

## **“You Ain’t Got To. You Can’t Help It”**

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<sup>15</sup>I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup>But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>18</sup>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. <sup>19</sup>For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. <sup>20</sup>Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. <sup>21</sup>So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. <sup>22</sup>For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, <sup>23</sup>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. <sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

(Romans 7: 15-25a)

In the first seven chapters of the book of Romans, Paul steadily builds a case in support of a central idea: the fact that we, as human beings, are a hot mess. He describes a very personal frustration that he is convinced all of us share. “*I can will what is right,*” Paul says, “*but I cannot do it... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.*” Paul has tried and tried to be a righteous person. He wants to be good, or to quote Spike Lee, to “always do the right thing.” But he just cannot seem to do it. Try as he might, he just cannot avoid sin. He hears the same thing from others and sees it in them, too, leading him to the inevitable conclusion: “*There is no one who is righteous, not even one.*”<sup>1</sup>

William Faulkner, the great Southern novelist, built his Nobel-winning career writing about this very experience. I would argue that few people have captured the wide and fascinating scope of human sin and brokenness better than he did. One good example is his 1951 novel, “Requiem for a Nun.” The protagonist in the story is a Black nurse and caregiver named Nancy. She is far from being a literal “nun,” but her steadfast faith, sacrificial love, and patience in the face of adversity all support the metaphorical title Faulkner gives to her. Nancy is accused of a shocking crime -- the murder of an infant in her care -- but the readers quickly discover that the characters around Nancy seem to be implicated as well. All of them are broken, sinful, and devious in their own ways.

The climactic final scene takes place on the morning of Nancy’s scheduled execution. Temple, the dead baby’s mother, and Nancy’s attorney pay a final visit to her cell. The three of them find themselves in a deep discussion of the nature of sin, suffering, and salvation. In the darkness of this final hour, Nancy shines as a saintly beacon of hope. While she recognizes that some of the fault is hers, she also knows that others who are also culpable in the tragedy will go unnamed and unpunished... that the weight of their sins will fall unjustly upon her. Oddly enough, she does not wallow in this mire, but instead sets her gaze stoically and peacefully up to heaven. She has made peace with her suffering, which she now sees as a necessary part of her journey back to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 3:10



Temple, the baby's mother, finds no solace in that explanation. "Why must it be suffering?" she asks. "[God is] omnipotent, or so they tell us. Why couldn't He have invented something else? Or, if it's got to be suffering, why can't it be just your own [suffering]? Why can't you buy back your own sins with your own agony?"

In a similar way, the attorney is wrestling with the concept of sin. He is channeling the lament of Paul, that human beings just cannot seem to avoid it, no matter how hard we try – and that always leads to pain and suffering. "What about sin?" he asks Nancy. "If we have to suffer, do we have to sin, too?"

Nancy's response seems illogical, but also somehow right and true. "You ain't got to," she says. "You can't help it."

Notably, the Reformed theologian Shirley Guthrie cites Nancy's seemingly paradoxical answer in his chapter on the Christian view of sin. It seems illogical, even impossible, for both of these things to be true. Either we have to, or we don't. Either we can help it, or we can't. "The problem," Guthrie writes, "lies in two apparently contradictory truths."<sup>2</sup> The first is that every person is **responsible** for his or her own actions. We all have choice. We all have free will. No one forces us to sin.

But the second truth, Guthrie says, is that "**sin is universal and inevitable.**" Trying to live a human life and also avoid sinning is like trying to swim without getting wet. To be human is to be, by definition, imperfect. Try as we might, we cannot be righteous like God is righteous. We cannot be holy like God is holy. We have some moments of light, but we cannot keep all of the darkness out.

We tend to get tangled up in the logic, but in the life of faith, this is not an either/or proposition. This is a "both/and" thing. This is one of those times where we can see that both things are somehow true, even if we cannot put the two puzzle pieces neatly together in our minds. Notably, Faulkner didn't try to explain it. He just observed it. When it comes to sin, two strange truths converge in our lives: We ain't got to sin, but we can't help it.

That is the main point I am hoping to make in this sermon is that yes, these two ideas seem contradictory, but I think we will waste a lot of time and energy if all we do is try to reconcile these two ideas, that is especially true if we put too much effort into assigning blame. We might be tempted to say to ourselves, "Well, if the predisposition to sin is somehow in my nature, and God created me this way, then why should I be held responsible? Isn't God more to blame than me? Is a shark "bad" for taking a bite out of a swimmer who paddled by when that shark was hungry? Or is the shark just doing what God created it to do? I was born with brown eyes, and I had no control over that. Why isn't sinning the same kind of thing?"

