

Preferring Pre-Dinged Cars

Romans 7:14-20

(Paul describes his frustration of doing what he should not and not doing what he knows he should.)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler
Redlands First United Methodist Church
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I have a confession to make. On one of my visits to the campus of Cornell University in upstate New York, when our daughter was an undergraduate there, I got a parking ticket. That does not *seem* like much to confess, but there's more. When I found the parking ticket on my window, I was baffled. I did not know what particular parking violation I had made, but, I did assume that I had done something wrong. *I had done something I should not have done.*

It's what I did *next* that was really bad. I recalled that my children told me about someone who, with a rental car, threw away a parking ticket because they figured there'd be no way they could get caught. Yes, I confess—I threw away the ticket. I not only did something I should not have done, incorrect parking (exactly what, I never knew), but also *I did not do something I should have done*—pay the ticket!

This dilemma sounds like the one Apostle Paul confessed in his famous letter to the congregation at Rome. He actually wasn't talking about individuals, but about the whole people of Israel. Yet, we often hear his words and think of them personally: *We do what we don't want to do and we don't do what we know we should.* It's frustrating to try to be good and to not always succeed.

The public radio program entitled "Car Talk" has aired in our household for quite a number of years, usually at 10:00 on Saturday mornings. I'm sure plenty of you listen to Tom and Ray the Tappit Brothers. They are experts on cars—and they are funny—as they answer the questions of those who call in. At some point I began not only to hear the show, but also to enjoy it. One of Tom's comments several years ago relates to today's topic. It caught my attention so much that I jotted down the details. A man named Harvey called in to ask a question. He explained that he had a brand-new Mazda 626 which his daughter had managed to scratch. At the 5,000 mile service, the dealer wanted \$900 to fix the scratches. Harvey was opting for a \$3.50 bottle of touch-up paint. Harvey's wife heard the dealer's opinion that the car would never look good with only the touch-up paint, so Harvey was calling to ask for advice as to how to get a decent result.¹

The Car Talk co-host Tom responded: "Well, you and I are philosophical soul mates, Harvey. People get too worked up about how their cars look, don't they?" He went on, "Personally, **I find it liberating to get that first scratch on a new car. In fact, I think cars should come 'pre-scratched.'** Wouldn't that be great?"

Ray, Tom's brother, adds, "Yeah, and Harvey and his daughter can get jobs doing the 'pre-scratching.'"

In a sense, the Apostle Paul was saying about humans, theologically, what the Car Talk brothers were suggesting would be good to acknowledge for cars. Cars are going to get scratched, dinged and dented—better to just acknowledge that and not get bent out of shape with the first scratch. Paul was saying, we humans are going to "sin," make mistakes, do things wrong; it's just of who we are as humans.

Actually what Paul was saying is far more complicated than it would seem. In a nutshell, Paul's attempt at a logical argument goes like this: He, a devout Jew, a follower of the Law, was not able to always follow the Law. Far more important, his *people*, as followers of the Law, did not consistently follow that Divine Law. His people—the Jews—*tried* to be faithful and still they failed sometimes. Some might say this predicament is the Law's fault—it expects too much. Paul defended the Law; he said the fact that people cannot always follow it is no fault of the Law. There was nothing wrong with Judaism per se, or with the Law upon which it was based. Yet there was something lacking, and this was quite a conundrum for Paul. He and others simply could not do what they sincerely tried to do.

Aha! Paul finally discovered something that helped him out of this dilemma, or rather someone: Jesus Christ. Jesus and his message gave Paul the exact boost he needed—lots and lots of love, grace and forgiveness that Jesus showered on people. That love, knowing he was accepted as he was, ironically helped Paul to actually follow the law better.

We tend to think of “sin” as the acts we do or do not do. For Paul at this point in his thinking, “sin” had a power of its own—it was like a separate entity within him. Really, it would not be wrong to say that according to Paul, “It was not I who disobeyed the parking laws and didn't pay the ticket. The sin indwelling in me did it.”² I.e. “Sin made me do it.” To tell you the truth, that's pretty much how I felt at the time! Okay, I might have gotten a ticket, but it was not really me—not the “me” I identify with, who threw it away!

Paul's theology here is quite like those in 12-Step programs who acknowledge that *by their own power* they are powerless over their addiction. They find help by realizing a “Higher Power” *can* help them to do what they seem unable to do alone. With this boost of loving power, we are able to refrain from drinking or taking drugs, or eating too much, or indulging in whatever habit is not healthy.

This passage we're focusing on today in Romans—a tiny one in the whole letter—is like a mirror. It states an observation about humans: “We do what we know we should not and don't do what we know we should.” It's kind of like saying, “Cars get dings in them; we dent or scratch our cars.” It's just an *observation*.

Frustration comes from our wanting to be better than that, with knowing that we can do better. We feel called by Love or God to do better.

I venture to say that many of us today are frustrated about something that we do or do not do. Those of us who are not frustrated by *anything* in that realm probably should be, if our goal is to be as loving people as we can be.

Once we know the predicament, we are like Harvey who called in and asked Tom and Ray on *Car Talk* what was the best way to fix the scratch on his Mazda. We ask, “How do we proceed, so we can do better?”

