

David Novak, the CEO of Yum Brands, the parent company of Taco Bell, tells of a business meeting in Las Vegas. A violent lightening storm knocked out all the lights in their casino hotel. The generators kicked in, but they couldn't power the entire hotel. But one section came back to full power within a few minutes. Can you guess which section? Sure, it was the slot machines. The comfort of customers, entertainment, and good food all mattered to the hotel management. But they never forgot their core business. Gambling was where the money was, and they made sure nothing interrupted that.

I never forget the core ministry of this church. BVBC is a happening place. We have good programs, we make our space available for worthy causes, and, yes, we just keep a lot of plates spinning. Most of them are worthwhile and even necessary, but none of them is the core ministry of this church.

The core of what happens here is those unforced, unpredictable moments, when a person has an encounter with Christ. You heard an example of such an encounter on Easter Sunday, when Jeff Green told us his faith story. You'll hear other stories like that next Sunday at a service of baptism. Hundreds of such encounters give to this church its vibrancy and hope. I know only a small percentage of those stories. I don't need to know them all. But if I didn't hear stories like them routinely, I would fear the decline of this church into an insufferable religious club or clique.

Encounters with God can be explosive, as was the conversion of Paul in the Bible, or they can be as quiet as dust on a windowsill. I suspect they all begin as quiet as dust on a windowsill. They come in many varieties. One variety is shattering self-knowledge. I will start with a powerful example from English Literature and then turn to an even more powerful example from the letter to the Romans.

Self-knowledge

Jane Austen's *tour de force* is *Pride and Prejudice*. It tells the story of the Bennet family. The heroine is Elizabeth Bennet. The story's turning point is her moment of shattering self-knowledge. "She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. Of neither (person) could she think without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.

"How despicably have I acted . . . I, who have prided myself on my discernment! I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candor of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blameable distrust. How humiliating is this discovery! yet how just a humiliation! Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly . . . I have courted . . . ignorance, and driven reason away . . . Till this moment I never knew myself.'" (214-215)

The even more powerful example of self-knowledge comes Romans 7:7ff. The apostle's integrity in writing this passage is potent. Great men seldom expose their weaknesses the way he did here. Let's look together.

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Is the Law of God a bad thing? Is keeping moral rules a bad thing? **Certainly not!** Here comes the statement you don't want to miss. **Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law.** We all understand that. The law of God tells us how to behave. Most often, it tells us how not to behave. The quickest way to be sure that we will do what we shouldn't do is for someone to tell us not to do it. That, said Paul, is what happens when we really try to obey God's law.

Keep reading verse seven for specifics. **For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”** That’s the Tenth of the Ten Commandments. **Do not covet.** Do not yearn to possess. Verse eight: **But sin, the streak of lawlessness in each of us, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.** Elizabeth Bennet’s reaction to the revelation of lawlessness in her was to say, “Till this moment I never knew myself.” The apostle’s reaction to the revelation of lawlessness in him was to say in verse eleven: **For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.**

The most painful word in that verse is **deceived**. “I thought the Law of God was on my side, because I thought I was blameless. I thought I was **a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants** (Romans 2:19-20), but I was wrong, and the Law of God did it to me. The Law of God turned on me and exposed me as a lawbreaker. It discredited me in my own eyes and in the eyes of God. My moment of self-knowledge was a kind of death.”

Romans seven confesses some of the most realistic self-knowledge that you will hear. The most difficult part of the chapter is yet to come.

The Streak of Lawlessness

The Apostle Paul writing about himself in this chapter, but you may think he hacked into your private information. Verse 14 introduces the most difficult part of this chapter. **We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.** “When it comes to my insatiable covetousness, I am no better than one of the slaves I see on the auction block in the market square.” The apostle’s language may strike you as exaggerated, unless the knowledge of your own capacity for evil has overwhelmed you.

Years ago, I pastored a family whose husband and father was an alcoholic. He had been to rehab more than once, and at one time in his adult life he had gone eight years without a drink. And he fell off the wagon – again. I went to his home to visit. He was a pleasant man when he was sober. I don’t know what he was like when he was drunk.

We talked about his struggles with alcoholism. He professed quite sincerely his desire to stop drinking altogether. I decided I would offer to help him start again. I said, “Where do you keep your liquor?” He told me. I said, “Why don’t you get the bottles out and open them up, and I’ll help you pour them down the drain?” “Right now?” “Right now.” He couldn’t do it. He *couldn’t* do it. The habit had him in its grip.

Is it too much to say he was **a slave to sin**? And don’t you look down on that man, not even for a New York minute! What has you in its grip? It could be alcohol, drugs, sex, work, slander, video games, or Tinker Toys. The devil doesn’t care how he snares you. He just wants to make you his lackey.

The apostle got into his analysis of this spiritual bondage in verse 15. **I do not know what I am doing. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.** My guess is that you know from first hand experience what he was talking about. The apostle came back to the same idea at the end of verse 18. **I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.** Verse 19 is painful. **For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.** I don’t want you to miss the point here. There is something in every one of us that loves what is good. My friend, who couldn’t bring himself to let me help him pour his booze down the drain, knew what was

good. Something in him loved the idea of soberness. The apostle said the same thing in verse 22: **For in my inner being I delight in God's law.** But something else is at work that can override your love for the good. It's that strong, and it can do it when you least expect it. It's the moral self-contradiction at the core of who you are as a person.

