

The Struggle Is Real

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 5, 2020, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Romans 7:15-25a](#)

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Sometimes the Internet offers up a great cartoon to start a sermon. For those of you listening on the phone, I'm showing a frame from a Peanuts cartoon. Charlie Brown is sitting in his bed, his chin in his hands, saying, "Sometimes I lie awake at night and ask myself, 'Where have I gone wrong?' Then a voice says to me, 'This is going to take more than one night.'"

I suspect that all of us can identify with Paul when he writes, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." The rest of the passage becomes somewhat convoluted, a writing style for which Paul is well known. That's why I decided to share today's lesson from *The Message*. While *The Message* is a paraphrase, it does make Paul's writing easier to understand. It translates those first two sentences of our reading as, "What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act in another, doing things I absolutely despise."

We've all been there. We've made New Year's resolutions, promising ourselves that we will follow some path, resist some temptation, practice some good. These are the very things we want to do, and in a matter of weeks we find ourselves breaking these resolutions, doing the very things we promised ourselves we would not do.

I've always heard in this passage Paul writing about himself. And I've heard Paul writing in such a way that the "I" in "I do not understand my own actions," could easily be any one of us, that we can all see ourselves in his "I." Some scholars argue that Paul is writing about the Jewish experience outside of following Jesus. Others suggest he's writing about his sense of life once we are in Christ. I just hear him writing about the human experience (and then I hope I haven't missed some deeper theological nuance).

These are important words for Christians in America on this weekend when we celebrate freedom. Paul is saying that none of us is truly free, that all of us are bound. "We are like the prisoner in his cell," rights United Methodist Pastor James Howell, "free to go to this side of the cell or that, to stand or sit; but the prisoner is still a prisoner. Culture shackles us. Self-destructiveness strangles everybody."¹

I actually hear Paul's writing a little less dramatically than pastor Howell does. I've come to see the writing is remarkably free of guilt. I would not have said that a week ago. A week ago, I heard plenty of shame and guilt in this passage. Now, however, I think I was reading that shame and guilt into the passage. I think I was projecting my own shame and guilt onto Paul's writing.

¹ John C. Howell, "Weekly Preaching: July 5, 2020," *Ministry Matters*, <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/10399/weekly-preaching-july-5-2020> (posted and accessed 1 July 2020).

Yes, there is a sense of confession in this passage – confession without guilt. Paul explains the situation. I want to do what is good and yet I keep doing what I don't want to do. So, I need God's direction. The thing is, God's direction isn't always enough. Even with God's direction, even with the commandments, I still do things I end up wishing I hadn't done. I need something more, and that something more is Jesus. "The sin [Paul] acknowledges is not something he's strained to recognize – rather, he experiences himself to be incapable of doing that which he truly wants to do"² on his own.

Kari Jo Verhulst says, "Guilt, that complex emotion we all love to claim as our own religious inheritance, inhibits getting to the freedom Paul demonstrates here. Guilt does not encourage this kind of honesty, but rather preoccupies us with its eradication. So we live waiting for the other shoe to drop – to be discovered as the judgmental, lazy, resentful, jealous, you-name-it person we're deeply convinced we are.

"What's more, guilt cripples our capacity to be in relationship, interpreting those around us as beings who might any day discover the truth about us. Guilt inhibits our capacity to genuinely say we are sorry, because it does not permit us the courage to sit in the pain of our own sinfulness and yet apprehend that we are still God's beloved. Thus God, too, becomes someone to avoid, rather than one to approach with a love that longs to know what God desires from us."³

This God, the God who Paul says has rescued him 'from this body of death' (Romans 7:24), isn't interested in increasing our guilt or shame. God is interested in being in a relationship with us that is based in the love that moves us to true freedom. Entering into this kind of relationship "requires an honest recognition that those 'actions' we wrestle with – including self-hatred – [that] increase sin's chokehold on the world."⁴ Only by honestly assessing our actions and our inactions, our motivations and our desires, can we open our hearts to the source of love revealed in Jesus. We need to be honest with ourselves in order to be honest with God. And sometimes finding that honesty with ourselves requires us to be honest with someone else. Sometimes we need what theologian L. Gregory Jones calls a "holy friend."

I hope you have at least one friend who fits Jones' description of a holy friend.⁵ A holy friend is someone who knows you so well that they offer you invaluable perspectives on your life, that they help you see problems and opportunities in fresh ways, that they help you imagine new possibilities, and that helps you love more profoundly, think more clearly, feel more deeply. In other words, I hope you have a friend who helps you become a better person.

That description probably makes you think of someone in your life, of some profound friendship you once had. If you lucky, it makes you think of someone who is currently in your life. If you have a friend like this, there's only one more thing to check on

² Kari Jo Verhulst, (accessed 30 June 2020). "Guilt-Free Loving," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/guilt-free-loving?parent=51056> (accessed 30 June 2020).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ L. Gregory Jones, "Discovering hope through holy friendships," *Faith & Leadership*, <https://faithandleadership.com/l-gregory-jones-discovering-hope-through-holy-friendships> (posted 18 June 2018; accessed 4 July 2020).

before you declare this person your holy friend. “Holy friends,” Jones writes, “challenge the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim, and help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream.”⁶

Let me read that sentence again. “Holy friends challenge the sins we have come to love, affirm the gifts we are afraid to claim, and help us dream dreams we otherwise would not dream.”

And in that statement, Jones sees something that I think Paul was getting at, though he didn’t quite get there. There are sins that we love, sins we often dress up as virtues. Someone might say, “I am simply following God’s call,” and a holy friend might discern that as cover for the fact that the honest statement is, “I am a workaholic.” And then the holy friend will name it, inviting that someone to confront the truth.

In a similar manner, “holy friends remind us that our shadow selves are quick to dig up the failures of our past and dwell on our inadequacies. Holy friends confront our default response that says, ‘I’m fine; everything is fine’ and speak truth to our stoicism. Holy friends remind us, ‘Everything is not fine. You are not fine.’ ... It is OK not to be fine.”⁷

For most of us, the distance from “I screwed up” to “I am a screw up” it not very far. It is important that we remember that the first statement is going to be true from time to time. The second statement is always a lie. And when we forget that, we need a holy friend to remind us of the truth.

Amen.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Victoria Atkinson White, “When we need holy friendships most,” *Faith & Leadership*, <https://faithandleadership.com/victoria-atkinson-white-when-we-need-holy-friendships-most> (posted 12 May 2020; accessed 30 June 2020).