placed a high emphasis on both scripture and revelation, as well as the gospel proclamation itself. So, how could Barth justify keeping a mistress?

Mark Galli, who authored a book about Barth, responded to Barth’s relationship with von Kirschbaum, saying, “What floored me now was…the rationale Barth used to justify the relationship.” Galli explained Barth’s belief in grounding our theology in the revelation of Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture and not in our subjective experience. “But it is that very subjectivism that Barth fell into himself,” Galli wrote, “more or less saying that his relationship with von Kirschbaum felt so good, so right, it had to come from God: ‘It cannot just be the devil’s work,’ he wrote Charlotte. ‘It must have some meaning and a right to live.…I love you and do not see any chance to stop this.’”

Most of us do not have our personal theologies as well articulated as Barth did, nor do we have our excuses as well documented, but we can probably identify with the idea of giving ourselves permission to occasionally sidestep deeply held principles. Few of us live up to our loftiest ideals all the time. Sometimes we make bad calls. At other times we let our emotions and temptations dictate how we apply our understanding of God’s will. Committing ourselves to following the Way of Jesus, rather than being dictated to by our desires, is an enormous, life-long challenge.

Galli wrote, “All of us use any logic available to justify our sins. Self-justification is so woven into the fabric of our souls, it’s a lifetime effort to root it out. In fact, we can be sure that we will never rid ourselves of it completely. Which is one reason we have friends and spouses. It’s my wife more than anyone else who has exposed my pitiful attempts to justify my faults.”

Each of us is at fault for giving ourselves “permission to sin” sometimes. Each of us is guilty of what psychology calls “moral licensing,” which is a cognitive bias that enables to behave immorally without threatening our self-image as a moral person. We basically fool ourselves into thinking we can choose to do a bad thing and remain a good person.

We apply moral licensing when we choose to reward ourselves for doing a good job or achieving some goal, even if the reward undercuts the achievement. For example, say you are trying to lose weight and you manage to drop a couple of pounds because of conscientious dieting. You may choose to reward yourself with some pie and ice cream, but this results in a net weight gain. Or we may have a particularly productive day at work, so you decide to take the next day off, but end up further behind. Moral licensing is the thin edge of the wedge, the cusp of the slippery slope: one small infraction easily leads to another and then another until you are spiraling out of control.

The irony is that moral licensing is most likely to tempt us when we are feeling good about our accomplishments. Life coach Elizabeth Grace Saunders suggests we might avoid the moral licensing trap by reframing our life-questions. “Don’t ask yourself ‘How good have I been?’ or ‘How much progress have I made?’ when you’re deciding whether or not to give in to doing something not aligned with your goals. Instead, ask yourself ‘How committed do I feel to my goal?’ and ‘Why am I choosing to resist temptation?’” Similarly, regarding giving ourselves permission to sin, we might ask: “How committed am I to following Jesus?” and “Why or for whom is it important that I resist temptation?” Reframing the questions may help us to hold fast to our goals.

We are not alone in our struggles with sin. The apostle Paul wrote, “the evil I do not want to do, I keep on doing” (Romans 7:15, paraphrased). Understanding that the deliberate movement into sin is a *choice*, i.e., giving ourselves *permission* to sin, points out that we are kidding ourselves when we make justifying excuses.

The Israelites at Mount Sinai gave themselves permission to do what they knew to be wrong. When Moses “delayed” (v. 1) in coming back down the mountain, the people used his absence to justify the appointment a new leader: Aaron. While the One, True God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt was away talking with Moses, the people fashioned their own god, a golden calf, and justified this by declaring a festival day to the Lord, which merely gave them permission to have a party, to eat and drink and “revel” (v. 8).

When God sees what they are doing, God is incensed. Recall that God calls their actions “perverse” (v. 7) and accuses the people of disloyalty by so quickly turning from God and God’s ways (v. 8). God calls them a “stiff-necked” people (v. 9) because they are reluctant to bow their heads and wills to God and God’s ways. As a result, God plans to write Israel off, letting God’s wrath consume them (v. 10), and selecting a new people to be God’s own.

