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A CRICK IN THE NECK

This morning I woke up with a “crick” in my neck. (That word is presumably a variant of “creak” (the sound). It is not to be confused with the “crick” in the meadow, which is the same as a creek or stream.) As a result it is difficult to turn my head or raise my hands. In my case it is probably a result of overexertion at the gym. God frequently refers to the Israelites as having a crick in the neck. In their case it was a result of good, old-fashioned obstinacy.

“And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people.” (Ex 32:9; Deut 9:13) Hezekiah even put this description of Israel into an official document.

So the posts went with the letters from the king and his princes throughout all Israel and Judah, and according to the commandment of the king, saying, Ye children of Israel, turn again unto the LORD God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and he will return to the remnant of you, that are escaped out of the hand of the kings of Assyria. And be not ye like your fathers, and like your brethren, which trespassed against the LORD God of their fathers, who therefore gave them up to desolation, as ye see. Now be ye not stiffnecked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves unto the LORD, and enter into his sanctuary, which he hath sanctified for ever: and serve the LORD your God, that the fierceness of his wrath may turn away from you. For if ye turn again unto the LORD, your brethren and your children shall find compassion before them that lead them captive, so that they shall come again into this land: for the LORD your God is gracious and merciful, and will not turn away his face from you, if ye return unto him. (2 Chron 30:6-9)

This comes in an invitation to all of the Northern Tribes (Israel) to join Judah in keeping of the Passover. Interestingly, most of those who got this letter proved Hezekiah’s description to be accurate. “So the posts passed from city to city through the country of Ephraim and Manasseh even unto Zebulun: but they laughed them

to scorn, and mocked them.” (2 Chron 30:10) Only a few from Manasseh and Asher came to the feast.

Even as late as the time of Jesus the Israelites had the same reputation. When Stephen was called on the carpet for preaching about Jesus he gave a history of Israel. His concluding remarks included, “Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye.” (Acts 7:51) Two sentences later they took him out and stoned him.

It is not fun to be stiff-necked. A crick in my neck makes it difficult to ride my bicycle safely, since I can’t turn my head to watch for traffic. It is painful and a constant irritation. And yet, many people, like the ancient Israelites, persist in living with a crick in their necks. Although they should know God, they choose to ignore him, to their own harm.

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened...Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them. (Rom 1:20-21, 32)

When I have a crick in my neck, I want to get rid of it as soon as possible. I massage it, work it, wish I could afford a chiropractor. Too bad that some people rather enjoy their crick. They just don’t know how good it would feel to follow God, the ultimate chiropractor.

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THE LIST MAKER

Ko-Ko, the Lord High Executioner of Titipu, in Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado*, has "a little list" of people who would not be missed if they were executed. The list includes "the pestilential nuisances who write for autographs--/All people who have flabby hands and irritating laughs... And apologetic statesmen of a compromising kind," among many others. Actually, it doesn't matter who you put on the list, since nobody would be missed. The main thing is, he has his little list.

Some people, like the Lord High Executioner of Titipu, are fond of their lists. They have grocery lists, shopping lists, what-I-need-to-pack-for-a-trip lists, and sometimes even lists of where to find their various lists. Paul was a list maker. He frequently makes lists of sins, and occasionally of virtues. Each list is slightly different, creating havoc for the legalists among us who want their own little list of sins. It seems that Paul's lists are tailored to his particular audiences and are more examples than absolutes.

The Roman list

At the beginning of his letter to the Romans, Paul accuses mankind of rejecting God when they should have

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recognized him. As a result, he says, God "gave them over" to a variety of sins. One is idolatry; another "vile affections" resulting in homosexual acts. Then he lists those things which are not convenient; Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, Backbiters, haters of God, spiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, Without understanding, covenantbreakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful. (Romans 1:23-31)

While some things on this list may be found on his other lists as well, that only shows that people are the same around the world. In many ways, however,

this list could be said to describe the stereotypical view of Rome. As a Roman citizen Paul could get away with describing his countrymen in this way. Some of these sins may not have been as prevalent in Paul's Rome as in later years, but the seeds had been sown. Later Roman emperors, for instance, were more famous for gratifying sexual desires with either gender. Even at this time, however, homosexual acts were overlooked. Idolatry was always a Roman characteristic. If anything, it was becoming less widespread as the emperors began to claim that they were the embodiment of the gods on earth. Covetousness and murder seem to be part of the human condition, as are the tendencies to break contracts and to be cruel.

There are those who see in America a tendency toward being "without natural affection." Symptoms of this are seen in assisted suicide, abortion, and a seemingly increasing tendency toward abandoning or killing one's own children. Others see an increase, particularly since the Menendez case, of disobedience to parents.

Many of the sins on Paul's list are tailored to the Romans as being at the political center of the world. Are not politicians everywhere accused of deceit, arrogance, and maliciousness? Even though mud slinging has been part of American politics from the beginning, many today are objecting to what they consider dirty campaigns. (This, even though the dirtiest campaign today is tame compared to the campaigns of Andrew Jackson or against Grover Cleveland.) The court of the emperors of Rome was especially famous for backbiting, whispers, and a lack of mercy.

The Corinthian list

A list to the Corinthians is particularly liked by many, not because of the sins on the list but because of Paul's conclusion. "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Cor 6:11) He reminds us that no matter how debauched and sinful we may become, there is still hope for salvation. If God could forgive these sins, "neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor men who sleep sexually with other men, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners," he can forgive any we may be subject to.

