

"Spiritual Sand Castles"

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¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7: 15-25a)

Through the first seven chapters of Romans, Paul has been making a rhetorical case, building toward one very specific theological conclusion. Stated simply, that conclusion is this: we, as human beings, are a mess. He hints at this ultimate landing point a few times along the way, including when he cites the texts of Psalm 14 and Ecclesiastes 7 to say that “there is no one who is righteous, not even one.”¹ But he rests his case with the passage we read today. The truth is, Paul says of himself, “I do not do what I want. I don’t understand it. I know what the right thing is, but I just cannot seem to do it. There is a conflict deep inside me that steers me consistently away from God.” And it all reaches a crescendo with verse 24: “*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*”

The prosecution rests, your honor. I am a mess.

Over the centuries, few have dared to argue with Paul’s case, probably because we all experience this truth in our own lives. St. Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century bishop from Cappadocia, was one of us. Gregory, accepting and following Paul’s logic, took a very dim view of our efforts to obey God’s law. He thought that anyone who works to do the right thing “ends up running after something that is ungraspable,” and he had some great metaphors for the things we try to do to “be good.” One was that our attempts to follow God’s law were like writing with our finger in the surface of the water.² We make the effort to obey, but when we do, our deed vanishes before it even really exists.

Another image Saint Gregory liked was to compare our efforts to obey God to someone trying to scale a steep, sandy slope. “Even if they look like they are traversing great tracts of ground on foot,” he wrote, “they tire themselves to no avail. Each time the sand slides to the bottom, in such a way that there is a great effort of movement but no progress.”³

But my favorite metaphor that Gregory used was to compare our efforts to be good, to do God’s will, to a child building sand castles. That child may work meticulously to sculpt towers, walls

¹ Romans 3:10

² Masback, Harold E. III, “Homiletical Perspective” on Romans 7:15-25a, in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors. Louisville: Westminster John Knox (2011), p. 209; and <http://www.elopos.net/elpenor/greek-texts/fathers/balthasar-nyssa.asp>, on June 28, 2011.

³ *Id.*

and turrets, but inevitably “the sand collapses, leaving no trace of the things that were made with such painstaking care.”⁴

All of this theological wisdom from Saint Gregory is rooted in Paul's idea from Romans 7. We may try to do the right thing. We may say we are finally going to be the people God wants us to be, the kind of people described in God's law, who care for others -- who show concern for the widow, take in the alien, and forgive those who trespass against us. But the truth is that, despite our good intentions, we never seem to be able to do it. We will to do what is good, but the things we actually do are not good. In the end, all we end up doing is building spiritual sand castles. For one thing, we are working with material that is inherently unreliable -- stuff that crumbles in our hands and doesn't stick all that well. And even when we do manage to get something built, something that seems to be good, we know that the winds and the tides will eventually reach it. Nothing we build in the name of good, or the name of God, ever seems to turn out as we intend.

Sixteen hundred years later, the same ideas preached by Gregory of Nyssa were shared by the theologian Paul Tillich, in a sermon he delivered as part of the Auburn Lectures at Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1958. Taking it a step farther, he wanted to explore in a deeper way this power that lives in our “members,” this “sin that dwells within.” That sin, he said, is

“not a matter of balance sheets between good and bad, [but] a matter of our whole being... of our situation... of our standing in face of the eternal, the source and aim and judge of our being. It is our human predicament, that a power has taken hold over us which is not from us but in us, hated by us, and at the same time, gladly accepted. We are fascinated by it. We play with it. We obey it. But we know that it will destroy us if we are not grasped by another power which resists it and is able to keep it down.”⁵

So what is this concept of sin that lives within us, that holds us back from being the people we want to be? What is sin?

No one helps us, as contemporary Christians, to understand this idea of sin as much as Tillich does. One way to understand sin, he tells us, is to see it as “**separation**.” “To be in the state of sin,” Tillich writes, “is to be in the state of separation.”⁶ As he sees it, we experience sin as separation in three ways: we are separated from one another, we are separated from our true selves, and we are separated from God, whom Tillich calls “the Ground of our Being.”

Because sin separates us in these ways, sin also finds expression as **anxiety**. Because we are estranged from God as the Ground of our Being, because we feel alienated from the source of our meaning, we feel anxious.⁷ In our sin, we experience feelings of insecurity and unrootedness.

In his 1958 sermon, Tillich adds another concept to sin, and that is inevitability. Sin “has a strange quality,” he preached. “It always comes back. You cannot get rid of it. It is as **insistent** as it is ugly.”⁸

All of this combines to lead us to the ultimate experience of sin. In our separation and our anxiety, in our perception that sin is inevitable, we fall into a feeling of **despair**.⁹ This is the ultimate consequence of sin that Paul is describing in Romans 7 -- the idea that, even though we want to do what is right, sin somehow keeps us from doing what is right. The futility of our actions -- the fact that sin seems to trip up and destroy our every effort to be good -- leads us to a place of despair.

