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The Economics of Grace

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The official title of this sermon is “The Economics of Grace.” The unofficial title, or the part that comes after the semi-colon, is “Hope for Spiritual Midgets.” I recognize that not everyone here this morning may fit into the category of spiritual midget, but I speak only for myself here. In that category, I find great comfort and hope in Paul’s words from Romans this morning:

I do not understand my own actions.

For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

Biblical scholars always ask who is this “I” is. Who is speaking here? Is this a description of Paul’s personal experience? Is he speaking about human experience apart from the grace of God in Christ? About Christian experience? Or what?

Despite all the scholarly debate, this is the wrong question. In 20 years as a pastor, I have never met a person who didn’t hear Paul’s words and say, “That’s me.” We know too well the dilemma Paul describes. We also do not understand our own actions. We also want to do the right thing, but to our horror discover ourselves doing the wrong thing – even in our most devout moments. Perhaps especially in our most devout moments!

Samuel Taylor Coleridge gives us a wonderful picture of this dilemma in a letter to his friend Poole, describing an incident from his childhood. He was pretty young – maybe eight or so – when this event happened. He writes:

I had asked my mother one evening to cut my cheese entire, so that I might toast it. This was no easy matter, it being a *crumbly* cheese. My mother, however, did it. I went into the garden for something or other, and in the mean time my brother Frank *minced* my cheese 'to disappoint the favorite.' I returned, saw the exploit, and in an agony of passion flew at Frank. He pretended to have been seriously hurt by my blow, flung himself on the ground, and there lay with outstretched limbs. I hung over him moaning, and in a great fright; he leaped up, and with a horse-laugh gave me a severe blow in the face. I seized a knife, and was running at him, when my mother came in and took me by the arm. I expected a flogging, and struggling from her I ran away to a hill at the bottom of which the Otter flows, about one mile from Ottery. There I stayed; my rage died away, but my obstinacy vanquished my fears, and taking out a little shilling book which had, at the end, morning and evening prayers, I devoutly repeated them – thinking at the *same time* with inward and gloomy satisfaction how miserable my mother must be!

Well, young Coleridge ended up falling asleep and staying out all night. The whole village stayed up looking for him; they dragged the river for his body. His parents were frantic. The next day a neighbor found and rescued him. Of course all his guilt was washed away by worry about his well-being. He describes what happened:

I remember and never shall forget my father's face as he looked upon me while I lay in the servant's arms – so calm, and the tears stealing down his face; for I was the child of his old age. My mother, as you may suppose, was outrageous with joy. [Meantime] in rushed a *young lady*, crying out, 'I hope you'll whip him, Mrs. Coleridge!' This woman still lives in Ottery; and neither philosophy or religion have been able to conquer the antipathy which I *feel* towards her whenever I see her.¹

We certainly can identify with young Coleridge, with his fury at the injustice of his situation, but also his own guilt and fear of punishment. But most especially, we can identify with the combination of piety and secret enjoyment at making his mother miserable. And finally,

¹ Coleridge, S. T., *The Portable Coleridge*, ed. I. A. Richards (New York: Penguin, 1978), 222-224 (emphasis original).

who wouldn't share his undying anger towards the young woman who dared to hint that he might be guilty. Everything is all mixed up together – guilt, anger, devotion. Coleridge's story illustrates in a very poignant and funny way the human dilemma that Paul describes in our epistle lesson for today from Romans 7. That dilemma is that we are caught in a vise between the enslaving power of sin and the condemning power of judgment.

So we come to the topic of sin. Sin is not a popular word these days. In fact, many folks, believing sin has gotten a bad rap, prefer to take the Nike approach to sin: "Just do it!" Perhaps in reaction, others take the opposite view. We saw a sign on a billboard recently that read, "Death is the wages of sin. Quit before payday."

Now both of these sentiments are completely wrong-headed, from Paul's perspective, because both assume that sin refers to choices we make. But nothing could be further from Paul's mind than the idea of sin as an individual choice. Sin is the power that takes choice away from us, which overrides our desire to do the right thing, and deceives us in the process. Sin is a hostile agent, a slave driver, a personified entity that acts *on* human beings, sapping our will, stealing our freedom. Sin is fundamentally alien to our humanity. In our inmost being, we delight in God's law, says Paul. That is, we do want to do the right thing, we want the life that truly is life, the life that comes direct from God's hand. Note how carefully Paul speaks. The 'I' retains the divine image, but is held captive by sin. We are *not* 'bad to the bone.' Our deepest desire is a yearning for God. This point is so important to Paul that he repeats it almost verbatim: "It is not I that do evil, but sin which dwells within me."

