

## Romans 7—Cognitive Dissonance

In 1957, Leon Festinger wrote *A THEORY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE* about the conflict in all of our minds when we believe one thing, but act in a different way. In other words, like a teenager has been told all their lives about the evils of smoking and drinking, and then when they are induced by peer pressure or curiosity to smoke and drink. They are conflicted by what they have been taught versus the new wild life they are experiencing. Their physical enjoyment outweighs their guilty conscience. They find themselves enjoying the new experience, but inwardly they are stressed and anxious about disobeying their parents and breaking the law. Ever since Festinger proposed this theory of human nature, which causes much of our mental angst there has been literally thousands of psychological experiments testing and developing the theory. Researchers have discovered that people are so conflicted in their moral conscience with repressed guilt that they will do anything to resolve the contradiction in order to reduce their discomfort. The greater the personal value of the elements involved, the greater the magnitude of the internal conflict. Side effects include anxiety, depression, insomnia, high blood pressure, and the susceptibility to various illnesses. The pain is so great that people will always act to align their beliefs with their actions. The fallen world we live in has many prescriptions to reduce the discomfort including analysis, self help books, alcohol, drugs, and a relearning of moral values—ie, just change your morals to suit your bad behavior so that anything goes.

Professional counselors suggest at least 3 paradigms for cognitive dissonance, meaning what happens after a person acts inconsistent with what they believe is true. First is “Belief Disconfirmation” (I love these terms), which is changing your beliefs by seeking support from those who share the new behavior. Second is “Induced Compliance” in which persons allow themselves to be forced into compliance by a person of authority. I call this the Geraldine excuse, “The devil made me do it”. Next is “Effort Justification” or they engage in an unpleasant activity to achieve a greater goal, like hazing in a fraternity. A pledge who didn’t use to drink will chug 5 shots of tequila in order to be accepted into the fraternity. In order to reduce the inner conflict counselors suggest the obvious way of just limiting your behavior to what you believe. If they can’t then they must justify the behavior by changing the cognition (their judgment). They change their perception by putting a new “spin” or rationalization on it. Lastly they need to ignore or deny all information that conflicts with what you are going to do, thus don’t talk or listen to your parents, advisors, or pastors about it. Now I understand

how our society has devolved into an immoral swamp of depraved but now accepted behavior and lifestyle. In the last 60 years the so-called experts have engaged in thousands of studies, experiments, and surveys spending hundreds of millions of dollars in order to solve the problem of Cognitive Dissonance. All they really needed to do was consult me, and for free I would have told them that people just have a guilty conscience. God created us with a moral sense of right and wrong, and when we violate that, it tears us up inside. In Psalm 32, David described how he felt when he covered up his sin with Bathsheba, "my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long". I'm reminded of the story of the little boy who was not allowed to play with guns, yet he snuck one out and accidentally shot the pet duck. He buried it, but his sister witnessed it. That night after dinner, sister said, "Johnny would like to clean the dishes. You don't want to "duck out" on me do you Johnny?" Naturally Johnny found himself doing all of sister's chores, and he became a virtual slave to her. I'll tell you the rest of the story in my conclusion, but you get the picture.

#### Post Modernism vs. The Word of God

The current secular view of truth is subject to the late 20th century view called post modernism. Modernism doubted that there was a truth, but post modernism says that truth is relative and there is no absolute truth because we each make up our own truth. Post modernism fosters an attitude of skepticism toward morality, truth, reason, and value systems. It is a movement toward moral relativism, therefore truth and morality is all relative, so we can make up our own morality and truth. I can't help but think that the spin meisters of the 1990s came from this movement. You remember Bill Clinton's famous "What does is mean?" and "I never had sex with that woman". Today I think the "fake news" mania is a result of post modernism as well. This all leaves us with a quandary of what is real and what can I believe? The psychological disorder termed cognitive dissonance becomes some sort of excused illness that makes my repressed guilt not my fault anymore, so I just need "Belief Disconfirmation" and change my moral beliefs to match my depraved lifestyle. Now an inveterate adulterer is a sexaholic and needs to go to a clinic for his/her addiction, which is perceived as being genetic. Every form of Biblical sin is now classified as being either "not my fault" or not even wrong. Nevertheless, the Bible asserts that, "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17) My point is that the Bible does not share the fallen world's view of relative truth. Jesus prayed

to the Father in John 17, "Sanctify them in truth, thy Word is truth (absolute, unchangeable)." Therefore God the Creator of all things has revealed Himself in the Scriptures and told us who He is and what He expects of us. If you doubt this, I challenge you to read Isaiah 53, which was written 700 years before Christ was born, yet it clearly details the life of Jesus Christ and what He accomplished.

