

Sermon for Sunday, January 31, 2010
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DOES FAITH MAKE A DIFFERENCE?
Romans 6:1-7

I sometimes read a serious advice column that shows what ordinary people are asking and what counts as good advice today. Here is Prudence, with a question from a reader who **takes the bus** to work every day.

Among the people at her stop every morning is a nice, older man with poor eyesight. "He would always **fumble**, trying to find the right bills for the bus, so one day I offered to help him. While I was in his wallet, **I stole a \$20 bill**. [It was very easy so I started] taking a bill once or twice a week. This has been going on for about **seven months**. He has never mentioned missing any money, so either he doesn't miss it or thinks he spent it without realizing what he was doing. I feel terrible but can't stop myself [because]... I can now have a **nice lunch** at work instead of bringing a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Please, tell me how to stop robbing this dear man and how to make amends." Dear Prudence, Jan, 2010

Summary: I feel terrible, but he doesn't mind and I love the sandwiches. Are you angry at her? Do you despise her? What would you say to her? Prudence is **so** tolerant with decisions made by consenting adults, but she burns people who take advantage of others. Her reply was harsh: this is evil and criminal. You must stop. If you can't, find a kleptomaniacs support group. And start saving so you can repay this man.

What would we say? First, the Bible says it's sinful. More: exploitation of the weak – children, the blind, the poor - is especially ugly and reprehensible: "Cursed is the man who leads the blind astray" (Deut 27.18 Lev 19.14). The category is **abuse of the weak**. This woman surely doesn't think of herself as powerful – she rides a bus and eats peanut butter and jelly. But she her eyesight and fingers give her power over the old man.

Can disciples do things like this? Yes, we can both feel terrible **and** keep on doing things. Therefore, Jesus says, "Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6.37). So we must ask ourselves: Do you see that even if you would never do **that**, you could do something like it? And if you seek mercy God will forgive you.

This is the gospel, but in Romans 6 it leads to an accusation: Paul doesn't care about sin. The more we sin, the more the grace, so why not sin? We see the origin of the accusation. In Romans 4-5, Paul said we're justified by grace, we have peace with God and confidence before him. We once belonged to Adam, the author of sin and death, but now we belong to Christ, the author of salvation. Therefore, while sin once abounded, grace increases more and we reign with him.

The problem, Paul's critics say, is that Paul says **nothing about** the penalty for sin or the **struggle** to live as a disciple. To be specific, Paul went straight from faith and justification to glory and eternal life. Roman says the day we believe, we are justified and have peace with God so that grace reigns "to bring us eternal life thru Jesus Christ our Lord" Romans 5.1, 21. Paul moved straight from the beginnings of faith to the triumph of grace, without a word about the arduous journey between them.

The journey is arduous and a struggle. A man learns that the **mass** in his body is not shrinking. A woman discovers that her job is at risk and he cannot stop worrying, obsessing over it. A woman can't shake a **joke** a friend made – at her expense. A man cannot stop his self-destructive behavior: binges of alcohol, drugs, or food, raging spells. A couple **sleeps all alone** in the same bed.

Why does Paul say nothing about the struggles? The challenge of temptation, of growth as a

disciple? Some say Paul is so intent on grace and our status with God that he's blind to our struggle, indifferent to the need for good works.

Some even say he **promotes** sin. If God loves us while we are yet sinners, why not **sin all the more**, "that grace may abound?" (6.1. They say Paul's gospel lets people sin all they please, because it leads to an increase in grace 5.20. Go ahead, indulge yourself; it will make God's **grace triumph all the more**. The charge: Paul's faith makes no moral difference. It may even undermine morals.

1. The charge: Christian faith makes no moral difference Rom 6.1

The charge "Christian faith makes no moral difference" marks a contrast. Most **religions** say: The way to get right with the gods, the way to **heaven** is to do good for a long enough time. Christianity says no such thing. It says we are right with God by **faith**, through grace, **apart from** works. And that seems to permit moral laziness. Further, some "Christians" are guilty of the charge. Some give in to sin. They sin and count on grace to cover it.

To be precise, Paul is called an **antinomian** – anti = against, nomos = law, hence "against the law." Paul is certainly against the law **as the means of finding God**. But to call Paul antinomian is unfair. He was an observant Jew, devoted, in words and deeds, to holiness as few have been (Phil 3.4-8).

