



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

ROMANS 7:13-20

APRIL 2016

The Greatest Possible Pleasure

NOTE: *You may be surprised that while the title of this message suggests something eminently positive, I begin by discussing sin, but I hope you will shortly see the connection.*

The seventh chapter of the Epistle to the Romans is famous for describing the struggle Paul has with sin (or, for that matter, the struggle of anyone who wants to live righteously). Paul confesses he knows what is right but doesn't do it, and he is not ignorant of what is evil, yet he practices it. He concludes that the culprit is neither the Law, which points out sinful behavior, nor the individual, but sin that dwells inside. Those who believe the Law is the issue will focus on it and either become a legalist (one who tries to live up to the Law) or an antinomian (one who rejects the value of the Law). Those who believe the problem is solely with the individual will focus on improvement or failure. If sin is the issue, we must be sure we know what that means. Otherwise we will understand neither our dilemma nor God's salvation.

Just knowing the various words that are translated "sin" is not enough. Probably the most popular definition comes from a word that means, "missing the mark." Of course we have missed the mark of God's purpose in us. We were designed to glorify him, and we have miserably failed to do that well. Another word for sin refers to willful transgression. When we choose to step over the boundary of God's care, we are transgressors. There are others, but maybe the easiest way to understand sin is to revisit the Garden of Eden and look at the original sin.

God created a garden with trees bearing fruit that would satisfy every desire and taste of Adam and Eve. The cafeteria had everything the couple could possibly desire. God made it for them and instructed them to eat from all the

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trees. His loving nature was not only displayed in his choice to create beings with the capacity of enjoying him, but in his bountiful display of extravagant fruit to match their desires. The serpent came up and reinterpreted the circumstances. He suggested that God made a lot of good stuff but was preventing his people from enjoying it. Eve rebuffed him at first by saying that God did not prevent them from enjoying some of his creation, just one tree. Satan interpreted that as evidence that though God is good, he is not totally good. The obvious implication is that something beyond and outside of the boundaries of God's care is better than his provision. This is the essence of temptation. God's absolute goodness is brought into question by the voice of a beautiful entity who interprets circumstances to suggest that he is either not totally good or that he is not fully sovereign.

When Eve **doubted the goodness of God**, she and Adam chose to look for something **outside the boundaries of his care**.

Why would God put a tree in the Garden of Eden that was prohibited? Maybe he was offering them a fruit that was better than all the fruit on all the other trees. If they would trust him totally without fully

understanding, they would taste of the greatest pleasure possible. There is nothing like living with absolute confidence in a totally good and sovereign person committed to your highest delight. What security! What significance! What hope of delight! What guarantee of success!

When Eve doubted the goodness of God, she and Adam chose to look for something outside the boundaries of his care. They believed the fruit from the forbidden tree would satisfy a desire that trusting God would not. They missed the mark. They transgressed the command. They yielded to the ruler of another realm of reality. They became slaves of misinterpretation and the spirit who misinterprets. With ears opened to that voice, they began to display his nature. So did all their offspring. They were fearful, jealous, angry, violent, bitter, and lonely. They lied, killed, stole, blamed, and accused. Sin was more than a single act. It was a power that connected them to the voice of the deceiver/accuser. They would never be able to rectify their misdeeds by doing better or by doing penance. Sin would have to be condemned, killed, destroyed by a power greater than Satan himself.

It is our story. We all can identify. One episode in my story involves my college athletic experience. I attended school on a football scholarship. I promised God I would use any success I had there as a platform to speak for him. I only asked that he help me do well. At first, things

looked good. God was keeping his part of the bargain, and I was trying to keep mine. I actually played a major portion of my first game as a freshman. I played all season. Then it happened. My hip was severely injured. My doctors recommended that my career was over if I wanted to be able to walk later on. The serpent entered and began to interpret the events in light of his belief that God is not totally good and can't be trusted. If God were good and sovereign, he would not have allowed the injury, or at least the severity of it. There were many conversations going on in my mind trying to sort out the right interpretation of the events surrounding my life.

What have humans done to overcome the sin problem? The most common solution has been a form of religion. Humanity has been creative in finding ways to get back to innocence. Trying to keep various commandments, suppressing desires, denying pleasure, paying penance, and appeasing God or gods. Those focused on behavior will have an external focus. They may be legalists, believing that the Law of God is the issue. They may be moralists, believing that getting better is the goal. They might be mystics, believing that the real treasure is found beyond, in spirit beings outside of God's river of truth.

God's eternal plan is a grace solution. He sent his own Son as a representative of humans. God dealt with him instead of those he represented. He was the last

Adam. He was Israel in one man. As such he defeated Satan in the wilderness where both Adam and Israel had fallen. He demonstrated the life of humanity totally trusting God the Father for every-

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thing. He became sin and absorbed the full wrath of God on that hateful and wicked thief called sin. Sin as an act was forgiven. Sin as a power was broken. Sin as an indictment was canceled. Sin as a master was condemned and executed. Sin's leverage was lost when the Son was raised from the grave as the first fruits of a new creation. He then ascended to the right hand of the Father to represent mankind as restored ruler over creation. He rules there still. As king he gave a gift of his bounty to his people. He sent the Spirit that raised him from the grave to indwell his people. The Holy Spirit replaced the spirit of death that had ruled since Adam and Eve's sin in the Garden. God's new people would share his life. He makes his presence real to them, and they are more concerned with knowing him than being good. That doesn't mean they act badly. It just means that relationship has triumphed over performance. They live forgiven and enjoy restored partner-

ship with God in causing creation to display his glory.

Because the grace solution is so unintuitive and countercultural, we struggle to believe it is real. It just seems too good to be true. Surely we can't expect God to bless us based on his own merit. Often we pick up some of the cultural religion that

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is so available and marketed so well. But, thankfully God's grace abounds where sin and religion grow wild. God helps us by exposing the deception of such by displaying scandalous grace. Right in front of us he will promote someone who doesn't deserve it. Or he will bless someone who has lived to denigrate his laws. The children of profligate parents seem to prosper while our kids struggle to make it. Our offense reveals our misinterpretation of God's grace to us.

It was the same case with the Jews and Jesus. They were indignant that God would forgive and bless Gentiles who had never even given him a second glance while they (the Jews) had labored long and hard to keep his laws. Jesus told them the story of a master who needed workers. He hired some early in the day and promised to pay them a daily wage. Later

he hired some more, and finally he hired some just before closing time. As they all appeared before the paymaster, they all were paid the same. The early hires were indignant that others would be blessed by the generosity of the master. Of course it is also a key element in the famous story of the prodigal son and his brother. When the father lavishly restored sonship to the prodigal and celebrated him with a party, the loyal, diligent, "good" son was indignant and refused to join the party.

This doesn't apply just to the Jews in Jesus' day. Self-righteousness is always lurking to steal joy from those whose only claim was and is mercy. If we let the Holy Spirit interpret for us, we cannot look with contempt on those to whom God chooses to show his love. Rather we will see it as evidence that sin was always wrong about the total goodness of God. Trusting him is the greatest pleasure possible.



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