**The Three Questions of a Struggling Christian**

**“Why do I do it?”** That seems to be the resounding question Paul’s asking in this dialogue with himself isn’t it? And I’m guessing it’s a question with which we’re well acquainted.

Each week, we leave this building hopefully with a sense of renewal that comes from the Gosepl, with a new motivation to go out and live better lives out of love for Jesus, and yet each week, there is probably a night where you lay your head down on your pillow and think to yourself, “Why did I do that?” Why did I lose patience with my child leaving them in tears? Why were my words so short and inconsiderate with my spouse? Why do I continue to go back to the same sin week in and week out, even when every time, I tell myself I’m not going to do it again.

**“Why do we do it?”** We don’t want to. We’re Christian people, we’re supposed to live Christ-like lives. And yet there’s this constant inner conflict inside of each struggling Christian.

 Today, the apostle Paul shares his experience, and it’s strikingly similar! He says, ***“I do not understand what I do!”*** Paul can relate. You hear his frustration too don’t you? There’s this struggle going on inside the apostle Paul, and it’s constant, and it bleeds itself out onto these pages of Scripture today in Romans. And when you read it, boy, don’t you feel like you’re reading a page from your own diary?!

He wants to do what is right. But that’s not what he does. In fact he does exactly the opposite! And for every one of us here today, there is no denying that you have the same war going on inside. It’s a war between me and me. The old me, in me from birth, and the new me, created at my baptism***. “What I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.”***

 What’s Paul mean by that? ***“If I do what I do not want to do, I agree that he law is good?”*** Paul’s train of logic here can be illustrated well from the life of a person who unfortunately has become addicted to drugs. His life is a mess because he is addicted to the thing he doesn’t want to do: And as a result, He’s become unemployable, he’s on the verge of losing his house; his children are suffering and his wife is threatening to leave him. Remorsefully, he looks at the situation and says, “I don’t want to go on like this. The law of the land is right when it forbids the misuse of the drugs I’ve gotten into, that law is good!”

Paul is in the same frame of mind. When he doesn’t want to do the bad things God forbids, he’s actually agreeing with God that God’s laws and commands are good and right. And so he concludes: “I***t is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.”*** This isn’t a cop- out, but an accurate assessment of the struggle every single one of us experiences on a daily basis. And there are two unfortunate ways we can respond to this.

Our elders are currently going through a book called the Narrow Lutheran Middle-by Dan Deutschlander. Sounds exciting huh? It is! It’s actually quite good. In this book the author gives a vivid description of the Christian’s daily struggle – Frustrated by sin and self. And he describes it as a narrow highway we’re going down in life. Along one side of the highway is the ditch of doubt and along the other side, the ditch of denial.

When you find yourself asking the question, “Why did I do that?” it can be very easy to forget God’s promised forgiveness. We can swerve into that ditch of doubt and wallow in it. “How could God ever forgive the things I’ve done, the way I am, the sins I fall into day after day.” That’s a dangerous ditch to wallow in. But what might be even worse for a Christian, is what happens when we swerve too quickly to the other side of the road, into the ditch of denial or presumption.

II. Am I that Bad?

This ditch sounds like this: “**Am I really that bad?** Look at everyone else! I’m a Christian, God’s going to take care of me anyway. So I can drive as fast as I want.” “…sleep wherever I want.” “…Look at whatever I want.” When we’re sitting in this ditch, we try to pretend that the problem’s not really there, or that we’re really not that bad, by finding someone else whose life looks worse than ours, someone whose family is more dysfunctional, we blame our spouse for everything that is wrong with our marriage and how held back we are, or we keep repeating the nice compliment someone gave us last month and pretend that that’s the only thing that’s true about us! But the fact is, we’re just pretending.

Have you ever heard of Sean McGrath? Sean McGrath tried to sue Dollar Rent-A-Car in Orlando Florida. Dollar Rent-A-Car rented a car to Mr. McGrath who then got drunk and crashed his car. Sadly, his girlfriend died in the accident. Sean tried to sue the car rental place. Why? Because, according to his lawyer, Mr. McGrath is Irish, and everyone knows how the Irish love to drink. Therefore, the rental car company should never have rented him the car. He blamed the car rental company for killing his girlfriend.

 Did you notice who Paul blamed for his problems? Not his parents, his bad upbringing, his environment, his government. No he blames himself. Paul (whose parents, by the way, taught him lies, whose environment taught him hate, whose former religion taught him to kill) understood that his attention needed to be focused within, on his own mind and his own heart.