Paul looks lawless (antinomian) at first because he denies that we can keep the law perfectly or even try to. Jesus kept the law on your behalf and will grant you his obedience if you receive it, by faith. If you follow Jesus **then** you will strive to keep his good law. So "It is not those who **hear** the law who are righteous in God's sight, but.. those who obey the law who will be declared righteous" (Romans 2.13).

Paul answers: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" (6.1-2).

The statement "Let's go on sinning" is absurd. First, God plans to redeem us from sin – from its guilt and power. God wants us to stop sinning and Paul says so a moment later: "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God... Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires" (6.11-12).

Paul knew that if you try to say everything at once, the result is a tangle of ideas. So he established **first things first**. The gospel: "A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" by the blood of Christ, not by observing the law (Romans 3.28). **Jesus** paid the debt we owe to the law. **We** cannot pay that debt by producing good works (5.9). This gospel comes first. Then law.

Two contrasting lives illustrate the point. #1: Andre **Agassi** is a hall of fame tennis player, a man admired for his style, tenacity generosity. He also says he hated tennis for most of his career. In 1997, when injured, hating tennis and, he says, a lost soul, he took a recreational drug. A test caught him and lied his way out of it. When his injury **healed**, he went right back to playing. In his autobiography **Open**, he confesses this and explains: "Every day I've lived with a second chance that most people don't get, and every day has been an **atonement** for that. This book is an atonement for that." That is, by doing a good deed, making a damaging confession, he atones for his lie. This is the way of law.

#2: An extortioner and traitor named **Zaccheus** illustrates the way of grace. Jesus came to Zaccheus because he saw something the man's heart. They talked and soon Zaccheus believed. He said "Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated [anyone – and he had] I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house." Not: if you fulfill this pledge, salvation will come. That is salvation by works. Rather, this **vow to obey demonstrates** that salvation has already come.

Yet we see that someone could abuse this message of grace. Some may say, "Whatever I do, God will forgive, so here goes." If any of you **pervert and abuse God's grace** this way, then beware. If someone twists the gospel so it promotes sin, we must wonder if they ever truly knew God or his gospel.

Hear Paul's main reply: "We died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?" We died to sin, that we "may live a new life" 6.2-4

2. The reply: We died to sin and rose to a new life (6.2-4)

So then, does Christian doctrine encourage sin? "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" Never! No way! "We died to sin; how can we live in it? Yet as soon as we hear this, we wonder: In what sense have we died to sin? The main idea is clear: the gospel is no excuse for sin. But how have we died to sin?

Whatever "death to sin" means, it's a **metaphor**. It can't mean we are **literally** dead. The mark of literal death is insensitivity. Suppose you see a bird lying on the ground on a bitterly cold day. You come close and it isn't moving, but it doesn't have that **collapsed** look of a body. Touch it with your toe. If it's alive, it will flutter, if not... Sadly, we aren't dead to sin in this sense. We are all too responsive to it. Even if we don't **do much** we are easily tempted to anger, envy, lusts, fear, despair, laziness.

Besides, if we were literally dead to sin, why does Paul soon warn about the dangers of sin? For he says we must not let sin reign, must not offer ourselves up to sin, must not let it master us (6:12-14).

So, in what sense have we died to sin? Our answer must satisfy two facets of Paul's statement: Paul is describing what **happened to believers** some time in the past. It's an achievement, not a command.

Stay with me for a principle of **interpretation**: When a word can have several meanings, see how the author uses the word, especially in the same context. So in the context of a conversation with several physicists, the word "wave" means a light wave or a sound wave, not a greeting. Again, in the context of family reunions, "I love you" is affectionate, not romantic.

Just so the language of death has an established meaning in the Bible. In Scripture, "death" is generally used in legal, not physical terms. For example, God told Adam "if you eat of the tree, you will die." Adam ate and his **body** didn't die, he died spiritually. He died legally. Romans agrees "The wages of sin is death" (6.23). See also Romans 1.32, 5.12 In Rev 21-22, the fate of the impenitent is not physical death, it's the second death – banishment from God.¹ Conclusion we died **legally**.

