

Personal Peace
Romans 7:15-25a
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One of the most exhausting occupations known to humanity is that of a firefighter. While trying to deter the progress of raging infernos, a firefighter burns through over 800 calories an hour. To put that in perspective, that is about eight times as much energy as a person expends while doing a desk job.

A prize fighter can go through almost 1400 calories an hour when engaged in a monumental match with an opponent. 800 calories an hour to fight a fire, 1400 calories an hour to struggle with another boxer, but no one has been able to measure the amount of energy we burn fighting with ourselves. I can testify, however, that it is far more taxing than struggling with either natural disasters or athletic competitors.

Paul talks about the internal struggle that saps our energy with breathtaking honesty in Romans 7:15-25. He confesses, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." A little later he shares, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." And then he brings the testimony to a crescendo by saying, "when I want to do good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

The apostle's words remind me of an old Kris Kristofferson song entitled, "The Silver-Tongued Devil and I." The troubadour's better self describes his more degenerate self as a devil and sings, "And you know, he's the devil. He's everything that I ain't. Hiding intentions of evil, under the smile of a saint. All he's good for is getting in trouble, and shiftn' his share of the blame. And some people swear he's my double: and some even say we're the same."

An amazing theological debate continues in the commentaries on this passage. The crux of the controversy is over whether Paul is talking about a struggle that occurred within him before he was converted or whether he is describing an ongoing battle that continued after he became a Christian. St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin and other towering figures in the history of the faith all agree that Paul is speaking of an internal struggle that persisted after his conversion. Rudolph Bultmann, along with most scholars from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, argue that Paul's inner wrangling could not be part of a true Christian's experience and therefore conclude that they represent his feelings before his Damascus road transformation.

For the life of me, I can't see how smart people could come to such a conclusion. I resolve this great theological debate with two simple questions: Do you consider yourself to be a Christian? Do you still struggle with doing the right thing? So do I, case closed. I can't say that I've met a healthy believer who did not also confess that he or she battled the desire to do the wrong thing or avoid doing the right thing from time to time.

I think the power of Paul's confession in this passage comes from the fact that it is universal. Last week, the Washington Post ran an article about how cool President Obama continues to be in the face of political turmoil. The journalist noted that the President has an uncanny ability to control his own powerful emotions in the face of

deepening controversy. One article down from this one, however, a reporter declared that try as he might, the President hasn't been able to stop smoking.

Do you think his failure to kick the habit is due to a lack of information? Of course not. He knows what is best, he simply can't find the power to follow what he knows to be the healthiest course for his life. The man, who by virtue of his office is often called the most powerful leader in the free world, can't control his own yen for a cigarette. Join the club, right?

A comical version of this truth is portrayed in the classic Billy Wilder movie "7-year itch." In the picture, the main character's wife and son go to the country for the summer, leaving him alone in his apartment. Knowing her husband will be without her supervision for three months, the wife admonishes him not to smoke while the family is away. To add power to her plea, she reminds him that his doctor too has warned him to stay away from tobacco. Of course the first night he is alone in the house, the cigarettes begin to call to him. He tells himself no, no, no, then pulls one out and puts it in his mouth. Just before lighting it, however, he hears his wife's voice in his head, snaps the cigarette from his mouth, opens a desk and places his entire stash in the drawer and locks it with a key. Then, he casts the key to the very top of a book shelf, far out of his own reach. Do you think that took care of the problem? No, within less than a hour, our vacillating friend drags a foot stool out from the kitchen, retrieves the key and lights one up. We laugh, because in one way or another, we recognize ourselves.

The tussle between our desire to be good and our desire to be bad has been going on since the Garden of Eden. We see it in Adam and Eve and recognize it in their offspring as well. Genesis chapter 4 reports that the Lord told Cain, "if you do not do well, sin is lurking at your door; its desire is for you, but you must master it." The wise words fell on deaf ears, however, and a few verses later, we find the evil mastering Cain. Paul refers back to this story in his own testimony saying, "when I want to do good, evil lies close at hand."

Jesus identified this struggle in his disciples in a different garden on the night before he was crucified. As Peter, James and John tried in vain to stay awake and pray with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus summed up their problem by saying, "your spirit is willing, but your flesh is weak." The Lord's brother, James, keyed in on this human dilemma when he wrote, "every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." I agree, it ought not be, but it is.

I wonder what caused Paul to pen these words? I know what causes me to become exasperated with my lack of ability to do the right thing. . . when I get caught doing the wrong thing. When my temper flares and I make a fool of myself, I immediately wish I could be a better person. Most of us feel likewise. If we aim to get some part of our sinful nature under control, only to lose the battle in public or private and get exposed for the faulty saints we are, we usually feel a surge of desire to straighten up. In those moments of regret, we often say things like, "I'm sorry, I'm trying to do better, I kept it under wraps for awhile, but I guess I'm just not strong enough to deal with my problem."

Sometimes, the desire to end our inner wrestling match arises because we simply get tired of the pain our problems are causing us. In other words, we get sick of our own behavior and the trouble it brings to our lives.

Liberation theologian James Cone speaks very movingly of his own father's battle to do the right thing. Cone says there was always a war in his father between Saturday night and Sunday morning. For stretches of time, he would give in to the pull of Saturday night and spend his free time drinking and playing in juke joints and, much to Cone's mother's vexation, sleeping in on Sunday mornings. Then, when he would get sick of being sick and cloudy from weeks of giving into the lure of Saturday night, he would walk the aisle at church and rededicate his life to follow Jesus. This new fervency would last for several weeks and then Saturday night would issue its call and Mr. Cone

would drift back into his wicked ways. Cone said that he believed his father was equally sincere in his desire to embrace and shun Saturday night for Sunday morning.

