

Romans' Greatest Hits: Help! I've Fallen and I Can't Get Up 5/18/14

Romans 3:9-18, 23; 7:14, 21-25

This morning we begin a sermon series about Paul's letter to the church at Rome. It is a letter that has had a profound influence in the Christian church, even changing the course of human history when it was read by Martin Luther in the early 1500's. And it strongly influenced Karl Barth, regarded by many as the most important theologian of the 20th century. We're not going to study all of it, but over the next eight weeks, we'll hit the highlights of Romans!

When President Calvin Coolidge, who was known as a man of few words, returned home from attending church early one Sunday morning, his wife asked him what the sermon was about. Coolidge replied, "Sin." His wife asked what the preacher had to say about sin. Coolidge thought for a minute and then responded, "I think he was against it."

In the beginning of his letter to Christians living in Rome, Paul is trying to answer the question, "How are people made right with God?" This forces him to wrestle with this issue of sin. He deals first with pagan Gentiles, noting that their decadence and corruption makes it clear that they haven't figured out how to deal with sin. But then he surprisingly says that Jews like him are no better! They had been given the great gift of the law in the Old Testament, which showed them how they were created to

live. And God chose them and protected them and blessed them. In turn, many of them determined to scrupulously follow the law. But did that make them right with God? No. Their attempts at following the commandments only led to frustration and failure.

After two chapters of this discussion, Paul reaches his grand conclusion in chapter 3.

⁹*What then? Are we (the Jews) any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin,* ¹⁰*as it is written: "There is no one who is righteous, not even one;* ¹¹*there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God.* ¹²*All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one."* ¹³*"Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of vipers is under their lips."* ¹⁴*"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."* ¹⁵*"Their feet are swift to shed blood;* ¹⁶*ruin and misery are in their paths,* ¹⁷*and the way of peace they have not known."* ¹⁸*"There is no fear of God before their eyes."* *"For there is no distinction (between Jew and Gentile), since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:9-18, 22b, 23)*

That's a pretty gloomy assessment of human nature isn't it? But unfortunately, it's true! All of us have sinned and continue to sin. It's not just pastors like me, it's not just criminals in jail, it's not just people on the

other side of the world committing war atrocities. All have sinned, including you! The great Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, put it like this, “If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?” (end quote) Sin is a reality for us all.

The Bible defines sin in a variety of ways. Sometimes sin simply means that we fall short of what God created us to be. We are designed by God to be and act in a certain way and we fall short of that. We miss the mark. Other times sin means that we willfully disobey God’s commands, rebelling against God, like the prodigal son. And sometimes sin means that we simply refuse to trust God.

Listen to Paul’s personal struggle with sin in chapter 7 and see if it is similar to your own struggle.

For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Romans 7:14, 21-25)

Wow! Even the Apostle found that doing right was nearly impossible for him at times because he was “enslaved” to sin. He desired to do right, but just couldn’t manage it. That’s you and me, isn’t it?

And however we define it, the result of being “enslaved” to sin is that we commit a variety of particular sins. Actions which break the Ten Commandments. Those seven deadly sins of pride, envy, lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, and anger. Then there are sins of omission- stuff that we should do (like giving generously to the poor) which we fail to do. And finally, according to Jesus, there are also sins of the heart- evil intentions that we nurture and delight in.

All of this leads us to the Christian doctrines of original sin and total depravity, which have long been emphasized by Presbyterian Christians. Simply stated, these doctrines mean three things:

First, sin is inevitable for us. That’s why we have a confession of sin in the service each week. I never worry that it may be irrelevant! I’m not sure any of us can even go a day without sinning, much less a whole week. An hour is a stretch for most of us! Sin is simply inevitable. You may have read William Golden’s book or seen the film, Lord of the Flies. One of the themes of the book is the inevitability of sin. A group of children are shipwrecked on an island. Even though they have no adult society to corrupt them, they quickly become selfish, clannish, and violent with one

another, even murdering one of their own. Sin is inevitable. That's why those hippie communes in the 60's and 70's failed. They thought they could escape from sin and selfishness and power struggles and materialism by withdrawing from society, but they couldn't. Sin came along with them and destroyed their utopias. Sin is inevitable for us.

