Saint Paul says that the good he wants to do is not what he does. What he does is the evil that he does not want to do. Paul’s complaint about himself applies to us all. We know what is good, and yet so often we do something else. Here is a fundamental contradiction within the soul, and it defines the Christian conception of the human predicament. What do we need to be saved from? From this contradiction: that we know the better and do the worse.

The Christian conception of the human predicament is virtually unique among philosophies and world religions. Plato had argued that people do bad things because they do not know better, and he recommended education as the remedy. Of course we think we know what is right most of the time, and these beliefs come from our culture, our family, and personal experiences. Then we discover that our beliefs about what is right are biased, or are based on too narrow a selection of evidence. Plato was quite correct to say that much of philosophy’s job is to lead us to understand what we know and what we don’t know, to expand our perspectives, to embrace all that can be learned from the arts and sciences, to travel and learn the cultural perspectives and values of others. Plato invented the university, and our own university is quite explicit about the importance of university education for attaining better moral insight. Even before Plato, Confucius in China had said much the same thing. Confucius emphasized the development of moral character, noting that everyone has the capacity to be moral but that this needs to be cultivated. Although the Chinese tradition is vastly complicated, it still follows Confucius’ conviction that evil comes from mis-education or a failure of development. These approaches to bad behavior that focus on education rest on the conviction that people necessarily do what they believe is best, even when that belief is selfishly framed or mistaken in fact: for, why else would they do what they do?

Christianity shares with Judaism and Islam the story of the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Judaism and Islam interpret that story as a problem of immaturity and lack of strength of character in the face of temptation. Christianity makes the stronger claim that Adam and Eve knew what they should do and yet deliberately chose the temptation when they were perfectly capable of not doing so. For the Christian tradition, Adam and Eve were morally culpable, whereas for the other Abrahamic faiths they were simply immature.

Without denying for a moment the importance of knowing what is morally right, cultivating moral learning in educational institutions, and accepting the ambiguity of many moral situations, I think we have to say that St. Paul was right about knowing the better and doing the worse. At least for myself, I do what I know is wrong far more often than I like to admit. Of course, sometimes I also do what is wrong under the mistaken belief that it is right. Many ethical situations are so complex and ambiguous that honest mistakes in moral judgment are just part of life. But my deepest concern is for those situations that are not so ambiguous, where the moral truth is plain, where I want to do the good, and I still do what is wrong. Aren’t many of the rest of you like Paul and me in this? I suspect so. This is sin, which the Christian tradition takes very seriously.

The Christian conviction that sin arises from this contradiction in the soul gives rise to a conception of the human person that emphasizes freedom. Freedom works something like this.
In a situation of choice we are faced with several possibilities, each with its own allure or repulsiveness. Sometimes the values of our options seem to be about equal, and choice is like flipping a coin. Other times the values of the options are so different they cannot be compared. Yet other times, we know that some options are better and others worse. The values in the options have powerful appeals, of different sorts. Some options are positive, but others are horrible and we are repulsed by them. When faced with choices, we feel the attractions and repulsions of the options and, to the extent that we understand them, we know cognitively which are the better and which the worse. Freedom consists in taking the next step, from feeling the various appeals and repulsions, to adopting one as the specific action we choose. We define ourselves as the choosers of this particular option. Before the choice, any one of the options with its positive and negative values could be made the motive of our action. All of them are possible motives, but until chosen none is our motive. After the choice, one of the options with its values has been adopted as our motive, and we act upon that motive. The exercise of freedom is to adopt one option with its values as the motive for our action, when any one of the options could have been adopted as our motive.

The immediate appeal of some options can be far stronger than that of other options. Physical pleasures have more immediate appeal than postponed gratifications. Options that benefit us individually are more appealing than altruistic options. But we all have the experience of knowing that less appealing options can be better in the long run, and do sometimes postpone gratification and sacrifice our self-interest for the benefit of others. Sometimes our habits reinforce certain kinds of options and make choices easier. The habit of putting others first makes altruistic choices easier. Addictions are habits with extraordinary power of appeal, apparently overwhelming the possibilities of rejecting them. Nevertheless, people sometimes do go cold turkey. Sometimes people sacrifice their interests, goods, and very lives for other causes. There is always the free act of taking the step to move from feeling the appeal of an option to making that option one’s own. With our millions of little free choices we gradually build up our moral and spiritual character. Beginning with the conditions of our environment and our genetic make-up, we create the moral and spiritual character that is our ultimate identity, and we are responsible for that.

Often we are tempted to think that all choices are antecedently motivated, that we always act for some reason operative in advance of the choice, which explains the choice. This is a dangerous way to think, however, because the potential motives for our choices never are the actual motives until we choose them. We give ourselves the motives that constitute our character and guide our actions. Not to admit this is to say that we are not free, but are determined by the motives we happen to have. If we are determined by motives that come before our choices, then we are not responsible. Rather, those conditions that give us the motives would be responsible. The people who say we always do what we believe to be the best think that our knowledge determines our will.

