

3 Lent 2003
“Help for Sinners”
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One of the hardest things to do is tell your self “no”. It takes enormous discipline, doesn't it? Think about it. How many of you gave up something for Lent? Has it been difficult? Are you struggling to stick to it?

If you are, I must commend you. It means your fast is working, that you are having a “good” Lent. Just hang in there, folks. We are almost half way to Easter when the fast will end. We will break the fast after the Great Vigil of Easter on Saturday night with a great big party, the biggest party of the year.

But you know there's more to saying “no” to our selves than sustaining a temporary fast in Lent. **There's a whole WORLD of other things we must deny ourselves**, things much harder to say no to. I'm talking about the various vices that are dug into our lives like a division of Republican Guards.

So what are your vices? Take a moment to think of those evil, selfish, lustful little cravings that dominate your life. While you're thinking, I'll just name a few. How about sharing delicious, malicious gossip. It's hard to say no to that isn't it? Or how about visiting porn sites on the Internet? Do you do that? Some nurture a sense of victimization or unforgiveness that you just can't let go of. Others are having an affair, or fantasizing about one. It's hard to break free from that.

Others are secretly – or not so secretly – addicted to drugs or alcohol. You kick yourself the morning after but you just keep going back. How about that gnawing ambition, or that desperate need to always prove yourself, or that relentless criticizing spirit, or that need to control others, or that smug self-satisfaction that you've got it all squared away in life, or that sense nameless fear and hopelessness you wallow in. These are things we do, but don't seem to have a whit of control over. **They hold us captive. We can't say no.**

Well, meet Paul the Apostle. He has the same problem and he tells us about it in our epistle lesson this morning. **Paul is at war...with himself.** And unfortunately he's on the *receiving end* of “shock and awe.”

Paul doesn't understand himself. He has certain goals he wants to achieve, but he finds himself continually hindered by – of all things – himself. He wants to obey God, to be faithful to all that God commands. He wants to make the right decisions and do the right thing.

And Paul generally did pretty well. He could go right down the list of the ten commandments, listed in our Old Testament lesson, and check them off one by one: no other gods, Sabbath day, honor parents, no adultery, stealing, or false

witness...Good to go. But then down at the bottom of the list is that last commandment, "you shall not covet...".

Uh oh. Paul says, "sin, taking advantage of the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire." I don't know what he was coveting. Maybe it was his neighbor's wife or his neighbor's ox, but **whatever it was, he couldn't stop doing it**. He couldn't say no to himself.

He's lost his command and control, as they say. He tries to practice self-control and do the right thing, but to no avail. "I do NOT DO what I want, but I DO the very thing I HATE....I can desire what is right but I cannot do it." Do you ever feel like that powerless in the face of sin? Well, Paul does too. It's so bad he feels like he's "sold into slavery under sin," a shoeless POW with his hands in the air.

And the strange thing about it is the harder he tries to fight it the harder he falls. It's a common experience for God's people. Once you start trying you discover that the harder you try to obey, the more you want to be faithful the harder it gets. **The closer you get to God the more sinful and weak you feel**. Paul ended up saying "Wretched man that I am!"

Though our culture would never want us to think this about ourselves and would give us some medication to deal with such feelings. I think it's a healthy realization and the season of Lent gives us an opportunity to deal with it in a healthy way. **It's nice that today is our healing liturgy**. We get to be healed of our wretchedness and find our way to success in our struggle with sin.

Notice how Paul deals with the problem. Did you hear how he described it? What stood out to me was the first person pronoun. Paul kept talking about himself, me, me, me, I, I, I. It's as though he's struggling to do it alone in the secret, powerless isolation of his own little heart. And if that's where you are dealing with your sin, which is where most of us do, you are going to lose.

He doesn't seem to realize that, in the words of our collect, "we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves" when we are battling against sin. **We need outside help**. Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step programs acknowledge this.

So does our Psalm. The psalmist is singing the praises of God's law, how it gives wisdom and brings enlightenment, how it tastes good like honey. **But there's a downside to the law**. The more you understand the law the more sinful you discover you are.

Our psalmist asks, Who can keep track of my sins? He tried. He tried to keep track so he could confess each one. He had his pen and paper to record them as he meditated on God's law. He ended up throwing out his log book.

He knows he can't trust himself so now all he can do is reach out to God for help. "**Cleanse me from my secret faults...**keep your servant from presumptuous sins, let them not get dominion of me." "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord my *strength* and my redeemer." He's crying out for help against an unbeatable foe.

We pray essentially the same thing in our collect. "Keep us in our outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls that we may be defended from all adversities and **evil thoughts which assault and hurt the soul.**" That's what we were asking earlier in our recitation of the Decalogue: "incline our hearts to keep this law."

When we are struggling with our vices, whether it's pornography or gossip, we need help. That's the conclusion Paul comes to at the end of our passage today. He collapses in utter helplessness and asks, "Who will save me from this body of death?" The answer is, "Thanks be to God, **through Jesus Christ our Lord!**" It's funny how realization comes only in the midst of utter failure. That's where he finds Jesus. And we can, too.

Paul tells us how in chapter eight of Romans. He describes how we can be successful in our struggle with sin. First, he tells us **we have a new power working in our lives.** It is the power of the Holy Spirit. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in our lives to raise us to new life to infuse us with the life of Jesus.

This life and power breaks the power of sin. It redeems us from death and changes our hearts and desires and lives. It makes us able to repent and turn away from sin. It inclines our heart to keep his laws and enables us to repent and turn from our sin. Jesus cleanses us like he cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem. "Zeal for your house will consume me." He's highly motivated.

Second, he tells us **we have a new identity in Christ.** We are no longer *slaves* to sin, but sons and daughters of God. We are caught up into the intimacy of the love of God. "For you did not receive a spirit of bondage again to fear but you received the spirit of adoption by which we cry out, 'Abba, Father'...and if you are children then you are also heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs of Christ."

This is WHO YOU ARE. Do you know that? Do you realize how it will change you life when you do? Have you heard the voice of the Father deep inside you? "I love you and all that I have is yours." This changes your perspective on everything, especially your precious addictions. It powerfully supplants them because God is so infinitely superior to all of them.

That's the help that God gives sinners. AMEN