

SCRIPTURE READING

You once were dead because of your sins and wickedness; you followed the ways of this present world order, obeying the commander of the spiritual powers of the air, the spirit now at work among God's rebel subjects.

[If I can digress for just a second: Paul knew that all the powers of the air were not evil. There was the *logos* of God – the WORD – which was completely in the service of God (or even the mind of God). But if we are in rebellion, there is always the other side. Here Paul is saying that in the old life, we put all our faith in our own intellect – that in some manner we thought we were completely in charge of our own lives. He goes on ...]

We too were once of their number: we were ruled by our physical desires, and did what instinct and evil imagination suggested. In our natural condition we lay under the condemnation of God like the rest of mankind. But God is rich in mercy, and because of his great love for us, he brought us to life with Christ when we were dead because of our sins; it is by grace you are saved. And he raised us up in union with Christ Jesus and enthroned us with him in the heavenly realms, so that he might display in the ages to come how immense are the resources of his grace, and how great his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you are saved through faith; it is not your own doing. It is God's gift, not a reward for work done. There is nothing for anyone to boast of: we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the life of good deeds which God designed for us.

WHAT WORKS? (AND IN WHICH REALM)

I thought it might save us some time and frustration if I told you early on that I don't care much about what works. There are ways to market things that we know will work. There are techniques and tools to use that we know will bring results. We have mega-churches and success stories all around us, and we have good-hearted people willing and eager to tell us what to do – what steps to follow – to grow and become really successful. It will seem crass and uncaring to some of you, but I don't care.

I know some things that work on an entirely different level, for very different purposes. But these different approaches do not mix and will not match. If you believe in the principle of “attraction, not promotion,” you are not going to be a fan of telemarketing. How long would it take you to persuade an AA group to spend money on advertising instead of caring enough to work the Twelfth Step? Is there anybody here who doesn't now what the Twelfth Step is? The truncated version: Having had a spiritual awakening, we tried to carry the message to others, without forgetting to keep walking in “the way” ourselves.

If this church wants to grow, it only has to remember and start working the Twelfth Step. AA got it from us. Does that mean we have to forget? The vast majority of churches in our time are trying to develop an audience – not build or grow a real church. With so many of them and so few of me, how can I say they are wrong? I did not say they are wrong; I said I have no interest. To me a church is a group of people who gather to learn and grow and support each other on the Christian Path or Pilgrimage. We are intentional and sincere about following Jesus, and we are in relationship with each other because we all have a relationship with Jesus. That is not an audience. I have no interest in developing an audience. If most of you do, I will not be here for very long. No hard feelings. It was just a misunderstanding.

All of us care about what works, but there are lots of different levels and dimensions to be considered when we use that phrase.

In Second Corinthians (12:2-4), Paul speaks of knowing a man who was caught up into the third heaven, where he had some very ethereal but impressive experiences and revelations of things not normally known or understood here on earth. Paul equates this

“third heaven” with “Paradise” but gives us no further information about either one, even claiming that those who have such experiences are not permitted to tell others what they have seen or learned from them.

Paul is writing a letter to the Christians at Corinth, the most difficult of all his churches. He has many friends there, but there is also a contingent of folks who dispute Paul’s leadership, the authenticity of Paul’s call, and even his claim to be an “apostle.” They are saying that they are far more advanced – far more aware and knowledgeable about spiritual matters – than Paul is. Big mistake.

In the midst of the fray, Paul gets exasperated – not so much at his detractors (if I read him right), but at those who are *listening to* the detractors. He thinks his friends should know better. So with some apologies, Paul starts to defend his claims. “If you want to compare credentials, that’s okay with me. Let’s put it out there.” And most of us are delighted that Paul loses his cool because we learn a lot about him and his ministry (especially II Corinthians 11:22-12:6) that had been vague or unknown before.

Paul ends his rebuttal by saying, “You think you have had spiritual experiences? So have I!” We suspect he is talking about his Damascus Road encounter, and we realize that what we were told about that experience in the Book of Acts was only a small part of the full story.