 Christians, You will not begin to fix the biggest problems in your life until you recognize, like Paul, that your biggest problem lives inside of you – your constant desire to do the things you’re not supposed to and ignore the things you should do. Your sin is such an intimate and regular participant in all of your decisions and actions that Paul calls it a law. Listen to what he says in verse 21:

**21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me**. Just as you can always go to the Ten Commandments and find guidance for you, you can always look to your life and see where you are making mistakes that hurt you. And the sad thing is, that because we don’t like to admit where many of our problems truly lie or how serious this really is, we actually make the problem worse.

You see what a dangerous and narrow highway this is? Like a teenager learning to drive, we have a very difficult time staying in our narrow lane. We can so easily swerve into doubt that our Lord’s death on the cross is enough to remove our guilt, or we swerve into the other ditch of denial and presume that God’s grace is a license to sin. ***“What a wretched man I am…”*** Paul says, ***“Who will rescue me?”***

**III. Who will rescue me?**

Friends, you can’t drive yourself out of the ditch of denial. You end up swerving across to the ditch of despair. “Why did I do that…” Wouldn’t it be nice if we could all just turn back the clock and fix things? Go back a couple miles on that narrow road, and make sure we stay on the path?

Well Christians, God has. He takes us back to that spot in the road where the yellow warning signs are big and bright. Can you see what they say? “Slow Down!”, “Look at Jesus!” “Keep Him in view.” He and He alone can keep you out of the ditch. Jesus knows your steering is out of alignment. So move over and let Him drive. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ, Paul says right after this. (8:1) His Word and sacrament are one powerful tow truck to pull you out of the ditches of doubt and denial. All you have to do is ask for help.

Why do we so often refuse to? Why do we so often try to take on this daily struggle by ourselves? Maybe it’s because you think you can’t win. That’s what Paul thought. He asks himself here, ***“Who will rescue me from this body of death?”*** I imagine that he first asked himself a similar question, “Who *can* rescue me from this body of death?”

It certainly wasn’t him. As he stood there on the road to Damascus with Jesus Christ in front of him, he had to be told that it was wrong to persecute and kill Christians. And every day after that, the more he read God’s Word and learned His will, the more he realized how good he was at doing all sorts of things that belong in hell; so good that, decades after this revelation, during which he fought and clawed and struggled against every temptation, the great apostle Paul could still only come to one conclusion, ***“What a wretched man I am.”***

And if he couldn’t rely on himself to rescue him, or his friends, who tempt him, his enemies, who hate him, his parents, who misguided him, his government, who misled him, then the only one left to trust was the one standing in front of him; the only person to go toe-to-toe with the same grave, devil, sin and win; who also happens to be the God against whom we sin and the one whose judgment brings our condemnation. And yet, against every fiber of what we believe is fair, the Bible assures us that he’s also the Savior who forgives our sins and gives even wretched sinners like Paul full and free salvation.

You know what I’ve found is one of my favorite parts about being a parent of young children? Your kids trust you. Both of my daughters have now gotten to the stage of lifting up their arms to me whenever they are either sad about something, scared of strangers, scared of our vacuum cleaner, or just need help and want to be picked up. Sometimes one of them even stands feet planted in the ground and slowly just falls into me expecting that I’m going to catch her. They trust, without a doubt, that their parents can and will help them.

It reminds me of why Jesus so often commends the faith of children instead of adults. Children know something about themselves that we adults tend either to forget or do not want to admit. Children know they need help, and they’re not afraid to ask for it.

We like to believe that God loves us because we’re these smart, grown-up mature Christians who have life all figured out; that we are special to God because we’re WELS Lutherans and so good at following his Word. But we’re not. We are not like Jesus, the only person who could ever say, “The good I wanted to do, I did; and the evil I didn’t want to do, I didn’t.” He never lost his patience, he never spoke short and inconsiderate words to those he loved, he never sinned. Always loved, always worked, always served. And yet he was still rewarded with the hell we deserve.

 So when he invites the weary and burdened to come to him for rest, he is inviting you, wearied by your sins, burdened by your guilt, to have rest assured that you are forgiven and will never feel the same pain. Your time in hell has already been suffered, and you don’t have one bruise or scratch to show for it. And so what our Father in heaven wants, what He loves, is children who admit they need help, children who lift up, not their arms, but their hearts to God, trusting that he has given them release from their burdens. He wants you to be reminded that day by day, His mercies attend you, bringing comfort to your anxious soul. To know He is near you when your burdens grow too great to bear. And he wants you to know that He will be there to guide you day by day, until you reach your promised land. Christians find rest, in the one who can actually help! “***Thanks be to God, He delivers us, through Jesus Christ our Lord!”***