

## Romans 7 Moments

Romans 7:7-25

We are a “celebrity culture,” fixated and fascinated by the rich and famous because everything they do seems so much larger than life. Celebrities are over the top gorgeous, outrageously rich, hysterically funny, or psychotically crazy. Every facet of their lives become part of the public domain and the public demand.

Excess is expected and extolled. In fact, there is nothing better for building a bigger celebrity image than excess, especially excessively bad behavior.

Remember the shouting match actor Alec Baldwin got into on the phone with his teen-aged daughter. He had a meltdown moment that was recorded and ended up on the internet, down-loaded and listened to by millions. He called her a “spoiled brat” “selfish” and “insensitive.” He ridiculed and belittled her, and said hateful things with the full intent of hurting. Without laying a hand on her he handed her a verbal lashing.

Baldwin’s reputation for being smart and sassy took a huge hit, and suddenly people saw him as an abusive, vindictive, cruel, and heartless father. But why didn’t we all get on our high horses quickly and condemn Baldwin’s behavior?

Could it be that we all jumped on Alec Baldwin because his behavior was so frighteningly familiar? Could it be that his was not celebrity behavior, but his was plain old human behavior?

Who hasn’t “lost it” at some time or another? Is there anyone who hasn’t said things in anger? Used words to wound or shame? Failed to “be there” for someone?

Even if you’ve never called someone a bad name to their face, you have in your heart and thought it in your mind. And these are the people we say we love most in the world, the ones we’d jump in front of speeding trains to rescue, take out a second mortgage to help, do all we could to see them happy and fulfilled. Except for those moments when we can’t stand them.

Truth is, **we all have our “Romans 7 moments”** - moments when we want to do good but do evil instead. Or as Paul put it in this morning’s text, “For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (7:19).

The problem with us humans is that we have just enough of what Paul called his “inner self” or “true self;” what Isaiah called “the still small voice” to know what we SHOULD do. But we lack the ability to actually DO it.

Actually, what we “lack” is the wholeness and unity of spirit that would put us in a right relationship with God. What we have instead is a fallen nature, a fractured self, a fragmented soul which lives in a state removed from and in opposition to, God.

It’s that state we call “sin.”

Jewish writer/holocaust survivor Chaim Potok wrote, “A man is born into this world with only a tiny spark of goodness in him. The spark is God; it is the soul; the rest is ugliness and evil, a shell. The spark must be guarded like a treasure; it must be nurtured; it must be fanned into flame. It must learn to seek out other sparks, it must dominate the shell.”<sup>i</sup>

Another Jewish writer/Christian martyr Paul of Tarsus recognized the existence of this “spark,” but realized that without divine deliverance the strength of sin would forever keep the damper down on that sacred spark. He wrote: “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate” (7:15).

Human history is a litany of Romans 7 moments, of good deeds gone bad:

The Hebrews fled from Pharaoh, followed God into the wilderness, then had a Romans 7 moment when they built a big golden calf and worshiped it while Moses was up the mountain with Yahweh.

King David danced before the Lord and praised Him as few ever had, then had a Romans 7 moment when he seduced Bathsheba, had her husband killed, and brought about the death of his own child.

Jonah was called by God, empowered the divine word, then had a Romans 7 moment when he fled from the Lord and was swallowed alive by a fish.

Peter proclaimed Jesus to be "My Lord and my God" and led the disciples throughout Jesus' ministry, then had a Romans 7 moment when he slunk away in the shadows after denied three times that he even knew Jesus.

"For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." No one has to tell us that Paul's words are true. We know it. We feel it. The indictment reverberates within our soul. We all know Romans 7 moments all too well.

But praise be to God, for in Christ while we are yet sinners, **we are a child of God that has gone astray**. Our souls are not just half-empty. They are also half-full.

"The Gospel of Christ, which means the good news of Christ, is given to tell us not what we already know but what we do not know. It is given not to tell us that we have failed, because we already know that about ourselves. That is not good news. It is given to tell us what we have forgotten, and that is who we are."<sup>ii</sup>

Who we are is the reason Paul can finally rejoice and say "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (7:25). We are created in God's image, and the "divine spark" we harbor is nothing less than a strand of divine DNA. We are God's "own."

Despite the fracturing power of sin that has separated us from God's purpose, despite one Romans 7 moment after another, God did not abandon us. God did not give up on us.

Instead God prepared a way for healing and wholeness to become available to us—a kind of DNA repair, some divine re-engineering, that not only forgives, but "breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the prisoner free."

So **we must remind ourselves of this spark within us and the availability of mercy**. And we do so by beginning our meals with prayer. Just as your hands get dirty and you wash them before sitting down to eat, so our souls get dirty and we need to wash our Romans 7 moments away before joining in fellowship with one another.

So this morning, I remember the good news of the gospel, which is this: for all our Romans 7 moments and in spite of all our sins, we have a Romans 8 God. For in Romans 8 we read, "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him . . . What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?"

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?

As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (8:32, 35-39)

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<sup>i</sup> The Chosen [1967]

<sup>ii</sup> J. Philip Newell, *Echo of the Soul: The Sacredness of the Human Body* [Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000], xiv.