

“Batteries not Included”

Romans 7:15-8:2 ¹

One of the amenities I was glad to see on our recent South African Airways flights was the ability to recharge electronics. There were USB chargers in front of every seat, and 110 volt outlets underneath every seat. Beyond that, I took a large lithium-ion battery pack so that I could recharge my phone when necessary as we traveled around Ghana. None of that was available when I was last in Africa, a dozen years ago.

Batteries are much in the news these days. Tesla, with every other automaker, is working around the clock to develop batteries that can practically and effectively power automobiles and other transportation devices.

Beyond our cars, we have batteries in flashlights, batteries in watches, and batteries in radios. We have batteries in cameras and batteries in cell phones. We have batteries in cordless razors, batteries in tape recorders and batteries in calculators. We have batteries in screwdrivers and batteries in drills. And I haven't even mentioned toys!

Now while aftermarket batteries are often quite good, the batteries that come preinstalled in our widgets frequently leave much to be desired. Cheaply manufactured to start with, these batteries have already been in the devices for months, and they last, oh, about fifteen minutes after we turn them on.

In this respect, at least, batteries have something in common with most of our New Year's resolutions. They don't last. We're ten weeks into the New Year. How are you doing with your resolutions?

I remember one Christmas in Louisville when we joined the YMCA as a family. When we showed up in January for our first efforts at fitness, we saw signs around the building that said, “We know it's a pain to have all these ‘new resolution’ people clogging up the system, but don't worry—they'll be gone soon.” Do any of you know what I'm talking about?

Ten weeks ago, many of us decided to do more of this and less of that this year. We decided that, this year, we're going to get control of our spending, our eating, our weight, our devotional life, our investing, our children, our work . . . you can fill in whatever fits for you. By now, though, ten weeks in, most of us have also discovered once again that changes aren't as easy to make as we had hoped.

Most of us underestimate how difficult it will be to make significant changes in our lives. Or maybe our problem is that we're not entirely honest with ourselves about our desires. For example, if I were to be honest, I'd have to say that my resolution list looks rather like this:

1. I'd really like to lose weight without changing what I eat.
2. I'd like to become physically fit without exercising to any great extent.
3. I'd like to learn Spanish without much study or effort.
4. I'd like to save money without changing my spending habits.
5. I'd like to experience the benefit of Sabbath rest without missing anything.
6. I'd like to deepen my walk with God without spending any more time with God.

Would your list look anything like that?

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 11, 2018.

The thing about resolutions is that it's easy to believe that because we've thought or said something, we have therefore done it. Keith Miller pointed out that "Making a decision to do something is only the first part of doing it. For example, if I make a decision to buy a house, I haven't bought the house yet, and I certainly can't move in this afternoon. . . . You haven't completed the transaction when you say the words of commitment."²

Our text this morning gets at these things, but before we consider the earlier parts of our text, let's remind ourselves where Paul ended up: "*So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. For the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you through Christ Jesus from the power of sin that leads to death*" (Romans 8:1-2).

No condemnation. NO CONDEMNATION. Would you say that with me?

NO CONDEMNATION!

Now that we have that in our minds, let's go back to Paul's beginning: "*I don't understand myself at all,*" Paul wrote, "*for I really want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do the very thing that I hate. . . . No matter which way I turn, I can't make myself do right. I want to, but I can't. When I want to do good, I don't. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway*" (Romans 7:15, 18-19).

Paul wasn't a new Christian when he wrote those words. He had followed Jesus for many years, had faced persecution and death many times over, and he had already written much of what we know as the New Testament. The human struggle to do what we know we ought to do isn't limited to January or to new believers.

The Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard, agreed with Paul when he wrote, "**There are, in the end, only two ways open to us: to honestly and honorably make an admission of how far we are from the Christianity of the New Testament, or to perform skillful tricks to conceal the true situation.**"³

Many Christians, bravely trying to obey Jesus' commands in our own strength, wonder how Satan, our adversary and accuser, outsmarts and overpowers us so often. The short answer is that we are defeated because we're using the wrong weapons. Paul reminded the Corinthians that they were battling a spiritual enemy who was humanly invincible, and that they must therefore fight with spiritual weapons, because the real battle takes place in the spirit world (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

As we sit here this morning, many of us in this room are well into our Lenten study of spiritual formation and transformation, and some of us—maybe many of us—have been reminded that Satan is quite likely to attack us any time we're trying to grow spiritually. *One thing we can count on when we pursue spiritual growth is that we will be attacked* (Matthew 6:13, 26:41).

So it is that many Christians, bravely trying to become better people and better disciples using our pre-installed power, find that we run out of fizz far more quickly than we expected. We become discouraged, and we've soon proven once more that the sign in the YMCA is true in the realm of spiritual fitness as well as physical fitness.

² Keith Miller, *A Hunger for Healing: The Twelve Steps as a Classic Model for Christian Spiritual Growth* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 53.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, "What Madness," in *Provocations: The Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard* (Plough, 1999), p. 180.

My friend, *Satan knows your weaknesses—all of them*—and he is hard at work trying to block God’s eternal purposes in your life, in the lives connected to yours, and in the world itself. We are no match for him, and it’s only through an intentional, life-giving, power-enhancing personal relationship with Jesus that you and I can make any progress at all.

If we return to the idea of batteries, batteries store energy and release that energy in controlled and helpful ways. Batteries provide **power** . . . portable power that can be used anywhere we are.

