

St. Bartholomew’s Church in the Town of Tonawanda, N.Y

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins - Curate

Scripture: Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

“Holiness Within”

Why do we human beings pursue holiness? We pursue holiness not only because Holy Scripture commands it, but more importantly, because God Himself is holy, and we are supposed to reflect that holiness in our lives. GOD makes us holy, and as we give Him permission to work in our lives, He enables us to reflect that work in our everyday living.

Where does that work begin? It begins on the battle GROUND of holiness, and then with the battle PLAN of holiness.

The Battle Ground is:

A. The Heart. It starts in the heart - YOUR heart, and your mind, your thought life – and yes, everything else is a reflection of your heart.

In today’s Gospel of Mark 7:21-23 that we heard read moments ago - Our Lord Jesus says *“For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”* That reading is from the more politically correct NRSV Bible – which I think uses several obscure words on purpose.

Please listen to another translation from the NIV that I think more properly calls a spade a spade! **Mark 7:21-23** *“For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'”* Of course the word “man” refers to mankind.

There are some words here that make some of the modern day prophets of the Episcopal Church, and others, very uncomfortable. The words sexual immorality hits them where they live, and they do not like it. They much more prefer fornication – because believe it or not there are many people who don’t know what it means – and it goes right over their heads like a 767 jet. Once it is brought into everyday language - It could not be any clearer – what “un-holiness is” – or to be “unclean” in the eyes of God. Arrogance, lewdness – (the way we act and the way we dress), greed, deceit – all of them – how we present ourselves to others – are we truthful? Are we genuine? Are we out for what we can get – no matter what it means to the other person? Name your vice – they are anything but holy – they are ungodly – they are unclean! **Those who go around shouting that there is no such thing as sin – have NO interest in trying to be holy!**

The Apostle Paul – who indeed knows the truth about sin, adds another dimension to this when he describes, in detail, the struggle for holiness in our hearts in his words of Romans Chapter 7, starting in verse 14 through to verse 25. *“We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For 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. 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. So I find this law at work: When 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 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. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks 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.”*

Let me take a moment to smash (no, what I’d really like to do is pulverize) a real popular

misconception: “if it feels right, it must be okay.”

WRONG! Listen to the Prophet Jeremiah 17:9-10. “*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."*” The current trend in our society – in our culture today, is to live lives that our parents and grandparents would find absolutely shocking - and is ultimately based on the question, “How can something that feels so right be so wrong?” Time after time the answer unfortunately comes out – “if it feels good – then do it!”

The problem is that this the wrong question entirely. It misses the point that we are called to make decisions based on **objective standards of right and wrong**, and **not through our fickle emotions**. My brothers and sisters, we are absolutely foolish to think that our feelings and emotions are reliable guides to tell us wrong from right. Our emotions are about as stable as a leaf blowing in the wind. The answer my friend is not blowing in the wind! (all apologies to Bob Dylan)

A number of things affect our emotions:

- a bad day at the office,
- feeling poorly from an illness,
- hormonal changes – and that goes for both men and women,
- having not had your coffee yet
- the amount of chocolate **you have or haven't had** in a day
- or how about news that your “out-laws” are coming to stay for the holidays – all of them – Groundhog Day, Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Flag Day, Labor Day, even St. Swithun's Day – **all of them!**

Oh Boy, it looks like some of you got into a bad mood just thinking about some of that stuff!

There was a man who came home from work at his regular time of 5 PM, only to discover that it had not been one of his wife's better days. Nothing he said or did seemed to be right. By 7 o'clock things had not gotten any better, so he thought that he would go outside, pretend he had just got home, and start all over again. His wife thought that might help. So, he went outside, came back in and, with a big smile, announced, "Honey, I'm home!" "And just where have you been?" she replied sharply "It's after seven o'clock!"...

Let me ask you a question: if you can't control the flow and fluctuation of your emotions, do you really think you can depend on them to make rational judgments of right and wrong, truth and error?

We need something that is outside ourselves – something that doesn't fluctuate with the moods in our personal life or the trends of culture and society. That something is **the very Word of God**. God's Word doesn't change like shifting sand, or the direction of the wind. It doesn't depend on national opinion polls of what is acceptable and what is not. **It is stable and dependable from cover to cover – every word of it! It is ROCK SOLID!**

B. The other part of the battleground is the Mind

What we allow into our minds is picked up and amplified by the desires of our heart. And we have already discussed the thin ice that we are walking on when we depend on our heart for trustworthy decisions.

If our desires are evil, then our minds are quick to grab onto or latch on to evil things, which in turn feed our evil desires. **It is a vicious circle.**

James 1:13-15 “*When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown,*

gives birth to death.”

So, let me ask you a question: where do temptations come from? Various sources, but if we allow ourselves to be totally honest, I think all of us would have to admit that we can place ourselves in the path of temptation sometimes – as if it were an oncoming train.

Somehow, as Christians, we get to thinking that we are above it all, somewhat bullet proof, but we know deep down that we are NOT above it, and we end up doing that very thing we vowed to never do again. We must avoid temptation, don't tease it and don't flirt with it! **Run from it! That's not cowardice, its wisdom!** Don't run from the One who loves you – run from the one who wants to get you separated from Almighty God – and keep you there.

