

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
“Children of God: You Can Do It”
Genesis 15:1-6; Romans 7:14-25
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It was unclear to me what they were doing with their hands. They were trying to figure out how to divide up into teams but I couldn't figure it out. I was about 14 or 15 years old and had gone with my parents and members of our church to the Seafarers' Center at the Port of Houston. For those of you who are unaware about Houston, it is 50 miles from the coast but is still the second busiest port in the United States and the 13th busiest in the world. What this means is that seamen from all over the world travel and stay there. The churches in Houston have long supported the International Seafarer's Centers by sending volunteers to befriend and spend time with these seamen who are far from home. My church was one of those. When we arrived some of the men were dividing up into teams for a softball game. They needed extras and asked me to join in. As they were dividing up into teams the men would do a thing with their hands and then one would go one way and the other, the other way. When I fumbled around with this ritual, the man just looked at me and said, “go there.” And I did. It was only years later that I learned what they were doing...paper, scissors, rock. Yes, this is a confession. I was a deprived child who had never learned to play paper, scissors, rock.

I assume that most of you here are familiar with this game of random chance. Paper beats rock. Rock beats scissors. Scissors beats paper. Ok, are we good? Alright then, if you understand how this game works then you will understand what Paul is trying to tell us in this part of his letter to the Romans.

To begin with Paul tells us that sin beats law. Sin is one of those words that carries with it multiple layers of meaning. For many of us growing up, sin was associated with particular actions. It was a sin to lie. It was a sin to steal. It was a sin to harm another person. If we grew up in more theologically conservative homes sin might even include drinking or going to movies on Sunday. Regardless, sin was seen as things. When Paul speaks about sin he is not referring to “things”. He is referring to sin as a human condition. Sin for Paul is like a spiritual disease which is possessed by every human being. Though Paul does not dwell on when, where or how we catch this disease he says we all have it. And what this disease does is distort and deform the image of God within us, causing us to turn away from God and toward self. We become the center of the universe and we will do whatever it takes to stay there. That is sin.

Law is the compilation of the rules and regulations that God has given us so that we can order and direct our lives according to what God desires of us. The law tells us what not to do; namely lie, cheat, steal, or covet among a multitude of sins. The law also tells us what to do. We are to love our neighbors. We are to care for the powerless. We are to make sure everyone has something to eat. Unfortunately Paul tells us that sin, our inner spiritual disease, beats out the law, which is God's rules for living. Paul writes of not being able to do what he knows he ought to do, and of doing what he knows he ought not to do. He sums it all up in the second half of

verse 25. “So then, in my mind I am a slave to the law of God (meaning he wants to do what God wants him to do) but with my flesh (which is another way of saying sinful self) I am a slave to the law of sin.” Sin beats law.

The second part of this spiritual game however is that Jesus beats sin. In verse 24 Paul cries out, “Wretched man that I am who will rescue me from this body of death?” His answer is, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” This is put another way a couple of verse later when Paul writes, “For the law of the Spirit has set me free from the law of sin and death.” What Paul wants his friends to know is that ultimately sin no longer controls them or us. The disease of self-centeredness while still being present no longer controls our lives. Granted, like chicken pox, it never completely goes away. And it may rear its ugly head from time to time, yet in the end it no longer has to dominate our lives. What this means then for those of us who are part of the League of Extraordinary Followers, is that we can live more extraordinary Christian lives. Even though we will have those days when we do what we know we are not supposed to do; or we have those days when we do not do what we know we ought to do; we know that Christ beats sin. We know that the life of Jesus is at work in us, helping us to be the people we are called to be.

My challenge to you then is this...How am I allowing this reality, the reality that Christ beats sin, to encourage me in my daily living? How am I allowing this freedom from the disease of sin to give me hope that I can do what God calls me to do.