²²*For 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.*" [Romans 7:22-23] There is our inmost self, the inmost self that knows and intends the good, and then it is as if there is some other, occupying presence that somehow overrules our good intentions and blocks their implementation. In Paul's metaphor, our good intentions are held captive by sin.

Now, we don't much like the word, "sin," do we? It makes us think of red-faced preachers shouting that we're going to burn in hell for our sins. And we don't much like the idea of some other power forcing us to make mistakes. It reminds us of Geraldine's excuse on the old Flip Wilson Show, "The Devil made me do it!"

But Paul is looking deeper – far, far deeper than the everyday small "s" sins of misconduct. Paul is talking about a capital "S" Sin, a fundamental disorientation at the very core of our being.

At Romans 1:21, Paul traced out his understanding of where humanity went wrong, the origin of this capital "S" Sin, the root cause of our human predicament.

Paul wrote "*For though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. ²²Claiming to be wise, they became fools...and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.*" [Romans 1:21, 22, 25]1

The universal mistake, the mistake every single one of us made way back when our consciousness was just

flickering on was to turn from God to self. Instead of centering on God and receiving our “OKness,” our significance, our acceptability as a gift from God; we centered on ourselves, looking to create our own “OKness” by the strength of our own character. Just like Adam and Eve with that apple, we didn’t want to remain God-dependent, we all wanted to become self-reliant, we all wanted to become self-made men and women.

And the universal consequence of this universal mistake, Paul says, is that we become futile in our thinking, and our minds are darkened. When we are turned to God we stand on a foundation of rock given by God; when we are turned to self we stand on a foundation of sand.

What is the futility, the darkening of the mind? When the self turns inward, it is disabled by an insecure “insatiability.” Whenever the self tries to establish its own foundation on which to stand, it can never make the foundation firm enough. No matter what the self achieves, no matter what the self acquires, no matter what love or affirmation the self receives, it is never enough. As St. Gregory of Nyssa wrote, the self trying to affirm itself is like scaling a sandy slope: we trudge, and trudge and trudge but we never get to the top. The sand just keeps giving way beneath our feet. We always end up short of the mark.²

You don’t have to take Paul’s word for it; you need only examine the experience of your own life. Don’t you always feel a bit short of the mark? Not quite organized enough, not quite effective enough, not quite clever enough, not quite thin enough, not quite secure enough, not quite loved enough? Doesn’t life sometimes feel like you just keep climbing, but the sand just keeps giving way? And what causes us to feel that way? Paul says it’s because we’ve turned from being God-centered to self-centered.

Moreover, once we’ve turned from God to self, Paul says it’s a trap - there’s no way we can solve the problem by ourselves. It must be apparent that if our problem is self-assertion, we can’t solve the problem by asserting ourselves even more forcefully. When the problem is in the very operating system of the self, the self can’t cure itself.

Do you remember the film, *A Beautiful Mind*? The brilliant but psychotic mathematician, John Nash, assures his psychiatrist that he would deploy his own analytic skills to cure his own illness. But his doctor replies, “You can’t reason your way out of this because your mind is where the problem is in the first place!”

Just so, Paul said, the self can neither enact its good intentions nor heal its relationship with God by itself, it is in a kind of bondage. As an AA member would put it, Paul had reached step one – Paul had bottomed out. He had finally admitted that he was powerless over this capital “S” Sin. And when Paul bottomed out he let loose with one of the most resonant cries of in all of Scripture: “*Wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death.*” [Romans 7:24]

But then Paul closes our reading by pointing back to the good news, to the gospel. “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” [Romans 7:25] If Paul’s understanding of the human predicament, if Paul’s bad news is that the self is trapped and cannot rescue itself; then Paul’s solution to the human predicament, Paul’s good news, is that God intervenes to rescue the self through Jesus the Christ. As an AA member might put it, Paul had reached step two, he “came to believe that a greater power than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

That higher power is God, and God looks at each and every one of us and says:

“Hey, we have got a problem here. You are straining to make yourself OK enough, significant enough, acceptable enough; and your struggle is causing you to grasp anxiously at affirmation and acquisition and elbow one another aside. And when you experience the insecurity of falling short you start to medicate the pain with alcohol, and drugs, and materialism, and sex and pornography and you work your way into a trap.

I am going to stop the cycle; I am going to free you from the trap; and here is the way I am going to do it. I am going to come amongst you as Jesus the Christ and I’m going to say to you, ‘I love you as you are.’

“Are you a little short of what you’d like to be? It’s OK – I made you like this, and I forgive you. And, as you turn back to me, I will give you all the love that you have vainly been trying to earn for yourself. Unconditionally. Freely. Abundantly.

“And I am going to give you a sign so that you will always remember just how much I love you. Put the sign around your neck; put it in all your meeting houses. And every time you begin to forget how much I love you, just look up at this cross. And every time you look up this cross, remember that I love you so much, that even if you were the only person on the planet, I would still have come to you as Jesus to live with you and die for you – just for you. Yes, even you.

“And, not only will I die for you, but I will send my Holy Spirit into your hearts to heal you. And my Spirit will come inside you, and warm your heart, and say, ‘You are ok. You are significant. You are acceptable. Just as you are.’ Trust me, and my spirit will heal you and turn you back to me in a way that you cannot turn back yourself.”

The Latin root word for that healing is “*salvus*.” Paul called it salvation. And so Paul proclaimed the good news. “*For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.*” [Romans 1:16.] Salvation. Healing. For us. For every single one of us. May it be so. **Amen.**

1 See Paul Minear, *The Obedience of Faith; The purposes of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans*, (London: SCM Press, 1971) 106-107. (What does the apostle see as the deepest, most stubborn root of sin, the root from which all sinning springs? What leaves men without excuse? How do we all become fools with darkened minds? What is it which brings God’s wrath against all ungodliness of men? Why does God give them over to the lusts of their hearts? How do men suppress the truth? The answer to all these questions is the same . . . They did not honor him as God or give thanks to him.”

2 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, translated by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, Paulist Press (New York: 1978) at 117.