



Romans 7:14-20

14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.

15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.

17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

18 For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

Special Music: “Old Man’s Rubble” Amy Grant

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EX05YARxfHU>

You find yourself in a lush garden with many colorful and fragrant flowers all about. It is somewhat whimsical and quite beautiful. There is a fountain on the stone path in front of you. The fountain has obviously not worked in many years but at the base of the fountain is all the materials and tools that you would need to fix it. To your right is a weather-beaten house in need of a good paint job. There are steps and a porch surround that leads to the front door.

Do you:

- A. Fix the fountain (Go to A1)**
- B. Go to the porch (Go to B1)**

A1

So, you chose to fix the fountain. It is tiring work in the hot sun but after a few hours of tinkering and sweat, the fountain is running again which adds to glory of the garden. When you look in the fountain you see a key and a gold coin. You can only take one.

Do you:

- A. Take the key and put it in your pocket (go to A1-A)**
- B. Take the gold coin and put it in your pocket (go to A1-B)**

B1

You find the postman on the front porch delivering the daily mail. You say, “Good Morning!” and wait patiently for him to finish. As he is leaving, he drops a

small box. He hasn't noticed that he dropped it. You reach down and pick up the box.

Do you:

- A. Call to the postman and return the box (Go to B1-A)**
- B. Put the box in your pocket (Go to B1-B)**

A1-A

So, you took the key and put it in your pocket. You take the path back to the front porch and then up to the front door. There is a welcome mat in front of the front door. The door appears to be locked, but it looks like the key you found will fit the lock.

Do you:

- A. Open the front door (Go to C1)**
- B. Put the key under the mat (Go to C2)**

A1-B

So, you took the gold coin. You take the path back to the front porch and then up to the front door. There is a welcome mat in front of the front door. There is a small boy playing in the front yard and he offers to trade you a key to the front door for the coin.

Do you:

- A. Trade for the key and unlock the door (Go to C1)**
- B. Leave the coin under the mat (Go to C2)**

C1

A police officer shows up and arrests you for home invasion. After all, this is not your house! You spend the rest of the story in jail.

C2

You have proven yourself a model citizen and return home with a smile on your face knowing that you are an ethical human being. The city gives you a gold key that will open every door in the town.

This kind of story is often called a “Pick a Path” or “Choose a Path” story. Throughout the entire book, the reader is asked to make decisions that will determine the progress of the story. Sometimes the questions are ethical in nature and force you to choose to be a “good person” or a “bad person.” Other times, the questions are about choices that seem to have no ethical relationship, “go here”, “go there”, “Pick up this”, “Use that.” But the point is that the reader drives the progress through the book based on personal decisions.

In 1987, a musical was written based on the novel “The mystery of Edwin Drood” by Charles Dickens. This musical version of the story was written like a Pick-a Path book. At different points in the musical, the audience is asked to make decisions that will drive the progress of the play. The play also allowed them also choose the murderer which was unique from the novel because Dickens never tells us who did it..

Multiple times, every day, we are face choices. Sometimes, they don’t mean a lot. “There’s a penny on the ground. Do I pick it up?” Sometimes, we find ourselves ethically challenged. “There’s a hundred dollar bill on the ground. Do I keep it or do I try to find the owner?” And later we find ourselves asking if we really made the right decision. Then the guilt comes when we realize that we may have made the wrong decision. Sometimes, the answers are not easy or clear, but it becomes a matter of conscience when we make our decisions based on our own

greed or selfishness even though we don't find it greedy or selfish at the time. Maybe we don't have time to help that mother with the broken-down car. Maybe that \$5 bill in our pocket is our lunch money and not for the out of work sign carrier on the corner. Maybe we are just too sick or too tired to help.

When we think of Paul, we put him on a pedestal believing him to be above such trite concerns. We don't want Paul to be any less than the perfect Christian, a shining beacon of clarity to help guide us. But in a rare, non-preachy moment, Paul opens a window to his heart and life to show us his utter disgust with himself for not being able to make the right decision all the time. He is a man so in tune with the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life that we have a difficult time understanding why he would say what he says here:

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17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

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19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

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Here is Paul admitting that, even though his faith and belief in Christ is paramount to his very existence, sin still shows up to control many of the decisions he makes. He knows that many of the choices he makes are driven by sin, whether it is a sin of omission or a sin of commission.

19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.

His struggle to do the right thing and not do the wrong thing is a constant moment by moment battle in his heart, soul and mind.

So where does that leave us? We are certainly not Paul. And if he is struggling with this, what makes us think we can do any better? Isn't it more practical to just give in to sin? After all, Jesus died for our sins and promises to forgive us, and it is so very hard to do the right thing or not do the wrong thing. It's often easier, at least on the surface, to do the wrong thing rather than the right thing. Why even bother?

