

***I Can't Help Myself***  
**A Sermon on Romans 7:15-25**  
**Proper 9**  
**July 9, 2017**

**Introduction**

We can't help hearing this text as Luther heard it: Paul is wracked with guilt. "O wretched man that I am! I can't help doing the very thing I hate." Luther understood this text as the plight of every Christian believer: "At the same time righteous and sinner." We are trapped in original sin and grace is the only way out.

The problem is, that's not Paul. Paul never reflects a sense of guilt in any of his letters. Luther is blinded by his own guilt and reads it into Paul.

I want to offer you today another way to hear this text. It is the new Paul, a new movement in scholarship that tries to recover the original Paul.

**First Move: God-Fearers Torn Between Two Worlds**

I took a semester-long class on Romans in seminary. The professor was Brandon Scott, who is an accomplished New Testament scholar, a member of the Jesus Seminar and the author of one of the leading books on parables. Our textbook for the class was called, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews and Gentiles*, by Stanley Stowers, written in 1994. Stowers began his academic career at Phillips University before teaching at Brown University for 30 years.

Stowers is a historian of early Christianity; he surveyed Greek and Roman literature and made a compelling argument that Paul was writing to Gentiles about the futility of using the Torah as a means of self-mastery. I resisted the argument for the first several weeks of the semester. Self-mastery, what an unbiblical topic! By the end of the course, I was convinced he was right, and still am.

Stowers says that we make the mistake of assuming that people in the first century think just like we do. We cannot understand the importance of self-mastery in Greco-Roman ethics unless we recognize how ancient morality and society differed from our own.

We live in a capitalist consumer culture where we are bombarded with advertising messages that stimulate our desires and communicate the thought that desires are good, they need to be satisfied. In Greco-Roman culture desires were believed to be not only bad but dangerous. Americans today think that goods are

infinite and that the economy must continue to grow for prosperity. Buying more stuff is our civic duty. Consumer demand is the engine of economic growth. People in the first century thought that the world had a limited number of goods. You were regarded as greedy by your peers if you tried to take more than your share—you were taking someone else's share. Their ethics were based on moderation and restraint.

Ancient Greeks and Romans also believed people by their nature were perpetually at war with one another. Life was a state of constant warfare, village against village, male against male, self against self. You had to subdue your own unruly desires and passions as a ruler would put down a rebellion or as a master would subjugate a slave. The psychology of the individual mirrored the organization of a society. In a society built on hierarchy, the soul was the master of the body and used reason to control the passions. To rule others, you first had to master yourself.

Paul is addressing the letter to Gentiles in Rome. Paul refers to himself in the opening sentence of Chapter 1 as an apostle called to bring Gentiles to the obedience of faith in Christ. These Gentiles knew the Jewish Scriptures, also called the Torah. They are mostly like what is called God-fearers. They were Gentiles who attended the synagogues but did not convert. They were attracted to Judaism. Jews wanted to be good citizens of the empire; they promoted the Torah as helping the Gentiles with self-mastery. The food laws helped control the desire of the stomach. The Ten Commandments were addressed to reason and helped control the passions.

The God-fearers are torn between two worlds. They don't fully commit to Judaism. They don't get circumcised and they don't observe the food laws. They still worship other gods in public rituals and make sacrifices to the emperor.

Stowers argues that in Chapter 2 of Romans, Paul is scolding a Jewish teacher at the synagogue who is teaching the Ten Commandments to God-fearers to help them with self-mastery.

Today's text is written in first person so it sounds like Paul is being autobiographical. The traditional interpretation for centuries has been that Paul is talking about the futility of the Law, that the only means of salvation for all people, including Jews, is Jesus Christ. Stowers argues that a first-century audience would have recognized that Paul was using a common dramatic and literary technique of speaking in character. Paul is assuming the character of another person. In this case, Paul is talking through the voice of a Gentile, a God-fearer, who has been taught to use the Torah for self-mastery.

With that background, now let's look at what Paul says in today's text.

