

July 19

GOOD INTENTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH  
THIRD IN SERIES ON "THE WAY OUT" OF THE HUMAN DILEMMA  
ROMANS 7:14-25

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A man was church-shopping. He worshipped in a different church each Sunday, trying to find one where he felt comfortable. One Sunday he arrived late at a service and was seated during the Prayer of Confession. The congregation was using the confession we prayed this morning. When they said, "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done," he relaxed, breathed a huge sigh of relief, and said to himself, "At last I have found a church where I fit. These people are my kind of people." I followed a car the other day with this bumper sticker: "I finally got it all together, but forgot where I put it."

The apostle Paul had similar experiences. In our lesson today, Paul lamented, (Romans 7:15) "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." In the last sermon, we looked at Paul's admonition to consider yourself dead to sin, but it is not always that simple. One of the questions I asked in previous sermons is, "Does living in Christ mean we no longer live in the human condition of sin and death?" Paul's experience is ours as well. The Christian stands between good and evil, sharing in both. There is a struggle going on within each of us; there is a struggle going on in our church as in all Christian communities; there is a struggle going on in our country, in society. Life is a battle, a wrestling match, a war. A sign in front of a Baptist Church read, "If you're tired of sin, come in!" Underneath someone had written, "If you ain't, call Freda, 253-0001."

We can identify with Paul's experience, but the words he uses in this passage are not easy to understand. He wrote, 7:21-23, "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members." By "members" Paul is talking about himself. Sometimes he uses the word "flesh" and sometimes the word "body." They are probably synonymous with "members," all meaning himself, his personality. There are two laws at work in him--the law of God in which he delights in his "inmost self" and the law of sin which dwells in himself.

Paul, according to Ernest Best in his commentary, is not saying that a person is divided into a higher nature which wills good and a lower nature or unspiritual nature which drags him/her into evil. It is Paul himself who wills which he will follow. He is not the victim; he makes the choice. We are not victims of sin; in fact we can consider ourselves dead to sin, but the power of sin deludes us and when we obey sin's seduction, we become its slaves. We are living between the ages: the present Old Age which is under the power of sin and death, and the New Age where God reigns. We are in between the times, and when we allow ourselves to slip, sin again is in charge.

It is at those times Paul laments, "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." Good behavior, acts of righteousness, obeying the law of God, require more than intention. He wrote in verse 18, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." Good intentions are not enough. Good intentions do not have the power to overcome the will to obey sin. Good intentions are not enough for us to do what is right.

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But, are good intentions enough to excuse or rationalize behavior? There is a very popular way of thinking today that believes good intentions are enough. "You may not do what you want to do, you may not be able to will to do what is right, but as long as you have good intentions, your behavior is acceptable," they say. In other words, does it not matter what you do as long as you have good intentions? Does it not matter what you do or believe as long as you are sincere? Are good intentions enough? Are you satisfied when your husband says, "Oh, by the way, happy birthday. I intended to get you a present, but something came up." Are his good intentions enough? Is sincerity enough? Is Lt. Colonel Oliver North rightfully considered a national hero now because his intentions were noble? Is his conduct irrelevant? Is the fact that he lied and willfully obeyed unlawful orders, and obeyed them with zest and personal gain, excusable because he had noble intentions? Is our nation a nation of law and order, with due process, or are good intentions enough?

Our society also excuses incompetency. Standards of performance, standards of excellence are lowered or ignored today. How many stores offer competent service? Do you even expect competent service in restaurants anymore? How many purchases do you return because they don't work? We accept mediocrity, inconsistency, failure and mistakes, all in the name of good intentions and sincerity. As a result, good intentions are even compromised to "I'll do just enough to get by."

Most of us don't get overly concerned with this nonchalant approach to standards. But, when you are lying on an operating table, wouldn't you hope the surgeon has some skill as well as good intentions or, worse yet, "I'll do just enough to get by?" When you are flying on a jet, wouldn't you hope that the air controllers and pilots are competent, as well as having good intentions?

Do you realize the United Methodist Church has no mechanism with which to deal with incompetent ministers? They are moved often, every few years, from church to church. We can predict that the church to which he/she is appointed will suffer, begin to decline, and people will be hurt; but we tolerate incompetent ministers. We have procedures to deal with immorality and offensive behavior, but not incompetency. We believe, you see, that good intentions are enough. As long as the minister is sincere.... Incompetent public school teachers are also tolerated. Once a teacher has tenure, it is almost impossible to terminate an ineffective teacher. It takes a principal with courage and careful work to build a case for the termination of an incompetent teacher. Our children lose, but good intentions are acceptable criteria in our society. "I can't do what I want to do," is excused!

