



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

LIVING IN THE GAP

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ SEPTEMBER 10, 2023

Romans 7:15–8:2

¹⁵I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. ¹⁶But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

¹⁸And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. ¹⁹I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. ²⁰But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

²¹I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. ²²I love God's law with all my heart. ²³But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. ²⁴Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? ²⁵Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God's law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin.

8 So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. ²And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.

Looking Like the Picture

A woman I once knew had to have knee replacement surgery. Because she was a widow and lived alone, her doctor recommended that she move from the hospital to a rehab center for a couple weeks. Other than the time spent in physical therapy and meals, she found herself bored. Not wanting to turn into a vegetable, sitting in front of a TV for hours, she busied herself with building jigsaw puzzles.

And she was good at it. She finished most of the puzzles that were there, until one of them absolutely stumped her. As she sat in her wheelchair, hunched over the table, she just couldn't make sense of it. She studied the picture on the top of the box, but couldn't find any pieces spread out before her that would fit. Finally, one of the occupational therapists—noticing her frustration—stopped by to help. The two of them finally figured out what was wrong. Someone, as a practical joke, had put the pieces of a puzzle into the wrong box. She had been trying to make Buckingham Palace out of pieces of the Eiffel Tower. It doesn't work!

When she told me about this experience, it struck me as comparable to a normal feeling so many of us have who attempt this adventure called The Christian Life. We notice a big discrepancy between “the picture on the box top” (the ideal for how we are supposed to live, as laid out in scripture and hymns and devotional literature) and the actual “pieces” of our own messy and imperfect lives. And they just don't fit.

The biographies of great Christian saints, and the testimonies and personal witnesses we hear from time to time, aren't always helpful to us in dealing with this discrepancy. We hear the accounts of people who turned to God and everything seemed to go wonderfully for them. Perhaps, in glossing over the bumps and mistakes and setbacks, they are seeking to lift God up and promote Him. But these seamless stories of spiritual triumph can, unintentionally, be discouraging rather than inspiring.

We need to be able to face honestly and candidly the reality of Christian experience. We need to confront this discrepancy between what we want to be and what we are, what we hope and what we actually achieve.

The Reality of Inconsistency

It's a universal feature of human beings. Educators and psychologists confirm that there is a significant difference between the speed at which one can intellectually grasp facts, and how long it takes us to process and implement behavior change. Every golfer knows this problem. My pro can tell me what I need to do differently, and I can grasp it in my mind. But grooving it into a changed swing that is permanent takes a long time—if it ever completely works. The same is true with every skill and every hobby. And it's seen in our spiritual lives, as well. Becoming a consistent, faithful follower of Christ—demonstrating all the attributes of His perfect character—is a very slow and halting process.

Therefore it doesn't take long for a Christian to begin to discover a growing gap between what he or she **knows** and how he or she **lives**. The more we learn, the bigger the gap becomes. Today we're going to talk about "living in the gap"—the gap between our knowledge and our behavior.

Thankfully, we are not left to ourselves in trying to figure out how to live in the gap. We have a wonderful guide by the name of Paul. He is generally regarded as one of the greatest Christians who ever lived—surely a giant, next to whom we all appear to be midgets. And yet, he candidly and unblushingly lifts the veil of his "stained glass" reputation so that we can see what really goes on inside of him. And how true and familiar it all sounds. "I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate" (Romans 7:15). "I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway" (Romans 7:19). Paul himself knew what it was like to live in the gap.

Gaps are part of every dimension of our human experience. Look at the sad reflection in the example of American government. Our Constitution is a noble and simple document, laying out a beautiful way for a democratic republic to order itself for the common good, based on common values. But what do we see at every level of our government today? Power misused, money and influence controlling our legislative process, and government bureaucrats acting in ways that cause real harm to our citizens, yet covering up their actions to protect themselves. Congress (once labeled “the world’s greatest deliberative body”) seems incapable of squarely addressing as statesmen the real issues we face, hiding behind partisanship and name-calling. What a gap between the ideal laid out by the Founding Fathers and our current reality.

The same thing even happens in the church. We would like to place confidence in our denomination’s leaders to follow God’s Word at all times, but I’ve attended too many of its national meetings to naively believe that. The partisanship, bureaucracy and political maneuvering happen as much in church as they do in government, corporations or other human institutions. The “actual” falls so far short of the “ideal.”

Paul puts his finger directly on the source of our problems. The corruption comes not from without but from within. “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (Romans 7:18). “There is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me” (Romans 7:23). Our minds and our souls are battlegrounds. There are two natures, two forces, raging within us. Some of the older translations of the Bible label these “the flesh” and “the spirit.” This civil war, between a nature or self within us that is represented by our conscience and God’s inner presence, and a selfishness and desire to choose our way rather than God’s way, is the universal human experience.

A prominent Christian teacher of the 4th century was speaking with a class of young men who were being prepared for Christian

service. He said to them, “Men, I have two dogs in my house. They are big, and they are vicious, and they hate each other. They are constantly barking and snarling and scratching and biting each other. And my house is often a shambles from the chaos of those fighting dogs within.” One of the most perceptive students recognized that this was a parable. “Master,” he asked, “which dog wins?” The teacher paused and smiled. “The one I feed the most.”

There is a dogfight raging inside of us. This is what Paul describes in Romans 7. But we have a role in this fight. Our choice—of which “dog” to “feed”—has a profound impact on the outcome.

Common Mistakes

So how do we live in the gap? How do we cope with the inner conflicts, turmoil and temptation? How can we make real progress in restraining the power of the sinful nature and enhancing the power of God to control and guide us? There are two common mistakes that seem to offer short-term relief but ultimately make things worse—and we must willfully turn away from these mistakes.

