

“This Grace Given: 4) The Struggle of the Self”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

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Text: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate”(Romans 7:15).

This past weekend, when my daughter Lucy was home, I spoke to her about her experience as a teacher at St. Stephen & St. Agnes School in Alexandria, Virginia. One of the opportunities the teachers have at that school is to design some of their own classes within the field that they are teaching. One of the ideas for a course that several of the English teachers came up with was entitled “The Literature of the Enemy.” It was a course designed to help young people understand something about other cultures, particularly those cultures that appear to be opposite to our own. The idea here was to focus on three Middle Eastern Cultures: Iraq, Iran, and the Palestinians. The teachers hoped that by understanding the culture of the enemy the young people would be better prepared to understand the world in which we are living today.

I.

During the Sundays in June we have been looking at St. Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. Now, of course, there is always some danger involved in doing a series of sermon. Given the realities of summer schedules it is sometimes difficult to encourage a congregation to stay with a subject such as the one Paul enumerates in these first chapters of Romans. I was reminded recently of an exchange that took place between the playwright George Bernard Shaw and his friend Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Great Britain. George Bernard Shaw sent Winston Churchill two tickets to the opening night of a play he had just written with a note that read: “I am enclosing two tickets to the first night of my new play; bring a friend, if you have one.” Churchill responded with a note of his own, which read, “Cannot possible attend first night. Will attend second night, if there is one.”

A sermon series is somewhat similar. One hopes there will be some people around for the final ones.

In these first eight chapters of Romans, Paul sets out his explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In Romans 1:16-17 he declares his intent: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel," he writes, "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." He then takes up the notion of the universality of sin (3:21-31). We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. In Romans 5:1-11 Paul declares that because we are justified by our faith in Jesus Christ, we are reconciled to God and have peace with our creator.

In Romans, chapter 7, Paul pursues another key argument the role of the "law" and the "struggle of the self." Oftentimes people see the Apostle Paul as a guilt-ridden Pharisee, who could not keep the Law of Moses. That is not really the case. Paul was actually a very faithful Jew. Listen to his own words: "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law, blameless" (Philippians 3: 4-6). For Paul, the law of God given to Moses was not evil. The Moral Law or the "Ten Commandments" had great validity for Paul, even as it has validity for us. For Paul, however, there was a deeper problem than simply trying to live in light of the Law of Moses.

II.

The main struggle that is going on in Romans, chapter 7, is Paul's struggle with the self. Paul understands that sin is not just something that other people do. It is something that all of us do. When Willing Golding received the Nobel Prize for literature, he was asked what he had learned in a lifetime of studying human nature. He replied, "I have seen that man produces evil as a bee makes honey." That is what the Apostle Paul observes in this section of Romans. "I do not understand my own actions," he confesses. "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Sin dwells within me. I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Romans 7:15, 17, 18).

Reinhold Niebuhr, in an address to a group of Seminary students, once spoke about "The Hazards and Difficulties of the Christian Ministry." Niebuhr understood something that is very important for all of us. Most of us have no trouble seeing the sin that is in other people. We do have trouble seeing the sin in ourselves. Niebuhr observed that the practical difficulty of preaching the gospel is that the gospel often seems least relevant to those for whom it is most relevant. Jesus observed that "the blind, the lame, and the halt" would enter the kingdom of God first. They know that life is broken. Those people however, who are secure in their power, wealth, or position often do not realize that the gospel is not just for the weak, it is for the strong as well.

Calvin Coolidge was a man of very few words. One Sunday, when he was serving as President of the United States, he returned from worship. His wife was suffering from a cold and was not able to attend.

“How was church?” Mrs. Coolidge asked. “Fine,” replied her taciturn husband. “What did the preacher preach about?” his wife asked. “He preached about sin,” replied her husband. “Well,” said Mrs. Coolidge, “What did he say about it?” The President replied, “He said he was against it.”

But being against sin is not just about being against sin in other people. It is also recognizing that sin exists in all of us and none of us are immune from it. One of the greatest problems the church faces is the problem of the self-righteousness of people who are convinced that their cause is righteous and just, and do not understand that there is sin in our best deeds as well as our worst ones.

III.

The key, of course, to the dilemma of the self is found in the witness of God’s grace. The Christian witness is that the last word in every human situation is not only forgiveness and renewal but also, God’s providential working in history by which he makes the wrath of man to praise him and transmutes good out of evil.

Certainly that was true of Paul. He had undergone a great struggle with the self. The good that he wanted to do eluded him and the evil he sought to avoid seemed to attract him. But then he discovered something else. “Where sin abounded,” he wrote, “grace abounded even more.” I don’t think that he wrote those words to be sentimental or even because he was looking for a happy ending. I think he wrote those words because on the road to Damascus he encountered the risen Christ. And he was stuck by grace.

I wonder if any of us fully understands what it means to be stuck by grace. It does not mean that suddenly we believe that God exists, or that Jesus is the savior, or that the Bible contains God’s truth. It does not mean that we are making moral progress. Moral progress may be a fruit of grace, but it is not grace itself.

Grace comes when we realize that our lives are touched by God. Because God has accepted us, we are now free to accept ourselves and to live in ways we had not imagined. One of the most interesting things to me is the way that Romans 7 is linked to Romans 8. In Chapter 7 Paul cries out “Wretched man that I am.” In Romans 8 he hears a word of redemption to his situation. “Therefore there is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.” This is the message that each one of us needs to take home today. None of us are what we should be. We are all sinners. But the good news of God’s grace is that he offers to each of us a new life.

In recent months I have been attracted to the life of William Wilberforce. He was one of the greatest statesmen in Nineteenth Century England. Once when Boswell went to hear him speak before the House of Commons, he observed, “I saw what seemed a mere shrimp of a man mount a table, but as I listened, the shrimp became a whale.

William Wilberforce never enjoyed good health. For twenty years he took opium at the direction of his physicians just to manage the pain in his life. But more than any other Englishman, he stopped the terrible slave trade in Great Britain. And as one stands in Westminster Abbey beside the grave of “The Attorney General of the unprotected and of the

friendless,” one has the feeling that this sensitive, suffering life translated itself into a persistent, unconquerable sympathy with the down-trodden that he would have never experienced had he been in perfect health.

So often we look for God in the pleasant parts of life, but more often than not God appears to us in the wilderness. As we reflect on the great history of men and women who discovered God’s power, it was in the wilderness that they came face to face with God. Moses in the desert; the great Isaiah in Babylon with his exiled people. Job, out of a great calamity in his life saying “I have heard of thee with the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you.” Soft occasions do not bring out the deepest in a person—never. Rather, in those formidable hours when loyalty to the right means the risk of everything, perhaps life itself.

When did Jesus say, “Not my will but Thine be done?” In Gethsemane. When did Luther write, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”? When he was risking his life.

I do not know where this truth hits you, but for myself, I bear this witness. My deepest faith in God comes not in those moments when everything seems to be going my way, but when the “rain blew and beat, and God was there so that the house did not fall.”

Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual. It strikes us when our longed-for perfection continues to escape us.

Sin and grace are strange words but they are not strange things. We find them in the midst of our own struggles when, like Paul, we cry out, “Wretched one that I am” and when we hear God’s word of grace that says to us, “There is now no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus.”

Amen!