

When Your Behavior Doesn't Align with Your Values—What Then?

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Are you familiar with the Biblical character Paul? When young, he was known as Saul, was very smart, and was educated by the most knowledgeable Jewish rabbis. A staunch defender of the Jewish law, he spent the early part of his adult life rounding up Christians for execution.

However, in Acts 9, Saul had a surprise visit from the risen Jesus, and he was never the same. Saul's name was changed, and he spent the rest of his life traveling the eastern and northern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, explaining the good news of Christ to as many Jews and Gentiles as he could.

During Paul's travels, he wrote letters to the various churches he had started, maintaining contact and providing guidance. His counsel, in the form of those instructive communications, was so descriptive and clear that they ultimately became about a third of the New Testament.

His longest and most thorough letter was written to the Christians in Rome. He'd not yet visited there, but he planned to stop by on his way to Spain. Because Rome was the center of the most powerful empire on earth, he wanted this particular letter to accurately describe the entire salvation story.

I've always been amazed at how honest and descriptive Paul's writing is. About half-way through that letter to the Roman church, Paul reveals what is a universal weakness for us humans. He blatantly explained something he knew to be all too real, even though he didn't totally comprehend it.

"I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. I want to do what is right, but I can't. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway." (This is taken from Romans 7:15-19 in the New Living Translation.)

Does that kind of duplicity ever happen to you? Of course it does. It's a common human experience, occurring sometimes as you interact with your family and occasionally in situations at work. You might look back on such a situation with regret, or you might vigorously justify your behaviors.

You might be embarrassed by what you did. Or you might defend what you did, genuinely believing it was the right thing to do. But if a person confronted you with a listing of your articulated values, you'd be hard-pressed to show that what you had done was consistent with the items on your list.

Last week, my article encouraged you to identify and articulate your values. Some of you may have started doing that. (If you missed that article, take a look at my website and click on "Dennis' Blog.")

How can anyone do something totally in conflict with his or her explicitly stated values? Well, in addition to our values, we all have a variety of unexamined, underlying compelling beliefs. Every time that you do something that conflicts with your articulated values, something you'd not anticipated must be true.

One possibility is that something that you've not yet fully thought through is influencing your decision-making. If that's what has occurred, you might want to do some introspection, seeking to determine what underlying beliefs are controlling your choice-making capacity. What you did is a function of how you "see" yourself and the situation you were in, and you can only understand that through reflection.

There are many other possibilities. You might be attempting some form of self-sabotage, you might be succumbing to immediate gratification, or you may be seeking glory or other recognition among some population that you don't even realize is important to you. As you ponder the cause, it will likely present itself as something outside of you, but the truth is likely an internal driver. Something inside you has caused you to make a choice, the reason for which is not immediately apparent to you.

Rather than punishing yourself, take some time for reflection. Invite others close to you to help you evaluate the situation. One outcome may be that you modify the listing of articulated values you've generated. Maybe the problem is that the priority of your values is not accurate. We often find ourselves in situations where two different values are in conflict, and we have to make a choice. This situation is not unusual--once you think deeply about it, you will understand yourself better.

Your values are something that you may have taken for granted. I strongly encourage you to explore what's important to you, so that the next time you are faced with making a choice, you are more likely to actually execute what you really want to do!