Mistake #1: We give up in frustration because we can’t perfectly close the gap and reach spiritual maturity. It’s tempting to want to “throw in the towel” when our sins and addictions and habits and flaws keep asserting themselves. Sadly, I have known people who have said that they tried the Christian faith and just couldn’t make it work for themselves. What’s revealing in that comment is that they were probably trying to do the work themselves—without total reliance on the Lord. And if we do that, we will fail. But being a Christian is not about trying harder; it’s about trusting. It’s not our work that matters, but Christ’s work for us. And because His work on the cross was sufficient, we don’t need to give up in despair or disappointment.

Mistake #2: We lower our standards because we can’t reach the lofty heights laid out in the Word of God. Of course it’s tempting, if we can’t clear the high bar, to bring it down. But there are dangerous consequences, to ourselves and others, if we do that.

A group of middle-school age boys living in an urban area loved the game of basketball. They would gather nearly every day at the local playground for pickup games. They idolized their heroes, the NBA superstars who could soar through the air, defying gravity. In addition to their love of basketball, the other characteristic these friends had was that none of them was tall enough to dunk the ball, though they all longed to be able to do so. But they came up with a plan. Late one summer night they borrowed a ladder and some tools, rendezvoused at the court, and lowered the baskets from 10 feet to 7 feet. Now they could all dunk. And they did so for the rest of the summer—almost exclusively practicing their one-hand dunks, their two-hand stuffs, their backward and spinning and over-the-shoulder dunks. They had a great time—until the school year started again.

When they tried out for their local school team, they all discovered just how much their skills had eroded. They had concentrated solely on dunking at the 7-foot baskets, to the neglect of passing and jump shots and dribbling and rebounding. But the absolute standard of basketball, worldwide and never to change, is a 10-foot basket. And by trying to lower their own standards they hurt themselves.

When we seek to lower the standards of Christian living to make them easier and more convenient, we are tinkering with things that can never change. The character and actions which please and honor God are not arbitrary but are reflections of His own character. We don't have the freedom or the option to lower them. They are what they are.

The Biblical Approach

If these two attempts to deal with living in the gap are misguided dead-ends, is there a way we can go forward with success and confidence? I think Paul is showing us the way right here in Romans. He has made it clear that, though he feels frustration—"Oh what a miserable person I am!" (7:24)—he will not give up following Christ. Nor will he try to amend God's principles—"I agree that the law is good" (7:16)—to fit his preferences. Rather, in four simple (and frequently-repeated) steps, this is the approach he models:

1. Confess our failings to God. We can do it every day, or whenever our conscience shows us how we've gone wrong. To confess is not some painful or profound action. It's really quite simple. It doesn't mean we crawl to the altar on our knees. It doesn't mean we whip ourselves on the back for our mistakes. To "confess" simply means to "agree" with someone. In a very different context, we use the term "confession of faith"—such as the Westminster Confession that was the theological cornerstone of the English Puritans who first founded America, and the Scots Confession that was the cornerstone for John Knox and the first Presbyterians. Confession means "this is what we agree about." To confess our sins therefore simply means that we agree with God and with His whispering in our conscience, that we have turned from His way to our own way. It means we drop the defenses, excuses, rationalizations and blame, and are honest before the Lord.

2. Accept the Lord's forgiveness. His grace is always freely offered, and all we have to do is accept it. Any gift I present to you is yours purely by reaching out and taking it. God's grace and forgiveness are the foundation of the entire Christian faith. It is our hope and confidence.

3. Forgive ourselves. This is sometimes the hardest step. In our pride, we not only hate to admit we fail but we're embarrassed to do so. And so we try to make it better by punishing ourselves. But we need to let the past go. If what you and I did yesterday or the day before has already been paid for by Christ on the cross, then we need to allow it to remain nailed there.

4. Yield ourselves to the Lord. This should be our conscious choice daily. We can never reach spiritual maturity or see significant progress in our own strength; it's not a matter of human willpower and effort. It's about letting God live through us and give us the power to change, to be the men and women He wants us to be.

Just this past week, the No. 1 bestseller in the non-fiction category (as reported by the *Wall Street Journal*) was—once again—a self-help

book entitled *Atomic Habits* by James Clear. It's a book about willpower, about changing one's habits by starting with small changes. There's nothing wrong with this, but self-help isn't the answer. We need God in our lives, to give us the strength to make those changes.

The Power of New Growth

I grew up in a place where we had four seasons (not the two of Florida—rainy and dry—but the full range of summer, fall, winter and spring). In the backyard of our house was a big oak tree. And as fall turned to winter and all the other leafy trees had dumped their loads on the ground, this particular oak held on very stubbornly to large clumps of its leaves. They were brown and wrinkled and ugly, but they hung on. The winds of winter storms would blow, and the heavy snowfalls would cover the branches, but still those dead leaves would cling. One winter day when we had a short warm spell, I climbed up that tree (as I often would in the summer) and tried to shake some of the branches to get their leaves to fall, but with no luck. They were on there really tight.

And then came spring. And, amazingly, with the beginnings of new life flowing in that pin oak tree, the branches would push the clumps of dead leaves off from within. What external forces could not accomplish, the inner life did so easily. And the brown leaves would fall to earth, replaced by new green buds.

The world of the spirit is parallel to the world of nature. All the effort and external forces may not be able to remove the dead leaves of sin and bad habits. But the greatest power is found in the new life, coming from within, that replaces sin with holiness and obedience to God. And as we consciously let Him live in us day-by-day, those new “leaves” emerge. ■