### Romans 7, Paul's Confession of His Sin Nature

The Law that God gave Moses and Israel at Mt. Sinai was perfect and holy. Therefore, anyone breaking it was not perfect and holy. The law itself is good, so the fault lies with the sin of the one breaking it. If all people have broken any part of the law, it follows that all people are sinners. Hebrews 4:12-13 tells us that to enter into God's rest (heaven), all people will be judged by God's law, "for the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we will be judged." This tells us that with God there is total exposure, not only to our actions but also our evil selfish thoughts and intentions. The holiness of God's Word cuts deep into the inner person and exposes what people cannot see. Just imagine if you had to go through life with an overhead screen with all your thoughts and intentions exposed for all to see? Who among us would be deemed "good people" then? See also Jesus' teaching in Matt. 5:22-27 that whoever is selfishly angry in his heart or lusts sexually in his thoughts has broken the Ten Commandments. God judges our actions, but also our thoughts and intentions. If there was ever a truly righteous or even a good person, it was the Apostle Paul who wrote about half the New Testament. Yet in most of his letters Paul made it clear, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost" (1 Tim.1:15; 1 Cor. 15:9; Eph.3:8). This great Christian leader also seems to have struggled with Cognitive Dissonance as evidenced by what he wrote in Romans 7. It is so troubling that many theologians refuse to believe Paul wrote it as a believer. They would say that Paul was talking about his struggle before he was a believer in Christ, but let's look at the evidence. Everything he says is written in the present tense, "I am of flesh...that which I am doing I don't understand...For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is my flesh", and his own present tense struggles with coveting are consistent with the context of the passage. He was writing about the Christian's struggle with sin, and it is addressed to "my brethren", and in discussing their struggle Paul says "what

shall WE say". The fact that he is talking about the Christian's present struggle is consistent with what Paul wrote in Galatians 5:17 and Romans 8:5-6. Therefore Paul (and us) was saved from the penalty of sin by Christ's sacrifice, but we must now live in these fleshly bodies with all our desires. How then can we grow spiritually and be more Christlike?

In Romans 7:7, Paul wrote that he actually understood his problem because the Tenth Commandment says "You shall not covet". The legal requirement was good, but since he continued to covet, he realized it was the sin nature within him that was bad. The law is spiritual, but he is fleshly. Then in Romans 7:15-23, Paul detailed his frustration that he wanted to keep the law, and he knew the law was good, but "I do the very evil that I do not wish". His conclusion is that "evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good". This internal struggle with his repressed conscience caused him to cry out "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death?" Thank goodness he gave us an answer, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

## Romans 8, The Rest of the Story

Remember that Paul's original letter did not have chapters and verses. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton divided the Latin Bible into chapters in 1205 A.D. Then in 1555, Robert Estienne divided the Bible into verses. The Geneva Bible in 1560 was the first English translation divided into chapters and verses. Therefore, the very next thing Paul wrote that was connected to Romans 7:25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ" is Romans 8:1-11, which gives us the explanation of what God has done for us not only to save us from the penalty of sin, but also the power of sin. I think Paul assumed the church might get being saved from the penalty of sin confused with being saved from the current power of sin, so he continued his discussion in Romans 8:1-3 to make sure they knew that since Christ died for their sins, they were totally forgiven and would not be condemned on judgment day. Then in Romans 8:4-11, Paul explained how we can live even now godly lives, because God has also provided His Spirit to help us. Therefore, Paul used the image walking according to the flesh vs. walking according to the Spirit. Now in these earthly bodies we experience a sort of tug of war between our selfish fleshly desires and the leading of the Holy Spirit. In Romans 8:9-11, Paul makes sure they know that all people who have believed in Jesus as their Savior have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit who is always leading, guiding, teaching, and convicting us. Just as Jesus promised His disciples in John 14:15-18 that after he ascended to Heaven God

would send them a helper, His Holy Spirit to help them keep His commandments. Jesus knew their base sin nature, and would not “leave them as orphans” (Jn.14:18), so He sent them the Holy Spirit to help. Therefore, believers in Christ live life with a choice, or one of two mindsets as Paul said in Romans 8:5-8. We can allow the Spirit of God to change our hearts and help us live the spiritual life that gives us fulfillment and joy, or we can vainly continue to pursue the lusts of the flesh that lead us to cognitive dissonance, continuing that frustrating experience that Paul testified about in Romans 7:15-24—“wretched man that I am!”

In conclusion, let me return to the story of the boy who shot the pet duck. The burden of doing his sister’s chores and carrying around the guilt finally overwhelmed him. He had become a slave to his “foul” deed. Finally he could stand it no longer, and he went to his mother and confessed. She said, “I know, I saw it from the kitchen window, but I didn’t say anything because I wanted you to experience the guilty conscience and come confess and repent so you would be free of the guilt.” The boy asked if he was in big trouble, and momma said, “There will be consequences, but I forgive you and I will always love you.” In the same way, God has said, “If you confess your sins, I will faithfully and righteously forgive you, and I will cleanse you from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9) How about you? God is watching, and you can’t hide from Him, but He loves you and wants to restore you to fellowship.

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