

Knowing Right and Doing Wrong

Introduction: “Feels good to do Bad” Pentatonix

In 2016, the wildly popular acapella group Pentatonix put out a Christmas album with a song they penned titled “Good to be Bad.” The song is sort of a modern take on the classic Christmas song “I’m Getting’ Nuttin’ for Christmas,” which tells the story of a young kid who knows that he’s not getting anything from Santa this Christmas because all of the bad things that he’s done, including breaking a bat on Johnny’s head, hiding a frog in, sister’s bed, and making Tommy eat a bug. In “Good to Be Bad” the singer continues with the same theme, updating the situations, but they add something else too. See if you catch it. This is what they sing:

“I've been thinking 'bout this year a lot, Whether I've been a good girl or not, Santa promised he won't get mad, Sometimes it feels so good to be bad, I missed my curfew by an hour late, I fed the dog the veggies off of my plate, Tried my best to obey mom and dad, Sometimes it feels so good to be bad, So maybe I'll get a-nothing for Christmas, But I had the thrill, Or maybe, just, maybe you'll go easy on me, Oh, I hope you will, I played hooky and I failed the test, Snuck out the house and didn't act my best, And now my face is in a wanted ad, Sometimes it feels so good to be bad.

Did you catch what Pentatonix added in this song that wasn’t in “I’m getting nuttin’ for Christmas?” They added a reason for the bad things they did. Because being bad feels good, and because they got a “thrill.”

Now, I'm not saying all of this to put down the Pentatonix, I know it's just meant to be a cute song. But they do touch on a truth that we all know and follow, whether or not we'd like to admit it. We do bad because deep down inside it feels good, because there is a thrill in it. St. Augustine tells a story in his confessions about when he was a young boy. He joined in with his friends stealing pears. But he says it wasn't for any practical purposes, like feeding his pigs. They did it just for the thrill of breaking the law.

Now we call doing bad "sin," which is when we think, act, or do anything that goes against God's righteousness. And like the singer, even though we know that there are consequences for doing "bad," like not getting Christmas presents from Santa, or for us disappointing God and walking apart from the example of life that Jesus gives to us.

Transition: In chapter 7 of the book of Romans, Paul writes about that struggle we all face of knowing what is right and yet doing wrong. He says that there are two laws that exist in the world, the law of sin which represents the current world as it is, and the law of God, which represents the perfect world that is coming when Jesus returns. And although when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior we are freed from that law of sin and become servants to the law of God, we still live in the world ruled by the law of sin and still struggle against it.

In the first half of chapter 7, Paul discusses the paradoxical nature of God's written Law that we find in the first five books of the Old Testament, which was meant to help guide God's people along paths of righteous living, but ultimately led people further into sin. He tells us that God gave us the law for His good purposes, to show us what living rightly looks like. But sin took the law and distorted it. It highlighted what people were doing wrong, and so in an effort to keep the law, many in Israel became legalistic and made the law their god. So he asks the question in verse seven: "7 What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful?" This is an important question, both to the Roman church reading the letter at the time and to the church today, because if the law was and is sinful, then it should be tossed out. Paul responds to his own question with the strong Greek phrase "me genoito" which meant "absolutely not!" Paul wanted to be clear in chapter 7 that he is not condemning the law and he is not giving anyone license or right to dismiss the law.

The law in the OT was a gift given by God to the Hebrew people as the symbol of His covenant relationship with them. To say the law is sinful doesn't square with God's intention for the law. But he wants people to understand that no one can become truly righteous by following the law, and in fact, the more you try and follow the law, the more you will become keenly aware of your own sin. And so, Paul introduces to the church two possible worldviews: to view the world through the lens of pleasing ourselves (sin), or to view the world through the lens of pleasing God (righteousness). The law, he puts forward, can

either be a magnifying glass for our sin or something by which we can work towards righteousness by the help of the spirit and the grace of Jesus.

In the second half of chapter 7, which is going to be our focus for this morning, Paul looks himself and in extension all of us, and the struggles to follow the Law of God while still living in a world trapped under the Law of Sin. Verse 19 captures the essence of this struggle: “ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”

What Paul is talking about in vv. 7-25 is the tension between the now and the yet-to-come. The now is the age we are living in that, unfortunately, is still controlled very much by the power of sin in the world that makes even the best of us do bad. The Rolling Stones said it best in their song “Sympathy for the Devil:” “Just as every cop is a criminal, And all the sinners saints.” All of us, the wisest to the most foolish, the most evil to the most righteous, live in the tension and struggle between knowing what is right before God and doing what is wrong because we still live in a world largely controlled by sin.

