

July 6, 2008

Title: Paradox: Desiring Good and Doing Bad

Text: Romans 7:15-8:1

The Big Idea: We don't let sin define us, we defy it and defy it and defy it!

Introduction

Alex Gibney's documentary on the life of "Gonzo" Hunter S. Thompson suggests that Thompson, "who committed suicide in 2005, survives to some degree in the popular imagination because of his self-burnished reputation for excess." (A.O. Scott, "Beyond Fear and Loathing", The New York Times, July 4, 2008)

In life and in death, Hunter Thompson was and is defined by his excesses.

We may be defined by many things. Some of us are defined by our ethnic heritage as reflected in continued traditions, the way we cook and eat, even our accents define us. Some of us are defined by our appearance. Some are defined by strengths and others by their weaknesses. We may be defined by our work. Sometimes we are defined by our spouses or our children. Here at church Bonnie is defined as Pastor Monty's wife... at her work, I am defined as Bonnie's husband.

I once knew a man who drove a bull wagon... he was a livestock hauler and he drove a cattle truck. He always wore a big floppy, rawhide cowboy hat. It looked hot and heavy. I did not think it particularly flattering. One day I asked him why he always wore his rawhide hat and he said, "Because people know me by my hat." His hat defined who he was.

Sometimes Christians are defined by noble demonstrations of Christ like behavior and sometimes, we are known for our failures... This may come as a huge shock to you but there is something you need to know.

1. Christians sin

This is how the Apostle Paul spoke of the influence of sin in his life:

- **"...I am sold into slavery, with sin as my master." 7:14**
- **"...I know what is right but I don't do it." 7:15**
- **"I know what I am doing is wrong..." 7:16**
- **"...sin inside me makes me do these things." 7:17**
- **"I know I am rotten through and through..." 7:18**
- **"When I want to do good, I don't." 7:19**
- **"...sin within me is doing it." 7:20**
- **"...I inevitably do what is wrong." 7:21**
- **"...this law wins the fight and makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me." 7:23**

- “...who will free me from being dominated by sin?” 7:24
- “...because of my sinful nature, I am a slave to sin.” 7:25

This text is somewhat controversial. Some contend that what Paul is saying could not be descriptive of his life as a devoted follower of Jesus Christ. They contend that Paul must be talking about his life before becoming a Christian... surely a man of God of the stature of the Apostle Paul could not have struggled so with his thoughts, words, and deeds.

Those who espouse the doctrine of sinless perfection are up against it in this text because Paul clearly uses “present tense” language and he describes himself as desiring to obey God, which is generally not the expressed desire of an unbeliever. But perhaps most convincing for people like me, is that my experience is not unlike that of the Apostle Paul. I know what it is to desire to do the right thing, but then blow it.

In reflecting on this text, the writer in *Homiletics Magazine* quoted a campus pastor from Texas who said, “This just feels like my relationship with God. Paul isn’t the only person who feels this way or has this experience... when he says “I” – I think it means me.” (*Homiletics*, July 2008, p. 10)

Perhaps you too resonate with the experience of the Apostle Paul.

It is certainly God’s expressed desire that we live sinless lives. John wrote,

- “My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if you do sin, there is someone to plead for you before the Father. He is Jesus Christ...” I John 2:1

When our children were born, we started them out with baby bottles. They then progressed to using sippy cups. And then, they were given their milk in a glass. The expressed goal, usually expressed numerous times during the meal was, “Be careful. Don’t spill your milk.” But inevitably... someone spilled their milk. This is an area in which children have not evolved... our grandchildren are as inept as were their parents at the spilling of milk.

The ideal is to not spill the milk... but if you do, you have a loving parent or grandparent who will clean it up for you.

The Word of God has a specific word to all of us, but in particular to those who claim to never spill their milk. John wrote, “If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleans

us from every wrong. If we say we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his Word has no place in our hearts.” I John 1:8-10

Russian author Alexandr Solzhenitsyn wrote, “If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being...” (*PreachingToday*, submitted by Jerry De Luca, Montreal West, Quebec, Canada; source: Michael Shermer, “*Something Evil Comes This Way*,” www.skeptic.com, 3/18/04)

However, the fact that we sin does not mean that we want to sin.

