

ARE YOU OK WITH GOD?  
Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67  
Psalm 45:10-17  
Romans 7:15-25a  
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

I know this is summer, the time when we are supposed to relax, enjoy the beauty of God's creation, maybe get in an extra round of golf or game of tennis, so I apologize in advance for what I am about to ask you because it is not a comfortable question. But, here goes, "Have you ever done something that you knew was wrong?" You don't have to raise your hand if you have. I just want you to remember a time when you did something that was bad or hurtful, even though you knew that what you were doing was wrong, and remember how you felt.

Now I want to tell you about a time when I did something that I knew was wrong. It happened when I was 5 or 6 or 7. I don't remember exactly. My mother had arranged a play date for me with the daughter of a friend of hers. The other girl was named Susan. I went to the same school as Susan, so I knew who she was, but I had never spent any time with her, because I thought she was ugly. Now it is embarrassing to have to say that because I hope I have learned that there are many interesting, smart, kind, fun people who are not physically attractive. Then, however, I judged Susan by how she looked.

The day for the play date came and my mother sent me off toward Susan's house. We were to meet halfway and then come back to my house to play. We met up and the conversation began. It turned out neither of us had sisters or brothers and that both of us wished we did. We talked a little more and then Susan said one of the most generous, kind, and loving things anyone has ever said to me. "I wish," she said, "that we could be twin sisters." Even though our new friendship was chugging along pretty well, at that point I was horrified as I imagined being her twin. Before I even knew what I was saying, out popped my response, "Me too, as long as I didn't look like you."

As soon as I said it, I knew it was wrong. Even while I was saying it, I knew it was hurtful and cruel. Susan stopped, looked at me, then bursting into tears, she turned and ran home. All these years later, I think I could locate the exact spot where it happened. I can see the buckled sidewalk and the big maple tree that shaded the spot where we stood. I can still hear the unnatural silence that seemed to surround us, as if all of nature were shocked by what I had done. I felt horrible. I tried to apologize, to explain myself, to try to repair the mess, but Susan was gone.

When I arrived home, my mother wanted to know where Susan was. "She changed her mind," I said. "She didn't want to come over." That at least was the truth. Then came the question I dreaded, "Why?" And now the lie, "I don't know."

I don't recall who called whom, but the mothers quickly figured out what had happened and I was caught in the evil web of my own making. I was marched to Susan's house and made to confront the harm I had done. I apologized profusely and asked, begged Susan to come play. I imagine I thought I would be protected by her presence, that my punishment would at least be delayed. But the hurt was too great, the trust shattered and she refused. I went home alone to face whatever my mother thought I

deserved. It's funny that I don't remember the punishment even though then I feared it, probably because I knew I had earned it. It is the look on Susan's face I can recall with utter clarity, that and my own regret.

Paul, who wrote the letter to the Romans, would understand. Did you find your head spinning with all the ways he talked about doing the wrong thing even when he knew it was wrong, about knowing what was right but not doing it? Did it hit you that what he wrote strikes close to home? Paul wrote other passages that are better known, better loved and more beautiful, but these verses are ones with which we are most likely to identify. Here he spells out the human condition. "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate."<sup>i</sup> This is us, isn't it? Paul is speaking for us all in laying out that dilemma of sin. We know what is right but fail to do it or do it for the wrong reason or do just the opposite.

Paul, however, pushes the problem of not being able to do what is right a step further. He tells us the dilemma is not only our failure to do the good, to obey God's law. The tension is present even when the law is obeyed, even when the commandments are kept. And here is why. If we keep the law, do what is good because we want to be on God's good side, then our goodness becomes a rigid form of self-protection and extortion, a way of trying to force God to reward us. Suppose I had played nicely with Susan because I knew my mother expected that of me. At the end of the day I could in essence, say to her, "See I did everything you said perfectly. You must reward me." Doing what was expected then would have nothing to do with loving responsiveness to my mother or to Susan. In fact, the rule, the law is corrupted and used to shut down or limit loving relationships.

We are left to struggle with a seemingly impossible situation. God gave us the law as instruction on what is good and what is wrong, what pleases God and what does not. The law is holy and just and good and a blessing from God. It gives us a chance to know God and to do God's will. The mind recognizes this goodness, but heart still acts out of the belief that we can save ourselves from punishment by behaving, that we can earn God's reward by being good. The problem is the law makes us think we can control God, that we can dictate the relationship, that we can manipulate our own salvation.

What we know, however, is that no law can mediate personal relationships. In *Brown versus the Board of education*, the Supreme Court said schools must be integrated and many people rejoiced because they thought that black children and white children would learn to be friends. Sometimes that happens, but the law couldn't make that happen. In the military, a soldier can be court marshaled for adultery, for breaking the marriage vow, but that law cannot force a soldier and his or her spouse to love one another. My mother could say that I had to play nicely with Susan, but she couldn't make me be Susan's friend.

The law, even God's good and holy law, cannot supply the spiritual power we need to freely do good. The law can identify what is wrong, but cannot prevent it and in identifying that wrong as something offensive to God, it also raises the wrong to the level of sin, the deliberate breaking of the relationship with God. Because my mother had surely told me to be nice to other children, when I hurt Susan's feelings, I also rejected my mother's expressed will and harmed that relationship as well.<sup>ii</sup>

So we are trapped in this vicious cycle of sinning even when we don't want to, even when we know better, even when what we want most is to know God's love for us and to freely and joyously love

God in return. We find ourselves, instead, fearful of God, like a child who has misbehaved dreading to face her parent.

Paul asks our question, “Wretched person that I am, who will save me from this body of death?” And answers it with this unexpected doxology, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” A friend of mine described this shift as a majestic case of canonical whiplash.<sup>iii</sup> This enormous and impossible leap from wretchedness to praise is made by grace. Because of the gift of God’s grace, we can make the leap from sin and brokenness and crisis, to new life and hope and doxology. In Christ, God saves us not merely from punishment but from the very power of sin that makes punishment necessary in the first place. God sent Jesus because God already loved us and had already forgiven us. When we offer our prayers of confession it is not to win God over by saying “sorry”, but to look at ourselves and our failings honestly and deeply and acknowledge our need for forgiveness, our need to be reconciled to God. In Christ, God breaks the vicious cycle of our sinning by forgiving us and welcoming us home. God has made it possible for us to do what we want most—to know God’s love for us and to freely and joyously surrender to that love by loving God in return.

Remembering her mother at the time of her death, Elaine told this story to her priest. Elaine came home late one night after some sort of youthful troublemaking. Her mother met her at the door with that look every child fears—tight, hard, cold and judgmental. The mother took one look at her ashamed and exhausted daughter and her whole face softened. Every hard line relaxed. The look of judgment transmuted into a look of unconditional love. Elaine never had a chance to use her prepared speech of repentance. “You get some sleep,” her mother said. “I’ll talk to you later.” The talk, when it came, was based in love not condemnation.<sup>iv</sup> God’s grace is like that—instead of condemnation there is unconditional love to undermine our fear, silence our excuses, break the cycle of our sin.

So, are you OK with God? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

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<sup>i</sup> Romans 7:15b.

<sup>ii</sup> For an excellent explanation of this dilemma, see *Reading Romans* by Luke Timothy Johnson, pp. 112-123.

<sup>iii</sup> The Rev. Richard Spalding, “Non-sequitur,” a sermon preached at First Presbyterian Church, New Haven, CT, February 1, 1981.

<sup>iv</sup> Fleming Rutledge, *The Bible and The New York Times*, p. 181.