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*The Struggle*  
*Romans 7:15-25*

*15 I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*

*16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.*

*17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

*18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.*

*19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*

*20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

*21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand.*

*22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self,*

*23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.*

*24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

*25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Some people say it's the *most challenging word we have, and it's only 2 Letters!*

Can you guess what it is?

It's a *tiny* word with *awesome power and consequence*..... the word "NO".

Who wants to hear that word, NO?

Do you want to hear it?

No...you can't *do that*.

No..you don't *need that*.

No..you can't *have that*.

No..that's not *good for you*.

No...that's the *wrong choice*.

**No, no, no.**

The problem is... we DO want to *do* that...and *have* that...

And *make the wrong* choices, don't we?

We *have made* the wrong choices!

When my niece *Audrey* was little, she stood in front of an outlet saying “Noooo”, just like she’s heard a million times before from her parents, but still she reached out and put her finger in it anyway!

It’s hard to hear *No in a world of Yes*, isn’t it?

I mean, we hear all day long from the world just how much we need certain things...*you deserve this, you need this, you should choose this, right now.*

*Call* in the next 15 minutes,  
and you’ll receive this for just two low payments of \$19.99.

The *first 10 callers* will receive the discount.

*This sale* is only good through today!

They even put the *candy* in the grocery checkout lanes....

all because we want to say yes,  
when we should say no!

I mean, most of us want *what* we want, *when* we want it, right?

And we usually want it *now*!

*No is difficult in a world of Yes.*

In a world where our *kids* are told  
that they *need* the latest greatest *toys*---right now!

In a world where *adults*  
are lured by the latest greatest toys as well—  
the latest computers, phones, gadgets, homes, cars, clothes....

*Saying no, is hard in a world where it’s just so easy to say yes.*

Maybe the hardest circumstance is with our *money*.

A lot of people don't carry cash anymore.

Most people *use plastic for almost everything* ...

which means that we have the option of *just charging it on a credit card...*

*buy now, pay later*....much more, much later.

*We* have a hard time saying no, don’t we?

And our *society* is the same way.

NO—is hard to *hear*,

hard to *say*,

hard to *act on*.

It’s such a *powerful* little word in 2 letters: NO.

But **WHY?**

**WHY is it so hard?**

Paul describes it in Romans 7:

*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*

Can you relate to that?

Remember the cartoon characters **Tom and Jerry?**

Tom with that little devil and angel on his shoulder....

and he gives in to all the little devil ideas?

**Reformed theology**, of which Presbyterianism is a part,  
Acknowledges this sinful nature.

In other words, we are going to say yes even when we should say no.

Some have called this total **depravity**,  
which sounds really awful and serious...**and it is.**

**Our situation is not good.**

Which is exactly why we **need Jesus** Christ!

It's why the Good News is **SO GOOD!**

Because on our own,

**we can try** to do good....

but we **default to the bad** much of the time....

which puts our lives in a bad place...

**unless we turn to our Savior Jesus,**

who **died** on the cross to save us from our sins,

and has given us **new life---freedom** from all our failures.

In fact, we are given a **clean slate** every time

we approach His throne of grace...

What could be better than that?

And yet, sometimes we think we don't need Jesus,

Sometimes we think we just need to **know the rules.**

That we should just **turn to the law,**

and God has given us Law in the Bible.

We have the **10 commandments,**

we have Jesus telling us the **Greatest Commandment,**

But the *Law* is like a *double edged sword*.

It's purpose is to *bring life*.

God created the rules in order to keep us *safe*, and help us *live life fully*.

*It's to our benefit* to follow God's laws, right?

*But can God's law save us?*

Paul is pretty sure that we can't rely on that...

because we have this *angel AND devil* on our shoulder,

and the little devil has such great ideas,

and enticing suggestions,

So we think, *what's the harm* in following that a little bit?

Ever read *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis?

It is perhaps the greatest work on this struggle—

it's the Devil writing to his little nephew a junior devil,

about how to turn Christians away from God!