But when we know the better and still choose the worse, we know that we, and not the configuration of our knowledge, are responsible. Of course, as Plato and Confucius knew, we are responsible for configuring our knowledge so as to know what is right and wrong so far as humanly possible. But even the choice of acting so as to improve our moral knowledge requires the free act of adopting that option as our motive. We make ourselves motivated to be morally knowledgeable. Sometimes we choose to be morally biased or ignorant, even when we know that is the worse course. Such is the human predicament.
St. Paul’s analysis was this. On the one hand, we have the law of God in our inmost self: He believed that people have a kind of innate conscience, for which the external law, as in the Bible, is only a clarification and articulation. Perhaps this was his interpretation of human beings as created in the image of God. Setting aside our concern with the genuine ambiguities of some moral situations and the difficulty of figuring out complex moral problems, we can agree that at least sometimes the moral course is clear and true. Paul says this is God in us, and that when we act in accord with this divine conscience, it is not so much we ourselves who are acting but God. On the other hand, we have this other law of irrational choice in us that makes us do the worse when we know the better. Paul likens it to bodily attractions that are not governed by a proper divinely inspired harmony; so, he says, sex is good if enjoyed properly, but becomes a kind of bondage leading us to do the worse when we know the better, when we let it dominate a proper harmony for an ordered personal and social life. Astonishingly, Paul says that when we know the better and do the worse, it is not we ourselves who are acting but the power of sin in us: the Devil made me do it. The power of sin is not just the attractiveness of bad choices. Rather it is a special kind of spiritual bondage we get into when we believe that we have no responsible control over our choices, that indeed the sinfulness in us causes us to sin all the more. Where is the self in this situation? When we choose according to God’s law, it is God’s choice. When we choose contrary to that, it is not our own choosing but the power of sin making us sin. Our human responsibility has been destroyed. Our very self has vanished, or rather our soul has been sold to the Devil, to use the old cliché. This is the human predicament: whereas we should be cultivating responsible moral selves to present to God in ultimate perspective, we are lost, vanished, utterly in bondage to the sin that we believe controls our choices. We rightly condemn ourselves for this bondage, and this self-hate binds us to unfreedom even more strongly. [And you thought British taxation without representation was bad!!]

Here then is Paul’s gospel. It has two steps. First, our sins are forgiven. However you interpret the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Paul concluded that Jesus has paid whatever moral debt we have for our wrong choices and that nothing is held against us by God in ultimate perspective. Instead of being condemned in ultimate perspective, we are loved and given a fresh start at every moment. God’s love is continual creative power. Paul’s second step is that we must accept the freedom Jesus Christ has given us and behave in free, responsible ways. Self-hatred is forbidden, because we are loved by God and self-hatred only gives us excuses to be irresponsible. When we accept our freedom and choose accordingly, we might still make bad choices because our understanding is poor. Even when we know the better truly and clearly, we might still choose the worse. Our habits of selfishness and giving in to addictions are not changed merely by accepting God’s love. But, if we accept those choices as our own responsibility, we have been given back our own soul and have something to present to God’s ultimate perspective. “Faith” is what Paul often calls this acceptance of our own freedom and responsibility. “Sanctification” is what he calls the long process of changing our bad habits and cultivating a character of high moral worth. The phrase, “accepting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior,” is shorthand code for accepting the forgiveness of sins and the return of our freedom so that we take responsibility for what we do and make of ourselves.

Now I suspect many of you came here today expecting a political sermon about national identity on the Independence Day holiday. Instead you have heard some rather philosophical reflections on personal freedom and identity. These are not unrelated, for each of us citizens has a responsibility for the nation and its choices. This is not the connection I want to develop, however. Rather, I want to point out in closing that the freedom to which we are restored by
accepting God’s love in Christ is our small finite share of God’s infinite freedom. God is like us, but without our limiting conditions. God did not create the world because God was bound by a motive. God did not create the world for a reason. God created in absolute freedom and only after the fact did God acquire the nature of being the particular, singular God who created this vast cosmos with its massive variety of things of value. Think of the difference between ourselves and God. We are free creators in small ways because we add something new to the dense set of conditions given to us as possibilities: God was given no materials or norms to work with and created absolutely everything new. We create our own moral characters but are greatly limited by the fact that our choices are about the issues given us by our environment in space and time: God creates the entire divine nature and all of the conditions that shape it. We say that our characters have a moral dimension because we have to choose between options that have morally differing values: God creates all options and the values that distinguish them, and in this sense transcends morality. God’s creation is an absolute fecundity producing unlimited swarms of things of value, which is the glory of divine love. Our small creation is a constrained fecundity based on the finite conditions of our specific lives, but even in this small place we can make things of value, that is, act with love.

Do we still do things we know are bad and want not to do? Yes, sometimes. Is that bad? Yes, but if we take responsibility for it, it is an exercise of our freedom. The human predicament, according to our Christianity, is that we are born free but commonly flee from freedom by enslaving ourselves to guilts and the conviction that we cannot help but do evil. Human redemption is to receive again the freedom that has always been ours, and to take responsibility for the choices we make. To bind ourselves to Christ is to accept that freedom by which God makes us define ourselves. Happy Independence Day! Amen

Robert Cummings Neville
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