



Sunday, June 21, 2020
Sermon Series: *Didn't See It Coming*

Why Character Determines Your True Capacity
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Romans 7:14-25 THE MESSAGE

¹⁴⁻¹⁶ I can anticipate the response that is coming: "I know that all God's commands are spiritual, but I'm not. Isn't this also your experience?" Yes. I'm full of myself—after all, I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary.

¹⁷⁻²⁰ But I need something *more*! For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

²¹⁻²³ It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

²⁴ I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question?

²⁵ The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different.

The Apostle Paul's struggle to do the right thing feels pretty familiar, doesn't it? Now maybe we don't always feel quite as strongly as Paul about our incongruent acts, but he's still on to something. How often do we see the opportunity to live our values, but at the same time don't act when we see an easier path? How often does it seem like really doing the right thing is just too much effort and we compromise our values

and settle for less? I find The Message version of this passage about as clear as it can get: “What I don’t understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise.”

It happens in individual and collective ways, all the time. It can happen when you hear someone say something offensive or mean-spirited, and are faced with the question: do I speak up on behalf of the one being harassed?

Sometimes it happens in our own families. Maybe you’ve made a promise to spend quality time with your family over the weekend, but then something comes up at work again and you tell your family again, “we’ll do it next weekend.”

Or you see what’s happening in our country, whether it’s the fierce political divide, economic disparity, or racial tensions that have come to the surface and you feel the pull to get involved, but you also hear that little voice in your head that says, “It’s been like this for so long, it’s never going to change.”

These compromises we make with ourselves are what Pastor Carey Nieuwhof says erode the content of our character. And it’s our character, he would argue, that is a constant work in progress. Like a garden in the summer, it needs constant attention. I think about this as a father. When I was first a dad I had great aspirations to do all the right things, say all the right things, and always be the model that I hoped my kids would look up to. The truth is more than twelve years into this parenting gig, I’m confident that I’ve done some of those things, but I’ve also done plenty of things that I wouldn’t have dreamed of in those early days of being a dad. I’m not always as patient or gracious as I’d planned to be. I don’t always set consistent guidelines for each of my kids. I don’t always act like the adult when we get into an argument, and I yell with exasperation more than I’d like to admit.

How does this happen? How do our intentions and our actions get so out of whack? Some of it is just life. We can’t always be what we want to be. A lot of it is that we give into those little nudges of compromise that make it ok to fudge on who we strive to be. This is called sin. And we all do it.

Our character, the way we conduct ourselves, the values we embrace, the ways we live out our faith in Jesus will show people who we really are. Perhaps that is why Paul spends so much of his letter to the Romans explaining the breakdown of character that happens through sin. We need to be honest about the persistence of sin, and at the same time we are not alone when we seek to be who we are called to be in Christ.

This is difficult work. It requires an ability to be honest with ourselves. Like Paul, we have to first admit that even with the best of intentions there are plenty of times when what we want to do and what we actually do don't line up. This is one way we talk about sin. But sin isn't just what we don't do that we should do or the things we do that we shouldn't do, but sin is also an inherent part of human life. Paul suggests that sin has a way of its own that coaxes and seduces us into compromising our values.

David Brooks, in his book, "The Road to Character", says that sin is a necessary piece of our mental furniture. It reminds us that life is a moral affair...When modern culture tries to replace sin with ideas like error or insensitivity or tries to banish words like, "virtue", "character", "evil" or "vice", that doesn't make life any less moral. To be aware of sin is to feel intense sympathy toward others who sin. It is to be reminded that the plight of sin is communal, so the solutions are communal...Sin is not some demonic thing. It's just our perverse tendency to [mess] things up, to favor the short term over the long term, to take the low road rather than the high road."

In other words, character isn't built on quick fixes, or taking short cuts, or avoiding the hard realities. Like taking good care of our health over the long-haul, we can't fad diet our way into good character, or into faithful living. It takes discipline and discipleship. It takes engaging in a daily walk with Jesus, and following in the ways in which he engaged the world. Sometimes we need to take dramatic action to right some really wrong behaviors, but it's the long term commitment to being who God has called us to be in our baptism that will make the most difference. In our baptism, Christ crucified the sin within us and in baptism we were raised to resurrection life. This is who we are, and this is how we are called to live and be.

As people of faith, we are measured by our identity as God's children and our commitment to live in God's grace and love for the world. People of faith haven't always done so great. Christian leaders haven't always done so great. But God's spirit continues to move us away from the sins of the past and toward a more just and equitable world. Think of the values that have changed about women's role in leadership - both in the church and society. Look at how children today learn about speaking up when they see bullying happening at school. And listen to the ways that people of color are being seen and heard in new ways, how many in our nation from different races, classes, and political parties are calling out the systemic problems of racism, and it feels like the content of our collective character is growing and moving in a direction that honors the character of God.

Yet, none of these things can be a fad and plenty of self-reflection and confession still needs to take place among predominantly white and Christian people - like the vast majority of us. We have a long way to go. But as Pastor Nieuwhof says, our character and willingness to confront these sins will determine our capacity to be the people and the society God has made us to be. And by living in our baptismal identity, we too can die to the sins that keep our lives, our families, our work and our world from being what God has called us to be. Amen.