Boy can you find yourself in those pages---it's funny, and convicting!

*We all have this struggle--The good we want is not what we do,*

we do the evil we don't want to do.

It's our human condition.

Frederick *Buechner*, one of my favorite Presbyterian theologians, once said:

*If there is a terror about darkness because we cannot see, there is also a terror about light because we CAN see. There is a terror about light because much of what we see in the light about ourselves and our world we would rather not see, would rather not be seen.*

*God's law can lead to life,*

but it can also lead to death,

because *we can't seem to obey it on our own*.

When we look in the mirror,

And we are exposed to the light,

it's often *not very pretty*.

I read about an experiment conducted by researcher Robert Cialdini, at the *Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona*.

The park had a problem, written across a big warning sign:

YOUR HERITAGE IS BEING VANDALIZED EVERY DAY BY THEFT,  
LOSSES OF PETRIFIED WOOD OF 14 TONS A YEAR,  
MOSTLY A SMALL PIECE AT A TIME.

The sign was supposed to appeal to our *moral compass*.  
And Cialdini wanted to know if that really happened,  
so he put *little loose pieces* of petrified wood along many of the trails,  
and on some trails they posted *a WARNING* to not steal,  
but other trails had *NO signs* at all.

*Can you guess what happened?*

The trails that HAD the *written warning signs* had about *three times MORE* theft  
than those trails without signs.

Cialdini was curious about whether the law, the signs, had two effects.

One would be:

*Wow, I should be careful, they are losing so much of this precious wood!*

But the other might be:

*Wow, the petrified wood is going fast—I'd better get mine now!*

Or: *Fourteen tons a year!? Surely it won't matter if I take a few pieces.*

Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Think Like a Freak* (William Morrow, 2014), pp 115-116

God's law, is designed to give us life,

But sometimes it leads us to do what we know we shouldn't do.

Kind of like the old slogan, *rules are made to be BROKEN!*

*So what can we do?*

As Paul's letters ask, are we supposed to just *abandon God's law?*

No, he says—the Law has a very important role.

It does *lead to a better life*.

But it also *reveals our need for God's grace*.

When you know what you're supposed to be doing,

but you can't seem to do it,

that's when you *realize how much you NEED God's help!*

That's when we know *we truly NEED Jesus*.

And we realize we don't need just a little bit of faith,

or just a touch of Jesus' way of life...

it's when we realize we *CANNOT DO life without Him!*

I read a commentary this week saying that Jesus is *not like protein-powder* in a smoothie. David Henshaw, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 3, pg. 230

He is *not a “moral boost”* for our lives.

Or something we need a touch of—or a little bit on Sunday.

***Jesus IS OUR LIFE.***

***And we need him—desperately.***

Remember **step 1** of the 12 steps of AA?

***Admit you are POWERLESS over your addiction, and your life has become unmanageable.***

Which leads to **step 2:**

***Believe that a POWER greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity.***

And **step 3:**

***Make a decision to TURN our will and our lives over to the care of God.***

***Paul could have written some of those 12 steps!***

We as Christians are supposed to realize what *bad shape* we're in,

how we make wrong choices all the time,

and we need ***Jesus to restore us*** to sanity, and ***take over*** our will and our lives!

Thankfully, that's exactly what Jesus came to do!

Romans 5:8 sums it up:

***But God demonstrates his love for us in this:***

***While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.***

Isn't that the Good News?

But sometimes, we look at our choices ***like a bank account:***

As long as we make ***more good decisions*** or deposits,

than sins or withdrawals, it's ok.

But is that ***all that God wants*** for us?

And ***is our salvation dependent*** upon our good choices?

I sure hope not!

That's ***works-salvation***, where we ***earn*** our way to God.

Which is the ***opposite*** of the Gospel—

We believe in God's grace, not our good works!

Good works are something that happen out of ***gratitude***

for the salvation we receive,

Good works are NOT our scorecard to heaven!

