

Epworth Chapel on the Green
March 11, 2012
Third Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Exodus 20:1-17
Psalm 19:7-14
Romans 7:13-25
John 2:13-23

Celebrated author C.S. Lewis was once quoted as saying, “no man knows how bad he is until he has tried to be good.” No doubt Lewis had read Paul’s discussion in Romans chapter 7.

I remember growing up as a kid and finding myself in a situation where I had disobeyed my parents. On one occasion I really did a “bonehead,” thing, and shot my brother Rod in the eye with a B-B gun. After bringing my brother back from the emergency room, my parents sat me down in a chair and said to me, “Brook, why did you do that?”

My best answer, my only answer: *“I don’t know.”*

It wasn’t that I didn’t love my parents. I did.

It wasn’t because I believed my mom and dad didn’t love *me*. I knew they loved me.

It wasn’t because I believed my parents’ rules were wrong; I knew they were right.

It wasn't because I thought that mom and dad didn't want what was best for me. I knew they were looking out for my best interests.

It wasn't because I didn't want to please them. I did.

And yet, I did bad stuff anyway.

I'm certain that none of you have ever had a similar experience in your life. But I have. And so did the Apostle Paul.

Writing to the local church in Rome, Paul reminds them that God's moral law is good and perfect. It shows us what we are to do and be. But while God's moral law is perfect, *we are not*. We are tainted by sin. And when our sinful nature encounters God's moral law, it often produces in us a great internal conflict and struggle.

On the one hand, says Paul, we recognize the goodness of what God's law calls for, and we even agree with it. But the effect of sin in us inclines us to act differently than we know we should. The good we want to do often seems elusive, perhaps even beyond us. We desire to do what is right, but the power of sin in us leads us in another direction. As a result, we are "torn and divided." Paul's term is "miserable" (v. 24).

Is there help for us in such a situation? Can we be delivered from our "divided selves?" Paul seems to think so. In fact, he says, "Thank God. The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord."

What perplexes us here is that right after Paul has thanked God for the solution to the problem, he restates the problem again (v. 25b): “So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God’s law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin.” This doesn’t seem to make sense.

Students and scholars have offered essentially two interpretations of Paul’s words here, two possibilities for understanding this dilemma.

Some understand the deliverance Paul mentions here to be a deliverance from the *punishment* of sin, but not from the “divided self” which leads us to sin. They refer to Romans 8:1, where Paul says, “there is therefore now no *condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus.” In this view, salvation involves a declaration of pardon for our sins, but as long as we are on this side of heaven, the internal struggle will always remain.

There is a problem with this view, however. For one, the material which both precedes and follows Romans 7 has Paul arguing very strongly that those who are in Christ have died a death to sin, a death represented and actualized by their baptism. There is a strong sense in Paul that persons have not merely been forgiven, but that they have died to one way of life and been transformed to live another type of life. The general tone of the New Testament resonates this similar theme.

Another potential difficulty with this view is that it makes one question the power and efficacy of Christ's death on the Cross. Essentially this view says that you find yourself in the same condition *after* Christ's death as you did *before*, except now you are pardoned and forgiven. This seems to be a rather pessimistic view of God's grace. At some point one must ask, "do I want a Christ whose death makes possible my forgiveness, but not my transformation?"

There is another way to see Paul's words here. It could be that Paul is saying that Jesus Christ not only delivers us from the condemnation of sin, but also transforms our "divided selves," what old timers called our "carnal" nature. Thus, his statement in 7:25b is merely a restatement of the human condition which leads him to his conclusion of deliverance in 7:24. Left to ourselves, apart from God's grace to us in Jesus, we are unable to deliver ourselves from our own internal and moral struggle. But through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, we may experience not merely *pardon* for our sins, but also *transformation* of ourselves as sinners.

Here's where John Wesley can continue to help us. Wesley believed that we are created in God's image. The presence of sin in us "distorts" that image. The purpose of Christ's atoning work is to *restore* and *renew* us in the image of God, to gradually and increasingly make us more like Jesus Christ, in our attitudes and our actions.

Now how does that happen? Does it happen in a vacuum? Do we just pray to God and say, "God, zap me and make me like Jesus?"

Well, it's possible, I suppose. But for Wesley, God had a more ordered and consistent way. For Wesley, the typical way God makes us more like Christ is through ordinary means or channels of grace that God has established. Those means include worshiping together with God's people, reading and studying the Scriptures, prayer (both personal and corporate), works of mercy, and others. But a very important way God does his transforming work in us for Wesley was through our participating in the Lord's Supper.

This is because when we share in the Lord's Supper by faith, Christ brings to us not merely *pardon*, but also *power*. Power to renew us in God's image, and power to make us more like Christ.

This is why we pray these words every time we come to the table: "*deliver us from coming to this table for pardon of our sins only, and not for transformation of our lives in your holiness...*"

We do not pray these words just to fill space in a worship folder. We pray these words because we believe that God wants to transform that part of our character that makes us sinners, not merely to forgive our sins. We realize that it does not happen "magically" or in a vacuum. It happens as we commit ourselves to disciplined practices where God's grace works in us. It happens as we commit

ourselves to living in community with others. It happens as we commit ourselves to coming to the table, where the ordinary stuff of earth like bread and wine become channels of God's mysterious work to heal us and to empower us.

As you come to the Table of the Lord momentarily, I encourage you to come with faith, and open yourself to the gracious power of Christ. Let your open hands be a symbol of your open heart. Release your life into his hands. Lay aside your pessimism when it comes to his gracious power. Embrace what he has done in your life, and what he is doing *now*, in this moment. Then go in peace, with the words of the apostle Paul on your lips: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus; for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death."

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.