It is so important for us to identify those areas of temptation and make it your purpose to keep from them. You know, sometimes that might mean taking a different route to work to avoid passing a particular place – that you are usually drawn into. It might even mean changing some of your acquaintances who delight in getting you into sticky situations. I don't know what that is for you, but YOU do, and so does GOD. He can help - giving you the strength to overcome them.

Being confronted with temptation is not itself sin. Jesus was tempted, but did not sin! **Temptation is the OPPORTUNITY to sin.** And God promises in Ephesians 6 that He will provide an escape if only we will accept it and take it. We have got to take up the shield of faith, with which we can put out all the flaming arrows of temptation from the enemy. He provides our protection – if we are open to it! We have established the battle ground on two fronts: the heart and the mind.

III. But, now we need to look at the Battle Plan

God has outlined a plan for each of us as we seek to reflect His holiness. I am not sure that these have to be in any particular order, after the first one – that is. I believe these are absolutely essential to getting a grip on the holiness that escapes our grasp. I think that these elements, or “weapons” if you will, will help us keep the right perspective – **seeking Victory in Jesus.**

A. The first, and by far the most important is Salvation. Aside from bringing us eternal life through the cleansing of our sin, it is the only avenue to getting the other parts of this plan. Taking Christ as Savior is the first step to holiness. We need to take Jesus, the helmet of our salvation, into our hearts.

B. Fill your mind with God's Word. By hearing, reading, studying, and memorizing it. Fill your mind with the Word of God, being bathed in it, and you will find it easier to flee temptation. 2 Corinthians 10:5 says to take every thought captive and obedient to Christ. Time in the Word helps us to do that.

C. Fill your heart with God's Word. Meditating on what you get from the hearing, reading, etc., helps you avoid being the one described by James who looks at him or herself in a mirror and then steps away and forgets what they looks like, because they are not a doer of the Word, but a hearer only. Don't make that mistake. **Meditate on His Word.**

Meditating on the Word is NOT the emptying of your mind that the “New Age” people talk about when they discuss meditation. **That's dangerous,** if you ask me. To meditate on the Word of God means to do just the opposite, you fill your mind with it – think it over, asking questions, thinking of how you can apply it to your life and situations.

Psalm 119:9-11 *“How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.”*

Meditation brings the Word from our head to our heart.

One great way to help the Word get into your heart is to pray as you read, praying in response to what

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you are reading, asking God to open your mind to what He has for you in that passage. **The Word of God is a powerful weapon against the attacks of the enemy** – as St. Paul calls it – the Sword of the Spirit!

D. Worship in a Bible-believing, Christ-centered church.

Taking the Word of God seriously, and surrounding yourself with His love, mercy and grace – before His altar – singing His praise and worshipping Him in a church that is all about Him – and not about us or about anything else. **It is not the Church of I, Me, Mine! It is the Body of Christ!**

E. Fellowship with like-minded believers who encourage you and hold you accountable – **Amen and Amen!** Look around you – need I say more?

F. The bottom line is – OBEDIENCE. 1 John 5:3 says this: *“This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.”*

My brothers and sisters in Christ - **obedience is not an option!** It doesn't matter who you are or what your background is. **You are required to be obedient to Almighty God.**

- Remember that you are not alone – that God is with you always – and
- He gives us the help we need!
- God gives us His Holy Spirit to guide and nurture us.
- He gives us His Word to instruct us.
- He gives us the desire to obey: **(Philippians 2:13)** *“It is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”*
- And He gives us forgiveness when we stumble: **(1 John 1:9)** *“If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

I stand before you today, just like each and every one of you, a human being who struggles with holiness. But I also stand before you as someone ready to renew my desire for holiness. I know the battle ground and I know the battle plan. And I intend to put up the fight of my life, with God's help!

I would like every one here today to bow their heads and to close your eyes. I want to give you a chance to come before God today and declare to Him that you have the same intention – to renew your desire for holiness. If you want to do that, I want you to quietly slip your hand into the air, so I can pray for you. No one will see you but me – and Almighty God.

If you would like to rededicate yourself to a life of holiness, in a public manner, quietly slip your hand into the air, so I can pray for you.

Remember that you are not alone – I am already standing right here! And as we pray, we will be lifting up not just ourselves, but each other as well. Please, don't do this to impress anybody, or because you think somebody expects you to, including myself, but do it if GOD is nudging you to.

“Almighty and ever living God, I want you to know that I love you with all of my heart. I know that I can come before you today because of what Jesus has done for me. Lord, I want to be holy, but I fall down. Lord, help me to stand with you, to stand up tall for you, and to say and do the things that glorify only you. Lord, help me to make better choices in the way I present myself to others, my actions, my words. Help me to clean up my act! Help me to be more like you!

Lord, I know that you love me, and I thank you that you have forgiven me for my sins, and that you continue to forgive me when I repent.

Lord, I do want you to be proud of me, but I cannot do anything without your help. I need you in my life, Jesus – to lead me and guide me, to comfort and bless me. Lord, I dedicate my life to you, to your kingdom, and to your service, in the precious name of Jesus. Amen