

Spirit vs. Flesh
Romans 7:14-25a

There is a beloved cartoon character I remember from comic strips and seasonal TV specials. He has an amazingly round head with just a squiggle of hair. He wears a bright yellow shirt with a black zigzag that goes around the bottom of it. He has a friend named Lucy. These two are a part of a sad, sad story involving a football. It plays out the same way every time. Lucy convinces Charlie Brown that she will not move the football. He gets a good long run at it, and just before he gives it a mighty kick, she moves it. He misses, goes flying through the air with an anguished groan, and land flats on his back. It happens every time. It is a sad, sad story.

Even more sad, is the story of a real life person who fails again and again and again. A man wants to do the right thing but doesn't do it. As good as he desires to be, in the end he can never be that. He can only be a failure. He can clearly see where he wants to be, but he can never get there. He is, and for his whole life will be, a poor miserable sinner. It is a sad, sad story.

This is the picture St. Paul paints of his life in our reading from Romans. It is likely that you can see

the brushstrokes ringing true in your own life as well.

There are several improper ways to read and respond to our text.

Blame: It's not my fault. I know what God wants in my life, and I'm making a pretty good effort to do it. It's not me who messes things up. It's sin.

What a good way to rationalize our failure! The life of discipleship, the life of obedience, never materializes, but it's not my fault. What a good way to pass the buck. What a good way to slough off responsibility. I'm not the Christian God wants me to be, but it's not me. It's the sin that dwells within. That's the problem.

Despair: It is a sad, sad story. It is a really sad story. No matter how good my intentions are, I always fall short. So why even try? I might as well just do whatever I want, or nothing at all. Because when I try to do what God wants, I never accomplish it. Even my greatest acts of love and self-sacrifice are tainted by impure motives. I do what I do not simply to serve, but to feel better about myself, or to have others think well of me. And a little anger smolders in me when they don't even bother to say thank you. Why do I even bother?

Try harder: The other side of the same coin is the opposite reaction -- to try harder. All I need to do is give it a little more effort and then I will succeed. I will overcome that bad habit. I will do everything I can to restore that relationship. I will clean up my language. I will revive my marriage. I will be the disciple Jesus wants me to be. The goal is right there. You envision it. You own it! And you work for it! ... And you blow it. There is no escaping it. This side of eternity we will always be saint and sinner.

Yes, you are a baptized child of God. You have been made new in the cleansing flood of water and the word. You continue to be filled with God's Holy Spirit as you live in faith in Jesus as the One who went to the cross for you to earn for you the forgiveness of your sins. You are a new person, delighting in God's love shown toward you. You are a new person, desiring to live a life of obedience to your loving heavenly Father.

But. ... But, the old self is still there. You are still a sinner.

Paul's point is clear. Yes, you should be striving to live according to God's good and gracious Law. And yes, you should be making significant strides in

conforming to that Law. But don't think that you are going to become proficient. Don't think that you are going to master that Law. No one ever arrives. No one ever saves themselves. God does it all. *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

God will not let you fall into the blame game, despair or works righteousness. God wants you to be His and will not let go. He grabs you at the font. He squeezes you tight at the communion rail. He holds you all the way. He does it all. He does the saving. You are saved through Jesus Christ our Lord.

And so, it is not a sad, sad story. It *is* a constant struggle. Your conflict will not end until you are received into glory. But it is not a sad, sad story because of Jesus Christ our Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.