Of course, you already know all this because you know that it is necessary for you to study some portion of the Scriptures each day. So it is inevitable that you would come across these chapters in Second Corinthians from time to time. Even so, studying the Scriptures does not answer all our questions or take all the mystery out of walking the Christian PATH. Sometimes we get very aware of the gap between the language and culture of our time and the language and time of Jesus and Paul. Jesus and Paul both speak freely about Satan – the Devil – and the contest going on here between God’s will and the many forces working against God’s will. They give us no reason to suspect that they are talking in metaphors or speaking in symbolic language about generic philosophical or psychological principles that would make it all a lot more palatable to us. More palatable, perhaps, but less urgent; less demanding; less of a call and an invitation to leave our old lives behind and follow Jesus into a New and Different WAY.

What can we do? Being too literalistic often causes us to miss the larger picture and miss the point. *“If your right hand offends you, cut it off.”* Not many Christians have taken that teaching to heart, no matter how literalistic they have been about most everything else. *“He [Jesus] sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty.”* Is it part of our creed to believe and defend to the death the proposition that God is right-handed?

No biblical writer – in the Old or the New Testament – believed that the earth was round or that it was in orbit around the sun. Every third-grader today is a better physicist than anybody who was alive in Jesus’ time. So why do we still read the Bible? Actually, most people do not read the Bible – not in our time. Just walking into this sanctuary on a Sunday morning makes you an anachronism, according to the wisdom and perspective of the society you live in. When I was a young Pastor in New England many years ago, every person in the entire community knew that you were supposed to be in church on Sunday morning. If you were not in church, you needed to have a really good excuse. Today that is exactly reversed. If you do go to church, you need to have a really good excuse. A wedding; a funeral; Easter; Christmas; something to benefit family solidarity – okay. But otherwise, you are really weird or superstitious or gullible if you go to church. Or maybe you are just going through a phase and will soon get over it.

Some of us have concluded that despite the two-thousand-year gap in scientific information, there are people who lived in ancient times who knew as much or more about spiritual truth as anybody alive today. If you do not believe that, then reading the Bible is ludicrous. Even if you do believe it, reading the Bible in our time is a lot more difficult and demanding than any of us want it to be. You cannot understand Jesus or Paul or Luke or John (or Moses or Jeremiah, for that matter) if you think they are talking to you like your next-door neighbor would.

The church in our day is making mayhem out of New Testament truth by trying to assume that Jesus lived in the same world we do. That is, they assume that Jesus watched CNN; carried a laptop around; referred to Google every morning; voted for or against the current President. And when Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, He really had Ugandan orphans in mind.

Jesus did not know that North or South America even existed. If we are going to follow Jesus in our time, we have to get used to the idea that His Holy Spirit must spend enough time with us to translate what is going on in our lives today into the awareness of God's presence, and into the goals and purposes and values that Jesus revealed to us and acted out before us. This does not happen in five minutes once a month.

One person said to me, as we were ending a Disciple Band meeting last week: "I feel more confused now than when I came in here." It seemed to be a complaint. I may have misunderstood, but it *sounded* like a complaint. It sounded like this person expected that a Bible Study Group – a Disciple Band – was supposed to clear up all her questions. If I was a good teacher, Pastor, Minister, I was supposed to make things clear and easy for her. Friends: If everything were clear and easy, we would not need Disciple Bands. We would not be a fellowship of sinners – that is, a motley crew of flawed, imperfect people needing and wanting each other for company on the Christian Pilgrimage.

If you have everything all figured out, you cannot learn or grow. You can only practice getting better and better at staying exactly the way you already are. There are churches that specialize in this kind of approach. In them, the Bible is inerrant; nobody can learn more than what they have already been told; everything is static and frozen; we know ahead of time what to believe about everything, and anything beyond what we have already been told is evil – just take my word for it. Fast food. Fast fixes. And any truth that takes more than three minutes to explain is not worth knowing. "I came in here to learn to play the violin. If I can't play a Beethoven concerto after the third lesson, I'm going someplace where they know how to teach."

