

I Couldn't Help Myself
July 3, 2011 Proper 9A
Romans 7:15-25
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Not long ago Larry went to see his doctor. He found out that he was borderline diabetic. With a stern look in her eye, the doctor told him: “Larry, if you don’t watch what you eat and get more regular exercise, I’m going to have to put you on medication.”

Larry glumly headed home and told his wife about it. She promised to help. She’d stop cooking with so many carbs and no longer bake her tempting chocolate chip cookies. That’d be a start. But the real problem was likely to be Larry himself. He was one of those persons who, late at night, when his wife wasn’t around to spot him, raided the refrigerator. He often made a large, creamy chocolate sundae—mmm—with mounds of whipped cream, peanuts, and a maraschino cherry on top.

So, want to guess what Larry did the very night he heard the news from his doctor? He made one of those creamy chocolate sundaes. He knew better, but he said *he couldn’t help himself*. “What will it hurt if I eat just one more?” he rationalized. Well, that was three weeks ago. Larry has been indulging his sweet tooth every night since. He keeps promising that tonight will be the last night. But so far, he can’t seem to break the habit.

Can anybody here relate to Larry? Whether we’re talking about chocolate sundaes or something far more insidious, it’s as if a power comes over us and *we can’t help ourselves*. At such times, the word *no* might be the most difficult word in the English language. We want what we want. And the word *no* always runs contrary to our wants and desires.

The apostle Paul appears to be struggling with this too. With remarkable honesty, he writes in his letter to the Romans: “I don’t understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate.” It’s as if *Paul can’t help himself*. There’s a gap—sometimes a large gap—between *knowing* what is right and actually *doing* it.

I would guess that all of us have spent some time in Paul’s shoes. We do lots of dumb stuff and we often don’t understand why. We get frustrated with ourselves. And so we make promises:

I’m going to stop yelling at the kids so much.
I’m going to quit telling little white lies.
I’m going to stop spreading gossip.

*This is my last drink. I mean it.
I'm going to quit looking at pornography on the Internet.
I'm going to quit charging things on my credit card.
I'm going to stop being so judgmental.*

I'm convinced that when we make these promises, we mean them. We intend to say *no*. But a day or two goes by—or a week or two—and suddenly we're back to the same old behavior. Why is that? Are we basically weak people? No backbone? No character?

I suspect that therapists would attribute our actions to a complex set of factors: the way we were raised, the family system we're living in, our level of self esteem, the payback we get from the choices we make. Paul, on the other hand, gives a theological answer for our behavior. He blames it on sin—sin with a capital “S.” He says that God's commandments for us are good. But because of Sin—which Paul sees as a dark, seductive force inside of us—we often find ourselves at odds with God and with each other. Sin, it seems, is a little like a “wet paint” sign. A part of us just wants to touch it.

So, if Sin is the problem, does that mean you and I are *not* to blame? Back in the 70's, comedian Flip Wilson suggested as much. Wilson was famous for his comedic routines. In one of his regular bits, he dressed up as a woman named Geraldine. Geraldine wore designer clothes and chartreuse stockings. Her hair was always perfect. And when she got into trouble, she would bat her big brown eyes and say, “The devil made me do it.”

Don't we still say that, in one form or another: *Officer, I couldn't help myself; I was preoccupied with work. Dear, I couldn't help myself; you were being totally unreasonable. Pastor Vern, I couldn't help myself; something just came over me.* The devil made me do it! Sin with a capital “S” is to blame, right? Not quite. Paul doesn't let us off the hook that easily. Sin may be a contributing factor, but *we* have given it a definite foothold by the choices we make. It's as if we've been putting up “wet paint” signs all over our lives.

So what's the answer? Try a little harder? Check things out with Dr. Phil? Buy the latest self-help book? The fact of the matter is, when it comes to our struggle with Sin, there's no such thing as a quick fix. Regardless of what the magazines at the check-out stand promise, there's no easy way to bridge the gap between *knowing* and *doing*.

When Paul is at his lowest, he says to the effect: “I've tried everything. Nothing seems to work. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one that can do anything for me?” I can imagine the Apostle putting his pen down and breathing a heavy sigh. Then finally he answers

his own question, and with more hopefulness than you might imagine: “Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Thank God, the vicious cycle of trying harder and falling further is broken by faith in Jesus.”

So what does faith in Jesus do for us? In the next chapter of Romans, Paul sets forth some possibilities. *The Message* paraphrase puts it like this: “Those who enter into Christ...no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a... lifetime of...tyranny at the hands of sin and death.” Paul goes on: “Those who trust God’s actions in them find that God’s Spirit is in them—living and breathing God!”

That, my friends, is good news. The Holy Spirit comes to set us free. The Spirit comes to give us power. The Spirit comes to give us the strength we need to say *no*. When *we can’t help ourselves*, the Spirit is there to help...to help us not yell at our children, to stop telling little white lies, to quit spreading gossip, to not take that drink, to quit watching pornography, to stop running up the credit cards, to quit being so judgmental. And get this: the Spirit’s help is available every day of our lives. We just need to ask for it.

So, considering the fact that life-transforming power is available, how’s it going in your struggle against Sin? Better some days than others? Me too. Despite all the help, despite all my good intentions, I remain a sinner. I say and do things I don’t want to do with alarming regularity. I think Martin Luther said it best: we are *simul justus et peccator*, which is Latin for, “we are at the same time saint and sinner.” Our condition is a paradox. We are completely forgiven in Jesus Christ *and* we are completely sold out to sin. Both are true, all the time. Like it or not, we’re going to struggle with Sin until the day we die.

You know, in a strange sort of way, maybe that’s okay. Why? Not because Sin is okay, but because one of the marks of Christian maturity is an honest awareness of who we are. As we own up to our personal struggles, something important happens to us. We realize our need for daily repentance; we realize our need for regular trips to the communion table; we realize our need to not be so hard on ourselves and to not be so hard on each other. And, at the heart of it, we realize our need for Christ...every day.

In some ways, being a Christian is a little like being a part of Alcoholics Anonymous. Your drinking is out of control. You’re at the end of your rope. You start going to meetings. With the help of a Higher Power, you promise to give up your drinking. As you do, you

become a *recovering* alcoholic. But you're still an alcoholic. There's no magic fix. If you want to stay on the wagon, you're going to need to work the program...every day for the rest of your life.

That sounds like discipleship to me. God has claimed you in Jesus. Still your behavior is sometimes out of control. You might even get to the end of your rope. With the prompting of the Spirit, you recommit your life to Jesus. You're a *recovering* sinner, but you're still a sinner. There's no magic fix. If you want to stay on course, you're going to need to work the program...to pray and worship and read the Bible and serve others and surround yourself with spiritual friends...every day for the rest of your life.

My friends, you are in the process of being transformed. Because of what God has done for you in Jesus, you don't have to live under a low-lying black cloud. No, there's a new power in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ is blowing like a strong wind in your life. That doesn't mean your choices are going to be easy. But here's the truth: *every* day with Jesus is better than *any* day without him. With Jesus at your side, perhaps your *knowing* and your *doing* can move a little closer together. With Jesus at your side, it might just be that the next time Sin comes knocking, you *can* help yourself. Thank God!