But where does that analysis really lead us? And aren't we missing a lot, if that is our primary concern? Because if we focus solely on that side of the equation – the fault side – then we lose sight of the other, potentially more important side: namely, our responsibility. You and I both *know* that our choices do matter. We know that, if we see someone suffering on the side of the road, it is better to stop and bind up that person's wounds than to pass by with indifference. We know that generosity is better than selfishness. We know that love is greater than hate. We can try to exonerate ourselves from any blame – tell ourselves, "I can't help it, so I won't worry about it" – but doesn't that feel hollow? So, the primary goal is

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<sup>2</sup> Shirley C. Guthrie, Jr., *Christian Doctrine* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 221.

to put this idea before you – that sometimes the life of faith asks us to hold onto two truths that we cannot fully reconcile – and that it is OK that we cannot reconcile them.

This leads me to the second goal of my sermon this morning, which is in no way meant to be an explanation of this paradox, but rather a frame of thinking that might just keep us from spinning our wheels on the question. I call the idea “spiritual guard rails.”

To explain, I will turn to one of the great, truly American amusements: go-carts. Perhaps some of you have already taken a turn or two around a track this summer. Good for you. If you have, I would bet that your experience took one of these forms.

The first is the “**Tomorrowland Speedway**” format. One of the first attractions to be built at Disney World in 1971, it is still going strong... which is remarkable, because it is so boring. Your gas-powered car is frustratingly slow, but it also straddles a metal rail that goes right down the center of the track. You can go about one foot to the left, one foot to the right. You don’t need to steer, or even hold the wheel. Just put your foot on the gas and the rail guides you around the track. In my opinion, just take another ride on Space Mountain.

The second form is a step up. I call this the “**Turnpike Cruisers**” model, because that is the name of the go-cart attraction at Tweetsie Railroad in the North Carolina mountains. These cars go a little faster, and there is no central rail on this one, so the steering is much more realistic. But the track is only about seven or eight feet wide, and the guard rails on either side are strong and high. So, you can steer back and forth, but you are still tightly bounded, and the whole course is just a simple oval. So, better, but still kind of lame.

This leads me to the third and clearly most awesome design. My primary experience in this case would be along the Carolina coast (think Myrtle Beach Grand Strand), but given our current location, let’s just call it by a name more familiar to you: the “**Coney Island Raceway**.” This track has guard rails, but there is a lot more freedom. The cars go faster and the rails are much farther apart, so there is much more room for adventures... and for mischief. Just listen to how the website describes it: With “24 go-karts and over 900 feet of racetrack, the Coney Island Raceway is a fun way to satisfy your need for speed. Get behind the wheel of one of the gas-powered karts and test your skills on a course complete with switchback curves and hairpin turns.”<sup>3</sup> They say “no bumping,” but let’s face it, there will be bumping... and taunting... and spinning out... and enough other ways to get into trouble that we now need a new addition to the attraction: multiple attendants – usually high-school linebackers on summer break -- brandishing whistles, shouting warnings, and, on occasion, tossing people off the ride if things get too out of hand.

The common denominator in all of these rides is a car that can move and guardrails. But the one that best approximates life is the last one. It’s the one with the most freedom. Yes, there are boundaries on either side... but within those boundaries we are free to steer. We are free to make our own choices: some good, some bad. But it is the freedom that makes it worthwhile. Because a game that you cannot lose is not much of a game. What is the fun of a ride that you can barely steer? At the same time, a game that you cannot win is no fun either. Why bother if there is nothing to gain?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://onthegrid.city/brooklyn/coney-island/coney-island-raceway>

This is the way I try to look at this seeming paradox that William Faulkner observes about sin. Nancy's seemingly contradictory observations about sin give us important spiritual guide rails, and we need both of them to steer well. When it comes to sin, no, ***we can't help it***. As human beings, we cannot keep from sinning. We are going to get off course from time to time.

But it is also true that, when it comes to sin, ***we ain't got to***. God has given us choice, and we are still responsible for the choices we make. We have the blessing and the duty to steer our lives as best we can.

If we can steer between these two boundaries, we have the best chance of staying on a good and healthy path. If we find ourselves drifting too far to one side... getting a little bit too comfortable with our sin... a little self-satisfied, blaming God for making us the way we are and taking a free pass for whatever we want to do... then we hit that guard rail that says, "You know, it doesn't have to be like this. You are responsible for the choices you make. You can steer your life better than this."

And if we drift to far to the other side... if we start beating ourselves up for our repeated failures... when we keep hitting the same potholes and making the same mistakes, no matter how hard we try... when we tell ourselves that we have to work our way into heaven but worry that whatever we do will never be enough... then the guard rail of God's sovereignty is there to catch us, saying "Do not fear. My grace is sufficient for you... and I will find a way to make things right and bring you home." And we are encouraged to take the wheel once more and to keep on moving forward with hope and faith.

When it comes to sin, "You ain't got to, and You can't help it." May these guard rails keep us on the path that God has laid out for us. ***Amen.***