But, not for Paul. For Paul, good intentions were not enough. He was baffled by his behavior. Vs. 15 "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." But, even more than baffled, Paul expressed despair. He was bothered and agitated when he failed to live up to his good intentions. He judged himself, not on the basis of intention, but on acts. 7:18, "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." And this discrepancy between what he intended to do and what he actually did made him miserable! "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Paul believed God judged him on the basis, not of intention,

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but of deeds. In 8:8 Paul wrote, "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God." There is judgment for those actions which displease God.

"Who will deliver me?" he cried. We rationalize and excuse, but Paul cried for deliverance. The traditional Jewish answer was the law. If you study God's law, if you use your wisdom and reason, the evil impulse can be defeated. But Paul knew that the law in itself was not enough. Paul knew that wisdom in itself was not enough. He cried in 7:21, "I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand." Paul knew that resolution was not enough. Setting resolutions, resolving, willing, was not enough! 7:18, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it." Good intentions are not enough. So, "Who will deliver me?" he cried! "Wretched man that I am!"

Christians are called to a higher standard than nonbelievers. The Interpreter's Bible put it this way, (pg. 482) "Christians are expected to reach a much more exacting standard than that unheroic acceptance of conventions which passes for morality in the world at large...Our judgments of other people, our estimate of money and of all the other objects of man's perennial pursuit, our scale of objectives and the ambitions we cherish---all these things are decisively affected by the outlook which governs our approach to them...Paul saw the Christian's moral life as an unremitting struggle with evil forces." And when we fail, good intentions are not enough, for we are judged by those higher standards, regardless of good intentions and sincerity. Therefore, the cry of all of us should be, along with Paul, "Who will deliver me?"

The exciting concept of this sermon series is: there is a way out of the human dilemma of sin and death. God has acted in Christ to overcome the world and bring us out of the human condition. Paul exclaimed in 7:25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" This would be a cold, stark, hopeless gospel if it weren't for God's act on our behalf. God reaches out to us, to us who are caught in the Old Age. God reaches out and offers forgiveness and empowerment.

Praise God! We can be forgiven. When our good intentions fail us, and we don't do what is right and what we want to do, there is forgiveness, restitution, and reconciliation. God offers second, third, seventy times seven chances. But forgiveness in itself is not enough, and this is where our culture gets mixed up. Forgiveness in itself becomes excusing. An air controller makes a mistake and two planes collide. Do we forgive him and say, "Too bad, but you are only human. After all, you had good intentions." We might even rationalize his mistake and say, "You must have been tired." Is that excuse adequate? No, forgiveness in itself is not enough.

Forgiveness in the gospel includes the admonition, "Go and sin no more." And, Jesus gave, not only the admonition, but the instruction, the means and the power to sin no more. In modern terminology and experience this might mean that we forgive the air controller, but we also send him back for more training, or give him more experience as an apprentice, or change the system so that not too much is expected of one person, or change the procedures to allow for more rest. Or, forgiveness and empowerment might mean, "You might be better suited at another profession, and we'll help you choose one and prepare for it."

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Frank and Elizabeth Morris of Hopkinsville, Kentucky, dedicated their lives to punishing the drunk driver who had killed their only child. Driven by hatred, they monitored his every court appearance, followed him to the county jail to make sure he served his weekend sentence, and watched his apartment to try to catch him violating his probation. "We wanted him in prison," Elizabeth said. "We wanted him dead." Then, they realized they were not finding satisfaction through revenge. Their biblical training and their Christian ideals broke through and they decided to forgive him, and not only forgive him, but try to rebuild his life along with their own. They invited him to dinner. They drove him to church twice a week. Now, as a result of not only their forgiveness but their love and caring, the 26-year-old drunk driver joined their church, quit drinking and has become an active lecturer for MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers.

Empowerment is the critical factor in forgiveness. Forgiveness in itself becomes excusing. Forgiveness with empowerment offers a new chance. God doesn't leave you just forgiven in order for you to repeat. God forgives you and enables you, empowers you, to find "THE WAY OUT" of the human dilemma, where good intentions are not enough. How does God empower you? Through the Holy Spirit...Continued next week.