

Like Fighting a Giant Tuna

Romans 7:14-25a & Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
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Romans 7:15-25 (NIV)

¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸I 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. ¹⁹For 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. ²⁰Now 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.

²¹So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²²For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30 (NIV)

¹⁶“To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: ¹⁷‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.’ ¹⁸For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon.’ ¹⁹The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and “sinners.”’ But wisdom is proved right by her actions.”

²⁵At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.

²⁷“All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

²⁸“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

Like Fighting a Giant Tuna

Pastor Spencer Homan tells an exciting true story concerning the Great Tuna run of 1998. The story begins with the tuna running only 30 miles off Cape Cod. What made this so exciting was that such a

run hadn't happened in 47 years. The tuna were not only running, but they were also biting! It was a fisherman's dream. All you needed was a sharp hook, some bait and you could haul in a bountiful catch.

You could even make some money. Rumor had it that Japanese buyers would pay up to \$50,000 for a nice blue fin tuna. But here's the catch: Atlantic blue fin tuna can exceed 900 pounds in weight which can be a problem if you are not an expert fisherman. And not every fisherman is an expert at it, believe it or not. And some of these non-experts got themselves in trouble in the Great Tuna run of 1998. Tuna are quite powerful fish. It is easier to hook one than it is to reel it back into your boat, especially if you snag a large one.

So it was a problem on September 23rd, 1998 when so many inexperienced fishermen ignored Coast Guard warnings and headed out to sea in small boats. One such boat, the Christi Anne, a 19-footer capsized while doing battle with a tuna. Another boat, the Basic Instinct suffered the same fate. And still another boat, a 28-footer named Official Business, was totally swamped after it hooked onto a 600-pound tuna. The tuna pulled it under water.

Says Pastor Homan, "These fishermen underestimated the power of the fish they were trying to catch." Then Pastor Homan adds this warning, "That is what temptation does to us. It takes us by surprise. It looks manageable on the surface. Only after we hook into it do we discover its strength, and by then it is too late. We find ourselves being pulled underwater." Pastor Homan is right of course.

THROUGH THE AGES MILLIONS OF PEOPLE HAVE BEEN PULLED UNDER BY THE POWER OF TEMPTATION.

For a light-hearted example, who hasn't given-in to the power of a delicious, moist, rich piece of chocolate cake — regardless of how hard we tried to resist it? Maybe I shouldn't use that as an example this close to lunch time, but it is an example to which most all of us can relate.

One lady I heard about was scowling at a friend as they sat in a small cafe. "I thought you said you were counting calories," she remarked. Her friend, who was enjoying her second slice of chocolate cake, said, "I am... So far today, this makes 7,750." Of course, chocolate lovers are not the only ones where dieting is a constant battle.

A woman noticed her husband standing on the bathroom scale, sucking in his stomach. "Ha!" she said, "That's not going to help." "Sure, it does," her husband said. "It's the only way I can see the numbers."

Of course, I'm making light of a problem that is a very serious one for many people. But I want us to be able to relate to these words from the pen of St. Paul, beginning with the 20th verse: "Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself

in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin (Romans 7:19-25A)."

Is there anybody today who's never done battle with temptation? Some of us fight that battle every day. And sometimes it's like fighting a giant tuna. We get pulled under, and we worry that we are going to drown. It's almost demonic how temptation works.

To use just one more illustration from the world of dieting, a man named Justin joined a Weight-Watchers group six years ago to lose forty pounds. He succeeded. He lost the weight and got down to a slender and healthy 170 pounds on the scales.

Almost as soon as he reached his goal, however, Justin stopped watching what he was eating. Pounded by pound the scales sneaked back up until today he weighs twenty pounds more than he did when he began his diet! Some of you know what that's like, don't you?

It's a battle that many of us wage all our lives, not just with dieting but with life in general. There are things we know we ought to do, but it is a battle to motivate ourselves to do them, and there are other things that we know we should not do — they are destructive for us — yet we go ahead and do them anyway. St. Paul cries out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

CAN THERE BE A MORE RELEVANT PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE FOR MANY OF US? DOING GOOD AND AVOIDING EVIL IS THE PRIMARY BATTLE OF THE HUMAN CONDITION.

It means taking control of our lives and ruling our passions. Have you ever had that struggle?

Someone once said that there are only two pains in life — the pain of discipline and the pain of regret. And then he adds: "Discipline weighs ounces while regret weighs tons."

That's true. If we could only discipline ourselves in all ways, we could have a remarkable life. The question is, how is it done? How do we win the battle over our own desires and actions?

Legendary management guru Tom Peters understands this problem. Most of us have a to-do list, but Peters also has what he calls a "to-don't" list — an inventory of behaviors and practices that sap his energy, divert his focus, and ought to be avoided. As Peters puts it, "What you decide not to do is probably more important than what you decide to do." That's an interesting perspective from a business guru, don't you think?

Do you have a "to-don't" list? I'll bet you do in your mind. These are part of your value system. There are some things you have already made up your mind that you will never do — cheat on your taxes, cheat on your spouse, commit murder — no matter how out-of-control the kids get (Just kidding,

of course). Most of us could improve our lives if we expanded that list of “to-don’ts” and put them on paper.

