

**The Paradox of Sin**  
**July 6, 2008**

**Romans 7:15-25a:**

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God!**

In the nineties, the late-night T.V. show *Saturday Night Live* shared so-called “Deep Thoughts” written by the comedian Jack Handey. In just a few sentences, Handey could always get a laugh. Handey once wrote, “There used to be this bully who would demand my lunch money every day. Since I was smaller, I would give it to him. Then I decided to fight back. I started taking karate lessons. But then the karate lesson guy said I had to start paying him five dollars a lesson. So I just went back to paying the bully.” Too often, we feel that it is just easier to pay the bully than it is to do the hard work of seeking actively to fight against temptation.

Resisting sin is challenging. It involves the courage to be honest before God about what we have done. In William Faulkner’s book Requiem for a Nun, one of the book’s wise characters describes sin this way, “You ain’t got to. You can’t help it.”<sup>1</sup> Sin is a paradox, a riddle: it seems illogical, but Faulkner’s character aptly describes our universal experience of sin. We don’t have to sin, but in the end, it seems that we just can’t help it.

After his conversion, the apostle Paul became one of the most dedicated Christians to ever walk on this earth. He wrote more books of The Bible than any other person. He traveled non-stop, full of energy, to spread the Good News that Jesus Christ offers new life. Paul often found himself in situations where he did not know where his next meal would come from or where he would lay his head that night. Because he would not deny his faith in Christ, Roman authorities threw him into jail. Even from prison, he continued to preach of Christ’s resurrection. Eventually Paul was martyred because of his faith.

This saint, this titan of the faith, wrote the text from Romans you heard this morning. The truth is even Paul, a remarkable Christian leader, continued to struggle

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<sup>1</sup> William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, (copyright) 1951.

with sin. This text is one of the classics about sin because it is so realistic. When I am going through struggles, it is helpful to find someone who can relate, who knows what I am going through. That way, the other person can offer empathy rather than judgment. In Romans 7, Paul shows us he knows what we are going through as we fight to overcome our sins.

It is a temptation for us to put our Christian leaders on a pedestal and think faith is easy for them. Paul is filled with the Holy Spirit and does some amazing things, but he never reaches a point where he has to stop worrying about sin. Paul shows true spiritual maturity through his willingness to confront his sin and to name the ways he experiences temptation.

We take a hard look at our sin to gain insight, not to put ourselves through a guilt trip. I have seen how excessive, unhealthy guilt has spiritually paralyzed many people, including me, at times. I hope that honestly acknowledging the consequences of our sin can help us become more aware of the consequences of our actions and can motivate us to grow. We can never remove all sin from our lives, but, with God's help, we can become more proactive, rather than reactive or unreflective, when sin tempts us.

In Romans 7, Paul discusses the relationship between the law and sin. Law, of course, offers us a guide for how we should behave. The law is one way God teaches us how to live. For example, the Ten Commandments provide us with ten rules to follow. But in this passage, Paul also argues that the law can lead us to temptation.

Huh? The law can cause us to sin? Reflecting on the story of the Garden of Eden helped me understand Paul's argument that the law can tempt us. God tells Adam and Eve that they can eat of anything in the garden except of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If God had not given them the law, this rule about not eating from that one tree, Adam and Eve would have continued to live in tranquility. We may wonder why God puts that temptation of the forbidden fruit before them. If God had not given them that prohibition, Adam and Eve probably would not have even thought of eating of the tree. But of course, they end up giving into their curiosity.

I do not think Adam and Eve had a craving for the fruit on that particular tree. They did not want the apple for the apple's sake. They only wanted it because they were not allowed to have it. Parents know that one way to entice kids is to tell them, "Do not eat any of the cookies in the cookie jar." The child may not have been planning to eat a cookie, but now she may think, "Thanks for the good idea! I had not even considered it, but eating a cookie would taste yummy!" We are tempted to want what we are told we cannot have, even if it is in our best interest to obey.

My former seminary professor, Shirley Guthrie, has helped me understand sin better. According to Dr. Guthrie in Christian Doctrine, "Sin is taking the Lord's name in vain not only by cursing but also by making it trivial. It is using "God" or "the will of God" only to justify our own personal, social, or national prejudices and ambitions. On the other hand, we trivialize our faith when we claim to be Christians whose lives belong to God, but then say that religion has nothing to do with practical matters.

Sin as disobedience is not only the external act of adultery; it is wanting to commit adultery, according to the Sermon on the Mount. It is living in a legally faithful

marriage without loving and supporting our partner. It is being legally faithful while in fact only using the partner to satisfy one's own needs, pleasures, comfort, desire for social status, or quest for security.

Sin is not just killing people; Matthew 5 tells us it is feeling hatred or contempt for any human being. It is not only murdering other people but also simply letting them starve to death physically or emotionally because we decide that social welfare and foreign aid are "a waste of money."

Sin is not just robbing banks. It is also stealing other people's money by false advertising. It is telling people that in order for their lives to be complete, they have to accumulate more and more stuff. It is when we believe that we have worth and value, not because of our God-given identity, but based on what car we drive or where we go on vacation."<sup>2</sup>

Tuesdays with Morrie, written by Mitch Albom, tells the true story of Albom's conversations with his former professor, Morrie, in the final days of Morrie's life. Morrie observed, "We've got a form of brainwashing going on in our country. Do you know how they brainwash people? They repeat something over and over. Owning things is good. More money is good. More commercialism is good. More is good. More is good.

Wherever I went in my life, I met people wanting to gobble up something new. Gobble up a new car. Gobble up a new piece of property. Gobble up the latest toy. And then they wanted to tell you about it. 'Guess what I got? Guess what I got?'

You know how I always interpreted that? These were people so hungry for love that they were accepting substitutes. Money is not a substitute for tenderness and power is not a substitute for tenderness. And I tell you, as I'm sitting here dying, when you most need it, neither money nor power will give you the feeling you're looking for, no matter how much of them you have."<sup>3</sup>

Sin is deceptive: it turns our attention away from what is important and we lose perspective of what really matters. Yes, sin is pervasive, yet that is not the final word about who we are. Getting back to the basics, yes, we are sinners, but even more importantly we are human beings created in God's image. Sin damages and distorts that image, but it is not more powerful than God. I believe that we are fundamentally and naturally the beloved creatures God created us to be: our sinfulness is unnatural. When we sin, we are a faker and keep trying to be something we are not. In *The Apostles' Creed*, the only time sin is mentioned is when we affirm our belief in the forgiveness of sins. We acknowledge sin is real, but we believe in the forgiveness of sins. No matter how badly we make a mess of our lives, no matter how big of a mistake we have made, no matter what we wish we had done that we left undone, we have achieved victory through Christ's death and resurrection. Just one chapter later, in Romans 8, Paul tells us that nothing, no nothing in all creation, can separate us from the love of God. Thanks be to God that God, not our sin, brings the final word. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, Christian Doctrine, p. 215-216. I have quoted portions of Guthrie's text and written my own additions.

<sup>3</sup> Mitch Albom, Tuesdays with Morrie, p. 109-110.