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The Struggle
Romans 7:15-25

15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.

17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.

19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.

22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,

23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.

Some people say it's our ***most difficult word***.

Can you guess what it is?

It's a ***tiny*** word with ***awesome power and consequence***..... the word "**No**".

Who wants to hear that word, NO?

Do you want to hear it?

No...you can't ***do that***.

No..you don't ***need that***.

No..you can't ***have that***.

No..that's not ***good for you***.

No...that's the ***wrong choice***.

No, no, no.

Because all too often, we want to ***do*** that...and ***have*** that...

We want to ***make the wrong*** choices, don't we?

We **have made** the wrong choices!

We're like my little niece **Audrey**, who stood in front of an outlet saying "Noooo", just like she's heard a million times before from her parents, but still she reached out and put her finger in it anyway!

It's hard to hear **No in a world of Yes**, isn't it?

I mean, we hear all day long from the world just how much we need certain things...you know the messages are everywhere...

*you **deserve this**, you really **need this**, you better **choose this, right now**.*

Call in the next 15 minutes,

and you'll receive this for just two low payments of \$19.99.

The **first 10 callers** will receive a special discount.

This sale is only good through July 4th.

They even put the **candy** right by the checkout lanes....

all because we want to say yes,

even when we should say no!

I mean, most of us want **what** we want, **when** we want it, right?

And we usually want it **right now**, don't we?

No is difficult in a world of Yes.

In a world where our **kids** are told

that they **need** the latest greatest **toys**---right now!

How many of your kiddos have fidget spinners?

I was just with Ed's 8 year old nephew who wanted to check out every single store on our vacation to see what their selection was!

We live in a world where **adults**

are lured by the latest greatest toys as well—

the latest computers, phones, gadgets, homes, cars, clothes....

Saying no, is hard in a world where it's just so easy to say yes.

Maybe the hardest situation is our **money**.

It was really apparent to us on vacation last week.

A lot of people don't carry cash anymore,

we had to make a point to get a little out....

Most people **use plastic for almost everything** out of convenience...

which means that we have the option of ***just charging it on a credit card...***
Which means we can ***buy now, pay later***....much more, much later.

Consequently, we live in a world where more people have ***more credit card***
debt than savings accounts...
in a world where even ***our country*** has debts and deficits.

We have a hard time saying no to temptation,
And our ***society*** is the same way.
NO—it's Hard to ***hear***,
hard to ***say***,
hard to ***act on***.
Such a ***powerful*** little word: NO.

But ***why is it so hard?***
Why is it like Paul describes here in Romans 7?
For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.
That's our situation.

Remember ***Tom and Jerry?***
Tom with that little devil and angel on his shoulder....
and he gives in to the little devil's ideas?

Reformed theology, of which Presbyterianism is a part,
Believes in our sinful nature.
From birth, we have this sinful nature,
like we're ***hardwired*** to say yes even when we should say no.

Some called this ***depravity***,
which sounds really awful and serious...***and it is.***
Our situation is not good.
That's why we ***need Jesus*** Christ!
It's why the Good News is ***so Good!***

Because on our own,
we can try to do the good....
but we'll ***default to the bad*** much of the time....
which puts our lives in a bad place...
unless we turn to our Savior Jesus,

who **died** on the cross to save us from our sins,
and has given us **new life**---free from our failures.

In fact, we are given a **clean slate** every time
we approach His throne of grace...
we come to Jesus, and we receive God's grace.
What's better than that?

Yet, sometimes we think we don't need Jesus,
we just need to **know the rules**.
Sometimes we think it easiest to just **turn to the law**,
and God has given us Law in the Bible.
We have the **10 commandments**,
we have Jesus telling us the **Greatest Commandment**,
(which is harder than it sounds, isn't it?)

But the **Law** is like a **double edged sword**.
It's purpose is to **bring life**.
God created the rules in order to keep us **safe**, to help us **live life fully**.
It's to our benefit to follow God's laws, right?

But can God's law save us?

Paul is pretty sure that we can't rely on that...
because we have this **angel and devil** on our shoulder,
and the little devil has such great ideas,
such enticing suggestions,
So we think, **what's the harm** in following that a little bit?