Transition: This morning, we are going to take a little bit of a closer look at Paul’s discussion in the second half of chapter 7 regarding the Law of God, the Law of Sin, the self-divided between those two laws, and finally the redemption that we find through Jesus.

1) **The Law of God:** First, it is important to establish what Paul means by “The Law of God.” For Paul, a faithful Jew and

former Pharisee, the Law could have only have referred to the first five books of the Old Testament, what they would refer to as Torah. And as he established in the first half of chapter seven, the law is good because it proceeds out of the character of God. Misuse of the law leads to sin. He continues this line of thought in v. 12 when he writes: “¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.” What is the command that Paul refers to? He could be writing about the Shema, the commandment that stood at the center of the law that the people were to hold in the center of their lives “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
⁵ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.” Jesus too summarized the law similarly, when asked in Matthew 22:37-40 what the greatest commandment was, Jesus replied: ³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” To Paul, the law of God represented God’s righteous will for our lives on earth, begun in the first five books of the Old Testament and continued and completed in the life and person of Jesus Christ. For the Roman church, and for us then, to Law of God, both found in Scripture and in the life of Jesus, is a roadmap for how we are to live our lives. Not that we can achieve righteousness by being good, but that because of the righteousness given to us through the life and death of Jesus we choose to live in the way that God desires.

2) Secondly, we need to consider what Paul means by **“The Law of Sin”** which stands in opposition to the law of God. He spells this out very plainly in verse 21: ²¹“So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.” The law of sin is like Newton’s 3rd law of physics, “For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” But instead it would read, “For every godly righteous thing I intend to do, there is an equally ungodly and unrighteous option standing right beside it.” It’s like when I’m trying to make healthy snacking choices, so I open our cabinet intending to grab a protein bar or a banana, but sitting right beside those is the industrial sized bag of candy that Erin brought into our house over a month ago. The healthy option seemed really appealing when it first came into my mind, but it started to look less appealing when sitting next to a handful of twizzlers or a kit-kat bar.

Paul continues that the law of sin not only stands opposed to the Law of God, but that it actually uses God’s righteous laws to cause people to sin. He writes in verses 7-8: “ I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”⁸But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead.” Think about what Paul is saying here; he would not have even known what it was to covet, or to have such a strong desire to possess something of somebody else’s except that the law told him it was a sin not to. Sin is so clever and insidious that it can take something meant for good, like for instance, not coveting,

which really is a good thing because it asks not only that we be content with what we have but that we don't hurt our relationships with our friends, family, and neighbors by doing or saying or thinking or feeling something bad because we are jealous of what they have, and turn it into something evil. There is nothing harmful to us about not coveting, and yet, sin makes us covet because it convinces us that if we only have that possession, that house, that career or job, that wife or husband, that car, that whatever, if we only had that then we would be happy. And it tells us that we deserve to be happy and to covet after those things, and if we don't want something supposedly "better" for ourselves, then something is wrong with us.

The law of sin says that the choice to do wrong always stands next to the choice to do right, and that it can use what is righteous, The law of God, to cause us to do wrong.

3) Thirdly, Paul describes how the struggle between the law of God and the law of sin divides him. Theologians refer to Romans 7:14-20 as the "**divided I**," that is, the division of self between the "I" that wants to follow God and live righteously and the "I" that thinks "it feels good to do bad." He sums up the struggle of this "divided I" in verse 25 when he writes: "So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin." Paul feels like a split person, with the mind knowing the righteous way to live but the body choosing to do wrong. Let's take a closer look at how he describes being a slave to the law of sin and his struggle between wanting to do the law of God but failing, and let's

consider in what ways can we ourselves relate to Pauls' struggle.

a. Slave to the Law of Sin:

- i. In vv. **14-18b**. “¹⁴ We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.” Paul begins by reiterating that the Law of God is spiritual, meaning that it comes from the Holy Spirit, and then makes the claim that he is unspiritual, a slave to sin. Paul then makes a statement in verse 19 that he can't seem to do the good things that he wants to do but somehow continues to do evil things instead. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

