

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It seems to be a trend that has become quite popular over the past few years. Becoming a better you. Working on you, working to become a better person. And, of course, there's help out there. Self-help books, claiming to have all the answers, all the secrets on how you can work through all your problems, overcome them, and in the process better yourself and live a much happier and fuller life.

And if those books don't do the trick, well, you can always hire a life coach, someone who's job is to do just that, coach you through life. They help you identify personal goals for yourself and then they provide the motivation and encouragement for you to achieve those goals.

And for all the money you could spend on coaches, or books, or the latest diet or exercise equipment, you would never fully succeed. Can you see where life coaches, where self-help books, where all of these life-bettering programs, where they all ultimately fail?

It's because all of these methods, they only scratch the surface. Oh, sure, you might reach your personal goals, to be a better person. But the sad reality is, you fall short of what should be your greatest goal, to be the best person there is, in other words, to be perfect. Because, that's what God's goal for you is. Or, rather, what God's demands of our lives are.

And, oh, sure, you might take care of the problems, at least on the outside it might appear that way. But often times, the real root of the problem never even gets addressed. The big problem, the problem which is the source for every other problem in every one of your lives, the problem that on a daily basis, you and I are dealing with two people who couldn't be any more different.

Do you know who I am talking about? I'll give you a hint. Both are inside of you. That's what the apostle Paul meant when he said in our verses this morning, "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want."

In those words, we see what the real problem, what the BIG problem is. God created man in his image, meaning God's will and man's will were in perfect harmony with each other. Meaning, God created man as a perfect creature and created man to be a perfect creature, to live a perfect life. But that perfection, that image of God, was lost because of one thing, and one thing only. The BIG problem, SIN.

The problem plaguing the lives of every single person since, including you and me. The problem we could never take care of on our own, so God took care of it for us.

Throughout our sermons on the Apostles' Creed, you've heard time and time again how God dealt with our problem of sin. Grace, God's riches at Christ's expense. Jesus, the Son of God redeemed us, he bought us back by paying the price for our sins, the price of his perfect life and his precious blood, his innocent suffering and death. Jesus lived, died, and rose so that our sin, is now taken away, wiped away for good. We, who were dead in our transgressions, in that sin, now made alive, all by the Holy Spirit, who made us alive when he created faith in our hearts, faith in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. You and I, made alive with a New Man, who wants to obey God, serve him, follow his commands.

God is the solution to the big problem of sin. Jesus lived, Jesus died, Jesus rose. That is the solution. Grace is the solution. So our problem of sin, taken care of, so you and I are in the clear, right? We live perfectly, exactly the way God expects us to, right?

Unfortunately, not, because even though our sins have been paid for in full, even though the Holy Spirit has created saving faith in our hearts, has made a New Man in each of us, you and I still have a sinful nature, a sinful nature which still hates God, is still his greatest enemy, who still opposes God at every step.

And the evidence that the sinful nature is still there, and still going strong, is obvious. The apostle Paul gives us a list of the acts of the sinful nature: sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery (that's sexual corruption), idolatry, witchcraft (or really, any kind of superstition), hatred, discord (not living in unity), jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition (greed), dissensions (disagreement, arguments), factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies.

That's the list Paul gives, do I need to go any further? I'm guessing there are probably a handful of those sins on that list you are guilty of, maybe even most of them. I know if I would have stopped reading Paul's list after the first two or three, I am guilty.

And that's not even the full list. We could go on, talking about stealing, lying, gossiping, cursing, swearing, the hurt we cause to so many people, at the same time hurting God every time we sin.

Even though our problem of sin has been paid for and even though God has graciously created a New Man, a heart of faith in us, as much as we want to obey God and do what's right, we just don't. We don't always obey God, instead giving in to our sinful nature and sinning.

You know, our verses this morning say that our sinful nature and our New Man are in conflict with each other. That's not a strong enough term. Inside each of us, they are waging war against each other, a deadly war. Deadly because if our sinful nature were to win the war, that would be death for us, eternal death in hell.