The good we want is not what we do,
we do the evil we don't want.
It's our **sinful nature**.
It's our human condition.
It's the **internal struggle** we all face, if we're honest with ourselves.

Frederick **Buechner**, one of my favorite Presbyterian theologians, once said:
If there is a terror about darkness because we cannot see, there is also a terror about light because we can see. There is a terror about light because much of what we see in the light about ourselves and our world we would rather not see, would rather not have been seen.

God's law leads to life,
 but it can also lead to death,
 because ***we can't seem to obey it on our own.***
 When we look in the mirror,
 when we are exposed to the light,
 it's often ***not very pretty.***

I read about an experiment conducted by researcher Robert Cialdini, at the ***Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona.***

The park had a problem, written across a big warning sign:
 YOUR HERITAGE IS BEING VANDALIZED EVERY DAY BY THEFT, LOSSES OF
 PETRIFIED WOOD OF 14 TONS A YEAR, MOSTLY A SMALL PIECE AT A TIME.

The sign was supposed to appeal to our ***moral compass.***
 And Cialdini wanted to know if that really happened,
 so he put ***little loose pieces*** of petrified wood along many of the trails,
 and on some trails they posted ***a warning*** to not steal,
 but other trails had ***no signs*** at all.

Can you guess what happened?

The trails that had the ***written warning signs*** had about ***three times more***
 theft than those trails without signs.

Cialdini was curious about whether the law, the signs, had two effects.

One would be:

Wow, I should be careful, they are losing so much of this precious wood!

But the other might be:

Wow, the petrified wood is going fast—I'd better get mine now!

Or: ***Fourteen tons a year!? Surely it won't matter if I take a few pieces.***

Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Think Like a Freak* (William Morrow, 2014), pp 115-116

God's law, is designed to give us life,
 But sometimes it leads us to do what we know we shouldn't do.
 Kind of like the old slogan, ***rules are made to be broken!***

So what then?

As Paul's letters ask, are we supposed to just ***abandon God's law?***

No—the Law has a very important role.

It does ***lead to a better life.***

But it also ***reveals our need for God's grace.***
 When you know what you're supposed to be doing,
 but you can't seem to do it,
 that's when you ***realize how much you need God's help!***
 That's when we know ***we truly need Jesus.***

And we realize we don't need just a little bit of faith,
 or just a touch of Jesus' way of life...
 it's when we realize we ***can't do this thing called life without Him!***

Do you know **step 1** of any 12 step program?
*Admit you are **powerless** over your addiction, and your life has become **unmanageable.***

Which leads to **step 2:**
Believe that a power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.

And **step 3:**
*Make a decision to **turn our will and our lives over** to the care of God.*

The 12 steps are so wise, and
Paul could have written some of those steps!
 We too are supposed to realize what ***bad shape*** we're in,
 how we make wrong choices all the time,
 and we need ***Jesus to restore us*** to sanity, to ***take over*** our will and our lives!

Thankfully, that is what Jesus came to do!
 Romans 5:8 sums it up well:
But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
 Isn't that the gospel?

But sometimes, we look at our choices in life ***like a bank account:***
 As long as we make more good decisions or deposits,
 than sins or withdrawals, it's ok.
 But is that ***really what God wants*** for us?
 And ***is our salvation really dependent*** upon our good choices?
 I sure hope not.
 That's a ***works-salvation***, where we ***earn*** our way to God.

That's the **opposite** of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—
which is about God's grace, not our good works!
Good works are something that happen out of **gratitude** for the salvation we
receive, not our scorecard to heaven!

In reality, we make withdrawals, we sin, a lot...
and then God steps in and **closes the account** for good.

But then, God opens an **entirely new account** for us,
but this time it's in **Jesus' name**, but it's for us.

Adapted from David Rich, 7 Biblical Truths You Won't Hear in Church (Harvest House, 2006), p. 37

We **don't have to rely** upon our own choices,
we **don't have to earn** our way to heaven,
we **don't have to pretend** we are good.
We can **strive** for the best, but know that when we fail,
we can go straight to Jesus,
and receive **His amazing grace**.
And that grace is what encourages us to choose better next time!

