

## **“What is sin? What is evil?”**

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July 5, 2020

Text: Romans 7:15-25a

I’ve been making some farewell visits during the last couple of weeks. It’s been wonderful to see many of you. During one call, we sipped tea on the deck and talked about the work that I was doing with the General Assembly, and the question came up, “Why are pastors unfaithful to their spouses? Why do they cheat?” It’s a great question. Just as the #metoo movement has been hitting our larger society, it has sparked a #churchtoo movement. People have been revealing how clergy have victimized them.

In so many ways, it doesn’t make sense. Having an affair is the height of hypocrisy for a pastor, and often it marks the end of their professional career. Ministers know what sort of damage they can do to people—families, marriages, and churches can be destroyed. So why do pastors do it?

One reason is that the job attracts narcissists, and sometimes a pastor’s ego gets so big, that it needs continued feeding. They become so dependent on the adoration of people, that if they cannot get enough of it. And if they go too long without a constant stream of praise, they will try to fill that void in unhealthy ways.

Or, there’s the flip side of the same coin: when a pastor’s ego isn’t healthy enough. Anyone who has spent more than five minutes in a church knows that there is no way to keep everyone happy. And if you’re a caring, people-pleaser, like so many clergy are, the complaints become overwhelming. They try so hard to make sure that people are content, that they over-extend themselves emotionally and physically, and become burnt-out. People will feel so beaten down by the demands of ministry, they eat too much or drink too much. So much energy flows outward that they stop taking care of themselves. Then, then when the criticism comes rolling in, their psychological immune system is down. They will feel flattened by the constant barrage of complaints. Then, when the opportunity to find a bit of joy in their lives arises, they go for it. Pastors are like everyone else.

The problem is not a new one. It reminds me of the text that Nancy read. Paul writes to the church in Rome. The whole letter is full of fascinating theology. And in this bit, we get a confession from Paul. He is wrestling with sin. He wants to do what’s right in his mind and spirit, but his body is leading him astray. We don’t know if Paul is having an affair, but he has an ongoing struggle. Sometimes he calls it a thorn in his flesh. In Romans, Paul equates sin with his flesh, and he explains how he continually wars with his body. It is a powerful image.

However, I want to propose this morning that there are different ways to understand our struggle with sin, and I’m not sure that Paul’s framing is the most helpful for everyone.

I believe that we can play with and bend Paul’s theology, because he does that himself. You see, Paul is highly educated, and he is a master at working within the cultural and philosophical

framework of his audience. For instance, one time, he stands on Mars Hill in Athens, Greece. He looks around and sees that there are statues of all different sorts of gods. And when he notices a statue to an unknown god, he jumps at the chance to introduce the crowd to an unknown God named Jesus Christ. It's a bold and fascinating rhetorical move. Paul is pragmatic and constantly makes sure that Christianity dances with culture.

In another major struggle in these early days of Christianity, the disciples are fighting over whether they should require circumcision for adult men. Paul says no. And I'm pretty sure Paul saves Christianity at that point, because adult circumcision without anesthetic is way too high of a membership bar.

Sometimes it can be frustrating, because Paul will say one thing to one group and contradict himself with another group. For instance, Paul wrote the most liberating things about women and slaves in one letter, and then he upholds the systems of oppression with another letter. And I believe that in the same pragmatic fashion, Paul is using framework of Platonic dualism in this letter to the Romans.

There was an idea in ancient Greece and Rome that stated that the flesh is bad and the spirit is good. Plato believed that the body was a cage for the soul. That the soul was lasting, while the body was ephemeral. So, Paul adopted these categories and used them in his own understandings of sin and evil.

This idea is powerful for some people. I'm thinking of my father, who was disabled with a neurological disorder, and every year of his life he lost more of his mobility. His idea of heaven was that he would finally be able to shed his body, that cage that kept him bound and in so much pain. My father loved this Platonic notion for understandable reasons.

But I don't think that the dualism--the idea that the spirit is good and the body is bad--is healthy for everyone. It goes against the truth of creation. When God created us, God proclaimed us good. We are made in God's image and our whole bodies have been designed for pleasure. As an example, many of you have told me that the most difficult thing about this pandemic is that we cannot hug one another. It feels wonderful to hold flesh and be held, because our very skin has been created for enjoyment. We go to a yoga class and learning how to stretch our bodies feels wonderful. We know that burst of endorphins after we exercise. God created those happy chemicals! From the top of our head to the bottom of our toes, our flesh has been designed for delight. Our tiny tongue, one little muscle can give us a lifetime of enjoyment. I believe that is God's design--that we were created to have abundant lives.

I also think that if Christians do not find healthy ways to enjoy our abundance, we will find unhealthy ways. I'm going back to my work with pastors. Sometimes pastors get in trouble when they try to ignore the needs of their bodies. That's because we're human. We might experience this as parents. We get angry with our children when we're sleep deprived and hungry. It's because we're not taking care of ourselves. I believe our spirits and bodies are not at war with one another; they are interconnected. Eating well, exercising, sleeping, resting—taking care of our bodies will help our spirits.

So Paul's thinking goes against our stories of creation. It seems to contradict Jesus' notion of an abundant life. And, when it's taken to extremes, it can be abusive. In First Corinthians, Paul talks about punishing his body daily. We don't know if he is speaking metaphorically, but we do know that many religious people took his words literally, and they have beaten themselves in imitation. It makes me worry. In our society, women starve themselves. Soldiers and athletes will work themselves to death. We find many ways to abuse our bodies. I think that when we imagine our own bodies as bad or evil, as something to be overcome, we can begin to imagine other bodies as bad or evil. And we have used terrible methods to curb the flesh. Children were beaten, slaves were whipped, prisoners were tortured—all sorts of abuse has happened in our history in order to curb the flesh. Right now, we have a movement in our country, declaring that black bodies matter. It is to combat that long history of abuse.

So, if you're like me, and you're uncomfortable with Paul's notion of sin, and warring against our own bodies, then how can we understand sin? I mean, most of us have an area in our lives where we tend to do those things that we wish we wouldn't do. Are we at war with our flesh?

Julian of Norwich gives us another way of thinking about sin. Julian agrees with Genesis. She says that everything that God has created is good. That includes us. We are children of God, created in God's image. We are good. Our flesh is good.

Sin, on the other hand, has no substance. She says that she **certain that sin nothing, and all those who love and delight in and follow sin will deliberately end in [sin]. They will be brought to nothing with [sin] and eternally confounded.**

Sin and evil have not been created by God. Sin is the absence of God. When we sin, we become estranged from God. We can recognize sin, because it's that thing that annihilates us. It's what causes destruction. When headache and nausea greet us after a night of bingeing. When tears follow empty sex. When shame floods us after an unfaithful relationship. When guilt overtakes us after we say something cruel to our child. When stomach acid eats up our gut after we betray a friend. When a hungry greed leads us empty and wanting even more. All of those things that lead us to destruction are sin.

To oversimplify, Paul sees our flesh as evil, something with which we will eternally fight. Julian, on the other hand, lifts up the beautiful story of creation and says that we are good. Sin has no substance, and it is those things that work to destroy our being.

So what do you think? What are the things that we wrestle with? What brings destruction in our lives? And how can we change? If we have been unable to change while imagining our flesh as evil, perhaps we need a different view of sin and the flesh that makes sense in our culture. Perhaps we need to affirm that our bodies are good, full of abundance, and when we take care of them, our spirits flourish as well.

May we go out, with the full knowledge of the love of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.