That's the warning Paul gives when he says, "Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." He isn't saying that anyone who's guilty of any of these sins doesn't have eternal life, is outside of the kingdom of God, but those who continue in those ways, who continually give in to their sinful nature, that they not only run the risk of missing out on entering the kingdom of God, heaven, but are showing themselves to be outside of God's kingdom because that kind of life shows them to be who they truly are, not children of God, but children of the devil.

Those who continually give in to the temptations of the sinful flesh without any regard for God and what he wants, a life of doing that can only result on being on the outside looking in when it comes to the kingdom of God, to heaven.

That's a scary situation, but that's not in our future.

You know, Paul laid out our situation when he wrote in the book of Romans, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do....As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

You and I aren't left to fight that war on our own. You see, the war has already been won. We have already been rescued from certain death in hell. The cross, Calvary, Jesus' death, that was the deciding victory in the war. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, sealed our victory over all our spiritual enemies, including our sinful nature. Our sinful nature cannot control us any longer.

So, really, all that's left now are the little skirmishes, the sinful nature still trying to fight back, rebel, take control again. But it won't. Because not only has the Holy Spirit created a New Man in us when gave us the gift of saving faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit also strengthens that faith for these skirmishes. The Holy Spirit helps us to fight back against our sinful nature. He's actually fighting the battle for us, and he's winning that battle for us.

And now, he's even leading us, showing us how to live a God-pleasing life. And not only leading us, but working through us to do those acts, to produce fruits of faith, works which show our thankfulness to God.

So, do you know what some of those fruits are? Our verses this morning gives us a pretty good list. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. It easy to see how those fruits play out in our lives. Someone wrongs you, spoke lies about you, and of course, your natural reaction, stemming from your sinful nature, would be to retaliate, to make up hurtful lies about that person. But the Holy Spirit is the one who makes you step back and brush off that comment and turn the other cheek, to be patient, slow to anger.

The mom with two screaming children at the grocery store, so annoying, and they knock over a bunch of cans of food, and the sinful nature says, “Just keep walking, she deserves what she gets, especially for bringing those naughty children into the store.” But stopping and helping to clean up the mess, help that mother out, that's kindness, goodness, a fruit worked by the Spirit.

The sinful temptation from our own flesh to have impure and lustful thoughts, but the Holy Spirit is the one who guides us to fight back, to practice self-control, another fruit. It's no coincidence they're called fruits of the Spirit. They are fruits, are works that can only come from the Spirit, can only be worked in us and through us by the Holy Spirit.

In our lives, it comes down to that deadly battle, and on our own we would lose. There's a reason it's called the sinful nature. By nature, naturally, we would sin against God time and time again. But we are not on our own. We belong to Christ. We have the Holy Spirit working in us, working through us.

And with the Holy Spirit on our side, we can crucify our sinful nature, beat it down, defeat it day after day. Can you think of another picture of what we do with our sinful nature every day? You were reminded of it earlier this morning. Let's see if these words can refresh your memory, "Baptism means that the sinful nature in us should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance, and that all its evil deeds and desires be put to death. It also means that a new person should daily arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever."

Your baptism is the daily reminder that we drown our sinful nature, along with all the evil it tempts us to do, kill it off every day by repenting of us sins and trusting in God's loving forgiveness. And with the death of the sinful nature the New Man, created by the Holy Spirit, it arises so we live by the Spirit, so we keep in step with the Spirit, and living holy and pleasing lives.

That's the life every person strives to live. That's why so many turn to life coaches or self-help books, so they can live a pleasing life, do what's right. You and I. We don't need any of that. We have something better. We have the only thing we need. The Holy Spirit. He's not just working to get us to achieve personal goals, but he's working in us to succeed in living by God's goals.

The Holy Spirit is more than just a life coach. He's a life creator, creating the New Man in us when he gave us the gift of saving faith in Jesus. He's our guide through life, showing us how to live according to God's will. And he's the one who makes us succeed in our lives of faith, because he's the one who's working through us to live holy lives before God. And with him working through us, we will succeed. We will defeat our sinful nature. That is the true life help we need. And it's ours. Amen.

Teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end. Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight. Amen.