

## “SHORT AND EASY TO SPELL”

Romans 7:15-25a July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2017

Seems like we are in the middle of a heat wave with all of us looking for ways to stay cool. I am so thankful for our air-conditioning this morning here in the sanctuary that enables us to worship in comfort. But let me tell you a little story about staying cool....

This one is by Delbert Hussey from Chadron, Nebraska and I pulled it from my July issue of Country magazine. “During a summer ranch tour we were hosting for an elder hostel, our van passed a pasture with a windmill and a herd of cattle around a stock tank .

A lady on the tour said, ‘Oh, look!! The rancher put up a fan to cool the animals!’”

What do you think is the most difficult word in the English language? There are so many to choose from but how about “lachrymose” (causing tears, tearful) or “contumacious” (insubordinate, rebellious) because we use them so rarely? Would it be “hemacytometer” (instrument for counting blood) or “boanerges” (skilled orator) because they are tricky to spell? George has a favorite word that I didn’t know until I met him—it’s “odiferous” which just means smelly or stinky. But perhaps if we take a little different route, the most difficult word in the English language is also one of the shortest, easiest to spell and most common: “no.”

That word is difficult to our young children to learn. “No, you can’t run ahead of us into the street.” “No, you can’t take that toy from your sister.” “No, you can’t play with the knobs on the stove.” “No, you can’t run with a knife or scissors in your hand.” No. We don’t like it because it is, well, just plain negative. Even more, it stands in our way, negating our immediate desires and wishes,

withholding something from us that we want.

Whether we are in middle school, high school, or adults-whether we are parents, aunts or uncles, grandparents, or really everyone in the larger human family, we have trouble with that word, “No.” We want what we want for a reason, and “no” always runs contrary to those reasons, wants, and desires. At the same time, as we mature we recognize the value of “no,” not only for others but even for ourselves. By saying no to the extra helping of dinner we stay healthier. By saying no to television before studying for the exam we earn a better grade. By saying no to claiming the doubtful tax exemption we retain a greater sense of honor and contribute to the public welfare. The other side of freedom, we come to recognize, is responsibility, being able to say “no” so that we can enjoy a greater “yes.”

As practiced as we may become at “no,” however, there is always the noticeable tension between what we want in the moment and what we know is better for us. This is the struggle the Apostle Paul describes in today’s reading, a struggle that is part and parcel of the human life. Which is why, according to Paul, God gave us the law. We tend to think of law negatively because we experience it as enforcing something we do not want. But for Paul, the primary purpose of the law is to urge us toward life, toward that which is healthful, life-giving, and of true value...even when we, lured by immediate desires, would rather seize those things which lead to death. For Paul, this tug between what is right and what is immediately gratifying is not only descriptively accurate of the tension-filled nature of human existence, it also points to our need for help, for encouragement, for forgiveness, and, ultimately, for God. The law, in this sense, has two functions, both to hold out for us what is life-giving and to make us aware

of our need for grace. Little wonder that Paul declares the law holy.

A practical question at this point would be: How do we help each other say “no” in a culture that seems only to understand “yes”?

How do we say “no” to children who are used to getting almost everything they want? While I realize that none of us set out to raise our children with a sense of entitlement, I’ve also observed that many of us, having greater resources than our parents, have delighted to give our children many of the things and opportunities that we weren’t afforded. The question then becomes how, now that they are getting older, do we teach them that they can’t always get what they want, that many times you have to work and wait for things of value, and that happiness doesn’t come from getting what you want but from wanting what you have? These are hard questions that many parents struggle with and there are no easy answers.

How do we say “no” to ourselves when our credit cards make it so incredibly easy to say “yes.” Credit cards, by their very nature, proclaim the goodness, not of delayed gratification, but of delayed payment. Little wonder that one of the greatest problems most families struggle with is credit card debt and that some economists say the potential future default on those debts may dwarf the housing-mortgage crisis from which we are just beginning to emerge.

How do we say “no” to the distractions that pull us away from our quiet time with the Lord? We are admonished to “Be still and know that I am God.” In her book, *Creating Calm in the Center of Crazy*, Nicole Johnson tells this story: Roughly twenty-five years ago, I participated in a silent retreat with Bennan Manning. It was the opportunity of a lifetime, and I was grateful to get to do it, but it almost killed me! I’m not kidding. I felt lost and ineffective for five hours, uncertain of what I was supposed to be doing, which was nothing.

Throughout my schooling, I maintained a 4.0 for talking, so not using one of my strongest gifts seemed wrong. I felt panicked and anxious over what others must be doing with it! When the retreat was finally over, I was joyfully relieved to get back to talking. I remember talking nonstop to anyone who would listen to me about why extroverts should never participate in silent retreats!

Yet she goes on to state that she has never talked to anyone who thought that getting still was a bad idea or practice. But setting aside the time to do it is difficult for most of us. I am still working on this practice even though I know how essential this quiet time with God is for my soul. I want it and I need it and someday I am distracted by other things and don't achieve it. It is especially difficult for me when I'm in Lakewood because there are so many people and things to do that call me away. I fail and then I try to do better the next day. With God's help, I keep striving for the goal of daily times of devotion and prayer.