Death to sin is used this very way nearby, in Romans 6.10. It says Jesus "died to sin once for all." This fits our "death to sin" perfectly. Jesus didn't die to the **appeal** of sin. He was tempted, but sin never fully appealed to him as it does to us. Jesus died to sin "once for all" when (legally) he paid its penalty. We die to sin similarly, when Jesus pays the legal penalty for sin. New life follows.

3. We are united to Christ and free (in principle) of sin (6.5-7)

Baptism into Christ follows. There are debates about this baptism into Christ: Is this the normal baptism with water? Or are we baptized into Christ as the Israelites were baptized into Moses, cf. 1 Cor 10.1. In that baptism, the Israelites crossed the dry sea bed as they escaped from Egypt? What's certain is that Christians should be baptized, as a sign and a seal of faith and our union with him. Like him, we died to sin. Like him, we are raised from the dead, so "we may live a new life." There is therefore a break between the old life, before Christ and the new, after faith.

This is where moral element of faith fits. We are "no longer slaves to sin." Sin no longer has control or mastery over us. We have the freedom and the ability to leave sin behind and to live a new life daily. This the Scripture teaches and it's what we can live. But how we can lay hold of it, how can we live it in our new life?

¹ Stott, pp. 166-179

4. Living a new of life: the glory, the agony, and the muddle

Let's take a common problem: Someone says something or does something that seems **unkind or hurtful**: You offer to help and your offer is ignored. Someone makes a cutting remark. A student or underling is rude; a boss growls and threatens. You give a gift and it isn't acknowledged. Ouch! These things can wreck our mood. Or we forget it during the day, when we're busy, but when we lie down to sleep, it roars back. Or: there are explanations for what happened, but we don't want to accept them. We prefer to stay **wounded**.

I was discussing this with a fellow pastor (Scotty Smith). He leaned on Proverbs: "A fool shows his annoyance at once, but **a prudent man overlooks an insult**" (Proverbs 12:16). "A man's wisdom gives him patience; it is to his **glory to overlook** an offense" (19:11). We think: It's glory to overlook an offense! Lord, give me this glory. But can we die to this pain? Stop feeling hurts? Probably not. But we can stop feeling it **so much**. We can stop feeding our wounds.

And the gospel shows us how: In the gospel, God takes our sin and folly seriously. Yet his heart is big enough to overlook it. He is *patient*. He is *forgiving*. If we meditate on this, we'll say "I want to forgive as you do, Jesus."

It also helps to remember where we are. On this side of glory, pains and hurts will never cease. The Bible says we should be "slow to anger" (Jas 1.19). Let's add "slow to be **annoyed**."

Let's also admit that all of us can see an offence where none was meant. We take a neutral remark in a negative way. We misread people. A man is shy; we call him **proud**. We need a "big heart and thick skin." Remember 1 Cor 13:5: Love "keeps no record of wrongs." We don't have to read a letter to the end if it's designed to hurt. We certainly shouldn't collect bad news and remember every bit of it. Why do we do this to ourselves?

As I listen to folk, I believe most **perceived** hurts are **real**: 80-88%. Generally, we don't making things up. But we make things worse by exaggerating the offense or seeing it as a personal attack when ordinary selfishness or carelessness is the greater cause.

Many people think this problem is worse than it was fifty or one hundred years ago because of our shift to individualism. In the 1960s, America changed. We became a nation of individualists. Individualism comes in two forms. One is older: The **utilitarian individualist** is the self-reliant person who tamed the West, started companies, etc. Utilitarian individualism can be very good. **Expressive** individualism is newer and not so helpful. It defines life through in terms of my development, my experiences.

Expressive individualists ask questions like: Am I growing as a person? Am I in touch with my feelings? Am I **stuck in a role** or living **authentically**? Am I happy with my marriage? If not, should I get a divorce and go find myself? The worst fate is to be stuck in a role I don't choose. Someone talked me into it and...

No doubt: development and authenticity are good. We all dislike parts of our roles if life. Getting stuck in a limited, unpleasant role is painful.

If you push expressive individualism, it becomes **self-worship**. There are laws or guiding principles: Freedom, choice, personal growth and development, the importance of my feelings and "what's good for me." The objective of devotion is the self; God or neighbor are a distant second.

