

TO CHRISTIANS WHO SIN AND WONDER WHAT IT MEANS?

Ted Wise

All of us are perplexed by why we still sin and probably more importantly what does this disobedience mean in relationship to God. The Apostle Paul had this problem too. He wrote the following after being a Christian for many years. It is/was written in the present tense, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" (Rom 7:24). Sounds to me like Paul and I have something in common.

If I were to tell you to go and find me ten men who truly confess that the law is good, who would you look for? I would be willing to bet that you would search for ten guys who outwardly appeared very obedient to the Commandments and produced a lot of good works. However, according to the Apostle Paul, the best obeyer of Commandments the world has known, a man who said this about himself, "...as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless..." (Phil 3:6). He also claimed the title, "chief of sinners" because his kind of obedience led him to try to kill the very God he thought he was obeying. What a strange religious condition, yet what an excellent example of how the letter of the Law kills.

According to what Paul wrote to the Roman Church, he had your/our problem but he saw it differently. He said, "For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good." (Rom 7:15-16).

Can you see it? The man who confesses that the law is good is not one able to do the good he wants, but rather a man who suffers a new internal contradiction because he can't. We have a new kind of conflict that was not in us before Christ came into our lives. I still cannot do the good I wish but instead of rationalizing it, I now confess it as sin. I'm at peace with God. Peace is not merely a feeling. It is that state that follows the end of a war. The end of a war certainly feels differently than fighting a war, but if we seek the feeling of peace without resolving conflict, then all we desire is a kind of heavenly tranquilizer.

If you are a Christian, I presume the war is over between you and God. You both agree that your behavior stinks, well actually God doesn't really see you as a sinner anymore but as one who is as righteous as Jesus Himself (by faith Jesus' righteousness is ours).

Conflict we still have, praise God. It is the evidence that we, like Paul, confess that the Law is good.

Strange isn't it? The evidence that we belong to God is not perfect behavior but increased distress over how short we fall from being as wonderfully loving as Jesus is. Love is part of the problem. If we love God it produces obedience, while effort to do better is doomed to failure. Ron Ritchie, a friend of mine, used to say it like this, "Everything from God and nothing from us". I would add that what God wants is not our behavior, He wants us. Giving God one's good deeds as in, "Get me out of this and I'll never do it again" is kind of like offering Him a bribe.

Let me press on with a bit more scripture so you can see the problem more clearly. This is not an easy thing to understand and will require re-reading the book of Romans and that little two page Prophet in the OT named Haggai. You will find the comments in Hebrews about resting in God interesting too.

In Haggai the people are perplexed by a very strange drought that did not end when they repented of working on their own homes and neglecting God's House. As they worked on the Temple, they expected conditions to improve and God to bless the work of their hands as He had blessed their fore-fathers when they had laid the

Temple stones. But the people in Haggai's time were baffled, their work on the Temple looked shabby to the older folks who remembered its former glory. So God sent Haggai to them with a sort of two part riddle.

"Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Ask now the priests for a ruling: 'If a man carries holy meat in the fold of his garment, and touches bread with this fold, or cooked food, wine, oil, or any other food, will it become holy?'"

And the priests answered and said, "No."

Then Haggai said, "If one who is unclean from a corpse touches any of these, will the latter become unclean?"

And the priests answered and said, "It will become unclean."

Then Haggai answered and said, "'So is this people. And so is this nation before Me,' declares the LORD, 'and so is every work of their hands; and what they offer there is unclean.'" (Haggai 2:11-14)

The usual human problem with works and God is present here: they repented, therefore God owes them at least a blessing for their efforts. The lack of God's blessing the "work of their hands" is not easy to grasp.

The book of Romans in and around the end of chapter 7 and the beginning of chapter 8 teaches us almost the same thing. Inwardly we are indeed new creatures in Christ. However, the treasure is in an earthen vessel and this produces the conflict of falling short of the glory of God in our behavior. Like the people in Haggai's time we have a problem when it comes to doing what is right or doing "works" that are acceptable to God. Because we have the Holy Spirit in an unrenewed body, everything we do comes out through a dirty filter, the flesh. Thus it becomes contaminated. Fortunately, God is at work outside of us as well as dwelling within us. He can correct what we do and will use anything and everything to work good in us and for us. He is faithful to complete what He has begun.

I find that it helps to remember that being saved wasn't my idea, I told Jesus on our first day together that if He wanted any of this stuff in the Bible done He was going to have to do it Himself because I didn't think like Him and I sure didn't do things the way He did them. I had the distinct impression that it was a deal. I stopped "doing" and He started "accomplishing". Later I fell in with bad company, Christians who taught a kind of mixture of God's will plus your will add up to super-will and one can then leap tall building programs in a single bound.

More on this subject can be found in Hebrews. I find it a difficult but very rewarding book to study. "There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience." (Hebrews 4:9-11)

Incidentally, one can almost insert "unbelief" for "disobedience" in this passage from Hebrews.

The Holy Spirit can be trusted to produce good works through us. One need not threaten people with loss to motivate them to do good works. The problem we see in the Church is that there are not very many Christians who are confident in the new covenant.

In Christ,

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