Johnson writes that being still is priceless. We call something priceless when it cannot be replaced. We call something priceless when its worth exceeds the value of money, because money cannot provide it. Stillness...has brought things into my life that could not have come in through any other door... She names them as a deeper knowledge of self, a deeper knowledge of God, and a created center of calm.

As she continues she affirms: I know that it is difficult and seemingly impossible to set aside time to be alone and quiet. And yet, I hope I've made the case that the reward for doing so will bring more benefit than the skipping of it ever will. I can't overstate the help, the health, the calm, the value stillness has brought to my life. For me, there has been no substitute, then or now, that can produce the same result in my life. Learning to be still and quiet inside my own

soul has created what I had only dreamed of: a center of calm.

How do we say no to the addiction of alcohol or drugs? This passage from Romans sound like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. “Hi, my name is Paul, and I’m a sinner.”

“Hi, Paul!”

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (v. 15). After six chapters of complex theological thinking, suddenly Paul speaks in the first person and describes the inner struggle of every heart. “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (v. 19). We are shocked and relieved by this risky self-disclosure. Paul can seem so perfect, so demanding, so holier-than-thou. Finally, he has put all of his cards on the table; he is a flawed and failed person, just like the rest of us.

Paul lays bare the state of the human soul when it comes to sin: try as we might, we cannot help ourselves. Unlike small children, who cannot be held responsible for their actions due to ignorance, we are fully capable of distinguishing between right and wrong. We know what to do; we just cannot seem to do it.

What is worse is that the closer we get to choosing the right, the greater seems the temptation to sin. Paul says, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.” (v. 21). These days, the landscape is littered with public figures who have fallen from grace. We even take some kind of perverse pleasure in watching the righteous get their comeuppance. It cheers us to see the proud publicly humbled.

Maybe this is why this passage in Romans can remind us of an AA meeting—the humility. As some of you are aware, I have struggled with alcoholism in my family in the past and continue that struggle today. It appears that there is nothing

magical about the AA model; it is really quite simple. You admit you are powerless in the face of your addiction. You surrender yourself to a higher power. You confess your mistakes and find welcome and support in the company of others. Small victories are celebrated, and life is lived one day at a time. As one person who is twenty-five years sober, puts it “I’m not going to drink today. Tomorrow, I might, but not today.”

In eleven short verses first Paul assures us that doing the right thing apart from God’s grace is a losing battle. It is not that we are simply weak or lazy or not trying hard enough. We all struggle with trying our best to do what we know we should do but failing, time after time. There are forces at work in us which cause this to happen. The will may be strong, but the flesh rules the day.

The second thing Paul assures us is that we are not alone in this struggle; everyone is engaged in the same hopeless battle. Although we might appear to have it all together and wish to keep our struggles private, we can’t really say that our motto is “Never let ‘em see you sweat”; because God knows the truth and so does Paul: we are all sweating. Each one of us may be reluctant to confess our failures and face our sins because each of us may believe that we are the worst offenders. Then along comes Paul, like some sort of psychic, who accurately diagnoses the state of every soul. Yes, we are a mess, but so is everyone else. Hallelujah!

Finally, so much of this passage focuses on the universal human failure to resist temptation and the power of sin that it is easy to get carried away. Certainly there are enough examples in our own lives and in the surrounding culture to create an unending litany of failure, some of it tragic and some of it hilarious. So it is essential not to lose track of the last three verses: “Wretched man that I am!

Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Paul’s heart felt cry helps us examine why the self cannot rescue itself from sin. It follows from Paul’s argument that the self cannot heal the distorted relationship, cannot cure its self-centeredness by yet more self-assertion. The self’s very apparatus for converting its good intentions into good deeds is infected by the futility of self-centeredness, and, in a curious way, straining at the levers of will-power just draws the self further away from God.

In the film *A Beautiful Mind*, the brilliant but psychotic mathematician John Nash assures his psychiatrist that he will deploy his analytic skills to cure his own illness. “You can’t reason your way out of this,” his doctor replies, “because your mind is where the problem is in the first place!” Exactly, Paul says, the self by itself can neither enact its good intentions nor heal its relationship with God. It can only be rescued from without.

Paul’s cry brings us back to grace: “Thanks Be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” If Paul’s bad news is that the self is trapped and cannot rescue itself, Paul’s good news is that God intervenes to rescue the self through Jesus. We can compare Paul’s argument to the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The human’s cry of desperation (v.24) is the cry of “bottoming out,” of “step 1,” admitting that he or she is powerless over sin. The human’s cry of joy (v. 25) is the cry of “step 2,” coming to believe that “a greater power than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” God’s grace “restores us to sanity,” drawing us back to God-centered salvation. Paul does not simply diagnose the sin-sick state of our souls; he names the cure! Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Amen.