- ii. Transition: Paul's confession in these verses might seem to contradict what he says later in v. 25, that he is a slave to God's law, or even to contradict how he identifies himself to the Roman church in the beginning of the letter, Romans 1:1, as a “slave to Christ.” But I think he really wants his readers to understand that even when you give your life over to Jesus, as long as you live in this present age, you will also be a slave to the sinful nature that dwells inside. Paul further

elaborates throughout these verses the struggle of the “divided I” between carrying out the two laws.

b. Struggle between slave to sin and slave to law

Paul writes in v. 20: “²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.” Sin is like a parasite inside of Paul, and all of us, that is able to take control of our mind and body and cause us to do what we know is wrong. In an episode of Star Trek Deep Space Nine that I was watching recently, this galactic criminal who, on the verge of death, was able to transplant his mind onto a tiny chip and implant it into the space station’s doctor, unbeknownst to him. The criminal was then able to hijack the body of Doctor Bashir and cause him to do some pretty heinous things, even betraying his friends and crewmates, even though on his own, Dr. Bashir would never have willfully chosen to act in such a way. Paul indicates that his sinful nature is the same way; it hijacks our mind, bodies, and spirits, and causes us to act in ways that are counter to the person of Christ in us. This is a really important point. Because we have to ask, if Christians have been supposedly redeemed, saved, and transformed by a relationship with Jesus Christ, then how can they go on sinning? Doesn’t that just make us hypocrites? Paul rejects that line of thinking, stating clearly that although he may do what is sinful, it doesn’t define who he is because he has already become a child of God. Therefore, though through sin he may do things he knows wrong, his struggle to not do so indicates his true self as God’s child. Pate writes in his commentary on Romans “Paul is not avoiding the personal responsibility that all believers

have to resist sin and do right, he is simply saying that in and of themselves, humans are no match for sin (but the Spirit is).” We have been transformed but are still in a world under the power of sin. And so we cannot be made righteous through our own efforts to follow the law. We need someone else to help us.

4) **Redemption:** Thanks be to God then, that we have Christ’s righteousness to save and redeem us when we cannot save and redeem ourselves! Paul writes in vv. 24-25: “²⁴What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” This is good news, that no matter how weak or frail I am, no matter how many times I choose to follow the law of sin over the law of God, Jesus continues to stand by me, offering me forgiveness and standing in my place for the consequences of my sin.

So, what can we learn from Romans 7, and how can we apply it to our lives today? First, we learn that Christians are deeply flawed because we are caught in a world struggling between doing right and doing wrong. If the Apostle Paul, who is arguably one of the greatest Christians to ever live, can write so honestly “¹⁹For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing,” then maybe we can realize that our struggle to do right is nothing unique to the Christian life. From that, then, we can take encouragement, that even though we may choose often to follow the law of sin rather than the law of God, the fact that we struggle at all is proof of our faithfulness. Only those who have given in to the

slavery of sin no longer struggle and it is only after we have died and gone to heaven or Jesus returns that we will no longer have to struggle against sin. Finally, we need to learn that we cannot earn our own redemption and salvation, no matter how “good” we are or how often we choose to make the godly decision versus the ungodly one. It is only through Jesus Christ’s life, death, and resurrection that we can be redeemed for those times when we do fall under the law of sin. Like Paul then, we can say “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” And so I close this morning with a prayer, using the words from the popular hymn, “Come Thou Fount:” “Prone to wander Lord we feel it, prone to leave the God we love. Here’s our hearts Lord take and seal them, seal them for thy courts above.” Amen.

Sunday School Questions:

- 1) Think of a time when you had the choice to do something you knew to be right or something you knew to be wrong in a given situation.
 - a. What did you choose to do?
 - b. How did you make that choice?
 - c. Which was the more appealing option? Why?
 - d. How easy was the decision?
- 2) Are you ever discouraged by the struggle to do right versus do wrong? Does this struggle get easier the longer you are a believer? Why or why not?

- 3) What does it mean, to you, that we cannot earn our redemption through doing right? How does this affect the way you live as a Christian?
- 4) Is sinning or making wrong decisions as a Christian hypocritical? Why or why not?
- 5) What does it mean, to you, that ultimate redemption is only found in Jesus?
- 6) How could a mature Christian's struggle with sin be a positive example for a growing Christian?

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