

Message: “The Things You Do (& Don’t Do)”

I invite you to join me in an exercise today. Take a deep breath. Relax. Please close your eyes. Now, think about your favorite thing to eat. Picture it in your mind. Imagine how it smells and tastes. Savor each bite as you enjoy it. Ummm. Now, open your eyes.

How many of you want to go and eat the dish? Most, if not all of us. Me, too. This shows the power of our imagination, our desire.

Okay, let’s do it again, but in a different way. Take a deep breath. Relax. Please close your eyes. I’m going to say something to you. I want you to hear it with an open heart and mind. Open yourself to the first thought or image which comes to mind. Ready?

“Don’t envy your neighbor.”

What came to your mind? It may have been your neighbor’s new car, or their well-groomed yard or their house or furniture or clothes or tech or even their spouse or family. We often admire and desire what we don’t have, particularly when we see someone nearby who has it. Knowing our life can change for the better can have a good influence on us. It can motivate us to change our lives for the better. But it can also have a negative influence.

Some of you may remember the song “You Do Something To Me.” It was written by Cole Porter in 1931. Frank Sinatra, Sinead O’Connor, Ella Fitzgerald and others made it famous. The lyrics go this way:

“You do something to me
Something that simply mystifies me
Tell me, why should it be?
You have the pow'r to hypnotize me
Let me live 'neath your spell
Do do that voodoo that you do so well
For you do something to me
That nobody else can do!
If I seem to stray
When you talk this way

It's because I'm wond'ring
What I ought to say
I could cry 'Please don't!'
But believe I won't
For when you talk to me
Such a soothing feeling goes through me"¹

The influence of desire on our soul, our well-being is powerful.

And outside influences often have a powerful effect on us as well. This leads to a tension between good and bad, righteousness and selfishness, abundance and scarcity in our inner being. The biblical word for this state: temptation.

We're tempted by our own, selfish desires and by the things other people, groups and entities tell us we deserve and should want. We all know something about temptation. As Jesus' followers, we know what to do when we're tempted. First, we turn to God's Word, the Bible. We look for a rule or commandment. We look for answers. We look for help with our temptations. And what do we find? Nada, nothing. The words on the page - the rules, don't take away our temptation.

Don't get me wrong. God's Word is helpful. We do respond. Yet when we read or hear the rules, we often feel a desire to do the opposite. For example, our exercise used "*Don't envy your neighbor,*" the tenth commandment (Exodus 20:17). And, if you're like me (& honest with yourself), a selfish image came to mind. Even though we know the law is for our own good, we find ourselves imagining and desiring something which isn't healthy for us. I'm not saying having a new car or a well-groomed yard or a different life is bad. What I am saying is the selfish desire for something we know we don't (& maybe can't) have is unhealthy for us. And, strangely, God's rules don't help us.

Welcome to the law of sin. And welcome to the wonderful, confusing world of Pauline theology. Many of us have read the scripture passage. I'm sure you've heard sermons on it. We may have studied it on our own or with others. And yet it still confuses us. It still confuses me.

¹ <https://genius.com/Cole-porter-you-do-something-to-me-lyrics>

I believe Paul is identifying what lies at the heart of our human condition. We're immersed in unhealthy attitudes and behaviors from the moment we're born until the moment we die. We've learned "me-first" from the time we were infants. This isn't always malicious. Part of it is survival instincts. Unless we cry or make a scene, we don't have our needs met by those who have the power or influence to do so.

There are no surprises here. Paul describes the situation – twice. The Message puts Paul's words this way, *"What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious God's command is necessary.*

But I need something more! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't do it. I decide to do good, but I don't really do it. I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

It happens so regularly it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's obvious not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge" (vv15-23).

Is it any wonder Paul concludes with a cry of anguish, *"Oh woe, what a wretched person I am!"* or as The Message says, *"I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me?"* (v24, MSG)?

We need help. The question is "what kind of help?" Some read this scripture and see a description of our natural state. We were born this way, corrupted by sin. Some read this scripture and see learned behavior. We were born good but were taught sinful ways by those who raised us. Some read this scripture and see it as an illustration of the way moral influencers affect our lives. We're shaped by the moral lessons we learn throughout life.

No matter how we read and interpret scripture, it doesn't change the frustration we feel when we're confronted by our own human nature, the immoralities we encounter each day. There's a perfect tension between what we want to do – our will to do the right thing, to do good, and the rebellious, adverse, sinful attitudes and actions we find ourselves doing.