This self-contradiction takes us into deep waters. When you are doing what you hate, it is tempting to say, "I'll try harder." But that's a trap, isn't it? Isn't trying harder where your self-knowledge came from in the first place? You knew what was good, and you tried hard to do it, and you didn't do it. You failed. No, you didn't just fail. You chose not to do it. You wanted to do something good and then deliberately refused to do it and instead you chose to do what you knew was bad. At times like that it is easy to say to yourself, "What's wrong with me?"

Here's how Paul put it. Verse 24: **What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?** It was not a confession of despair, but people in this frame of mind are trying to come to terms with the shattering self-knowledge that has come upon them. Is there a path forward? Verse 25 points to the path forward. **Thanks be to God – through our Lord Jesus Christ.** How do we get there?

The Path Forward

First, we permit the new self-knowledge to finish what it started. Verse 15 resonates with me: **what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.** I know what that's like all too well. But my moments of shattering self-knowledge have been more like that of Elizabeth Bennet: "Till this moment I never knew myself." Being exposed for what I really am leaves me feeling vulnerable. "How could I have missed that? How could I have been so blind? Is this the self that other people see? Have they been asking, 'What's wrong with him? Doesn't he know?'" What I couldn't see at first was how blessed I was to be exposed for what I really am. Here's what I mean.

Earlier in Romans the apostle wrote this: **Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance, and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?** The ancient prophet of Israel complained to God: **Why do you tolerate wrong?** – Habakkuk 1:3. The apostle of the Church answered: Because God is kind! **He is patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance** – 2 Peter 3:9.

If you have suddenly realized the power of evil in your soul, it could be the turning point in your life. Allow your new self-knowledge to point you to the kindness of God. He tolerated your folly for years. He is now calling you to repentance.

Repentance starts you on the new path forward. Repentance is not about trying harder. It's not about blaming someone else for your lawlessness. Repentance is about turning back to God. It is about taking responsibility before God for your lawlessness. You take that responsibility when you acknowledge the lawless streak in you and the behavior and the distance from God it causes. You could not do that any better than by saying, "Lord Jesus Christ, be merciful to me a sinner."

The gospel says that Christ died for your lawlessness, and God raised Him from the dead to bridge the distance between Him and you. The decisive turn back to God is when you believe that and say so publicly. If you have never made that decisive turn, why not do it right here, right now? And don't be a secret Christian.

Confession: Good for the Soul

Moments of moral contradiction and moments of sudden self-knowledge are always disturbing, but I say again that they have been a blessing beyond anything I ever thought possible. They give another gift in addition to repentance. They give humility, and humility sets you free. In particular, you no longer take yourself as seriously as you did before. The moral contradictions within you and the sudden self-knowledge of your folly make you aware that you are as vulnerable to moral failure as anyone else.

You become kinder to other people when they fail. You stop keeping score. You know you can't be trusted to keep score right. It is liberating to stop keeping score. G. K. Chesterton once wrote: "For with the removal of all question of merit or payment, the soul is suddenly released for incredible voyages" (*Heretics*, 69).

Finally, our new self-knowledge brings our friendship with God into sharper focus. Romans 5:10 says: **When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.** Jesus Christ has restored friendship with God. Repentance, faith in Christ, and their sign, baptism, make our relationship with God real.

However, the persistent streak of lawlessness in us reminds us that our restored friendship with God is not a friendship between equals. Friendship with God never becomes chummy. It "simply puts you in the position where God can begin to change you" and where you want to be changed. The continued irruptions of lawlessness in our lives may at times call into question our friendship with God. "How can God tolerate this? I keep doing the same things over and over. What do I do about my streak of lawlessness now?"

1 John 1:8 says this: **If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.** Our moments of shattering self-knowledge bless us by undeceiving us about ourselves. We now know that we sin and we want to know what to do about the persistence of lawlessness in our souls. 1 John 1:9 continues like this: **If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.**

But I fail again and again. Will he forgive and purify again and again? Yes. Do you remember the time Peter asked Jesus how many times he was supposed to forgive his brother for sinning against him? **Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times but seventy-seven times"** – Matthew 18:21-22. Will God be any less generous toward you than He asks you to be toward your brother?

Certainly not! So confess your sins. Confess them to God directly. Confess them to one of your pastors here. To help us in that discipline let's now use our prayer together for this Sunday.

**Prayer
for the
Week of April 15, 2012**

Invitation to Obedience (Congregation)

Then I acknowledged my sin to you
And did not cover up my sin.

Psalm 32:5

Request for Help (Pastor)

Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.

Psalm 51:2

Confession of Trust (Congregation)

Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight.

Psalm 51:4

Theme (Pastor)

So I find this law at work:
When I want to do good,
evil is right there with me.

Romans 7:21

Old Testament (Congregation)

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way.

Isaiah 53:6

Theme (Pastor)

So I find this law at work:
When I want to do good,
evil is right there with me.

Romans 7:21

New Testament (Congregation)

“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Luke 18:13

Theme (Pastor)

So I find this law at work:
When I want to do good,
evil is right there with me.

Romans 7:21

Prayer (Everyone)

O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart,
O God, you will not despise. Amen.