But Moses intervened. Moses prayed, reminding God of the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: to multiply their descendants and to make them a great nation in a land God would give to them. Moses asked God to honor those promises, despite the mistakes of the people. God hears Moses’ prayer, and God relents. The text says, “God changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people” (v. 14).

If you ever wondered about the effectiveness of prayer, here is your proof: Moses’ prayer changed God’s mind and spared God’s people. But an even greater truth is how we can rely on the grace of God’s unmerited favor; while-we-were-yet-sinners favor; those-whose-hearts-are-turned-from-God favor; those who are stiff-necked-and-stubborn favor; those who are willful-and-wayward favor. Grace is the scandalous act of God moving toward us and acting on our behalf, even though we are the very ones who turn away, violate our allegiances, and fail to keep our promises. God’s grace is the assurance that God never moves away from us even when we move away from God.

God’s grace is not a gussied-up version of the “God knows I’m weak, and God will excuse me for being human” rationalization. Make no mistake, God will hold us accountable for our sins. God must uphold God’s justice if God is to be trusted. Rather, grace is the assurance that our salvation is not dependent on whether we can avoid giving ourselves permission to sin or refraining from a little moral licensing, but on God’s saving act on our behalf in Christ.

When we were dead in our sin (Romans 6:1) and unable to save ourselves, God did not abandon us. God provided a way to uphold justice and a way for us to return to God’s good graces. Jesus Christ died on the cross for the remission our sins. He rose again to afford us a second chance to live better than we did before by modeling our life on his.

Still talking about Barth, Galli wrote, “I am a firm believer that good theology can be an immense help in leading a godly life. But there is a reason the Lord also gave us prayer and fellowship, Scripture and worship, among a host of other gifts: to help us grow up into the full stature of Christ.” Prayer, fellowship, scripture, and worship are tools to use against the flimsy justifications we offer to excuse our sins; but in the end, our salvation comes because God is the grace-giver, and that overrides our permission-giving. Thanks be to God for such amazing grace!

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**The Permission Givers**

Sunday, October 11, 2020 Exodus 32:1-14

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Listen to these statements and think about what they have in common. “I deserve to be happy.” “You only go around once so take every opportunity you get.” “It can’t be wrong when it feels so right.” “Surely God didn’t mean that to apply to *everybody*.” “I’m a good person; exceptions can be made in my case.” “I can do this [wrong] thing without letting it touch my soul.” “These are special circumstances, so normal rules don’t apply.” “God knows I’m weak and will excuse me.” “It’s okay. Everybody’s doing it.” “Just this once.”

If these statement sound like excuses to do something wrong or to stray from the standards of morality or to go beyond God’s boundaries for human behavior, you are right! When we hear these statements rolled out one after another it is easy to see the common thread; but it might not be quite as easy to recognize what is going on when we seek to give ourselves permission to do something that pushes moral boundaries.

This links to the scripture reading. Moses is up on Mount Sinai receiving God’s law. While he is away, the Israelites get restless. Moses’ brother Aaron permits them to set up a golden calf and allows them to carouse around it, acting “perversely,” as God tells Moses (v. 7). It is not difficult to guess what excuse the Israelites used to justify their misbehavior: “Aaron told us it was okay!” Which leads us to wonder how Aaron came to that conclusion, giving *himself*permission to act as he did. But before we beat up on Aaron too hard, we must admit that people with a whole lot more experience with and knowledge about the ways of God have done equally immoral things.

Take Karl Barth, a man described as the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th century. In 1913, while pastoring in Switzerland, Barth married Nelly Hoffman, with whom he had five children. In 1924, as a professor at the University of Göttingen, Germany, Barth met Charlotte von Kirschbaum, who later became his long-time assistant and confidante. In 1929, he moved Charlotte in with his family, despite Nelly’s objection. This arrangement lasted 35 years and put a strain on everyone involved.

Barth’s unorthodox living arrangement stunned many who respected Barth as a theologian, a pastor, and as one who helped lead Christian resistance to Hitler and Nazism in Germany. Barth’s theological beliefs are not always easy to categorize, but we know he