Nonetheless, sin *does* dwell intimately in and among us, and has made itself at home in human history, in every human household and economy. The Greek word Paul uses for "dwells" is related to the word for "house" – *oikos*. It is the basis for our word, "economy" – in Greek,

oikonomia, referring to household management. Here, sin is the household manager, who repays humanity's service with death. So when Paul says, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23), he doesn't mean that *God* repays our sinful acts with death, but rather, that *Sin* is an agent who rewards his slaves with death. God, by way of contrast, is a household manager who abundantly gives overflowing life, not as a wage, but as a gift.

How do we experience the enslaving and death-dealing power of sin? We may immediately think of the usual suspects, sins understood in terms of personal morality and public ethics. We read the newspaper and see how greed has taken over our society, with the lie that we can do whatever we want as long as it doesn't hurt anyone – as if any action doesn't have effects on others without our even knowing. We see or experience racial stereotyping, and systems of class that steal hope before a person is born. We experience passions of lust and rage, which override our better judgment and lead to rash and destructive actions. We think of addictions that overtake a person's will.

But these are the *usual* suspects. There are other, less obvious experiences that equally are symptoms of sin's hostile takeover: depression; self-abuse; piety that is accompanied by cruelty to oneself or to others; hurtful patterns of relationship within families that keep being replicated, to our horror; old disappointments or bitterness that poison our days, and try as we might, we can't just "get over it." To speak of these experiences as "sin" is not to pass a moral judgment on them, but rather to recognize and name sin itself as a deceptive, hostile power.

Added to this experience is the burden of judgment. A friend who is a therapist has this to say about the "personal, private pains" of human suffering:

They frequently involve relationships with other people, past, present, or both, and they are often accompanied by some degree, however unconscious, of a sense of judgment on the self, either self-imposed or perceived as emanating from others. Whoever remarked that 'Hell is other people' was in error; it resides closer to home. . . . Anguish in human relationship often has hidden at its core a

kernel of ineluctable suspicion of one's being worthy of judgment. There is a self-doubt accompanying whatever goodness we believe about ourselves; and an anger, if not a fury, is felt toward anyone who confirms that doubt. Put any one of us close to another person for a sustained period of time, and that person will eventually be the unwitting agent of the doubt, and consequently the target of our anger. Herein lies one of the sources of fire that burns down families.²

Faced with the double bondage of compulsion and condemnation, our impulse is to go to some approximation of the law as way to “get control of our lives.” We must kick the habit. I must love the neighbor whose cat peed on my convertible. We must forgive the spouse who betrayed our trust. We must get a better handle on our anger, and forgive those fat cats on Wall Street who destroyed our retirement. We must not go over our credit card limit. And having done all that, we must not feel superior to that poor fellow sitting next to us who can't seem to get it together like us. Nor can we resent those people who seem to do so well in life, with happy, perfect families, successful careers, no observable addictions, and all the rest of it.

These are our “laws.” They are approximations of the law of God, which is so high and holy that we can't begin to get near it, let alone claim that we keep it. And if we do make such a claim, it will inevitably be at someone else's expense, because self-justification is inherently individualistic and competitive – it's the market economy of the spiritual realm. And it is the way the taskmaster – sin – deceives us into thinking we're doing the right when in fact we are hurting other people and ourselves. Paul discovered this when we looked back at his own life and said, “As to the law I was blameless. And at the same time, I was persecuting the church of God” (Phil 3:6). Listen to that! I was doing what the law said – I thought. And I was opposing and destroying God's own people, thinking they were God's enemies. How is this possible? No wonder Paul also says, earlier in Romans 7, “Sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me.”

² Dorothy Martyn, “The Intersection of Two Disciplines in Group Therapy,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 51:3-4 (1997), 43-54, (pp. 50-51).