Sometimes we call it willpower — or in this case “won’t-power.” Did you know that psychological studies agree with Tom Peters? They show that willpower is the single most important habit for individual success. These studies show that self-discipline, or will power, is more important than IQ in how well students do in college.

That shouldn’t surprise us. Self-disciplined young people spend less time watching television. They have fewer absences from classes. They are more likely to earn higher grades in their classes and gain admission into more selective schools.

Think about that for a moment. So, you want to help your student get scholarships so they can avoid accumulating massive student loans? Help your children to discipline themselves and you will set them on the path of lasting success.

But that’s not just true for students. In all of life, willpower is more important to success than talent. If you could make yourself do everything on your “to-do” list and eliminate everything that is on your “to-don’t” list you could probably be a super-star in the office, or in your home, or in school, or any endeavor in life.

Plato once said, “For a man to conquer himself is the first and noblest of all virtues.” The writer John Milton put it like this: “He who reigns within himself and rules his passions, desires and fears, is more than a king.”

But how do you do that? How do you rule your passions and desires? How do you develop good discipline? It’s like fighting a giant tuna. How do you pull it into your boat? No one can do it for us. It’s a battle each of us faces every day. St. Paul writes, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me...?”

EXPERTS TELL US THAT ESTABLISHING GOOD HABITS IS THE KEY TO STRENGTHENING EITHER OUR WILL POWER, OR OUR WON’T POWER.

If you establish the right kind of habits, you won’t have to wonder what the right thing to do is in a given situation. Doing the right thing will just come naturally. Studies by psychologists tell us that developing good habits can become our “default” behaviors so that, regardless of the situation, we will act in an appropriate way.

Those of you who have computers understand about “default” settings. For example, the font on your Microsoft Word document may be Arial. If so, anytime you begin a document, the Arial font will show up on your computer screen. If you want to begin your document in Times Roman, you will have to reset the font.

A default behavior is your natural way of acting — particularly when you are under stress. For example, some people when they are under stress, always get angry. Others get depressed. That is their default behavior. That can change, of course, depending on who is around. If the pastor's visiting that day, you might use different language when you get frustrated than you normally would use. You delay your default behavior until (he or she) is gone. Every pastor has seen that happen.

According to these studies, we have only limited reservoirs of self-control. So when we get stressed, tired, or otherwise emotionally or mentally preoccupied, our ability to will ourselves to eat properly, be polite, or any other positive behavior, wanes and we resort to ingrained or habitual behaviors. Some of these behaviors are not in our best interest. We'll overeat or go on shopping sprees, for example.

But there are other behaviors that we can default to under stress that are in our best interest, if first we have established the right habits. The researchers surveyed college students and found that when the students were tired or stressed, such as during final exams, they would default to good behaviors or bad behaviors, depending on their habits.

For example, students who habitually ate a healthy breakfast every morning continued to do so through exam week, while students who routinely ate junk food ate even larger quantities of junk food through exam week. So you see, whatever you have established as a habit is the behavior you will resort to in times of stress. If we want to guard against giving in to our "to-don'ts," the secret is to set up new healthy habits.

This was part of the secret of the success of NFL coach Tony Dungy, one of the most respected figures in professional athletics. He was famous for helping the players on his teams to form the right habits. "Champions don't do extraordinary things," Dungy explained. "They do ordinary things, but they do them without thinking, too fast for the other team to react. They follow the habits they've learned."

That's true in athletics and it's also true in life. Create healthy habits and you will create a healthy life. It will be easier if you start when you are young — and that is why it is important for parents to help their children establish positive habits, but it is never too late. Even if it is something as simple as substituting an hour each day with a long walk rather than sitting in front of the TV, the more good habits you establish the easier it will be to substitute "to-dos" for "to-don'ts." But still it will not be easy. St. Paul writes, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me....?"

BUT THEN HE WRITES, "THANKS BE TO GOD, WHO DELIVERS ME THROUGH JESUS CHRIST OUR LORD!"

This is to say, there is help for us in the battle. We are not alone, just as St. Paul was not alone. We have someone who will come along side us and help us with our struggle in our battle with temptation.

This is where prayer is all-important! Prayer is not simply a matter of spending a few moments every day making your requests to God. Prayer is also a matter of spending time each day listening for God to speak to us about our lives.

There is a story told of a pastor named Carter Jones. Jones had a small room in the attic that he used as a place of prayer. When he was especially burdened, he would make his way up the winding staircase to that room to spend quiet moments with God. The members of his family knew that when he went to the attic room, they were not to bother him.

One day he climbed the stairs and knelt beside a chair to pray. He had hardly started when the door swung open. There stood his little girl. The moment his eyes met hers, she knew she had done wrong. She said, "Daddy, you've been so busy lately I haven't seen you much. And I just wanted to tell you that I love you." And with that she threw her arms around her father's neck, gave him a big hug, wheeled around, and was gone as quickly as she had come.

When she was gone, Carter Jones continued in prayer. "Father," he said, "I've been so busy lately that I haven't had much time for you. I just want to tell you again that I love you." It is amazing how much strength we gain for our battle with temptation when we spend time every day simply basking in the light of God's love.

Life doesn't have to be like a constant battle to land a giant tuna. We have a Friend who wants to help us in the battle. Developing strong willpower, or won't-power, will help. Developing good habits would be even better. But spending time in God's presence and asking His help in the battle is the best help of all.

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