

When We Fail

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About two weeks ago, scores of people made New Year's resolutions again this year, most involving some intended change to their life or the way they live it. And from what I am told, statistically speaking right around now a majority of those people have since failed to honor to their resolutions, with all the usual feelings of guilt and shame. Coming face-to-face with our own imperfections can be hard enough, but trying and failing to correct our flaws can be even more discouraging. The question is: how do we react to such things?

Many years ago, Paul wrote about his own struggles with his sinful nature and his desire (and human inability) to obey all of God's laws. In Romans 7:7-8:4, Paul talks about his experience. He begins by saying that as he learned God's commandments, his sinful nature took advantage of the opportunity to concoct all sorts of desires to violate those commandments. Learning all the things that he shouldn't do only made him want to do them all the more.

Then starting in verse 14, Paul begins a narrative that can be heart-wrenching to read. He says that he often finds himself doing not the good things he wants to do, but the evil things he hates. He says that he has the desire to do good, but cannot carry it out. When I read this passage, I can almost hear the frustration in his voice as he considers the struggle between his zeal to serve God and his quintessentially human sinful nature. In his discussion of these things, Paul draws an interesting distinction: he says that when he does things that he does not want to do, that is not he who does them, but sin living in him. He draws the reader's attention to a distinction between his inner spiritual desire to obey God and his carnal inclination for

disobedience. Paul explicitly notes that there are not one, but two conflicting natures at work within him and I get the impression that sometimes Paul would like to be rid of this irritating human nature so that he can follow the spiritual desires of his heart without interference. In these verses Paul not only admits his own imperfection, but also his inability to conquer all his flaws and become perfectly obedient to God no matter how hard he tries. I think we can all identify with an ongoing internal struggle to do good rather than evil, and also with frequent failure. I like the way Paul states it verse 21: "When I want to do good, evil is right there with me" and later "I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin."

The intensity of Paul's internal struggle is clear, but in my opinion one of the most important aspects of this narrative is sort of hiding in plain sight - that is that Paul didn't let feelings of shame or guilt about his shortcomings cause him to withdraw from God or the community of faith. Remember, Paul wrote this letter to the Romans after his conversion and in the midst of his incredible missionary activities. We know that he didn't give up and go home after writing this. These are not the words of a man who ultimately concluded that trying to do good is futile. And Paul did not leave the church to try to hide from God or his fellow believers, hoping they wouldn't see his flaws or realize that he sometimes disobeyed God. When you think about it, it's a silly notion anyway: as if God does not know it all already!

Paul wasn't advocating hypocrisy either; it's just that he kept in mind that grace through Jesus Christ, not adherence to the law, was the key. Chapter 8 begins a much more uplifting tone in which Paul explains that the law, while certainly holy and good, was powerless to free him from sin and death because it is not humanly possible to always obey it. So instead Jesus Christ was sent as a sin offering, making atonement for the multitude of all our sins. Through Christ,

we are forgiven our flaws and failures and welcomed into the arms of God just as we are. Faith in Christ, not perfection according to the law, is the key. The law rightly condemns sin, but as Paul wrote "There is no condemnation for those for those who are in Christ Jesus."

To conclude, to be human is to be imperfect. Even in our Christian life, we will make frequent mistakes. We will sometimes want to do good and find ourselves doing instead things that we hate. It's only natural that we feel guilty or ashamed when we do something that we know we shouldn't; and since we can't just stop being flawed and start being perfect, those feelings are going to visit us from time-to-time. The point is that the proper response to feelings of shame or guilt is not to hide from God or withdraw from the community of faith. Quite the contrary! God knows we aren't perfect and doesn't expect us to be; that is why he sent His only Son to die for us after all. He knew we couldn't possibly live up to the divine standard set by the law, so Jesus freed us from it. And He accepts us just as we are, forgiving all our failures and flaws. I can't say it any better than Paul when he wrote that "through Jesus Christ the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death." How blessed we are to be loved so much!