This is the human situation, and we will not advance far in our Christian life if we don't recognize it. Centuries ago, a monk in the Egyptian desert named John the Dwarf diagnosed it perfectly when he said:

We have put aside the easy burden, which is self-accusation,
and weighed ourselves down with the heavy one, self-justification.³

Self-accusation or self justification – these are the two responses to the human situation: to establish and maintain our goodness against all odds, or to examine our thoughts, attitudes, motives and actions in the presence of God's mercy. In truth, most of us spend most of our days trying to do a little of both. We justify our actions in one area of our life, and accuse ourselves in another. As in – I'm not doing so great on the home front, but I'm brilliant at my job. Or – I shouldn't have gotten so angry with my spouse, but considering all I'm doing for my aging parents, it's understandable. This is called compensation or bargaining. Our relationship with God and even with ourselves has become a balancing act, accumulating credits for good behavior to set over against debits for bad behavior.

This is where we live. It keeps our market economy going, socially, financially and emotionally. It's like the sign I saw outside a florist's shop: "How mad is she? One rose, or a dozen?"

Today's gospel is a frontal assault on this whole way of being. Jesus storms into the Temple, overturns the tables, and says, "Take these things away. You shall not make my father's house a house of trade." You shall not be caught in the lie that faith is a matter of bartering our way into the heart of God. You shall not think that God's house, God's *oikos*, is like sin's marketplace economy. God's household, God's economy, is not a house of trade. It is not a place of exchange, a marketplace. God's household economy is pure gift, abundant gift, overflowing

³ Benedicta Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian, 1948), 90.

grace for the undeserving, without regard to merit. God is not keeping a balance sheet: debit, credit, debit, credit, debit, debit debit debit debit. . . God doesn't balance accounts; God gives it all away, without keeping track.

In John's gospel, just before he goes to the Temple, Jesus attends a wedding party. It's a good party; everyone's obviously having a good time, because the wine runs out. How does Jesus react? Does he say, "Hmmm. Good thing that wine ran out. People had too much. Serves 'em right. These guys need to dry out." No! He turns the holy water, set aside for purification rites, into wine – and it's the best yet.

This is the economics of grace, an abundance of gift, the gift of life rather than the wages of sin, which is death. And the free gift itself has the power to break the enslaving, isolating power of sin. Why? Because the gift is above all the gift of God's own self in gracious relationship. Paul puts it this way: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24-25). But then immediately he answers his own question: "Thanks be to God!" God is the one who delivers us, because "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1).

How do we experience this? We experience it as God in Christ coming alongside us, without condemnation. Yes, sin dwells in us. But even more powerfully, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the God who raised Jesus from the dead, makes a home in us (Rom 8:9, 11). That Spirit is far more powerful than the power of sin, because it is the non-condemning presence of God in Christ. Jesus is at the party. Jesus is in the Temple, becoming the dwelling place of God with us in all our striving and confusion. It is in the light of God's non-condemning presence that we have the freedom from fear necessary to engage in self-accusation without masochism – that is, to take a good look at ourselves, admit we're not always right, cease the exhausting struggle to defend our own integrity, and be compassionate towards others, knowing that they too struggle.

As John the Dwarf said, let us put aside the heavy burden, self-justification, and take up the light burden, self-accusation.

Rowan Williams comments in this way:

Self accusation, honesty about our failings, is a light burden because whatever we have to face in ourselves, however painful is the recognition, however hard it is to feel at times that we have to start all over again, we know that the burden is already known and accepted by God's mercy. . . . [Self-accusation] means a stepping back from the great system of collusive fantasy in which I try to decide who I am, sometimes try to persuade you to tell me who I am (in accord, of course, with my preferences), sometimes use God as a reinforcement for my picture of myself, and so on and on. The 'burden' of self-accusation, the suspicion of what the heart prompts, this is not about an inhuman austerity or self-hatred but about the need for us all to be coaxed into honesty by the confidence that God can forgive and heal.⁴

This is what God is like. Recalling the words of our opening hymn, let us come before this God in confidence of abundant grace:

In want my plentiful supply,
In weakness my almighty power,
In bonds my perfect liberty,
My light in Satan's darkest hour,
In grief my joy unspeakable,
My life in death, my heaven in hell.⁵

Amen.

⁴ Rowan Williams, *Where God Happens* (Boston: New Seeds, 2005), 46, 48.

⁵ "Thou Hidden Source of Calm Repose," Charles Wesley, 1749.