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ Paul Tillich, “I Do Not The Good I Want, Sermon On Roman 7:19-20.” Audio Recording. Richmond, Va.: Union Presbyterian Seminary (2010).

⁶ Paul Tillich, “You Are Accepted.” *The Shaking of the Foundations*. New York: Scribner's (1948), p. 154.

⁷ Jeremy Bouma, “The Gospel According to Paul Tillich: On the Human Condition, Sin (2),”

<http://www.jeremybouma.com/the-gospel-according-to-paul-tillich-on-the-human-condition-sin-2>, Aug 24, 2011.

⁸ Tillich, “I Do Not The Good I Want, Sermon On Roman 7:19-20.”

⁹ Tillich, “You are Accepted,” at 160.

This despair may explain why Tillich didn't like to preach about sin. "It is dangerous to preach about sin," he said, "because it may induce us to brood over our sinfulness. Perhaps one should not preach about it all... But sometimes it must be done, in order to remove the distortions which increase sin if the wrong thoughts produce wrong ways of living."¹⁰

This is why it is profitable for us to spend this morning poring over Paul's difficult conclusion in the seventh chapter of Romans. Sin is a difficult and uncomfortable subject, but we should look at it, even if not directly, because we must be aware of the ways that we turn away from God as the Ground of our Being. But it is only profitable to take this look at sin, Tillich continues, if we use it as an opportunity to remind ourselves of the ultimate hope in that Ground. In short, we look at Sin to remind us of Grace.

When I was serving as a pastor in Rocky Mount, one of the leaders in the church was a man named Bob Mauldin. For much of his life, Bob was a prominent North Carolina banker. He finished his career as the CEO of Centura Bank, but Bob began his life in much humbler circumstances just up the road in China Grove. His parents both worked in the textile mill, so Bob and his brother grew up in the mill village. Truth be told, people probably didn't expect much from Bob. He was just a rough and tumble kid from the village. Even so, Bob somehow found his way onto the high school basketball team. In one game, shortly after he made the team, the competition got pretty heated, and Bob ended up fouling an opposing player who had been enjoying a little too much success against the home team. It was a flagrant foul, and it got Bob ejected from the game. To hear Bob tell it, it was one of those fouls that was so bad that there was a possibility that Bob might even be kicked off the team. And he probably would have, had it not been for the principal of the school. When the principal called Bob into his office, Bob knew he was in trouble. He knew that this man had the power to keep him on the team or show him the door.

When Bob sat down across from his desk, the principal spoke to him plainly. "Bob," he said, "I don't want to make you feel like an egg-suckin' dog, but I don't ever want to see anything like that foul ever again." The man kept Bob on the team, and the good news is that he never did see anything like that again. In fact, the next season, that same principal would entrust Bob with a key to the gym so Bob could work on his game on Saturdays and Sundays. Nearing the end of his life, Bob confided in me. "That man," he said, "saw something in me that I hadn't seen in myself. He didn't see a no-good kid from the mill village. He saw potential."

This is the same pivot that Paul makes in Romans. Just as he comes to the conclusion that he is a wretched man, imprisoned by sin in a body of death, he turns immediately to the potential that is made possible through the grace of God. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Paul says, because "There is ... no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."¹¹ When we confront our sin with openness and honesty, we are able to see the full glory of the gift that is given to us. When we confront our sin, we are able to see our estrangement through the lens of blessed reunion. We name our anxiety, but understand it in the reality of peace and comfort. We acknowledge our despair, but only in the say that it is overcome by hope.

And so it is that on this Lord's day we are able to name our sin honestly for what it is: that even our best attempts to be good and faithful are as effective as writing with our fingers in water... that in our striving for righteousness we are wasting our energy trying to scramble up a steep hill of sand... that in our attempts to live up to God's standards we are doing little more than building spiritual sand castles that will inevitably topple down and be washed away. But God does not remind us of these realities to leave us brooding about the power of sin in our lives. God wants us to name our sin, not to make us feel like "egg-suckin' dogs," but to remind us that we have amazing

¹⁰ Tillich, "I Do Not The Good I Want, Sermon On Roman 7:19-20."

¹¹ Romans 7:25a, 8:1

potential that lives not in our own striving, but in a God who has great plans for us... in a God who will never leave us behind.

In response to this kind of grace, all we can say is what Paul wants us to say: *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Amen.