



Series: THE WAY OF THE CROSS  
Sermon: "Closing the Goodness Gap"  
Scripture: Romans 7:15-25  
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Can you remember a time – like the Apostle Paul describes – when you became aware of a “goodness gap” in your life? You wanted to do “good.” In fact, you tried really hard; but by the end of the day, not only had you not done “good,” you may have done several bad things. As a result, we recognize that there are often times when a huge gap exists between the good that we intended to do and that which we actually do. We fail to be the person God had in mind when he created us.

One of the most obvious struggles such as this that I personally experienced occurred when I was a freshman in high school. As I have shared previously, our family started attending church when I was five years old and at nine years of age, I went to an altar and accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior; But for many different reasons, when I was thirteen, we stopped going altogether. Yet, there was one stretch of time when I was fifteen that my mom and I attended a small church where there was a really young senior pastor who connected well with young people like me because he played the guitar. I liked him so much I invited my best friend to church; and not long after that, the senior pastor invited us to a youth conference near Cleveland. So we went with him along with the entire youth group.

For the first time in my life, at that youth conference, I experienced contemporary praise and worship music. I had never before heard dynamic, nationally-known youth speakers who challenged us regarding where our lives were heading and our need to follow Jesus Christ. I was so caught up in those worship services; and for maybe the second time in my life, I felt God’s presence so powerfully. My hands were raised in surrender, and I sang at the top of my lungs with that huge congregation of youth. I wanted more of God. I even raised my hand when they asked if anyone wanted to rededicate their lives to Christ. And I left with a new found desire to do “good.”

That evening, we returned to the hotel where we were staying, and while our group was hanging out together; this really cute girl started “making eyes” at me. Whenever I said something funny, she laughed. Whenever I smiled at her, she smiled back. As the night progressed, we started talking and – as luck would have it – she did not have a boyfriend and was in the market for one. Now, for some reason, my thinking shifted – no longer was my focus on God’s presence and a desire to follow him anywhere. Instead, my thoughts were sort of like the ones we read about in the Song of Solomon last Wednesday night. Each day we would worship and I would sing, “Lord I want to serve you...” Then each night we would go back to the hotel and hang out – and I would feel all “Solomonic” about that girl and I was miserable. If ever I experienced a “goodness gap” in my life, this was a big one. And I have faced the goodness gap in many different arenas in my life over and over – and I know I am not alone.

Listen to the words of the hip-hop theologian, Kanye West, in an interview with Time magazine back in 2004 just after he was nominated for ten Grammy awards. During

the interview, Kanye West was asked, “What do you say to people who see a contradiction between the devoutness of your Grammy-nominated hit ‘Jesus Walks’ and the profanity and sexual content on the rest of your album?” West replied, “It’s definitely a contradiction. Contradiction is part of who everybody is. I am a real person, and I make my mistakes. I laugh and I cry and I smile and I hate and I love. One song is, I love God, and the next song is, Can you come over? That’s how I feel. Sometimes you’re in church, and you’re looking at the girl’s dress right next to you.” (Barbara Kiviat, “10 Questions for Kanye West,” Time 12-20-04, p. 8).

Or, if you’re not into hip-hop theologians, how about the words of the poet Carl Sandburg who said, “There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.” Friends, that’s exactly what Paul was saying in Romans chapter seven – did you hear his struggle with the “goodness gap?” He is truly miserable, even to the point that he cries out, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Do you ever feel that way? Do you ever look into the mirror at those eyes staring back at you and want to scream, “What is your problem? Why can’t you get it right? You study God’s law and you try to fulfill it and you fail!” I feel that way more times than I would like to admit.

So did the people who received these words from Paul. In the words of commentator William Barclay, “No one knew this problem better than the Jews. They had solved it by saying that in every man there were two natures – called the ‘Yetser Hatob’ and the ‘Yetser Hara’ – and there were certain things which would keep a person from falling to the evil impulse.” First of all, they believed, “if you occupy yourself with the law you will not fall into the power of the evil impulse.” How many here today have learned that you can study God’s law and still break it? In fact, Paul says earlier in chapter seven, verses nine and ten, “Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death”.

What’s he saying? Is the law sin? No! He makes that clear. So what is he saying? Let me illustrate it this way – do you remember when a law was passed saying, you must wear a seatbelt? How many of you said, “I’m not wearing a seat belt! They can’t make me!”? I can remember people who had always been wearing a seat belt responding, “If they’re going to make it a law, I won’t wear it!” Or when I was on that youth retreat and my pastor said, “You are not to have any girls in your room at any time,” and I thought to myself, “That’s a pretty good idea!” That was all my flesh wanted to think about. That is precisely what Paul means when he says, “...when the commandment came, sin sprang to life...”. Our flesh wants to break all the rules.

The second way the rabbis back then taught that a person could avoid falling to the evil impulse was “the will and the mind.” Barclay writes, “When the evil impulse attacked, the Jew held that wisdom and reason could defeat it; to be occupied with the study of the law of the Lord was safety... [But] Paul knew all that; and knew as well that, while it was all theoretically true, in practice was not true.” Simply put, these actions will not work. There had to be more than just studying the law of God and using our mind and will. In the words of John Ortberg, “Both human experience and the Bible teach that increased knowledge – even knowledge of the Scriptures – does not automatically produce transformed people.”