Paul is dramatizing that the God-fearer is a slave under the power of sin. Paul employs a Jewish stereotype of Gentiles as idolaters, worshiping many gods. Each

god in Greek mythology controlled one sphere. The gods are at war with each other. The many gods create conflicting desires with the Gentile. Jews considered Gentiles to be morally degenerate, just as Greeks considered barbarians to be morally degenerate. The other was seen as morally inferior.

Paul never describes Jews in the same way as being under the power of sin. They follow the whole law and that provides a means for expiating their sin. Gentiles are torn between two worlds and are unwilling to fully commit to Judaism. They are torn between the passions of an idolater and the law of the one true God. Therefore they cannot fully enjoy the gift of the Torah and the covenant relationship.

Their reason is unable to control their sin. They recognize that the law is good but they are unable to follow it. The power of sin is overwhelming. God has handed them over to their sins in punishment for their idolatry.

Paul describes the conflict that takes place within the inner self in antiquity. The members are at war with the mind. Reason in the upper self cannot control the members in the lower self. The Gentile is a slave to desire.

## **Second Move: The False Self**

Many of us are torn between two worlds today. Our sense of who we are is the product of the culture. We ask ourselves how we measure up to the messages we have internalized. Marcus Borg in *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* says that the messages we receive from the culture center on the three A's: appearance, achievement and affluence. We get different messages from a counter-cultural gospel: humility, servanthood and suffering. Thomas Merton calls this a conflict between the false self of the culture and the true self who is standing naked before God.

In the biblical vision we are created in the image of God, but we spend our lives outside the gates of paradise. We are estranged from God and preoccupied with ourselves.

Let me focus on just one of the three A's that we get from the culture: appearance. I had a friend in school who was very good looking: tall, thin, good hair, a Kirk Douglas chin. Women were drawn to him. His long-term relationship in school was with a model. I had friends who liked to go with him to bars in hopes that they could pick up the women he rejected. I was with him on a trip to Lincoln to see the OU-Nebraska game and we went into a sports bar. A television anchorwoman from Omaha talked to him at the bar all evening. I can't imagine talking to him all evening. I thought he didn't have much to say. But he is who most guys in college want to be.

Contrast him with William Barber. He led a rally yesterday on opening day of General Assembly on the steps of the state capitol in Indianapolis. A 50-something black man, overweight, with a crippling disease that makes it difficult for him to walk. But what comes out of his mouth is pure gospel. I think he is the most powerful preacher in America.

Mary, who would you rather talk to for an evening? The good looking guy with nothing to say or William Barber? Fortunately, you got the best of both worlds with me.

Women know all about the pressure of looking good. Most women won't go out in public without doing their hair and makeup. At least until they get old enough that they don't care anymore.

I am reading a book called *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*, by Roxane Gay. She is a Haitian American, a best-selling author, and she weighs 425 pounds. Her top weight was 575 pounds. She tells us what it is like to go through life as a super morbidly obese woman. She says that she writes a memoir of her body because, more often than not, stories of bodies like hers are ignored or dismissed or derided. Many people in her life saw her body before they ever saw her. She has no stamina. She cannot walk for long periods of time. When it is hot outside, she sweats profusely. She has been on countless diets and joined countless gyms. She has hired several personal trainers. She struggles to fit into seats at restaurants, movie theaters and waiting rooms. Strangers at the grocery store offer her unsolicited advice on nutrition. Every time her parents see her or talk to her on the phone, they ask about her weight.

One third of Americans are obese. They have had similar stories. I know I struggle with the tiny seats on Southwest Airlines and at Chesapeake Arena. People totally out of the blue offer me advice about losing weight or doing a sleep study for sleep apnea. I want to tell them: Pull the weeds in your own garden. Let me worry about mine.

Paul tells us that we need to be born again, to die to the False Self and rise to the True Self. Appearance, achievement and affluence are not who we are. Hardly any of us can measure up to those standards.

### **Third Move: Training the Elephant**

How do we overcome this obsession with appearance, achievement and affluence? It is hard. We absorb the cultural cues and they become part of our passions and desires.