And then there is that verse so often quotes in Romans 3:23 **“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** It’s almost as if God expects us to sin. Maybe He does that so that everyone can see how wonderful He is when He forgives us? Since grace is free, isn’t that a license to sin all we want? After all, doesn’t Romans 5:12 tell us:

The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more,

The more we sin, the greater the grace. Sounds like a good thing, doesn’t it?

There were Christians in the early church that preached this theology that sinning was a great way to show other people how much God loved them. But that is a truly warped way of looking at this subject and certainly ignores what Christ had to say on the subject.

We don’t read this passage from Matthew very often, because it has a tendency to make some people uncomfortable.

Matthew 5:17-20

17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

19 Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

20 For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Notice that sin isn't even mentioned in this passage, but up until the time of Jesus, what was considered the law was held as the standard for addressing and preventing sin among the people. The problem came when the Jewish religious leaders decided to expand the law based on their own interpretation. It's a lot like what we find in government today. There are people that think we need more government in order to maintain the intent of the constitution and there are also those who believe that we need less government because that was the original intent of the constitution. And it is not just liberal vrs. conservative thinking or Republicans vrs. Democrats. We all, at some point, want to lump another person's ideology and theology into a box with every other Republican and Democrat. The truth is a lot grayer.

So, while Jesus teaches us that every letter of the law is perfect and to be understood, he often tells us in the gospels that the Sadducees and Pharisees were not wrong to obey the law, but that they didn't really understand the law and the purpose for the law. The law was created by God for the people so that the people could have some guiderails to help them live in harmony with God and also with each other.

We have the same problem today. We want to force people to live inside the fence of the law but don't understand that the law is not a fence. It isn't meant to separate people. It is meant to bring people together into a common relationship with the Creator. Jesus even went so far as to give purpose to the law by answering the religious leaders that were following Him around and wanting to trap Him into saying something that they could use against Him.

These verses are found in [Matthew 22:34-40](#).

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.

35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

37 Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'

38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

If you do not learn anything else from me, I beg you to learn this. To boil this passage down to law, even though that is what the question is about, does disservice to what Jesus is trying to say. It is not about passing a test to get into heaven. It is not a test rooted in condemnation. It is not about the parameters of the law as much as it is about relationship with God and the people around us. It is not about forcing the sheep to stay inside the fold as much as it is about giving them a reason to stay. Every part of the Law of God unfolds under these two commandments.

1. " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.'

2. 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

If we follow these two very basic commandments, we will fulfill all the commandments. When we are faced with a decision, it is our mandate to determine if our choice fits within these parameters. Does the decision that we

are about to make show that we love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and does the decision raise people up or push people down.

If the decision we are making profits ourselves but tarnishes the image of God in the eyes of others, we should rethink our decision. If the decision we are making profits us at the expense of others, we should rethink our decision.

Some people believe that this simplifies the matter too much. That this makes every decision easy. After all, we don't always see what the outcome is going to be. But that is why we are going to spend the month of January looking at the consternations that we face with our very own decision-making process. How does God help us through the process and lead us down the path that most pleases Him?

I will tell you straight out that this is never as simple as it looks. If it were, Paul would not have been struggling like we see him struggling in His letter to the Romans. Listen again to his words

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Paul tells us that even though Christ lives within us, by our very nature we are given to sin. We have to constantly choose righteousness over sinfulness, and we are often not successful. We give into sin because it is expedient. Because it suits our purposes. Because it profits us. Because it gives us a false sense of security. Because it tickles our endorphins and brings us pleasure. And then we regret it. And ask for forgiveness. We do not do the good we want to do, but the evil that we do not want to do, we do. We find ourselves going round and round with ourselves hoping that we will do better.

That does not make us horrible, wicked people. What it does do is make us human. And Christ knows that, which is why He is constantly cleaning us up so that we can stand in the presence of God. We are like children wearing our Sunday best who choose to go play in the mud, and we know that our parents are not going to be happy, but we do it anyway. And then we come inside with a sullen look on our face and apologize for our behavior and ask our parents to clean us up. Which is where grace enters the picture. God, through Jesus Christ continues to accept our apology, cleans us up, and forgives us. But just like our parents, He keeps hoping that we will learn our lesson and do better the next time.

It doesn't make what we do acceptable or okay. If you haven't realized it, when we come into the saving arms of Christ, we gain a desire to please God. When fail, we are well aware of it. That's the Holy Spirit working within us. We feel the Holy Spirit shaking His finger at us and pushing us in a different direction. The fact that grace exists is not an excuse to give into our sinful nature, but all the more reason to realize that the Joy that floods over us comes when we stand in a right relationship with our Heavenly Father. The more we choose to obey God, the closer we find ourselves in our relationship with Him. And the closer the relationship with God, the greater the joy.

What to do? What to do? How about we do what God expects of us as His children, which will then help us to separate our nature of sin from the blessings of being a new creation through Christ. Let us allow God to speak into us and shine a light on the path He has set before us.

AMEN