If you want proof of that point, simply look at people coming out of seminary – I can honestly tell you that, after spending four years in undergraduate studies and three years at the graduate level, I gained a great deal of head knowledge; but it did not make me “Mr. Super Christian!” Just ask my wife! Knowledge and the use of the mind and reason is not enough to close the “goodness gap.”

So how do we find victory in this war that is waging within the members of our body? Well, thankfully Paul was not finished in chapter 7 because his thoughts on transformation continue. And if Paul had stopped writing in verse 24, I would still be miserable and clueless. I do not know about you, but I can read this text where Paul asks that question, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" And then I can hear him say, "...thanks be to God – Jesus Christ our Lord!" And I can walk away saying, "Amen. The solution is through Jesus – but how? I have accepted Jesus and tried to know and follow God's law and do good; but, I still keep losing that battle. "What am I missing, God?"

Do you know what we are missing? If you listened closely to what I just said, this is what you heard – "I accepted Jesus and have tried to know and follow God's law and do good..." Why is that significant? It is significant because that is how most of us determine spiritual transformation. That is how we gauge holiness. And that is precisely where we miss it every time. That is precisely how we end up looking in the mirror wanting to scream, "What a wretched person I am!" We are still living our lives as slaves to the law. Do you want to hear a revelation this morning? Turn to Romans chapter seven, beginning at verse four – do not miss this: "So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code."

Did you just hear what I just heard?! The reason we look in the mirror and want to scream is because we are still living as slaves to the law. From the time we get up in the morning and throughout our day, our focus is on all the things we must do and not do: "Gotta speed read 3.8 chapters of my Bible so I get through it in a year. Gotta offer up my prayer, but I'm pressed for time, so thirty seconds should do it. Gotta do something for the poor and destitute. O great there's a "will work for food guy". I'll throw \$5 at him. Let's see now. Read my bible – check. Prayed – check. Gave to the poor – check. Now for the list of can't do's. Can't steal – check. Can't commit adultery – check. Can't lie – check. Can't lust (looking at imaginary woman) – oh man, I blew it again!"

In his book, *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg suggests that we live out "Boundary Marker Spirituality" which involves setting up highly visible, relatively superficial practices that allowed people to distinguish who was inside and who was outside the family of God. For example, in the church I was raised in until thirteen, the boundary markers to determine who was righteous and who was not were quite clear. You do not drink, smoke or chew or go with girls who do. You do not go to movies. You do not ever participate in social dancing; so as a high school senior, your mark of spirituality was the fact that you did not attend prom. You do not eat in restaurants on Sunday. You never play cards with a standard deck because the Jack is the devil, but you could play Rook with a Rook deck. Even the college I went to had boundary markers. Until 1987, no one could wear blue jeans; so everyone called our campus the "Polyester Palace."

This is what John Ortberg calls Boundary Marker Spirituality – which is not the by-product of authentic transformation. It is the by product of pseudo-transformation. But boundary markers were all I was ever taught. And one by one, my flesh reared its ugly head desiring every one of those. I even dated a girl who chewed! She liked Skoal – but she was gorgeous. By the age of fifteen, and after that youth retreat, I

just gave up. Simply put, I was a slave to the law, and I could not do it. Try as hard as I could, the “goodness gap” just got wider and wider.

So what is the solution? Paul said it in Romans chapter seven. Did you hear it? Look again at verse 25 – “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Period! No boundary marker spirituality added on; but rather – as Pastor Jeff said last week – we must follow in the example of Jesus. Why? Because Jesus did not focus on boundary markers! As John Ortberg says, “Instead of focusing on the boundaries, Jesus focused on the center, the heart of spiritual life.” When asked to identify what the law is about, Jesus’ response was simply, “Love God, love people.” So does that mean we can just say we love God and go out and party? In the words of Pastor Jeff who quoted the Apostle Paul last week, “HECK NO!”

Let me illustrate it for you this way, when I was dating my wife, Jennifer, and we would go out to eat or go to the mall, there were always other nice looking women walking around. I could have leaned on the law which says, “Don’t look at other women with the eyes of lust.” And my flesh would have reared its ugly head and said, “But I like looking at other beautiful women,” and the war would be on as I would struggle and eventually fail; but that is not what happened. Instead, deep inside, there was a love for my wife like I had never known and I did not want to do anything stupid that would hurt her in any way. For all the wives here today, which statement would you rather hear? “Honey, the law says I can’t look at other women with the eyes of lust so I’m giving that up.” Or, “Honey, you are so beautiful and I love you so much, I don’t want to look at other women.” Which one do you prefer?

In the same way, if we really love God, we will not want to do anything stupid to hurt Him. So the key to closing the “goodness gap” is to focus on the center, the heart of spiritual life which is to love God – what’s not to love? He only gave us everything, including His one and only Son. I do not know where I read these words but I really like them – “We need to get so connected to God and the exciting things He wants to do with our lives that sin starts to look very uninteresting.” But we will never be able to do this unless we are willing to die to the law as a legalistic means to a holy life. Paul says, “...we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit.”

Truth be known, Carl Sandburg was right. “There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud.” Funny thing is, the more connected we get with God, the more we recognize the mud for what it is – even to the point that we say, “Why would I ever want to get in there?!” That is authentic transformation. That is how we close the “goodness gap.”