2. Christians do not necessarily want to sin

Once again, from the experience of the Apostle Paul:

- “I really want to do what is right... instead I do the very thing I hate.” 7:15
- “...my conscience shows that I agree that the law is good.” 7:16
- “I want to [make myself do what is right], but I can’t” 7:18
- “I love God’s law with all my heart.” 7:22
- “...who will free me from this life dominated by sin?” 7:24
- “...in my mind, I really want to obey God’s law...” 7:25

Poet Carl Sandberg once said, “There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.” (Richard Hansen, “*A Good Mystery*,” *Preaching Today* Audio issue 253)

Colorful, old-time evangelist Billy Sunday said of sin, “I’m against sin. I’ll kick it as long as I’ve got a foot. I’ll fight it as long as I’ve got a fist. I’ll butt it as long as I have a head. And I’ll bite it as long as I’ve got a tooth, and when I am old, fistless, footless, and toothless, I’ll gum it till I go home to glory...” (Submitted by Aaron Goerner, Utica, N.Y., *PreachingToday.com*)

Christians who sin do not like it, but the fact is, sometimes we do and sometimes it gets a hold on us that we absolutely detest. Paul’s description of his experience reminds me of the story told by a pastor vacationing with his family in northern Minnesota where they went to a small county fair near the town of Babbitt.

They found that they were the only people in line to ride the Tilt-O-Whirl... but the operator let him and his three kids on and started the ride. He hoped that since they were the only ones, the operator would give them a nice long ride... and he did.

They were laughing and having a blast as their ride extended well beyond the length of an ordinary ride, until he suddenly began to feel a bit queasy. The centrifugal force had him pressed against the back of the car... he

wanted off. But the ride went on and on and on as he was held there by a merciless carnival ride operator.

When the ride ended he was completely green.... he staggered off the platform and made it all of twenty-feet before losing his breakfast, much to the delight of his children.

He wrote, "If you are caught in the grip of a diabolical ride that started out fun but turned into an addiction – if you are going in circles, powerless to get off – you know the helpless feeling of losing control of your life. You know what it means to need God's supernatural help to stop the ride so you can escape." (Rich Goebler, Cloquet, MN, PreachingToday.com)

When you find yourself doing what you don't want to do but desperately want to do the right thing, you know you are in for a struggle.

3. Christians are engaged in a life-long struggle

- "No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong." 7:18-19
- "I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another law within my heart. There is another law within me that is at war with my mind." 7:21-23

The June 23, 2008 issue of Newsweek ran a feature article "*The Mythology of Munich*" cited a gathering of the War Cabinet in London to consider an offer from Hitler in which, if Britain would agree to stop fighting, he would let them keep most of their empire.

While many were thinking it expedient to attempt to appease Hitler, Churchill would have none of it. It is said that he contemptuously growled, "If this long island story of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each of us lies choking in his own blood on the ground." Then on June 4, 1938 he spoke those memorable words to the people of Britain, "We shall fight on the beaches... we shall fight on the fields... we shall never surrender." (Evan Thomas, *The Mythology of Munich*, Newsweek, June 23, 2008, p. 23)

Churchill's spunk reminds me of the II Corinthians text where Paul described the spiritual spunk that characterizes the life of the person who persists in the Christian life.

- "We are pressed on every side by troubles, but we are not crushed. We are perplexed, but we don't give up and quit. We are hunted down, but God never abandons us. We get knocked down, but we get

up again and keep on going... so that the life of Christ may be seen in our bodies.” II Corinthians 4:8-10

In this struggle against sin we do not always win but in failure,

4. Christians who sin, are covered by God’s grace

- “Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. 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. So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.” 7:25-8:1

This is actually quite a liberating text. Despite the fact that we are engaged in a struggle to live good and godly lives, we sometimes fail at it. And when we do, God forgives us.

