

Romans 7:7-25 (Matthew 11:25-30) – 6 July 2014

Here's a question for you this morning – how do you make someone good? What factors do you need to be able to lead a good life? It's a fundamental question isn't it – goes to the heart of what it means to be human. How do we lead the good life? How do we raise our children to be good? Huge subject – if you were to ask people today, you might get these kinds of answers:

Education: people need to know what's right and wrong. If you play catch with a young child, natural for them to start throwing all kinds of things: not just soft balls, but the TV remote, a stone from the garden, a china ornament. It's all a game isn't it? The only way they learn what is acceptable to throw and what isn't is by telling them. 'Don't throw that priceless Wedgwood figurine, stick to the sponge ball.'

But then what happens if they throw the priceless Wedgwood figurine? We need more than education, we also need **punishment** when those boundaries are crossed. That's what the naughty step is for – or whatever we need – to get the point across that you throw *this* but you don't throw *that*. At the societal level: for naughty step, read our judicial system. That's what it's *for*, isn't it? The punishment fits the crime – in other words, to make you behave well, these are things you should not do, and if you do them, then you will receive this proportionate punishment. The law is there to enforce good behaviour, isn't it?

But then, you have two children – let's say twin brothers: one is a cheeky, likeable fellow, the other is quiet and awkward. The cheeky likeable fellow throws the priceless Wedgwood figurine, but does so in such a funny way, that you think it's endearing. Then the surly awkward child copies him, and you get cross and tell him off. You punish one child and not the other. So you need more than just education and appropriate punishment, you need **consistent enforcement of boundaries**: otherwise some children might grow up believing they have a better chance of getting away with stuff than others. (e.g. of watching teenagers with toddler on the bus in London)

But it's obvious from the history of the last century that even with universal access to education, a huge body of law and enforcement of punishments, that human beings aren't getting much better. So how do you make people good? Here's some more ideas:

- **Coercion:** you make people good by forcing them to be. Increasingly popular in our modern society, where you can get punished for just about anything nowadays. That's why we have more than 4 million CCTV cameras in UK: the message is – *we know*. So just *don't*.
- **Therapy:** you understand the triggers that make you do wrong things and re-learn. It's a form of education, but it aims to work at a deeper, almost subconscious level. A form of re-wiring, if you like.
- Alongside that, there's **medical intervention**. Certain drugs are now used to control forms of behaviour that make people do reckless or even wrong things.
- Perhaps in the future, and this is already starting to be discussed, we will manipulate certain genes which seem to be likely to cause people to do wrong, trying to **re-engineer** people to be better. Already starting this with those at risk of physical problems: why not moral ones too?

Most effective – though most deceptive – is simply to **lower our moral standards** so fewer things are wrong. Dutch client in my old job joked: ‘no crime in Holland, we’ve legalised everything’

Question is: are we getting any better? Can you educate, force or engineer people to be good? How can we be good?

Goes right to heart of passage today – Romans 7. In ch6 Paul has just said that we have been set free from being slaves to sin, and are now slaves to righteousness. It’s an emotive image, but if God is going to be our master now, the next question is the million dollar one. How are we going to be righteous?

If you were a good Jew – as Paul was, and as some of his readers would have been in the small church community in Rome – the answer was obvious. Obey the Jewish law. That was what God gave his people as the way to live. Follow those and you’ll be OK. Obey the law.

But there’s just one small problem with that: it doesn’t work! We simply can’t do it. The history of God’s people made that abundantly clear, and Paul spent the first part of Romans hammering that point home. Having described the morally licentious life of the average pagan in detail, he starts ch2 by saying: READ 2:1: and then goes on in the rest of ch2 to say that even good Jews don’t obey the law either. Jesus made the point just as clearly in another way, with the Pharisees. Even if they obeyed most of the outward rules and regulations, their hearts were corrupt. Hence Paul in Philippians could describe his own legalistic righteousness as faultless, but also call himself the ‘worst of sinners’ in Timothy. He fell into the trap of the Pharisee: externally good, but internally corrupt. So the damning conclusion of Romans 3:9: READ. And therefore: READ 3:20.

So what’s going on? How do we get out of this conundrum? How can we be good? How can we live righteously? We’ll get to Paul’s glorious answer in ch8. But before then, we have to go through ch7 to understand *why* a bit better. Why didn’t the law work as it should have done? Why can’t people obey it? 613 rules: 248 pos, 365 neg – comprehensive, practised for centuries, reflected on by the wisest holy people of every age. What’s wrong with the Law?

The answer is that **the problem is not the law, it’s us**: it’s what’s inside us. This is the heart of the problem: the real problem is our sin – in other words, our instinctive selfishness and rebellion against God. So Paul starts: READ v7a. What does he mean by that? ‘I would not have known what sin was except through the law’ (compare with 3:20). Here he finally explains fully what he hints at in 3:20: READ v7b-8.

You can see what he’s saying here? There’s something in us that instinctively rebels against God’s commands. So as soon as we get a good command like: ‘Don’t envy’ we immediately start thinking of all those people who have done better than us, or got more than us, or have something we really want. It’s just there in us. And to be honest, we’ve all seen it – anyone who’s a parent has seen this hundreds of times. What’s the best way to make a child touch something they shouldn’t? Say ‘don’t touch that.’ As soon as you say it, it becomes an object of fascination.