It is also pervasive. That's what John Calvin's doctrine of total depravity is about. He isn't saying that we can never do anything good, or that human progress is impossible. He is saying that every part of us- our thoughts, our desires, our feelings, our bodies, and even our wills- have been tainted by sin. And that everything we do, therefore, is a result of mixed motives. Sin is pervasive.

Finally, these doctrines remind us that we are powerless to overcome sin on our own. The tag line in the TV old commercial sums it up well: "Help! I've fallen and I can't get up!" In a Peanuts comic strip, Lucy is arguing with her brother, Linus. She asks, "Who's crabby?" "You're crabby!" Linus responds. "You're always crabby! You're crabby in the morning, you're crabby at noon and you're crabby at night!" Lucy thinks for a moment as Linus walks away. Finally she yells after him, "Can I help it if I was born with crabby genes?"

Lucy sounds a lot like Paul when he says we are "enslaved" to sin. I don't know if it's genetic, but we can't not sin. It has power over us and we

are helpless to fix it in our individual lives, in our families, in our community, in our church, and in the world. Sin remains a powerful force in our lives and in the world to this day.

Someone once said that the doctrine of original sin is the only Christian doctrine for which there is irrefutable empirical evidence! Yet, in spite of that, our reaction to our sin is usually to minimize it or deny it! We shift the blame for our sin onto the way our parents raised us or onto society, or onto someone else. “I drink too much,” we say, “but it’s because of my wife or my vexing children.” “I don’t do my best at school because of my lousy teacher.” We try to shift the blame. We deny our responsibility for the sins we commit.

We also rationalize our sin. The human capacity to rationalize sin is truly astounding. People rationalize their personal sins. We say, “It’s OK to gossip about her because she really is a bad person and other people need to know it.” Or, “It’s OK to cheat on my income tax, because the government already takes too much of my money.” Or, “There’s really nothing wrong with making illegal copies of music or movies, because those companies make so much money they’ll never miss it.”

And whole societies can rationalize sin. A number of years ago, I suggested that Bonnie and I go see a movie. She said that would be fine, but she didn’t want anything depressing. I had read a review of a movie

which the reviewer said was a real “triumph of the human spirit.” That sounded pretty safe, so I took her to see the movie, “Rabbit Proof Fence.” I’ve never heard the end of it! It was a true story about three “half-caste” girls removed from their mothers by the Australian government. The government policy, which began in 1931, declared that half-white, half-native children should be removed from their Aborigine parents, trained in modern society, and married to white folks in order to prepare them to participate in modern, civilized Australia.

The film followed the real-life story of three such girls, aged 8-14, who were forcibly removed from their mothers and taken to a camp 1500 miles from their village of Jigalong. They were housed in dorms, forbidden to speak their native language, and taught in school. If they ran away, they were tracked down and severely punished upon their return.

Nevertheless, fourteen year-old Molly led two younger girls in an escape. She was very cagy and managed to avoid detection for months as they walked 1500 miles toward home, following a 1000 mile-long fence that protected crops from rabbits. They made it all the way home.

They grew up. Molly married, had a child, and as an adult was taken back to the camp along with her child. She escaped again with the child and returned home on foot once more! Eventually her child was taken from her and she never saw her again. At the end of the movie, we see the

actual Molly, now a stooped, elderly woman. And we learn that this despicable practice of the Australian government did not end until 1970. (A real triumph of the human spirit...)

The most chilling scene of the movie for me was when the officer in charge of enforcing this policy was patiently explaining and rationalizing this ghastly practice to a group of ladies over tea, smiling as he does so, actually persuaded that this policy was best for the poor natives. The human capacity for rationalizing sin and evil is truly astounding, even in polite, “civilized” societies, like ours. Remember that our own society rationalized the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children for several hundred years, because we needed their labor to advance our economic interests. We routinely rationalize our sin both as individuals and as a society.

So, in Romans, Paul invites us admit that we have a problem with sin, and that in spite of self-help books, Dr. Phil’s best advice, and psychotherapy, it continues to rule our lives. But that is not altogether bad news. For something can be and has been done about our sin. And that’s where we’re going next week, to how we’re made right with God. To be continued...