We feel powerless AND vulnerable in the face of this internal and external conflict. This is saying something! We may be asking, "Who's to blame?" Or "How is God helping us?" And so we turn to the Bible for help. Paul examines the role of the Law, the five books of Moses, where we find the ten commandments and other rules drawn up by the priests. And yet, reading the Law often doesn't help. In fact, it can make our sense of helplessness or frustration higher.

Why is the Law unable to help? This is a whole other sermon. Let me offer a thumbnail sketch. Have you heard the phrase "the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law"? We may be following the letter of the law, thinking we're doing good and being virtuous when we're really violating God's will, what the Spirit intends.

Elliot offered a good example in our Wednesday Bible study.

Suppose someone comes to me says, "We need your help. Can you come help us feed some people? And perhaps you could donate to the cause?" However, I've made plans to go out and have an expensive meal with friends. So I tell the person, "I'm sorry, I can't help at this time." I could have gone with my friends and had a less expensive meal AFTER I helped feed the hungry people, giving at least a small gift to help. And I could have invited my friends to come along. But I didn't.

I don't tell you this story to shame you or make you feel guilty.

It's an illustration of the sin of commission – I was selfish, and the sin of omission – I didn't help those in need even though I could have.

The reality is God's instructions often intersect. And so, discerning God's will, the good thing to do, the way of love, is often challenging. We can be devoted, even zealous in our principles, only to realize evil has used the letter of God's Law to violate the spirit of God's Law.

Paul understood this very well. He was involved in persecuting Jesus' followers for years, even indirectly involved in the deaths of some,

including Stephen. The first words he heard when he encountered the risen Christ were, “*Why are you harassing me?*” (Acts 9:4). Paul’s zeal to uphold the third commandment, “*You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain*” led him to oppress Jesus’ followers to the point of death, violating the sixth commandment, “*You shall not kill*” (Exodus 20:7,13).

Personally, I believe this difficulty lies at the heart of many of the unhealthy, unhelpful and false interpretations of how we are to be as God’s children that we see in our world today. We can do harm to people under the guise of “knowing what’s best for them.” At the end of the day, the only person we make decisions for is ourselves. And we have enough sin in our lives to wrestle with.

Also, Paul isn’t interested in the “blame game.” I believe he’s giving us insight into our human nature, the selfish behavior we’ve learned from birth. Sadly, our will isn’t strong enough to rule over us every minute of the day. Our minds and bodies can fall into unhealthy patterns. Like the person who is addicted to drugs or alcohol, we are all addicted to sin.

And, just like Paul, we don’t understand why. This is frustrating. Eventually, we come to the end of our rope. And when we do, we discover something vitally important: we can’t fix the problem. We can’t save ourselves. We need a higher power, a gracious, almighty God to save us. I believe this is the key lesson.

Paul offers us a breath of fresh air at the end. He said, “*The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does [take charge]. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different*” (v25, MSG).

The answer is found in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Please return next Sunday and, in two weeks, we will take up the second half of Paul’s lesson. There is something called “holy discontent.” We’re probably feeling it right now. There is hope and there is an answer for the discontent we feel.

So I invite you to read this scripture at home. Join us for Bible study. Pray for grace and guidance. God has a plan. And you are part of it. To God be the glory!

Let us pray ...

“Jesus, gentle and humble of heart, you visit every human being to reveal God’s love.

Jesus, goodness without end, you liberate captives, you pardon our sins.

Jesus, our rest and our refuge, your yoke is easy and your burden light.

Jesus, sent by God, you heal our blindness.

Jesus, living bread, you nourish our hearts by your words.

Jesus, you came to light a fire on the earth.

Jesus, risen from the dead, you share with us your joy.

Jesus, you are the Way, the Truth and the Life.”²

In his name we pray. Amen.

² https://www.taize.fr/en_article5806.html

Romans 7:15-25 (CEB)

I don't know what I'm doing, because I don't do what I want to do. Instead, I do the thing that I hate. But if I'm doing the thing that I don't want to do, I'm agreeing that the Law is right. But now I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it's sin that lives in me. I know that good doesn't live in me - that is, in my body. The desire to do good is inside of me, but I can't do it. I don't do the good that I want to do, but I do the evil that I don't want to do. But if I do the very thing that I don't want to do, then I'm not the one doing it anymore. Instead, it is sin that lives in me that is doing it.

So I find that, as a rule, when I want to do what is good, evil is right there with me. I gladly agree with the Law on the inside, but I see a different law at work in my body. It wages a war against the law of my mind and takes me prisoner with the law of sin that is in my body. I'm a miserable human being. Who will deliver me from this dead corpse? Thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then I'm a slave to God's Law in my mind, but I'm a slave to sin's law in my body.