

Reflection on the Scripture: Romans 7:15-25

[[The video of the reflection.](#)]

When we start out as kids, sin involves cookies. Or smacking little brothers. There might possibly be something about mouthing off to Sunday School teachers in there. Or maybe that's just me. But we grow up and somehow our sins don't grow with us. Other people's sins, of course, they not only grow up – they flourish. They're easy to identify and point to and call out, even if we're not calling them out to their faces. But our own sins? They stay in the cookie jar.

And then we hear the reading from Romans, *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). And we all recognize that moment. We all have a list of doing things we know we shouldn't do and we do anyways. Or a list of things we don't do but we know we should do. And none of us are surprised that those lists exist. So, we just nod and give a big “amen” to Brother Paul.

But somehow that lack of surprise, that expectation that we're going to do stuff that we don't really mean to do, doesn't connect to the concept of sin, perhaps because our concept of sin is stuck at the Nutter Butter level.

Look at what Paul is arguing. Paul was a Pharisee, someone who felt salvation for individuals and for the state of Israel was going to come by scrupulous obedience to the Law. Not the rules and regulations of the Roman emperor, but the Law that God have given the Jews. Paul wasn't ashamed of that belief, he was proud of it, saying that there had been no one better than him at following it (Philippians 3:5-6). This gift of God, this way for human beings to live together and smooth the path for the arrival of the kingdom, was something good in Paul's life. And yet, in following it, it had led him to persecute the body of Christ. This unalloyed good and holy thing in Paul's life had led Paul to the greatest sin he could imagine committing.¹ Not because the Law was defective, but because sin has the power to twist the good gifts of God, even the Law, to evil ends.² And sin lives in us. There's no way to understand Paul's argument if we insist on keeping our understanding of sin limited to “Only eat cookies with permission.”

When you see me coming out of Hannaford's these days, I'm flushed and longing to wipe my sweaty face on my t-shirt. My reading glasses are still perched on my nose, usually not steamed up because they're in front of the top edge of my mask. And the mask itself has a perfect circle of sweat spreading from the tip of my nose. I will keep that wretched mask on until I am in my car. Not because I

¹ Ted A. Smith, “Proper 9, Theological Perspective, Romans 7:15-25a” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 208.

² Smith, 210.

love my neighbors. Not because I want to keep them safe. But because I refuse to be one of those people who isn't wearing a mask. I have absolutely turned wearing a mask into something political. That wasn't the case when I put the mask in the car or when I put it on before going into the grocery. I have taken something that is a good gift, that peril of the Covid-19 pandemic can be reduced by people wearing masks, and turned it into something evil, a way of separating me from "them," whomever "they" are. That is sin, and it rises out of me, without my intention, because of pride and anger and stubbornness. And because wearing a mask is something I can do to help limit the transmission of this disease. Sin gets tangled up in good ethical actions.

Be clear about what Paul is arguing. Human knowledge is inadequate. Knowing what the right thing to do isn't enough. Human resolution is inadequate. Deciding to do the right thing isn't enough. Human diagnosis is inadequate. Knowing what goes wrong isn't enough.³ Even at the top of our game, even when we drawing on the best of our abilities, we are going to fail. That's how powerful sin is in this world. We can pretend that's not the case, but we aren't fooling anyone. *Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* (Romans 7:24). And how depressing is that? We are going to fail and then we're going to die? Why even bother?

It's not the human failure Paul is pointing out in this passage, where we so want to say "amen, Brother Paul." If we just needed to shore up our resolution and improve our will power, Christ would be reduced to some kind of fabulous life coach.⁴ There is a gap between our human abilities and God's call. It's a gap we can never close. But God can. Christ can. Christ has. That's the good news, the gospel that Paul is preaching. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." The burdens don't get less heavy. We don't get more efficient at carrying heavy burdens. We accept the deliverance that Christ offers.

When we put down our inadequate Nutter Butter concept of sin and accept that it is a truly powerful force that we are not capable of defeating in all cases, then we can also truly accept Christ's deliverance from that sin. We're never going to muscle our way through this world, relying only on ourselves and our own ability to stick with the straight and narrow. Because sin is strong enough to turn even the Law that God gave us into a way of doing evil in this world. The longer we think of sin as the answer to a decision tree of right and wrong, the longer we are going to be crying *Wretched one that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* (Romans 7:24). Because the answer is right there, waiting for us when

³ Barclay, 100.

⁴ Smith, 210.

we finally put down the fantasy that we can manage a path around sin the way we manage a path around a 3:00pm Nutter Butter when we're just bored. *Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!* (Romans 7:25).