Many of you are really serious about the Christian Life and WAY. Lots of you whom I didn't know before are serious also. I am really glad I came here. But if you are on the fringe or are new to all of this, I need you to know that it will not be fast or easy. Christianity is a lifetime adventure, and that's just for openers – it's only chapter one. I do not have all the answers for my own life, never mind for yours. And I have been at it longer than most of you have. But God keeps giving me more days, and every new day comes with more questions. That's okay because we do not come into the Christian Life to get all the answers. We come into the Christian Life to find more trust and

gratitude and obedience toward God. Christianity is about relationships, and we never finish or fix a relationship; we only get to *live* in relationships. There are always little questions inside every relationship, but the relationship itself is not about answering questions. It is about responding to another being; it is about a love-bond that keeps growing; it is about loyalty and valuing and caring that end up going way beyond what words alone can convey.

This morning we read a brief passage from the book of Ephesians. It talks about two different realities within the life we experience here on earth. They go on simultaneously, and we have all experienced both of these realities. There is tension between them, and the suggestion is that everybody ends up having to decide which reality they care about most. But there is also the suggestion – though we could use a stronger word – that we cannot switch between these two realities at will. The proclamation is that because God loves us, God uses our connection to Jesus to draw us more and more from one reality into the other. Clearly Paul thinks we cannot do this for ourselves or by ourselves. At the very least, we know that this was true for Paul. It took a Damascus Road encounter with Jesus to move Paul more and more from one reality into the other.

First of all, most of you noticed that I was doing a great deal of “translating” in my effort to understand what Paul is talking about in this passage. I want to understand it in my world, not just in his. Secondly, you probably noticed that my words were far from perfect or accurate in making this attempt. But the unmentioned assumption on my part is clearly there: I have already concluded for myself that Paul is not an ancient jerk or an irrelevant old fossil just because he does not know modern physics. I consider him to be highly evolved in spiritual matters, and one of the best followers of Jesus we have ever known. Not only that, but Paul’s whole life and experience as a follower of Jesus takes place after the Resurrection. In other words, Paul is a follower of the Holy Spirit of Jesus – just like we have to be, if we want to follow Jesus at all.

So I have a lot to learn from Paul and never get tired of learning all I can from him. But I never assume that Paul is right about everything. If I did, he himself would scold me. If I do not wonder, doubt, ponder, and ask how it matches with my own experiences, then I cannot truly learn from him. I am only going through the motions and getting more and more superstitious and codependent as I go. That would insult Paul *and* the Lord we both

want to follow. Christianity is not a puppet show. It is a serious and many-dimensional invitation into a very different kind of LIFE.

Isn't this exactly what Paul is lining out in Ephesians? We live in a dual reality. All around us is a physical realm. It is governed by laws and principles of pleasure and pain and, most of all, the mandates for survival. If we do not learn these laws and principles, we do not survive here for very long. Our parents had to learn them before us or we would not have survived here for very long. It is sometimes good to remember that the Seven Deadly Sins – before they get exaggerated and blown out of proportion – are all necessary to our physical survival.

Nevertheless, in the New Testament, the physical realm is seen to be evil, as understood by Paul. From the Adam and Eve story on, we live in a world estranged from God and outside the harmony intended by our Creator. *"It is an evil generation,"* Jesus says. Is this still true? Do we need to be reconciled with God in order to get back into harmony with nature or each other or even ourselves? We are nice people with good intentions, for the most part. And that is not said with tongue in cheek. But despite all our "goodness," we get caught in systems and energy patterns that keep surprising us with their results. Most people are not having a lovely experience on our planet. Nature is still "red in tooth and claw." Everywhere we turn we see the devastation and suffering and death that result from the need all creatures have to survive. According to Paul, life on the level that most of us start out with is not a very admirable thing.

If the physical realities were our only realities, perhaps we could get adjusted and more easily come to terms with what life is like here. But for humans, there are spiritual realities as well. That is, we are not merely physical – we have souls. Or if you don't like that word: There is something within us that is not content with mere physical realities. Some humans spend enormous time and energy making music, or writing poetry, or even making snowmen.