In 1979, Christopher Lasch labeled this in his book, *The Culture of Narcissism*. He said a **therapeutic** mindset is encroaching on social and family life. We have **lofty** but **fragile** self-concepts. So we protect our self, our development by avoiding commitment and binding relationships. We dread aging and admire fame.

Whether conservative and liberal, Christian and secular, lots of people see this. I first noticed it as a college professor in late 1980s. One day, while reading a pile of essays I noticed that every essay or paper touched on freedom, choice and development. I thought: Did I forget my own essay? Did I ask them to write about freedom and development? No, I asked for nothing of the kind. But the minds of the students were fixed on them, so... Freedom and self-development had become dominant values.

This is our world. We breathe this air. I raise it now because it hampers us as we try to live out what we have – **union to Christ and freedom from sin**. It can rob of us of the peace we have in Christ.

Important point: We don't solve this problem simply by reading the Bible. We must examine, understand, interpret our culture. The culture teaches us to see life - success and failure, happiness and misery – a certain way. So let's question our culture and compare it to Scripture for it definitely can lead us astray.

Our culture's concepts of identity and the good life can lead us astray. Even small slights seem large if I follow my culture and make reputation, self-esteem and image, too important. They're important. But they're not ultimate.

At worst, we aim for **self-justification** through development, achievement and recognition. But we can't guarantee meaning this way. Because our efforts are doomed to fail, we become fragile. It's better to look for God's validations and justification. **He validates us** – created in his image. He doesn't justify us on the basis of our achievements, but on the basis of the work of Christ.

David Wells says men used to be strong and stoical, but now they are too sensitive. There is always someone is offended, "if not by what is said, then by what is not said. Or by what could potentially be intended in what was said or... not said." Everyone fragile and afflicted. America has more counselors than librarians.²

Again, we don't solve this problem simply by reading the Bible. We must understand our culture. The point: If we are blind to our culture, it will hamper our ability to die to sin and live a new life.

The crisis of American marriage is on my mind too. I believe there is a link between the common, but smaller, problem of easily wounded feelings and the catastrophic problem of collapsing marriages.

In years past, the ideal was a working or **collaborative** marriage. People were wary, reticent to marry for love or beauty. Why? **Romance blinds** people to the sturdy virtues that give life: Discipline, work, skill, character, perseverance.

Then the **companionate marriage**. It's not enough to work together, there should be love and **affection**. This, I think, was a move toward a more biblical understanding. By God's design, husband and wife work together and love each other. But within twenty years a new model, the developmental marriage.

In the **developmental marriage**, Andrew Cherlin says "Each person should develop a fulfilling independent self instead of merely sacrificing oneself to one's partner... [Marriage] roles should be flexible and negotiable [and] openness in confronting problems [is] essential." This is our age, our air.

This is the spirit of the age and the law eventually follows it. Take no-fault divorce laws. A great many people regard this as a destructive law – one spouse wants to leave the marriage and the other is powerless to prevent it, can barely even slow it down for a few months. I'm aware of the complexities of divorce law.

There is a world behind the text of divorce laws. In that world of practices and ideas, if people

² Courage to Be Protestant, 2008, 140; Cherlin, The Marriage Go Round, 3-13, 63-115

unhappy, unfulfilled, stuck in a role that keeps them from developing, they have a right to a divorce. They don't need a rationale – a **fault or offense in self or spouse**. There is no fault. People drift apart, that's all. They stifle each other, therefore they should be able to divorce.

This gives us **the text** of no-fault divorce. It's also "expressive divorce." The goal is a new world of freedom and personal growth. What happened is quite different. Adults suffer divorce and children are the biggest losers.³

Again, we must know the spirit of our age. It is near at hand. The apostle says "test all things and hold fast to what is good." Test the age, so you can resist it and claim the new life we have in Christ.

Don't find identity and direction in freedom, self-development, self-esteem. Find it in the strong grace and love of God, in our union with Christ. With him, we can die to sin and live a new life.

Other sources:

Boice, pp. 641-644

Cranfield pp. 296-310

³ Andrew Cherlin 11-24, 87-143 Barbara Whitehead, Divorce Revolution