It is liberating in another sense as well. This truth reminds us that in our struggle against sin, we are not trying to qualify for God’s grace, i.e., “for by grace you are saved through faith, not of works.” There is nothing we do that entitles us to God’s grace.

I saw a bumper sticker on a car while driving I-25 this week. It said, “End All Entitlements!” I was curious to see who was driving the car... As a “Boomer” I expected it would be someone from the generation before me. It was not. My second guess was that it would have been a fellow boomer. It was not. It was not even a Gen Xer. It was a Millennial driving a Millennial car with a bumper sticker expressing the Millennial outrage that they will have to work hard to pay a lot of taxes to pay for the care of the rest of us for a long, long time. The Millennial may well feel he is entitled to protect his own entitlements.

I confess, I feel some sense of entitlement when it comes to Social Security and I feel like our investment in our home should be a safe one... we are entitled. The fact is, every generation feels they are entitled. And while one generation wags its finger at another for feeling entitled... every one feels entitled.

Perhaps we are all entitled to receive God’s mercy and grace...

Given the facts that even the most conscientious Christian:

- Sins;
- Sins even when he or she doesn’t want to do so;
- Struggles against sinning and sometimes loses;
- Is ultimately not condemned for sinning;
- Why not just sin away and let God’s mercy and grace do their work?

Paul raised that very issue in Romans 6 where he asked and answered his rhetorical question,

- “Well, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more kindness and forgiveness? Of course not!” Romans 6:1-2

Of course we don't throw up our arms in surrender over our inability to live sinless lives and just succumb to sinful living. But the promise of there being no condemnation to those who are in Christ is a gift given to be received when we need it. Mercy and Grace are not entitlements... in fact, just the opposite. It is unmerited, unearned favor from God. The fact that we are not condemned when we sin is nothing less than a gift given us from God through Jesus Christ.

We are not pigs swimming in the muddy filth of sin and degradation, knowing that when we get good and dirty we can swill at the trough of God's grace. And yet, we are... for in truth, there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus.”

Conclusion

We are to be reminded that we are not alone in our struggle to be devoted followers of Jesus Christ. We are not left alone to fend for ourselves in our desire to be good and godly people.

Ultimately there is another power at work in our lives:

- “God who has begun a good work within us, will continue his work until it is finished on that day when Christ Jesus comes back again.”
Philippians 1:6
- “We are God's masterpieces. He has created us in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he has planned for us long ago.”
Ephesians 2:10
- “As the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like him and reflect his glory more and more.” II Corinthians 3:18
- “God is working in us, giving us the desire to obey him and the power to do what pleases him.” Philippians 2:13

Let me tell you a story.

There was a farmer who was known to be a hard man. He was abusive and foul-mouthed to both man and beast. In time he became friends with a Christian who influenced him to consider becoming a Christian and he did. His life was immediately marked by dramatic change. He cleaned up his language and his behavior. He treated his employees well. He was gentle

and patient with his livestock. And he was loving and considerate toward his wife.

One day he became frustrated while working and fell back into his old ways. He cursed the livestock. He spoke harshly to his hired hand. And then, he caught himself and went to the farmhouse where his wife found him sitting at the kitchen table distraught and broken over his failure.

When she asked him, “What’s the matter?” He blurted out, “I’m no different than I used to be”

“Oh, but you are different than you used to be “ She said. “Then you would never have been sorry or thought you had done wrong. Then you would not be contrite and wanting to be a better person. I see every sign that the Holy Spirit of God is working in you.”

www.fpcjackson.org/rsources/sermons/romans/romansvol11to2/romans25b.htm

No, that guy had not yet arrived but he was on his way. None of us has arrived but we are not who we once were either. That, is a sign of grace.

Saint Augustine said, “The church is not a place where the perfect dwell, but rather a hospital where sick sinners get well.”

The invitation this morning is to simply receive the mercy and grace of God... if you are in a cycle of sin, confess your sin and receive the forgiveness of God in Christ Jesus and open yourself to letting God continue his work of transforming you into the person you will one day be.

And so it is, we don’t let sin define us, we defy it and defy it and defy it!