

Looking Within: Coming to Terms with Ourselves

Romans 7:14-25 and 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

Over the last several weeks we've been seeking a fresh perspective on relationships. We began by taking a look in the rearview mirror to clear out the trash of our regrets and to find healing by forgiving others. We were encouraged to focus on the priorities we are pursuing in life to make sure that our most important relationships are getting the priority they deserve. Last week, we discovered the essentials of the church and were again reminded how important it is for us to be intentional about our relationship with God (vertical dimension) and with others (horizontal)- keeping the main things in our life that main thing. Today, we need to take a look within: coming to terms with ourselves.ⁱ That's what Paul did in the reading from Romans.

As Bob Kaylor put it in Homiletics magazine, Paul took a "selfie". In case this is a foreign term to you, a selfie is a picture someone takes of them self usually with a smartphone and then shares it on social media. And people are doing it all the time.

- It's as if this is how the modern mind thinks: "Slow day at work? Well, then snap a quick pic and show the world how hot you are, even when numbed by boredom and sitting in a cubicle.
- Trying on a new pair of sunglasses? Take some shots of yourself rocking a few different pairs and get some instant feedback from your friends.
- Just have an amazing meal? Enjoying the game from some great seats? Don't just take pictures of the food or the field - - no! Snap a selfie and show the world what they'd be enjoying if they were along for the ride"

In Romans, what we have from Paul is nothing less than a "selfie" of his own. It's a snapshot in papyrus and ink, of how the apostle sees himself. And he's *not* donning a new haircut with pride or posing with friends at a killer party. No, Paul has given us a snapshot of himself that is raw, unfiltered and -- at least according to Paul's own assessment -- *deeply unflattering*.ⁱⁱ

It's as if Paul is looking at himself and saying, "Dude. I'm a mess." He writes: *"I can determine that I am going to do good, but I don't do it; instead, I end up living out the evil that I decided not to do."* (v. 19 *The Voice*)

Paul's snapshot reveals a man who feels caught in a constant battle with his own self. Paul knows he has been made right with God through his faith in Jesus Christ and that he has received the gift of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. And yet, deeply rooted within him, remains the power of sin. It remains at residence in his flesh and bones, rearing its ugly head and drawing him from the new path on which God has placed him. . It as if Paul is saying "Just when I think I've got it, I mess up again."

Now, keep in mind Paul is no newbie to the Christian faith. According to most estimates, he'd been following Jesus for around 25 years by the time he writes the letter to the Romans. Paul's selfie reveals that he is, despite the grey hair on his head and lines of wisdom on his face, still both a saint and a sinner. He is righteous in the eyes of God because of Christ, yet broken to the core because of his sin.

There is a Native American tale that reminds me of this truth: A Cherokee grandfather once said to his grandson, "There is a battle between two wolves inside us all. One is evil. It is anger, jealousy, greed, resentment, inferiority, lies and ego. The other is good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, humility, kindness, empathy and truth." The boy thought about it and asked, "Grandfather, which wolf wins?" The old man replied, "The one you feed."

Paul might agree. And I think that is what Paul is trying to get at when he wrote to the people in the city of Corinth. They were believers in Jesus Christ, they have been saved by God's grace, but their lives weren't demonstrating it. They were preoccupied with material, fleshly, worldly pursuits. Instead of receiving the solid "meat" of God's Word so they can grow in their faith, they remained like babies, drinking only "milk". They hadn't learned to follow the Spirit's leading, and they failed to guard themselves against the temptations of the flesh.

God calls us to read His Word, to pray, to be in fellowship with other believers and to serve within the body of Christ according to our giftedness. Why? So we can feed the good wolf inside us. So we can gain power through the Holy Spirit to avoid pitfalls. When we fail to maintain spiritual disciplines and begin to disconnect from a local church body, we start to take steps down the dangerous path – feeding the evil wolf.

So, it's time to take a selfie (time to look in the mirror) and take an honest look at ourselves. The honesty of Paul's self-portrait is jarring. Especially when held in contrast to the selfies in which we so often indulge. Because if we're honest, we have to admit that when we snap pictures of ourselves, we only share the ones that are the most flattering or the ones we can edit so we present a particular self to the rest of the world.

If we want to be seen as the buff guy who's always flexing at the gym or the fun friend who's always doing something crazy and having lots of fun, then we can. And no one will ever see anything else -- at least, not on our Instagram feed.

Yet Paul knew that there is power in the unfiltered assessment of life. There's power for the follower of Jesus, in the no-makeup, harshly-lit selfie that shows every wrinkle. The power, of course, is that the more honestly I assess myself, admitting my deep, continuing brokenness, then the more heroic, the more grace-filled and generous Jesus begins to look.

Because the truth is, you cannot understand the true height and depth of God's love until you come to grasp the radical depth of your sin. Paul knew this. Paul knew that by staring at his unflattering selfie he was less likely to be fooled by the facade of awesomeness that he and every other human so often present to the rest of the world.

Not only was it good for Paul, but Paul, in writing this to the church at Rome, knew that his transparency would be good for his people and it is good for us.

Paul knew we needed to regularly take a good look at ourselves – we need to truly see ourselves and admit our sins in order to grasp the incredible gift of God in Christ Jesus.

No matter how unflattering the image of us is, no matter how strong the forces are that pull us, and Paul, off the path of righteousness, God refuses to reject us. *Go ahead, hit the camera icon on your phone and show God the worst.* God promises that, for those who have been covered in the goodness of Jesus and injected with the power of his Holy Spirit, there will be no words of condemnation! (8:1)

You may disgust yourself, but God, on account of Christ, will not delete our pics or kick us out of the family. God will continue to call us daughters and sons.

Remember this, no matter what that picture shows -- the "good" us, the "bad" us, the super-cute or the surprisingly ugly us -- because of Christ there's no rejection for us and there's a better, more powerful force at work in us. May we feed that better "wolf."

May we also deepen the joy we and others have in Jesus by being willing personally and publicly to embrace the truth of our unflattering and unlovable selves.

Here's an idea – take a selfie today – go ahead, do it right now and post it with this caption: "What you see is what I am, and what I am is loved by Jesus."

Are you up for it? Paul would be. Say cheese. (feel free to tag me or the church because I'd love to see your pics too)

ⁱ Swindoll, Charles R. *Gaining A Fresh Perspective: Seeing Relationships through New Eyes.* Insight for Living, 2002.

ⁱⁱ Kaylor, Bob. "The Apostle Paul Takes a Selfie, in *Homiletics*, July6, 2014