John Ortberg tells a story about his friend, Jimmy, and his son, Davey, who
were playing in the ocean in Mexico, while his family—his wife, daughters,
parents, and a cousin—were on the beach.
That's when it happened—**a rip tide swept Davey and Jimmy out to sea**.
They were too far away from shore for their screams to be heard.
Jimmy, a strong swimmer and Decathlete, was powerless against the current.
He could only think to himself, *My wife and daughters are going to have to have
a double funeral*.
That's when a cousin saw what was happening and went out to a sandbar.
He knew that fighting against the rip tide can kill you.
You can't just start swimming right back to the shore....
Instead you swim parallel to it.
So his cousin reached out to them from the sandbar and said '**come to me**'.
The two were finally pulled to safety.
Isn't that what God says to us, "**If you come to me, you will live**."?
John Ortberg, in the sermon *The Way of Wisdom*, PreachingToday.com

Isn't that what **Jesus is saying in our Gospel** today,
from Matthew 11:28-30?
Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,

and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

I love those verses.

They speak to me when I am ***stressed*** out,
and they speak to me when I know I've made ***wrong choices***.
Either way I feel ***weighed down, heavy burdened***.
And Jesus offers ***rest***.

That's the choice I'm talking about—
we can ***try to make it on our own goodness***,
and fight against the rip tide of Sin.

Or we can realize that ***God is reaching out to us through Jesus***,
Saying, *Hey, come to me.*
I'll give you rest.
I'll give you life.
You can make good choices because I'll live in you.

Paul puts it this way in Romans 7 today:
Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?
25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Presbyterian author Anne Lamott offers a great definition of grace:
*Grace means you're in a ***different universe****
*from where you had been ***stuck***,*
*when you had absolutely ***no way to get there on your own***.*

No way to get there on our own.
It's God at work in us.

The grace of Jesus,
having our hearts and minds and lives ***taken over by Jesus***,
instead of relying on ourselves,
that is our Hope.

South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu has said
that his favorite Bible verse is Romans 5:8, because It sums up the Gospel.

He says, *We think we have to impress God so that God could love us.*
But God says, "No, you are loved already, even at your worst."

Tutu says that his outlook on life is ***based in Hope***.

Not optimism, but real hope.

He told Time magazine, *I'm not optimistic, no. I'm quite different. I'm hopeful. I am a prisoner of hope. In the world, you have some very bad people—Hitler, Idi Amin—and they look like they are going to win.*

All of them—all of them—have bitten the dust."

10 Questions," Time magazine (3-22-10), p. 4

The truth is that ***evil cannot, it does not, ultimately win.***

It ***looks*** that way sometimes.

If you wonder whether that's the case,

just try reading the ***Psalms***, where they lament the seeming good fortune of bad people.

No, because of Christ's death on the cross,

and His resurrection from death—***death and sin do not win.***

In the end, what wins is God's love and grace.

We have the ***victory***,

whether we can see that realized now or not,

we are victorious over the little devils sitting on our shoulders!

So how does this help us live?

How can we learn to ***listen*** to when we hear a no?

How can we learn to ***say no***, when we want to say yes?

How can we ***help one another say no***, in this world of Yes?

What if the answer is found in an old story, author unknown...

A grandfather was talking to his grandson.

"Grandson," he said, "there are two wolves living in my heart and they are at war with each other. One is vicious and cruel, the other is wise and kind."

"Grandfather," said the alarmed grandson,

"which one will win?"

The grandfather paused and said,

"The one I feed."

We all have those ***two sides living within us.***
It's not something we want to admit, it's just a reality.
But the ***one we feed*** is the one that wins.

We feed the good side,
by ***filling ourselves with a relationship---with Jesus Christ.***
With His words, His way of life.
We allow Him to take over our hearts and lives, and live in us.
We ***put on Christ***, in the words of Paul (Romans 13:14)
We reach out for Jesus when the rip tide of sin threatens to take us away—
all the while acknowledging that we cannot do good on our own,
But rather, it is ***Christ at work in us.***

Our ***account*** of good works has been closed,
Our ***new*** one is in Jesus' name.

We are ***powerless*** over temptation and sin,
our lives are often ***unmanageable***,
But when we ***turn our will and our lives over to Jesus***,
He brings us new life.
That is our ***Good News*** of the Gospel today.
Praise God, and all the people said, Amen.