

An Expanded View of Sin and Grace
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Romans 7:14-25

In the seventh chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul wrestles with his own spirituality. He notices that the good he wants to do is not always what he is able to do. Paul confronts the great complexity of being human. Today I want to look at the things we have always been taught about sin and grace. I want to encourage us to expand our thinking about our spirituality. I suspect we have limited our focus to sin and forgiveness and we have missed many other important gifts that came to us from God.

If you are as old as I am, you no doubt remember a prayer like this:

We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed, by thought, word, and deed, against thy divine majesty. We do earnestly repent and are heartily sorry for these our misdoings and the remembrance of them is grievous unto us.

One theologian talked about total depravity. He meant that we were so flawed by sin that we were utterly helpless. That is not a doctrine I affirm.

Please don't get me wrong, sin is real and we do do things that offend God. It is appropriate to take responsibility for those things and to seek God's forgiveness. Just as there are times when we offend one another, it is good to acknowledge those difficult experiences and seek ways to rebuild our relationships. But Borg states, and I agree, that we do it far too often and we do it to the exclusion of other biblical truths.

There are times when our relationship with God suffers for reasons other than our assertion of our own power. Sometimes it suffers because we fail to use the power that God has given us. The medieval church called this "sloth," and one modern theologian called it "leaving things to the snake." Both images are meant to encourage us to live our lives as the gifts that they are and accept responsibility. Maybe once a month or so we should pray Nelson Mandela's prayer:

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear

is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

I think there are times when we need to push ourselves to be more assertive and use the gifts we have been given.

The Bible is about a lot more than sin and forgiveness. One of the first major stories in the Bible has nothing to do with sin and forgiveness. The story I have in mind here is the story of the exodus. Israel is not held captive in Egypt because they have sinned. Israel is held captive in Egypt because Pharaoh is a villain. He wants cheap labor to make bricks.

The story of Exodus is the story of liberation. God sees a people enslaved, and God acts to set them free. The story of God as liberator has always been powerful. Maybe once a month or so we should all ask God to give us the power to stand up to and challenge the authority of the Pharaohs in our lives.

I hope you don't have a boss who simply wants to bleed you dry. Who uses the paycheck to extract more and more while giving less and less. If you do, then you know who your pharaoh is and asking God for the power to stand up for yourself is righteous and holy.

I hope you don't live with someone who physically abuses you or who uses emotional cruelty to manipulate you. But if you do, you know who your Pharaoh is and may God give you strength to seek your freedom.

Maybe your Pharaoh is an inner Pharaoh, and you hear the harsh voice of constant criticism. Maybe you are your own worst enemy. Maybe you need to rebel against your own driven nature and accept yourself for the good person you already are.

Maybe once a month or so we should sing the second half of the first verse

of the great hymn of the Civil Rights movement, “Lift Every Voice and Sing”:

**Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.**

It does not matter who your Pharaoh is -- God wants your liberation. Maybe once a month we should have a call to a holy rebellion not against God but against all the Pharaohs.

There is another major part of the Bible where the divine human relationship is not defined by sin and forgiveness. People who live in exile search for a path home, and God makes that possible. The story comes from the time when Israel is conquered and many people are deported. Their grief is expressed in the Psalmist who asks “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137)

Some of us experience a physical exile. Concord is filled with refugees who cannot go home because of political and civil unrest in their homeland. And praise God for Carol Harris and her willingness to help these folks make this strange land their home. Sometimes we have to move for a job. Or maybe we have to move because we have no job. It is hard to get used to a new city and a new state.

We all experience emotional exiles. Someone we love dies and then no matter where we go we do not feel at home in the world without our loved one. Or maybe we have done something, and the guilt is powerful that we cannot accept ourselves and we dread the consequences of our actions. I know someone who was so rich he had homes all over the world. But strangely enough, he didn’t feel at home in any of them.

There are times when what we need most from God is neither forgiveness for our sins or strength to fight our enemies. There are times when we most need a path back to normal, even a new normal. What Israel wanted most from God during their exile was a return to their old homeland. But what God gave them was a spiritual transformation. In the exile, they ceased to be a people of the land and became a people who loved the law and prayed with great vitality.

Maybe once a month or so we should pray with Paul Simon: “I wish I were homeward bound.” Once a month, we should pray the serenity prayer with Reinhold Niebuhr.

**God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.**

**Living one day at a time;
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;
Taking, as He did, this sinful world
as it is, not as I would have it;
Trusting that He will make all things right
if I surrender to His Will;
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with Him
Forever in the next.
Amen.**

Well, if you have sinned and need forgiveness you are in the right place. But remember there is more to our spiritual sojourn. If you are timid and in need of being built up, Grace is here for you. If you are threatened by a villain, the liberating power of God is here, and if you feel lost and spiritually homeless, God’s grace can become your home.

Amen