

Our failures to be good have not made us “bad.”

3rd Sunday in Lent, Yr. B. March 19, 2006. (Text: Romans 7:13-8:2.)

The Ten Commandments are very popular in America. There are about 4,000 public displays of them in various places around the country, including the Supreme Court building and the Library of Congress. There's one here in Aspen, in Conner Park. Zeal for the Commandments runs high among us, but our zeal is diluted by ignorance. Two years ago a poll showed that nearly 80% of Americans oppose removing displays of the Ten Commandments from government buildings, even though a later survey showed that fewer than 10% can name more than four of them. —I wonder which four commandments people know? The poll didn't say. Apparently it's more important to post them in public than to try to remember them.

Most people say that the function of the Ten Commandments is to provide moral guidance, to help us know the difference between right and wrong. They say the Commandments show us what behavior to punish and what behavior to reward. They say the Commandments cause us to have a better, more moral society. Those are modern answers, not Biblical answers, since they ignore God. The Biblical answer is different: the Commandments revealed the will of God to Israel. They identify the kind of behavior that was meant to set Israel apart from the nations around them and mark them as God's own people. The Commandments were about holiness — about being holy as God is holy. To keep God's Law is to belong to God.

But even if we go, for the moment, with a modern interpretation of the function of the Commandments, we're confronted with a problem. Laws won't make society “good” because Laws can't make *us* “good.” Being told the difference between right and wrong won't necessarily lead us to make more choices for good than for evil, though fear of punishment might keep us from blatant evils like murder and robbery. Knowledge of the Law will, however, make us conscious that we're mired in moral failure. It's one thing to know the Law, but something else to *keep* it!

St. Paul was a great example of somebody who tried *really hard* to keep the Law —not just the Ten Commandments, but every one of the six hundred-odd precepts of God's Law that the Pharisees counted. Paul tried and failed.

We heard this from him a few minutes ago: *“I don't understand my own actions,”* he wrote. *“For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ...I can will what is right, but I can't do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do! ...I find it to be a law that when I want to do good, evil lies close at hand.”* Then he talked about a war that was going on inside him. He said, *“I delight in the law of God in my mind, but I see in [myself] another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin.”* Paul knew his mind to be a battlefield between the “Law of God” and the “law of sin” —between the principles of good and the power of evil.

And it appears that the law of sin was winning most of the battles. Paul felt like a moral failure, and it left him depressed.

We're not too different from Paul. All of us can tell some version of the same story. This operates on every moral level. To choose a very “soft” example, the sort I can talk about from the pulpit, have you ever decided that you were going to control your temper and always give a mild answer when someone provokes you? —I've made that resolution repeatedly, but every time I do, someone manages to “get to me,” and I *lose* it! My temper returns with an embarrassing vengeance, and I angrily blurt out something I shouldn't say. --Especially to a parishioner!

It's impossible for us to single-handedly overcome the inclination to make bad choices: ...the inclination to vengefulness, ...the inclination to make other people do things our way, ...the inclination to grab as much as we can for ourselves, and to heck with the other guys.

Christians don't take their spiritual and moral standards from the latest public opinion polls, but from what God has revealed to us. We aim at a higher standard than the "wisdom of the world." The world won't accept our standards, because our standards are impractical and politically unwise.

Take just the last of the Ten Commandments as an example: "*You shall not covet...*" How can we follow that commandment and cheerfully promote a global culture based on consumerism? Consumerism utilizes greed and envy. It works by persuading people to *covet* products and services they don't *need*.

The values of Jesus take us even further than the Ten Commandments. He sets the bar higher. He says, "*If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also. Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*"

The world tells us that Jesus' standards are utopian and unworkable. Maybe so. Jesus also says "*if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.*" — "Don't refuse a loan to anyone who wants to borrow from you"!? Who could run a bank (or any business) like that? Jesus was so unrealistic. — The question is: How many Christians have the courage to say that the world is wrong and Jesus is right?

Within all humanity, there's a tendency to evil. I don't think we're naturally depraved (John Calvin's opinion to the contrary notwithstanding). We're God's good creation, formed with potential for holiness. But what we might call "the option for evil" has become a habit for our species. We can recognize the highest good. We can set fine moral standards for ourselves and name the right things to do; but we can't make ourselves *do* them. — So, like Paul, we find a war going on within ourselves: "*The good that I want to do I do not do, but the evil that I do not want to do is what I do.*" Then Paul adds, "*Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this?*" He knew he needed help. And we need help too.

The message of Jesus is not law but *grace*, not punishment for rule-breaking but forgiveness and hope. The two verses from Romans that follow the part we have in today's Second Lesson are crucial ones for us to hear. I can't imagine why they were omitted except that they're the first two verses of the next chapter. Why don't you take out your bulletin and let's read out loud together the last few lines of the passage from Romans, beginning with "*Wretched man that I am...*" and then I'll read what comes next. — "[But] *there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit, the law of life in Christ Jesus, has set me free from the law of sin and death.*" [Rom. 8:1-2]

The Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, the Sermon on the Mount... all of these show us right from wrong. And all of them convict us of failure and sin. We can recognize good, but we can't do it. — The Good News, the authentic Good News, is that *our failures to be good have not made us "bad."*

Lent, the season for self-examination and repentance, for cleansing our consciences the way Jesus cleansed the Temple, can sometimes leave us feeling like losers if we take the process seriously. We haven't lived up to our own highest standards. But in Christ we find forgiveness for our failures, mercy when we need it, and hope in times when our own guilty consciences might tell us we're not entitled to it.

God's holiness is what it has always been, and the Law is there to show us when we've gone astray. But for those of us who've learned, as we said in the Collect for today, "*that we have no power within ourselves to help ourselves*" our guilt is swallowed up in God's mercy, through Jesus, whose love saves us from self-condemnation, whose death on the cross has atoned for our sin, and whose Spirit sets us free.