Maybe the apostle Paul was caught doing something he ought not have been doing, or maybe he just got fed up with his weakness in the face of temptation. Or maybe, he had a powerful encounter with the Spirit of Christ and made a new commitment to leave his destructive patterns behind once and for all, only to find that they crept back into his life again.

My good friend Bob Jordan recently resigned his pastorate to become the Executive Director of Habitat for Humanity for Howard County. When I asked him why he made such a decision, he spoke about a trip he recently took back to his home in Sumpter County, Alabama. Bob said as he rode around his hometown, he came upon a street he never remembered traveling. He turned onto the dirt road and soon began to pass inhabited shack after shack after shack. As he saw how people lived in his own hometown, he was moved to tears and decided that people should not have to live like that in the United States. When he returned home, he made a promise to God to find some kind of work that would address inhumane housing. When he finished answering my question, I was so inspired, I was ready to give him my home.

Half a dozen times in my life, I have been swept away by the power of a sermon, retreat or testimony and decided to give my life to serve God without reservation. In those moments, I am sure that I no longer want to pursue any ambition or possession, but want to finally go and do everything Jesus has taught me to do. That authentic spiritual zeal always stays with me for a month or two and then I begin to regress back to self-centered and lazy patterns. When I see what's happening, I always feel an exasperation with my sinful self.

Most of us get very religious when we're caught doing something wrong or when we simply get tired of the trouble our bad habits are causing us or when we catch a glimpse of who we want to be. Possibly one such experience kicked off the in-depth spiritual conflict that Paul so clearly describes in this passage.

Whatever caused it, we recognize it, because we've experienced it. Even though we have honestly repented of our sins, received the spirit of Christ and have begun a genuine attempt at discipleship, we still battle powerful impulses to do things that we know and believe aren't right. So what can we do about this dilemma?

Paul says we can thank God that Christ has freed us from this awful mess. When we took Jesus as our Lord, God sent the Holy Spirit into our lives and that Spirit will eventually overcome the negative resistance that persists within us. The battle will continue on some level for the rest of our lives, but the outcome has been secured. Greater is the Spirit of Christ within us than is the spirit of self-centeredness that clings to our old way of life.

This truth helps us see the struggle itself as a good sign of growth. For years, prior to our spiritual awakening, we did bad stuff and didn't care. All sorts of people are still doing vile, rotten and violent stuff without a hint of regret. According to the Bible, the current state of their lives and their ultimate destination, despite how it may appear on any given day, is not enviable. I wouldn't trade places with them. Thank God for the strong desire the Spirit has placed within us to do good even when we don't always follow through on the Spirit's prompts.

We can also recognize that we have already made progress even though we still have a long way to go. In II Corinthians, Paul writes that our outer nature, the one that gets us in trouble, is slowly wasting away, while our inner spiritual nature, the one transformed by God, is growing stronger each day. We should celebrate this spiritual reality. Maybe we ought to establish an, "I'm not as awful as I once was" day and put up balloons and eat cake. I know there are relapses and regression on our path of discipleship, but I assure you, by the grace of God, we're making progress.

Lastly, we can acknowledge how difficult it is to learn a new way of walking and give ourselves a break. Learning how to walk by the Spirit and not by our own egos is incredibly difficult. In Romans 8 Paul declares, "all who are led by the Spirit are children of God." The Message paraphrase of Scripture inspires us with this promise, "A new power is in operation. . . God's spirit beckons. There are things to do and places to go!" This is true, but certainly not easy.

Last year NOVA broadcast a show about the Ulas family, a group of four sisters and one brother living in a remote Kurdish village in Turkey who walk on all four appendages. The reasons the children walk like bears are complex and in some ways still mysterious, however, there is no doubt this strange development has greatly impeded their intellectual and social growth. Therefore, in 2005, a team of doctors, geneticists, therapists and sociologist went to the Ulas family and attempted to help the children learn to walk upright.

Even with expert guidance and an apparatus designed for the relearning process, the children, who are all now adults, made very slow progress. They wept with pain when the new way of walking stretched their muscles in new directions. With each attempt they stumbled and fell, bruising and scarring their bodies. Huseyin, the one son among the siblings, had an especially difficult time trying to walk upright. He had walked on all fours for 28 years and the lessons wounded him physically and emotionally. Finally, after weeks of grueling therapy, he disappeared from the family home for days. The emotional peak of the documentary occurred, however, when, as the therapists packed up to leave, Huseyin returned to the village, pulled himself to his feet and took several wobbly steps toward his mother. She declared that she did not know Alah could make such a beautiful sight.

I think most of us don't realize how difficult it is to learn to walk a new way. For years we walked under the direction of our impulses and ego and then Christ came to us and called us to a new way of life. Time, practice, help and guidance is required for us to learn how to walk by the Spirit's guidance. We're going to experience a lot of pain, fall down some and we will go back to our old crutches from time to time. That is what forgiveness is for. Our calling, however, is to keep trying and to keep helping one another. Over time, by the power of God's grace, we will learn how to trust the voice of the spirit, yield our will to the Spirit's guidance and walk in new ways. It may be years before we can walk without a limp or a stutter step here and there. Whole sections of our lives may pass before we can truly run at the Spirits bidding, but because of what Christ has done for us, we will, by God's grace get there.