Sometimes we care about others or support idealistic causes, even to the seeming detriment of our own survival. Some people have tried to reduce all generosity, love, and self-sacrifice into convoluted behaviors that still serve self-interest and self-survival. But it doesn't wash. We are more than physical beings. We are also spiritual beings. We live in a reality where the physical dimension and the spiritual dimension intersect and interact. That means we are never totally

at peace here. We always feel the tension between our physical side and our spiritual side. The two do not function on the same principles or for the same purposes. The two do not have the same values, the same rules of morality, or the same ideas about what is successful or admirable or worthy of praise.

That means no one in this room has it all figured out. Right in the middle of our trying to be totally spiritual, we suddenly realize that we have reverted to a physical approach or method for achieving our purpose. Likewise, it can be unnerving when somebody we consider to be totally devoid of any awareness of God or any desire to serve or help others suddenly does something noble and beautiful for a child or even for an animal.

We tend to categorize organizations and institutions into something that serves either a physical or a spiritual purpose. Even the government tries to do this. What is a non-profit corporation? More to our point: What happens to our clarity if we get involved with a so-called secular organization and it ends up showing deep caring about its employees or squanders money unnecessarily to benefit people? Concurrently, what happens to our convictions if we get involved with a church and then discover that it is more secular in its methods and practices than the stingiest company around?

The sermon title asks “What Works?” But of course that depends. Do you mean in the physical realm – or in the spiritual realm? Clearly some of the approaches and techniques that work in the physical realm are a disaster in the spiritual realm, and vice versa. But not always. Sometimes generosity pays big dividends in the physical realm. Sometimes backing off and minding your own business pays big dividends in the spiritual realm.

That’s why we stop trying to control and run everything ourselves, and why we end up deeply convinced that our only hope is to pay attention and devote ourselves more and more to following the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Essentially (not perfectly, but essentially) we think of the Christian Life – of conversion and being born anew – as a turning away from our physical nature and being more and more focused and obedient to our spiritual nature. Can we not turn our allegiance and gratitude toward God if we want to? In Paul’s words, we want to *live by the Spirit* – and we want to live less and less according to the pleasure, pain, or survival goals of our physical nature.

But the tension between the physical realm and the spiritual realm is inescapable here on earth. Many of our attempts to escape the tension and to become more spiritual are a mirage – a dead-end street. Thousands of Christians went into monasteries to escape the world. Thousands of Christians took vows of chastity so that their sexuality could be obliterated and they would become totally spiritual. Thousands of Christians took vows of poverty so that they would not be tempted by greed or worldly success and could become truly spiritual. Did it work? Jesus had already told us it would not work.

The problem is, getting more spiritual is not what works. Getting less or more physical is not the secret. Paul tried to tell us too: *“It is by grace you have been saved through faith [trust in God] – and this is not from yourselves; it is the gift of God.”* (Ephesians 2:8)

Every decision we make – one day at a time – can reveal our desire and our intention to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Does that mean we no longer live in the tension of this dual reality? Does that mean we no longer feel the draw of our physical natures to survive, or that we no longer want to avoid pain or find pleasure? Just because we love Jesus does not mean we no longer live in physical bodies. And after all we have learned from Jesus and Paul, do we still think that getting more spiritual will solve any of our problems or help any of our issues? Don’t you know any deeply spiritual people? Is that what you think God really wants? Is that what you think Jesus is really after?

Negation, deprivation, and learning to be “above it all” does not fit the Man we follow. *“I came that you might have life – and have it abundantly.”* Like many others, I suspect we never see the fulfillment of any of it in this realm. I suspect that Jesus is far more and far greater than any of us have realized or figured out. But whatever our level of understanding, some of us have felt His invitation and heard His call. Even so, this is only the beginning. It is hard to remember, but this is only the beginning. That is why it is so important for us to learn to trust God – not get the right answers to all our questions or believe everything correctly. Faith means we TRUST GOD! And trusting God, we stumble into a true and enduring patience.

Since questions are no longer the focus, let me ask you one: How much time can we really afford to spend listening for the hints and the affirmations – for the guidance and the comfort – of the Holy Spirit?