In reality, we make withdrawals, and sin, a lot...  
and then God steps in and ***closes the account*** for good.  
Then God opens an ***entirely new account*** for us,  
this time it's in ***Jesus' name***.

Adapted from David Rich, *7 Biblical Truths You Won't Hear in Church* (Harvest House, 2006), p. 37

Whew! That's great!  
We ***don't have to rely*** upon our own choices,  
we ***don't have to earn*** our way to heaven,  
we ***don't have to pretend*** we are good.  
We can ***strive*** for the best, but know that when we fail,  
we can go straight to Jesus,  
and receive ***His amazing grace***.  
Which helps us choose better next time!

Lately we've heard on the news lots of rip tide warnings about the Jersey Shore.  
John Ortberg tells a story about his friend, Jimmy, and his son, Davey, who were  
playing in the ocean in Mexico,

And ***a rip tide swept them both out to sea***.

They were too far away from shore for their screams to be heard.

Jimmy, a strong swimmer, was powerless against the current. He thought to  
himself, *My wife and daughters are going to have to have a double funeral*.

That's when a cousin saw what was happening and went out to a sandbar.

***He knew that fighting against the rip tide can kill you.***

You can't just start swimming back to the shore....

Instead you have to swim ***parallel*** to it.

So his cousin stood on the sandbar and yelled '***come to me***'.

The two finally got to safety.

John Ortberg, in the sermon *The Way of Wisdom*, PreachingToday.com

***What if that's a picture of God—saying come to me,  
when we're caught in the rip tide of sin?***

Isn't that what ***Jesus is saying in our Gospel today in Matthew 11?***

***Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens,  
and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am  
gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.***

I love those verses.

They speak to me when I am *stressed* out,  
and when I've made *bad choices*.

Because in both cases, I experience a *heavy burden*.

And Jesus offers *rest*.

That's the choice before us—

we can *try to make it on our own goodness*,  
and fight against the rip tide of sin.

OR we can realize that *God is reaching out to us through Jesus*,

Saying, *come to me*.

*I'll give you rest*.

*I'll give you life*.

*You can make good choices because I will live in you*.

Paul puts it this way in Romans 7:

*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*

*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ!*

*It's all about God at work in us*.

It's about having our hearts and lives *taken over by Jesus*,

instead of relying on ourselves,

*that is our Hope*.

The late South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu said

that his favorite Bible verse is Romans 5:8, because it sums up the Gospel.

He says, *We think we have to impress God so that God could love us*.

*But God says, "No, you are loved already, even at your worst."*

Tutu said that his outlook on life is *based in Hope*.

Not optimism, but real hope.

He told Time magazine, *I'm not optimistic, no. I'm quite different. I'm hopeful*.

*I am a prisoner of hope. In the world, you have some very bad people...and they look like they are going to win.*

*All of them—all of them—have bitten the dust."*

"10 Questions," Time magazine (3-22-10), p. 4

The truth is that *evil does not ultimately win*.

It *looks* that way sometimes, this side of heaven.



And all throughout the Bible, especially in the *Psalms*, people lament the *seeming good fortune* of bad people.

But because of Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection—  
*death and sin do NOT win.*

*In the end, what wins is God's love and grace.*

We have the *victory*,  
whether we can see that right now or not,  
*we are victorious over the little devil* sitting on our shoulders!

*So* how can we learn to *SAY NO*, when we want to say yes?  
How can we *help one another say no*, in a world of Yes?

What if the answer is found in an old story, whose author is unknown...

*A grandfather was talking to his grandson.*

*"Grandson," he said, "there are **two wolves** living in my heart and they are at **war** with each other.*

*One is vicious and cruel,  
the other is wise and kind."*

*"Grandfather," said the alarmed grandson,  
"which one will win?"*

*The grandfather paused and said,  
"The one I FEED."*

**Which one will we feed?**

May we all feed the good side,  
by *filling ourselves with Jesus Christ.*  
With His words and His way of life!  
That is our *Good News* of the Gospel.  
And for that, all God's people said together, Amen.