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Parables and Pop Culture: The Gospel and Harry Potter
Romans 7:14-25

Prayer and Other Defenses against the Dark Arts

14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.* 15I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23but 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. 24Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Ever since the Harry Potter books were first released, there has been a vigorous conversation about the many spiritual and even Christian themes present within them. In fact my father-in-law, a retired Presbyterian pastor, recently told me about a new book that explores these issues in great depth.

(Continue to page 2)

I remember before the final (seventh) book came out, there was a debate: would Harry Potter die in his final confrontation with the villain, Lord Voldemort. Would Harry lay down his life as a sort of martyr against the evils of the Dark Lord?

There was reason to argue that Harry's death might be required to destroy Voldemort once and for all—the two characters are linked to one another in ways I won't get into here.

I had no doubt that Harry would be *willing* to sacrifice his life, whether he actually needed to or not (and I won't spoil it for you). Harry knows that this is a cosmic struggle between good and evil, and in the midst of such a battle, the stakes are high. The Dark Arts, as they are called, are powerful, and fighting them has grave consequences. J.K. Rowling has said, "We *are* dealing with pure evil here." (from the Wikipedia entry for *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*)

The New Testament writers, too—particularly Paul—saw themselves in a similar conflict: they were the war reporters on a cosmic battlefield. Good locked in a struggle against evil. God's grace vs. the Powers and Principalities. God's Holy Underdogs vs. the Big Bad Empire. We know who's going to win the *war*, but there's still a lot of battle to be fought. This was the worldview of the first-century Christian.

We in our day tend to be suspicious of good and evil language, mainly because it has been so misused. Good and evil get reduced to a bumper sticker, a rallying cry, a political slogan.

But we live in a world that's complex and nuanced—not black and white at all, but shades of gray. This good and evil business gets murky. And I guess I want to say that if it's going to be murky anyway, then we might as well wade all the way into the murkiness and admit that there aren't too many two-dimensional characters in the real world—very few perfectly good sheriffs with the white cowboy hat and the spotless silver badge fighting the perfectly bad outlaw with black hat and the stubbly beard.

No, the forces of good and evil do battle in the hearts of each and every one of us. Even Paul, war reporter on the cosmic battlefield, understood this. *The good I want so much to do, I cannot do. And the evil I deplore, I still do.*

There's a fascinating device stored at Hogwarts School called the Mirror of Erised. Erised is "Desire" spelled backwards, and when Harry stumbles upon it, he peers in and sees himself standing with his parents, who died when he was an infant. He returns to the mirror again and again, spending longer and longer in front of it, gazing at the family he never knew. Listen to the warning he receives from Dumbledore about the mirror's power...

Let me explain. The happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is. [The mirror] shows us nothing more or less than the deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts.

However, this mirror will give us neither knowledge or truth. Men have wasted away before it, entranced by what they have seen, or been driven mad, not knowing if what it shows is real or even possible.

The Mirror will be moved to a new home tomorrow, Harry, and I ask you not to go looking for it again. If you ever do run across it, you will now be prepared. It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live, remember that. (from *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*)

There's nothing wrong with Harry wanting to see his parents again. And not every desire of our heart is evil! But Dumbledore's warning is Paul's warning as well. When we let our own desires hold us "captive," until that is all we can see, then sin has gained a foothold in our lives and, to quote another New Testament writer, "we are strangers to the truth" (I John 1:9).

Our goal is to live a life that is congruent—to align our will with God's will. Like the man who looks in the mirror and sees only himself, we strive as much as we are able to have our reflection match up with the reflection of the person that God has created us to be. And the way we do that is not to lose ourselves by gazing into the mirror of our own desires, but to spend time losing ourselves in God's Word, gazing into the face of God in prayer, seeking to see Christ reflected in people we would normally ignore or even despise, and then to be Christ's hands, feet and hearts in return.

We know, of course, that we will never do this perfectly. This journey toward congruence takes a lifetime of work. But we make the journey. And our choices along the way do matter.

Paul makes a choice too, right here in Romans. It feels very abrupt: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

In the midst of this conflict raging within himself, Paul makes a choice to turn toward Christ and acknowledge him Lord and the ultimate victor in this battle. Paul shifts the focus for us. Yes, there is an internal struggle, but "All praise to God in Jesus Christ!" Paul's faith in Christ is what saves him from despair and paralysis. In some sense it's the only viable option—away from despair and towards a grace that surpasses our understanding.

Throughout the Harry Potter story, the characters learn tools to defend themselves against the so-called Dark Arts. Two of the most powerful tools are explored in the third book, which also happens to be my favorite of the series (I think it is the most theological!).

One tool is used to defeat the dementors, which are dark ghost-like beings that feed on a person's joy and happy memories. The dementors' power lies in their ability to suck all life and happiness out of a person, forcing them to relive their worst memory again and again. (I have friends who have struggled with depression who have resonated very deeply with the image of the dementor.) There is only one defense against a dementor, and that is to conjure a patronus.

A patronus is a powerful figure made of light, a protector and shield. And though the dementors are absolutely menacing to their human victims, they are no match for the patronus. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness could not overcome it” (John 1).

I think it’s no accident that J.K. Rowling, who is herself a Christian, named these protective beings using the word patronus, whose root in Latin means “Father”... and that she made the incantation “*Expecto patronum.*”

When we’re faced with the darkness—when we are confronted with evil—do we *expect* that God (the Father) will be there with us, lighting the way? Isn’t that the nature of faith? To see the darkness swirling about and to still be expectant of the glimpses of grace that will come?

Now it’s important what one does when conjuring a patronus—the patronus goes ahead of the person, but they can’t turn their back; they must stand, and stand firm. God gives us the strength to confront the evil, but make no mistake—confront it we must. We must stand firm in the truth of God’s grace and mercy and say to the darkness, “You have no power here.”

The other tool of defense against the dark arts I want to share is a personal favorite. It is a defensive tool against a sort of bogeyman character called a boggart. A boggart is a shape-shifter—it takes the form of whatever the person fears most, which means that the boggart looks different to every person.

The incantation against a boggart is the word “Ridikulus!” But while one is saying Ridikulus, one must imagine something funny, something that makes the person laugh. There’s a wonderful scene in which each person’s boggart turns into something humorous: a huge spider sprouts roller skates and stumbles about; a giant coiling cobra turns into a jack in the box.

What could possibly make someone laugh in the midst of the fear? How can we stare into the face of what terrifies us and see it as something absurd rather than frightening?

We can do this if we know that, while the fear is very real to us, it is not ultimately true. What is true is what Paul will write to the church at Rome just one chapter later: that there is nothing, not death, nor evil, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor dementors, nor boggarts, that will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, who has already and will again declare victory over all the darkness and evil we might experience or concoct.

Tom Long tells a story about the city of Atlanta during the civil rights movement—how the Ku Klux Klan would often march down Auburn Avenue, which was the African-American center of town. Each time the people would see the Klan coming they would draw their shades, lock their doors, and cower in their homes until that parade of evil was over.

Until civil rights started to take hold.

Just when the tide was starting to turn, when people could finally see justice on the horizon, the Klan marched once again down Auburn Avenue. But this time the people lifted their window shades, threw open their doors, stood on the sidewalk and laughed, and laughed, and laughed... and the Klan never marched down Auburn Avenue again. (from a sermon preached by Tom Long at the 2007 Festival of Homiletics)

They looked evil in the face and said, *Ridiculous*. Because they know what is ultimately true. Evil may be real, and we dare not pretend otherwise. But only God's grace is true.