

Scriptures read: Deuteronomy 30:15-20, 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, and Matthew 5: 21-37

WINNING THE WAR WITHIN

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 7 beginning with verse 14: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but 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. ²⁴What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

St. Paul who is credited to be the greatest missionary of church history, the earliest writer of Christian faith and

practice in his letters, a man whom Jesus personally chose to bring the Gospel to the world...and yet he writes this in the letter to the Roman church. Even the greatest saint in history had a war within him, a continuous battle of wanting to do good and yet his practice kept ending with him falling into sin.

Now for Paul, this war was centered on the battle to fulfill the Law of Moses in all of his practice and action...which is the definition of Judaism: The state of integrity of your practice and acts that matches your words and thoughts. If you say at least two times each day that you love God with all of your heart, mind, and strength, your actions had better be in line with that relationship of love with God. Yet Paul says that he fails to practice that which he preaches, his

actions do not reflect his love for God. Therefore, Paul's actions separate him further and further from God and widen the gap in their relationship. Paul's will is stronger than anyone I have ever read about or met in my life, and yet, he says that even his immense willpower cannot overcome the lack of consistency between his mind and heart, and the words and actions he does every day.

In our continued reading of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus takes the Law of Moses and relationship with God to the next level. Jesus says that even though your actions may reflect your love for God when you are out on the street, your thoughts must be in line as well. You must be consistent in your whole self so you can truly speak the words of the Shema with integrity: I love the Lord my God

with all of my heart, mind, and strength. For it seems that the scribes and the Pharisees outwardly showed their love for God and neighbor, but inwardly they were angry with their brother and in private called him a fool, putting him down over and over in their mind, so much so that they dismissed him as a human being with all the respect each person deserves.

This word respect and walking in someone else's shoes with empathy and integrity...that is exactly what each of these little teachings in the Sermon on the Mount demands of Jesus' disciples. From anger to grudges to lustful thoughts to divorce to making oaths to prove you are telling the truth, these teachings are given to help Jesus' disciples be authentic when they say they love the Lord their God with

their whole selves, mind, heart, and body, and in the same way love their neighbor as they love themselves.

Now here's the problem: these teachings are even more burdensome than just the actions commanded by the Law of Moses, they pour gasoline on the fires of the war within a person. Jesus' teachings here in Matthew 5 are incredibly difficult to live up to...how can anyone keep out impure thoughts when we have these God given emotions running around in us? It's hard enough to keep our actions in line with God. And so people get further and further away from God in their thoughts, words, and actions until finally they give up and say that this is impossible...so I'm choosing not to believe in any of this. A person falling away from God is

counter to everything Jesus does and says in his life, so what gives? Why would Jesus teach these things?

I believe Jesus' challenges his disciples to go further in and farther up in their relationship with God. Paul says that it is through the cross of Christ that God comes close to us, that the gap that separates us from God because of our inconsistency no longer exists, all because of the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ. The gospel of John says over and over that if we only believe Jesus, then we can go further in and farther up in our relationship with God, through the Holy Spirit of God who takes away all the obstacles that block us from being consistent for Christ, authentic in our witness, and having integrity in our relationship with God as we profess our love

for God and neighbor. Paul calls this life in Romans chapter 8, a life that has won the war within through the cross of Christ and the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit, a life that is led by the Spirit rather than the flesh. For if we live a life of the flesh where we rely upon our own willpower, our own strength of character, our own discipline to govern our thoughts and our actions, we will certainly fail and fall away from God. But if we live a life that allows the Holy Spirit to work in us by actively maturing us, perfecting us, transforming us, and saving us...we win the war within!

We have victory in Jesus because our sin, which is the gap between God and us, is gone! We have victory in Jesus because the struggle is not between our actions, words, and thoughts, but by our constant openness to the Holy Spirit

and following the example of Christ that the Spirit lays out for us! We have victory, the war is over, the battle has been won within ourselves because of what Christ did for us and what the Holy Spirit is doing in us.

Now the big question is "How do we constantly remain open to the Holy Spirit?" Ah, that's the work of the church together as we practice the spiritual disciplines and means of grace found in the Big 5: Consistency in Prayer, faithful attending Worship and Sacrament, study of the Scriptures, small group accountability, and doing works of love for God and others. It is not these acts of piety, study, and action that transform us, they are not to take the place of God, but they are the tools by which we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and become new creations in Christ Jesus our Lord.