Any ex-sailor will notice that Paul tailors this list to the particular knowledge of the Corinthians. Corinth was what some would call a "sailor town." It was a port city, and subject to all the vices common to ports of call

around the world. Most of the sins listed are sexual sins. Sailors who spend months or years away from home are particularly prone to such sins. Experience shows that sailors are especially famous drunkards. Anywhere you have sex and alcohol, theft and extortion are not far behind. Many a drunken sailor has awakened to find the woman gone, and with her his wallet. Nor can it be said that belligerent drunks will refrain from reviling one another, the bartender, or anyone else that even remotely appears to give them cause.

Some of these sins may be common in other contexts. Paul lists them here, perhaps, because they were especially common in the port of Corinth.

The Ephesian list

But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. (Eph 5:3-5)

Ephesus was the second largest city in the Roman Empire. In American terms that would make it Chicago or Los Angeles, but with a difference. It would be more like a Chicago in which the Moody Bible Institute was the main attraction instead of Wrigley Field or the Sears Tower. It would be like a Los Angeles where Hollywood was a temple of a goddess (which, in a sense, it used to be). The main tourist attraction, even the main attraction for locals, was the Temple of Diana (or Artemis). This made it difficult for Christians in Ephesus. When the worship of the goddess involved temple prostitutes, fornication and baseness were the city norm. In his reference to covetousness, Paul may have been thinking his time in the city (Acts 19), when the silversmiths started a riot against the Way simply because it could hurt their business. Thus this list was directed primarily at the local religion.

The Galatian Lists

There are other lists in Paul's writings. Two can be found in his letters to Timothy (1 Tim 1:9-10; 2 Tim 3:2-5) They contain many of the same things as the other lists. The most famous of Paul's lists, however, may be those in Galatians 5:19-23. There he lists the works of the flesh: "Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like." Some of these are sexual, some are alcohol related, and some are religious.

Most, however, relate to interpersonal relationships. The Galatians—more than the Romans, Ephesians, or Corinthians—could be considered the "common man." They lived in an area away from the strongest Roman or religious influences, and were not as familiar with the exigencies of military life. Thus the dealings of man with man are the areas of greatest concern. Like most people, the Galatians were particularly troubled with hatred, disagreements, anger, and envy. Most people can say that they aren't prone to temptations of rebellion against government, temple prostitution, or prostitution in general. How they (we) feel about a neighbor or the other person on the highway may hit closer to home.

This passage contains another list. It is more positive. "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance." Lest Paul be known just for his lists of sins, he includes a list of desirable attributes. Like his other lists it is probably not all-encompassing. Like the list that precedes it, this list is more concerned with interpersonal relationships. More specifically, it deals with internal relationships. The only way we are going to improve

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relationships with others is to change our relationship to ourselves and to God. A person who internalizes joy and patience is going to be more joyous and patient even when others attempt to threaten those virtues. Many of the sins Paul has listed boil down to one word: selfishness. The positive attributes are based on love, which is an outward action.

Some legalists have tried to combine Paul's lists of sins to come up with a table of sins. If you avoid these things you are in good shape. They want life to be centered on two lists: thou shalt and thou shalt not. That was not Paul's purpose. He would have been the first to say that such legalists have "fallen from grace." (Gal 5:4) The life God wants us to live is not dependent on what we do. He can forgive what we do. Instead it is dependent on who we are, and whose we are. If we are God's assembly, what we do will follow who we follow.

ME AND YOU

I'm not fond of texting. I probably got that wrong, but I have to remember that text is a different language than English. Text has its own syntax, spelling, grammar, and place in society. I have studied Spanish, German, and a little bit of Greek. I understand their grammar. I don't understand text because I just haven't studied it. What can you expect from an old fogey who has to be told how to hang up a cell phone? I do know English grammar, however. Partly because of the language of text, I have seen some things lately that make me cringe. One of my pet peeves in grammar precedes the invention of the cell phone, and even the personal computer. It shows up even in popular (or once-popular) music. Paul Simon, for instance, sang of "Me and Julio, down by the schoolyard." As I was growing up, I had it drummed into my head that such a phrase, if in the subject, should be "Julio and I." If in the object, it should be "Julio and me." English grammar says that the speaker should come last. The other person should always come first. Funny thing, but that's exactly what the Bible says, too.

"Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another." (Rom 12:10) "In lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves." (Php 2:3) Jesus, and the Law, said it a little differently. "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." (Lev 19:18; Mk 12:31) Now, some might say this is putting the other equal with you, rather than above you. Looked at from a different angle, however, it is elevating the other. If you would tend to put yourself first, by loving another the same as you, you would naturally put their interests first.

That is what love is all about. Love in the New Testament (Greek *agape*), and even loving-kindness in the Old Testament (Hebrew *chesed*) is generally

interpreted as "desiring the best for another person." Since it is an action, rather than an emotion, it might better be stated as "putting the interests of the other over your own interests." Love, then, is an active choice. It is something that we must think about, and then act upon. Thus one can "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." (Matt 5:44) We have to choose to love our enemies, even if we never particularly like them.

One problem with using the King James Version of the Bible is that language has changed in the last four hundred years. When Paul is translated as saying "preferring one another" we tend to think that we are supposed to want to associate with one person over another. Instead, the word means that we are to put the other forward. As in English, we give the other pride of place.

Perhaps children have to be taught this particular rule of English grammar, having it, as I put it earlier, pounded into their heads, because the tendency is to put oneself first. Children think of "me and you" because they tend to think of themselves first. As we grow in God, we need to put such thinking aside. We need to put others before ourselves. "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things." (1 Cor 13:11) "For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." (Heb 5:13-14) Perhaps when we fail to "prefer" one another we are still being childish. We should be child-like, but not childish.

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