

CRUCIFIED WITH HIM

Every once in a while, I read a book that is so good that I periodically pick it up and reread it. One of those books that I've read in the last 15 years or so is Peter Turchin's book War and Peace and War. The book explores the question of why some states grow to become large empires while some remain small countries. The book looks at a number of factors: the history of the nations involved, the cultures of those nations, mathematical models of population growth and economics among those factors.

In the course of the book, the author discusses an interesting experiment conducted by a group of economists and sociologists working together. It was led by a Swiss economist named Ernst Fehr. Much of our economic thought over the last three or four hundred years has been built on what's called the rational choice theory. This theory states that people will automatically choose to do the most rational thing in any economic situation. Fehr created an experiment called "the public goods game." Subjects are divided up in groups of four and given an initial endowment of \$10 each. The game is played in 10 rounds. Every round each participant can contribute any part of their \$10 from 0 to 10 dollars, to the group project- which is to say the pot. The experimenters will first double the total amount contributed to the common account, and then divide it equally among the participants. Thus for each dollar contributed to the common pot, a participant gains back only 50 cents. On the other hand, he or she also gains 50 cents for each dollar contributed by others. If all participants contribute the maximum amount (\$10), they would end up with \$20 each, doubling their initial endowment.

Now, let me do the math for you. If everyone gives the maximum of \$10 each, everyone gets back \$20. Everyone makes \$10 on their \$10 investment. However, it's not mandatory to contribute to the group project. If one person contributes nothing and the others contribute the maximum of \$10 each then everyone gets back \$15 apiece. Three people put in \$10 and made \$5 more. One person put in nothing and made \$15. It is more advantageous to give nothing, than it is to contribute to the group project. So, rationally, economic theory says nobody should give anything to the group project. That's what the economists expected to find.

However, the experiment didn't match that reality. Some people continued to give throughout all ten rounds, even though they later admitted being angry that people stopped contributing to the public good. So they changed the game. They allowed participants to punish the free- riders at a cost to themselves. They could pay one dollar for the privilege of fining a free rider three dollars. The punisher gains nothing from this- that money doesn't go into the common pot. It's just paid out. All that anyone has to do to avoid the fine is pay a single dollar. So, there's no real advantage to punishing your neighbor for not contributing- except satisfaction. So, it doesn't make any sense that anyone should want to punish others. Yet, in the game people punished the free-riders.

What the experimenters concluded from this, was that society consists of three different types of people. There are those who are self-interested rational agents. They will never contribute to the common project that doesn't benefit them. They will choose to free ride, unless they're forced to do so by fines imposed on them or by some punishment imposed on them. The book labeled these people the knaves.

The opposite type, also about a quarter, are the unconditional cooperators, which the book calls "the saints". The saints continue to contribute to common pool, even if they lose money. Even when it is obvious to everybody that cooperation failed, they will continue to give.

Finally, there are the conditional cooperators. This was the largest group. The author labeled these people "the moralists." The preference of the moralists is to contribute to the pot so that everybody would be better off. However, in the absence of the mechanism to punish the non-contributors, free riding proliferates, and the moralists become disgusted by this opportunistic behavior and withdraw their cooperation. On the other hand, when the punishment option is available, they use it to fine the rational agents. The knaves grudgingly begin contributing, so that they won't be punished. Once free riding has been eliminated, the saints and the moralists can follow their pro social preference of contributing the maximum. Interesting experiment.

The book explored the economic implications of this theory, but I found it an interesting insight into human behavior, because I think it's not just about economics. In the letter to the Romans, Paul is discussing the nature of sin, grace, and salvation. His extended argument is the basis for so much of our theology. In chapter 6 he says:

1What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? 2May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

Now to understand this, in the previous chapter Paul had set forth the theological principle that salvation by grace comes through the sacrifice made by Our Lord, Jesus Christ. He even goes so far as to say, "The Law [of God] came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased grace abounded all the more." So it's easy to lead to the question. "Shall we then sin that grace may increase?" If sin causes grace to increase, shouldn't we sin? Let's just all go sin; we'll get more grace!

This is a good question. I have heard this same question asked in a different guise all my life. Can you just do whatever you want? What about the "deathbed confession"? The person who at the last minute says, "Yeah, you know, I've screwed up my entire life, but I believe in you God. So, in the next five minutes, when you decide to take me, will you please take me to heaven." Can someone just do whatever they wish their whole lives and then make a last-minute confession and

be forgiven? This question has been discussed by theologians at least since Paul raised this question here in this letter. Theologians have even given it a name. Theologians call this the question of “cheap grace”. In the early church there was even a group of Christians called the libertine movement, which kind of reminds me of the hippy movement of the late sixties in its philosophy. It was very hedonistic. The basic premise of these movements was similar to the point Paul raises here: what we do doesn’t matter because we can be forgiven. So, we’ll just go do whatever we want. Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.

I have noticed that our attitudes towards sin mirror very closely with the findings of the experiment I referenced earlier. We all sin, but some people pay no attention to others and sin unabashedly, unless forced in some way, to behave. Others will knowingly avoid sin when they can. Most of us would prefer that nobody sin knowingly, but if good behavior isn’t enforced then they will join in so they don’t suffer a disadvantage. I’ve seen that behavior out there. Now, I don’t know which group you fall into- honestly, I can see a little bit of myself in all three of those groups. I want to be clear that I’m not up here to judge anybody. I am just as much a sinner as you, and I face the same choices that anybody else does.

Perhaps, however, since Paul is an apostle, it would be well to take his advice on this subject. He suggests that while we can be forgiven anything at any time, even on our deathbed, by virtue of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, that doesn’t mean we should. He says:

3Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? 4Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. 5For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection,

You see when we take on the name of Christ we get a new life. The old life is swept away. Now, if our only interest is where we go after we die, then there would be no reason for us not to do whatever we wish. I was thinking this morning that this is sort of like a scene from the movie, “Forrest Gump”. There’s a scene where Forrest Gump gets a letter and he opens it up, and you can see the logo for the Apple computer company on it. Forrest says, “I got a letter from Lieutenant Dan said we don’t have to worry about money no more. He invested in some kind of a fruit company, and now we don’t have to worry about money no more. And I said, “That’s good! One less thing!” Well, that’s kind of where we are with our salvation. Christ died on the cross. We don’t have to worry about our salvation anymore. One less thing, right! Just trust Christ! Whosoever believeth shall not perish.

But we get more than to go to heaven some day. This is the thing I wish I could get across to people. We get more than just to go to heaven. We get a new life here, now, today. In Paul’s world, sin was the culture of willingness to dishonor God.

So, he is referring to a life that honors God here, now. I think that's important. When we sin, it must be so humiliating for God. But there's more. I'm amazed at how destructive sin can be in our lives. We are all sinners and we never completely remove the specter of sin from our lives, but we can at least curtail the amount of sin that we engage in knowingly. I found personally, that the more I do so, the more stable I become and the better my life becomes.

Paul alludes to this. He says that we were once slaves to our own sin- but not anymore. Our old sinful self has been crucified with him. We now are no longer slaves to our sin. We have been liberated by the grace of Jesus Christ. I guess I view it as an enormous gift. That means I can start over. I can begin again. Because I have been crucified with him- by the gift of his grace- my sin need have no impact on me. It's still there and it still haunts me. But it doesn't control my destiny and my life is more stable because of it. What an enormous gift to be crucified with him.