

THE INSIDE OUT LIFE

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Jeremiah 31: 27-34

Psalm 121

2 Timothy 4: 6-18

Luke 18: 1-8

Everyone is on the road to God. All of humanity in all times, whether they know it or not, is on the road to God, thanks to the work of Jesus Christ. That's the message of this church, that the good news of Jesus Christ is for everyone, without exception.

But the fact that everyone is on the same journey with the same ultimate destination doesn't mean that there aren't a lot of interesting questions to ask about that journey, and we're going to take a look today at one of those questions, and provide an answer based on today's scriptures.

It's a time-honored debate whether, from a Christian point of view, it's a sign of greater maturity to have met and conquered temptation, or whether it's a mark of greater maturity not to experience the temptation at all.

Suppose you're standing on a street and across the street there's a bank with a sidewalk in front. And as you look over there you see two men approaching the bank, one from either direction. They walk towards one another, come side by side as they walk in front of the bank, and then continue on their way, each in the opposite direction, getting farther and farther from each other with every step.

Not a very dramatic picture, is it? Two men passing a bank as they walk down the street.

But now, suppose you could look into the hearts and minds of these two men. What might you see.

What you might see in one of them is somebody thinking about football, about his team, the New England Patriots, say, and what a wonder that guy Tom

Brady is, and how Bill Belichick deserves to have his head included on Mount Rushmore.

And now here's what's important. If you could see into the heart and soul of this man, if you could peer into even the smallest nook and the darkest cranny of who he is, you wouldn't find even the least bit of unease about the fact that he is walking past a bank.

But now suppose you look into the heart and soul of the other man. What you might see there is a titanic moral struggle. What you might see is someone debating fiercely with himself and perhaps even pleading with God to give him the strength necessary to walk past that bank without stepping inside.

This is a plausible scenario on the assumption that one of the two men is an ordinary guy with an ordinary life, while the other guy is a heroin addict with a history of armed robbery who really needs a fix.

The point is that different things tempt different people. Heaven knows I have my own vices, and one or two of them are almost certainly worse than this one, in God's eyes, but when I go shopping in Walmart, I'm not even tempted to rob the branch of Medina Savings and Loan inside, so it would be ridiculous to applaud me for having made it in and out without having done so.

The thought I'm circling around here is that the central Christian concern, when it comes to the life of the individual, is always and everywhere with the inner woman or man, and only secondarily with the person's behavior.

When Paul gives us his famous list of Christian virtues in the fifth chapter of Galatians, notice how they are all description of personality rather than behavior: "*...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.*" (vv. 22-23)

So that Christ could impart His own Spirit to each and every believer was the whole point of His death. But the object of receiving Christ's Spirit is so that we can embark upon the never-ending project of bringing our own Spirit into perfect accord and harmony with His.

The Christian life is essentially an inside-out life. What I mean is that the growth and maturity of that life always occurs first on the inside, and then manifests on the outside. As Christ Himself put it: "Are grapes gathered from

thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? So every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit."

And I think that's the deep message of our passage from Jeremiah in our readings this morning. Let's reread the passage starting in v. 31:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD...I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

What was the old covenant? It was the covenant God made with Israel on Mount Sinai, and it consisted of a large number of laws, six hundred and thirteen of them, to be exact, and almost every one of them was a law about what to **do**, or what not to **do**. And the first ten of them, which symbolically represent all the rest, were written on stone.

The new covenant, on the contrary will put the law within us. What does that mean?

What that means, as Christ came to teach us, is that our central effort, as partners in the new covenant, is to become a certain type of person, rather than conform to a certain set of rules.

The Christian ideal is not perfect adherence to every jot and tittle of a set of six hundred and thirteen Jewish laws, or to Shariah law, or to the American criminal and civil law or to any other set of external commandments. The Christian ideal - that towards which we as Christians should constantly aspire - is rather perfect conformity to the character of Jesus Christ.

If we go back to our original example of the two men walking by the bank, I think it's safe to say that the one who provides the better symbol of the Christian ideal is the one who is not even tempted by the thought of robbing the bank, rather than the one who struggles mightily against his temptation. While it is certainly a good Christian thing for the one man to resist the temptation to commit armed robbery, should he feel that temptation, surely it

is a better Christian thing to be the sort of person who wouldn't even contemplate it in the first place. An alcoholic may congratulate himself on being six months sober; but in his heart of hearts, surely he envies his neighbor who does not need to engage in the daily struggle, just as the person who has to bite his tongue to prevent humble-bragging might wish he didn't have to guard his tongue at all, but simply was never inclined to do it in the first place.

All of which brings us to the parable we find in today's gospel reading from Luke, the so-called parable of the persistent widow and the unrighteous judge. We examined this same parable not that long ago from this pulpit. What we argued then was that this was not a parable designed to teach us that we must continue to badger God with our requests until He eventually gives in and accedes to them. Instead we focused on that element of the parable where Christ emphasizes the **certainty** and the **immediacy** of God's response to prayer. In thinking about that, we concluded that the act of praying itself is its own reward. The immediate and certain reward of prayer is not the change it makes in the world, but the change it makes in us.

And I think that if we hold onto that thought, we can take it even deeper, in the context of what we said earlier, about temptation and the inner versus the outer.

At the end of our passage in Luke, Jesus asks, almost as if he were speaking to Himself, *Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

What this tells us is that what we thought was a parable about prayer turns out to be really about faith, that deepest and most elemental foundation of our earthly relationship with God. And I think the point Jesus is making by expressing this concern about faith at the conclusion of this particular parable, is that he is worried that people might misunderstand the point of prayer, and that that misunderstanding might lead to disappointment that can undermine one's faith.

But what is this *faith* that everyone is always making such a fuss about?

My suggestion is that faith is the extent to which one has allowed oneself to be conformed to God's Spirit. That is not the same as being obedient to God's Spirit. It is rather to be at peace and in agreement with God's Spirit.

Perfect faith then would be when every element of one's life - one's actions, one's thoughts, even one's emotions - is in full harmony with God's gracious and loving and forgiving spirit. That is the ideal Jesus himself personified - incarnated - and towards which the path of the seeking Christian is always directed.

The parable of the persistent widow and the unrighteous judge is certainly about prayer, but it's about prayer as something much more than those short periods of time we set aside to offer our thanksgiving and our requests heavenward. It is about the opening up of our behavior and thoughts to God's inspection and improvement, the orientation of our will to God's own, the offering up of our discordant, wayward, and sorrowful lives to God's loving guidance and care.

The concern Christ expresses at the end of the parable is not that, on his return, he might find that people aren't praying much anymore, or aren't praying enough. His concern is that their faith has dwindled or even disappeared.

And so in conclusion we return to our two men walking towards each other, one lost in meditation about the Bills, the other struggling mightily against temptation. The first simply ignores the bank as he walks in one direction. The second sends up a few hurried words of thanksgiving as he proceeds on his way, patting himself on the back for his moral victory.

Both are on the journey towards God; we're beyond debating about that. They're just at different places, or perhaps I should say, on different paths. The first, I would contend, is a little farther along, at least with respect to robbing banks. Of course he's a fan of New England, and that counts against him.

And so, Lord, our prayer for this morning and this message is that our lives might be inside-out lives, that our lives may be good because our actions are good, but that our actions may be good because they are the fruit of our good spirits, and that our spirits may be good because they are journeying ever closer and closer to you, and on that journey becoming ever and ever more like the spirit of your beloved child, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.