

Romans 7:14-25a (Matthew 11:25-30)

If you remember the comedian Flip Wilson, then you recall his famous line, “The devil made me do it.” People laughed at him, but I recall the opposite from my parents. It was not funny to them, and they used it as a teaching moment for my brother and myself. If we ever did something wrong, but blamed the devil for it, it wasn’t the devil who got the spanking; it was us.

St. Paul sounds a little like Flip Wilson in Romans 7: “*It is no longer I who do it,*” he says, “*but sin that dwells within me.*” This may be the perfect excuse. The adulterer can tell his wife, “It wasn’t me honey, it was the sin in me.” The thief can tell the judge the same thing. So can the older brother after belting his younger brother in the mouth. In fact, there may be people preparing this line for God on Judgment Day: “It wasn’t me who did all those bad things, God, it was the sin in me.”

But Paul did not write these words to be an excuse. He wrote them out of deep frustration, even out of agony. “*I do not do what I want,*” he cries, “*but I do the very thing I hate...I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.*”

This Scripture speaks to the excuse that most people have--the excuse of good intentions. “I intended on being in church Sunday.” “I intended on avoiding that sin.” And so on. Someone once said that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.” But even St. Paul had them...”The desire, the intention to do what is right is in me; I just don’t carry it out.” If you beat yourself up on a regular basis for not following through with doing the right thing, and avoiding the wrong thing; if your good intentions rarely make it out of your heart, then join the club. St. Paul was in it. I’m in it. Your loved ones who are in heaven were in it. It’s a club that we join, not when we’re born into sin, but when we are baptized.

The baptized are different from all others because the baptized are given the new man. This new man in the heart desires to do what is right because the new man is born of God and wants to please God. But the new man is not there in the heart by himself. Sin is right there with him. When Paul bemoans the truth, “*Nothing good dwells in me,*” he is speaking of his sinful flesh, and the Old Adam who is in a life-and-death struggle with the new man in the hearts of the baptized. Without the Old Adam in us, we would always be a joy to live with. Church work would always get done. Offering plates would always be overflowing. Pews would always be packed. And voters meetings would be like a picnic on a cool Summer’s day.

But there is no Christian who ever lived who did not struggle with his sinful flesh. And, believe it or not, this struggle is good. If that life-and-death struggle between the Old Adam and the new man is not there in the heart, it means that the Old Adam has won. If you do not struggle, as Paul did, with the desire to do what is right, but with the inability to carry it out, this means that the new man in you was put into a chokehold and did not survive.

Only the baptized have this struggle. The struggle is daily and it is lifelong. But this struggle dare not be an excuse for us. “Oh, I gave in to sin yesterday, didn’t I? Well, that just goes to show that the Old Adam in me won that battle. Maybe I’ll do better next time.” If we have such an attitude, then we are not struggling; we’re giving in. Had that been the attitude of our country’s founders

in 1776, we would still be under the rule of England today. If you and I do not fight as Christian people against the power of sin in us--the power of pornography to control us, the lust for riches to entice us, the apathy in us to neglect preaching and the Sacrament and say, "Oh well, there's always next Sunday,"--if we do not struggle against sin, then the Old Adam in us will soon have complete control.

"But why struggle," we may say, "if even St. Paul bemoaned that he was helpless against the power of sin?" Ah, but now we come to the heart of it all. "*Wretched man that I am!*" Paul indeed cried, "*Who will deliver me from this body of death?*" But in his helplessness, he proclaims the answer: "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*"

Let's turn to the words of our Lord. In our Matthew reading for today, Jesus thanks His Father in heaven for hiding His truth from those who think they are wise, and revealing His truth to "*little children.*" This is the key. Little children, babies, are truly helpless. They would sit in dirty diapers were it not for their caring parents. They would starve or die of thirst if they were left to fend for themselves. A little child is helpless, and we must see ourselves as such little children. You are not able to win in your struggle against sin. I am not able to carry out my desire to do what is right. We are helpless as babies. But such helpless babies are those Jesus comes to rescue.

No Christian, no matter how strong in the faith he is, will ever win over sin and the Old Adam unless he cries with Paul, "I am a helpless infant!" We do this in one way--by returning to our baptism through daily repentance. The only way to defeat the sin in you is to confess it with a contrite heart, repent of it, and seek forgiveness for it in Jesus Christ your Lord.

God is not impressed with Christians who think they are mastering sin by avoiding sin and by carrying out what is right instead. For then we are only deceiving ourselves. Only Jesus can master your sin because only Jesus died on the cross as the sin-offering for all, and rose in triumph to defeat sin once and for all.

Those who think they are wise will never master sin and the Old Adam, because they do not cry with Paul that they are helpless. But you who turn to Jesus each day, repent of your sin and ask Him to forgive you...you who come to His House freely confessing your sins with the congregation, but clinging to His word of absolution spoken by your pastor...you who come to the Holy Supper hungry for your Lord's body and blood for the remission of your sins--you are the little children whom Jesus draws to Himself. You are the ones who, though you struggle with sin each day, will live each day in peace and joy because God does not leave you helpless. He who cries, "*Come unto Me all who labor and are heavy laden,*" is the One who comes to you through His very words. He comes to you for no other purpose than to care for you as a loving parent cares for his helpless child. He comes to you, and you are forgiven of your sin. It does not matter what you have done. It does not matter how much the Old Adam has controlled you, how often he has beaten up the new man in you. All of you are forgiven.

And when God forgives you, He gives you His Holy Spirit to live in you. And friend, the Spirit of Christ is stronger than your sin, stronger than the Old Adam in you. And so, though you and I do not follow through with our good intentions; though we are mastered by sin at every turn in

our life, the Spirit of Christ lives in you to fight for you. He will help you follow through in your desire to do what is right. He will help you to avoid sin and not give in to it. Helpless as babies in dirty diapers we are, but Jesus is He who comes to you. He removes your filthy diaper, forgiving your sins, and He puts His Spirit in you to help you to live as His dear children. Amen.