Our tradition and experience give us a few rather simple guidelines that I'm reducing to three: 1. Be honest about what we are doing or not doing. 2. Do not immobilize ourselves with guilt. 3. Expect better of ourselves and others.

1. **Be honest.** Look at ourselves honestly and see what we are doing and not doing.
2. **Do not immobilize ourselves with guilt.**

Guilt is only useful when it functions as a mirror—to help us to look at ourselves and realize, “You can, with the help of the Spirit indwelling you, do much better!” This is where the pre-dinged philosophy can be helpful, in fact, as the *Car Talk* guy said, “liberating.” We don’t have to try the impossible: to keep ourselves forever un-dinged. We do make mistakes—That’s the way we are. However, we can do better.

3. Expect better of ourselves and others.

Know that the same key that Paul found helped him to follow the law is available for us. The power of the Indwelling Spirit of Christ can help us, too! We are loved, as we are.

We’ll *never* be able to do all we should do—yet, we can always do better, and expect more from each other.

Clearly the biggest imperative from Jesus was to help the poor, and it would take a long while to ever feel we have done enough in that regard. Also, we’re to get along with others. And, we can always listen a little better, extend our zone of tolerance a bit further, and seek to grasp another’s view with more compassion.

We’re not alone in this improvement scheme. We genuinely help each other. Once I was absolutely stunned with the way a salesman at a gas station helped me. About the same time as the parking ticket, maybe even on the same trip, I was frustrated and blue and had the idea of smoking one cigarette. It was a crazy notion, but I was driving by myself the 8 ½ hours back home to Dayton from Ithaca, NY. I had smoked perhaps a total of ten cigarettes in my entire life—all ten when I was about 21 years old. It was a crazy notion. But when I got gas, I inquired at the counter about a package, explaining I wanted just one cigarette—there were so brands I didn’t know what to get. The salesman put me through the third-degree. He asked why I would want to have just one cigarette. What good would it do? He suggested I just not buy any. So, I didn’t. I went away amused, scratching my head, and grateful to that strange non-salesman. A real live human being convinced me I could deal with my frustrations in some healthier way.

No one would have criticized that non-salesman if he had sold me a pack of cigarettes—it was his job. But, some Indwelling Spirit in him reached out to me, and he did what he felt he should do—recommend that I change my mind. I admire him. He did not have to confess that he did not do what he should have done. He did it.

It’s so much more obvious—to others, and also to ourselves—when we *do something we should not*. Park in the wrong place, smoke a cigarette, act unkindly. But half of Paul’s observation when he looked in the mirror was that *he did not do what he should*. It’s more difficult to realize what we should do. We here at First Church “should” reach out to our community, and we do. But how much? To whom? When? Where? We know we can always do more. What is enough?

Paul’s big discovery was that God is loving and grace giving. He realized that God probably would say, “For Heaven’s Sake, don’t get so bent out of shape with the ding or scratch.” In other words, God accepts us, forgives us, sort of says, “Get on with your life . . .”

There’s more to that parking ticket story of mine. We were back on the same campus a year later. Not knowing what I had done, our daughter told us that in the city of Ithaca drivers are *allowed to ignore one parking ticket per year!* Can you believe that? I guess I was not the only one who behaved so badly. The city leaders want to stop *repeat* parking offenders. They don’t want people to make a habit of illegal parking, but they

understand that on rare occasions obeying the parking signs and doing what we need to is quite difficult—so, one ticket per year is allowed. I guess you could say the leaders of the city of Ithaca expect us human beings to be pre-dinged. They do exactly what God does, and what Paul was so excited about: they offer grace, forgiveness.

If we were to actually follow Jesus' ethics, we would not abandon laws—we would still park in the right places at the right times for the correct length of time, most of the time. And, feeling God's love, we're better able to be law-abiding. However, we would not only not be doing things we shouldn't, we would find ourselves doing a whole lot of things out of love, that are really way beyond any law, things like these:

Although there's no law about it, if we are able-bodied, we'd park farther from a site, to let others who aren't as mobile have a shorter distance to walk.

Although there's no law about it, if we were not in a hurry, we'd let others into spaces rather than darting in ahead of them like it's a competition.

Although there's no law about it, if our car were small, we'd look for a smaller space so that the larger spaces were left for bigger cars.

Although there's no law about it, if our car were big, we'd *only* take big spaces, not the ones marked "compact," so as not to dominate the parking lot and *not to scratch Harvey's new Mazda in the next space*.

Although there's no law about it, we'd consider the feelings of the other drivers.

These suggestions just relate to parking—you can apply this higher goal—that of love, that goes way beyond law—to other domains of your life—relationships, prejudices, our work, caring, being cared for...

This is what shocked Paul, and still surprises many of us today: If we let law be in the background, like the backdrop of a theatre set, then compassion and love can be in the foreground—and amazingly we are *able to do good and not to do what isn't so good...most of the time*.³

¹ <http://www.cartalk.com/content/columns/Archive/2000/February/07.html>

² This is the only time *indwelling sin* is referred to in Paul's letters or in the whole Bible

³ *Resources used: Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, July, 2004, "Romans." And Barth, Karl, *The Epistle to the Romans*. London: Oxford University Press, 1933.