David Hume, the Enlightenment philosopher, famously said that reason is the slave of the passions. Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, proves that Hume is right

in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. We read it on Wednesday nights four years ago. I think it is one of the best books we have read.

Haidt use the image of the rider and the elephant to describe how each of us makes moral decisions. We make hundreds of decisions each day and nearly all of them are made by the elephant, who is driven by unconscious messages and desires. The elephant sees and reacts; it uses intuition to make its decisions. The power of reasoning and the capacity for language developed late in the evolutionary history of human beings. The elephant made all decisions without a rider until then. The rider is our power of reason. The rider is the servant of the elephant. His main function is to justify what the elephant has just done.

“You will be frustrated if you see moral reasoning as something we do to determine the truth,” Haidt says. “It makes more sense if you think of it as something we do to further our social agendas, that is, justify our actions and to defend our teams.” The rider is our inner lawyer who defends our actions. The more knowledgeable a person is, the better he or she is at developing theories of self-justification.

Western philosophy has worshiped reason and distrusted passion for thousands of years. There is a direct line from Plato to Kant to Kohlberg. Haidt calls it the rationalist delusion.

It is possible for the rider to exert influence over the elephant. The rider is capable of seeing further into the future, learning new skills and mastering technology. The rider can be intentional and hold the elephant back from reacting intuitively. But it takes a lot of effort and it only affects a small percentage of the hundreds of decisions that the elephant makes each day.

How do we put the rider in control of the elephant? Haidt says it is easier to train the elephant. Our faith journey is about training the elephant. The elephant responds to the desires and longings of the False Self. It takes a long time to train the elephant to unlearn the habits of a lifetime and respond naturally to the calling of the Spirit.

Marcus Borg talks about being born again as a process rather than a once in the lifetime event. Baptism is just the first step in the journey. Rising to new life in Christ is the process of maturing in Christian life.

Practicing non violence is a good example. It takes the discipline of a lifetime of practice to become non violent. We have to train ourselves to listen to the other person before we jump back at them with our own opinion. We will still get angry—it

is an instinctive human emotion. We have to train ourselves how to respond non-violently instead of aggressively when we feel anger welling up within us.

This training process takes daily practice. Martin Luther speaks of daily dying and rising with Christ. Marcus Borg says he has to remind himself of centering on God every day. He often goes through a day and forgets God and becomes burdened with the cares of the world. When he reminds himself of the reality of God, he experiences a lightness of being, rising out of his self-preoccupation.

This process of growing into life in the spirit is the subject of Romans, Chapter 8, which Mary and I will preach on the next three weeks. I just want to touch on it today and say that it offers us something more attractive than physical appearance.

Borg says that spirituality combines three things: awareness, intentionality and practice. We become conscious of and self-intentional about a deepening relationship with God.

We already are in relationship with God and have been since birth. Spirituality is about becoming aware from moment to moment that this relationship already exists.

Becoming intentional about that relationship means that we set aside time for God. Being in relationship with someone requires time. Text messages aren't good enough. We need actual face to face time. With God, that means we need quiet time, to let go of our thoughts and simply be present with God. Leave our thoughts behind in a cloud of forgetting and open ourselves up to the cloud of unknowing.

A deepening relationship with God is the goal of the spiritual life. Paying attention to the relationship transforms us. We are now in connection with what is really real.

Dying and rising with Christ daily has consequences. It changes us. Christian tradition calls this transformation sanctification. Borg points out that the sanctified life is enormously attractive. It is the life of reconnection with God. It is the life of the prodigal son being welcomed home, the life of the healed demoniac, restored to his right mind and to community, the life of the bent woman, standing up and restored to health.

## **Conclusion**

Paul opens our eyes to the wretchedness of being torn between two worlds. The God-fearers were unwilling to fully commit to Judaism, and the teachings of the Torah simply raised their awareness of sin without the daily practices of a new way of life to help them overcome it.

We are torn between two worlds when we fail to follow up on our baptism. We must die and rise with Christ each day to be transformed. Training the elephant takes a long time. May God be with you on your journey.

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