Anyone who’s parented toddlers sees what happens when this lovely little baby starts to exert their will. My curate friend: ‘Showing all signs of doctrine of original sin.’ But it’s true isn’t it? Two words you never have to teach a child are ‘No’ and ‘Mine’. And how many of us actually train our

children to sin? How many of us say to our child one day: 'son/daughter, it's time, time you learnt how to sin. We'll start with lying and take it from there.' Where does it come from? It's just *there*.

What we hit on here is what my curate friend joked about – doctrine of original sin i.e. that ever since human beings walked the earth (Adam and Eve) we choose to go our own way: and every person in every generation repeats that choice. Don't have to believe like Augustine that it was passed on through the procreative act, but however that choice is made, we all *do* make it.

Modern science backs it up:

Evolutionary theory – (Darwin – survival of fittest = best adapted) Dawkins 'Selfish Gene' – our genes do whatever they can to ensure own survival.

Freud – narcissism (1914) – backed up by modern science. Baby has to be utterly self-centred to survive – arrives in world less developed than most other mammals, completely dependent on others, and so it acts in order to get what it needs to live. (Disentangle emotion here, this is the scientific viewpoint!)

e.g. study of babies and music: BBC website 2012 – *Observations of babies indicate that they are born primed to expect that the world will be at their beck and call. After only 15 hours, they can distinguish their mother's voice and prefer it to that of strangers. Similarly with mother's smell and face. Other experiments demonstrate that the infant is calmed by hearing recordings of its own cry, and becomes upset at the crying of other babies. They like to hear the sound of their own, or their mother's, voice.*

This command-and-control mentality has been lent support by other ingenious research. In one experiment, an infant is trained in the delusion that it can turn music off and on. What happens is that when the infant is sucking, music turns off and on according to the rhythm of its sucking.

The child soon comes to assume that it can turn the music off and on by varying its sucking patterns. Only next, the experimenters turn the music off out of sync with the sucking. The sound fails to "obey" the child. The infant becomes distressed, crying and whimpering. His, or her, majesty has been defied.

I find that fascinating: but it makes the point that science and faith don't need to be in conflict with each other. Much science actually backs up what the bible is talking about. *What science is describing here in evolutionary terms is what theologians call original sin*. And it matters not just for the survival of our species, but because of how it affects our relationship with God. (Aside: task of every parent to nurture our children from that naturally selfish state to one where they can give to others and serve others. Interestingly, the article goes on to describe how being loved at the start of life sets up the child to be able to do that, as they start with a basic sense of emotional security. But it is really the task of our whole lives, isn't it – to go from that selfish state to living out what Jesus calls us: even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve. Agape – that's what it means – selfless service.

(But to go back to the passage,) And this is what Paul is talking about here: our basic instinct to disobey. And the result is that, as v10 says: READ. Nothing wrong with God's law. What's wrong is what's inside us: our selfishness.

Which produces a conundrum: once we become Christians, once we dedicate our lives to God, our challenge is to live the righteous life that he calls us to. But we now have two competing forces inside of us: READ v21-23. This struggle can often be bewildering: READ v15. And it leads to tremendous frustration as we try to obey God's law: READ v18b-19.

I love this passage, in fact I find great comfort from it. If *even* the apostle Paul struggled to live a good life, then there's hope for the rest of us. I love this passage because it is so true, so real: this is life as we experience it, isn't it? It's just wonderfully and beautifully honest! READ v18b-19. If any of you have tried to live as a Christian for any length of time, you must have cried at some point in utter frustration: READ v24. Well, even Paul did.

And I hope that as we've read it today and gone through it today, you're sat there thinking: yep, he's right. There's hope for me as well. Romans is a hard book, but if you can wade through the dense theology, it's so real as well. Paul just nails human nature. And in the next chapter, he goes on to describe, in what is probably the most awesome chapter of the whole bible, just how we do live the sort of life God wants us to: not by trying to be good in our own efforts, but by letting the Spirit of God empower us into a totally new kind of life. A life not of outward observance but inner transformation. A life empowered by God's love. READ 8:1b.

But that's for next week. For now, I just want to finish by reflecting on our culture. We've done so much damage to ourselves by cultivating this myth that we can all be good, we can all perfect ourselves. And so we create ever more oppressive laws and ever harsher punishments; we put up all our CCTV cameras and hold more and more information about people; we create huge tick-box processes and procedures to try and do everything right and find that it doesn't stop all the accidents, mistakes and just plain crimes any better than the old system. Perhaps saddest of all, I look at all the thousands of young people queueing up for X-Factor auditions desperate to be someone, to be famous, craving affirmation because we've told a whole generation that unless they're perfect and continually improving they're not good enough.

Our last school reports in Bristol a year ago – our kids got fantastic reports, as good as any parent could hope for. And we came out of school together and said how proud we were of them, and they said to us: 'what we can we do better?' And I thought, is that what our education system is doing to our kids? That by the age of 9, they're locked into this permanent cycle of never being good enough?

This is what happens when a whole culture lies about the reality of sin, of our human imperfections. Not that we want to embrace sin, but there is another response. The response our society used to make until the early 20th century. READ v24-25a. Understanding our sin is not an end in itself. Sin can do one of two things to us: it can destroy us, or throw us onto the mercy of God. The great news of the gospel is that there is hope: READ v25a. I want that for our culture again. I want that for our churches here. I want that for myself: our selfishness is not the only answer. READ Matt 11:28-29.

There is hope, and that hope is who we worship: READ v25a. Amen.