You and I desperately need some kind of portable power, greater than our own power, and more powerful than a Tesla battery, to make it possible for us to follow Jesus and to live the Abundant Life that Jesus makes possible. And when we come to the conviction that a relationship with our Creator, as revealed in Jesus Christ and experienced through God’s Spirit, provides that Power, and once we have made the decision to commit—or to re-commit—our lives to that relationship, all sorts of remarkable things begin to happen.

The Good News is that when we fail to achieve our aspirations, when we make decisions that mess up our lives, God sends an ambulance, not a firing squad. And the Great News about God’s power is that when we make life decisions that cause our spiritual batteries to become short-circuited and useless, God will forgive our sin and put us back on track again, fully charged and ready for action.

Paul actually spoke and wrote about God’s power quite a lot. Here are just a few examples:

- *“I know very well how foolish the message of the cross sounds to those who are on the road to destruction. But we who are being saved recognize this message as the very **power** of God”* (1 Corinthians 1:18).
- *“For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith. As a result, I can really know Christ and experience the mighty **power** that raised him from the dead”* (Philippians 3:9-10).
- *“I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great **power** for us who believe”* (Ephesians 1:18-19).
- *“But this precious treasure—this light and power that now shine within us—is held in perishable containers, that is, in our weak bodies. So everyone can see that our glorious **power** is from God and is not our own”* (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Our pesky New Year’s resolutions almost always have to do with discipline, and practicing worthwhile disciplines of just about any kind helps to align our emotions, our wills, and our habits with God’s grace-full purposes for our lives. Indeed, our need for discipline—for spiritual “muscle memory”—is one of the main reasons that many of us are pursuing spiritual transformation through Lenten disciplines related to practicing the Prayer-Filled Life, the Virtuous Life, the Spirit-Empowered Life, the Word-Centered Life, and the Sacramental Life. Even if you’ve not been in one of these groups, we still have books available, and you can learn and grow if you secure one of them.

Just as a jeweler works to remove microscopic flaws from a diamond that no ordinary person would ever notice, so God works in your life and in mine to make us able to contain His glory. But our transformation is very slow, rather like the way the running water of a creek

polishes stones in its path, and we easily become impatient. To make progress, we must steadfastly choose to continue our disciplines, whether we ourselves see progress or not. Those around you will notice the changes.

In an age when our computers and our communications operate at mind-boggling and steadily-increasing speeds, we're accustomed to thinking that "faster is better."⁴ But no matter what our computers can do, **spiritual growth is seldom faster than physical growth.**

Some would go so far as to say that the speed of spiritual growth is "agricultural." Paul suggested such a speed when he wrote, "*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up*" (Galatians 6:9).

And there's a reason for the slow pace of our growth. Richard Foster noted that "On our own we are not sufficient receptacles to contain the divine Blessing. We would simply blow apart, or something worse. Therefore, we should always value this ordinary way (this intolerably slow way) of growth, for through it God prepares us for things we can hardly imagine."⁵ C. S. Lewis agreed that God intends to make us into "dazzling, radiant, immortal creatures, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine."⁶

Having said all this, let's turn our attention to resolutions and transformation once again. Toward what end do we make resolutions? To make more money? To have a better retirement? To live longer? To know and love God more deeply? And how badly do we desire these things?

We tend to get what we desire with our whole heart. If we organize our lives toward a particular end, if we make every choice with that goal in mind, the chances are very good that much of that desire will eventually be realized. The difficulty comes when we choose goals that can't carry the weight of life, goals that are time-bound, goals that will take us into eternity empty-handed.

Happily, God hasn't left us clueless about our Real Goal, about our hearts' True Home. God has always told us that "*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13). And Jesus reminded us that God's most important commandment for us is this: "*You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind*" (Matthew 22:37). The fact of the matter is that **the more in love we are with God, the easier it is to do the things that take us to Him** (Hebrews 12:2).

As with most things, there's both good news and warning here. The good news is that the spiritual Disciplines, if we steadfastly pursue them, will in fact transform us. The warning is that God has given us veto power over our own transformation. As C. S. Lewis put it, "The goal toward which [God] is beginning to guide you is absolute perfection; and no power in the whole universe, except you yourself, can prevent Him from taking you to that goal."⁷

Some of you may remember that years ago, during Super bowl XXXVII, FedEx ran a commercial that spoofed the movie *Castaway*, in which Tom Hanks played a FedEx worker whose company plane went down, stranding him on a desert island for years. Looking like the

⁴ My first pc operated at eight million cycles per second. The fastest of today's pc's can approach four billion cycles.

⁵ Richard Foster, in Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (HarperCollins, 1991), p. 91.

⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperOne, 2001), p. 85.

⁷ Lewis, *ibid.*

bedraggled Hanks in the movie, the FedEx employee in the commercial goes up to the door of a suburban home, package in hand.

When the lady comes to the door, he explains that he survived five years on a deserted island, and during that whole time he kept this package in order to deliver it to her. She gives a simple, "Thank you."

Curious about what's in the package that he's been protecting for years he says, "If I may ask, what was in that package after all?" She opens it and shows him the contents, saying, "Oh, nothing really. Just a satellite telephone, a global positioning device, a compass, a water purifier, and some seeds."

Like the contents in that package, the resources you and I need for growth and strength are available to us right now if we'll take advantage of them. A.W. Tozer reminded us that, **"Anything God has ever done, he can do now. Anything God has ever done anywhere, he can do here. Anything God has ever done for anyone, he can do for you."**⁸

My friends, *"there is now **no condemnation** for those in Christ Jesus, because the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death"* (Romans 8:1-2). *"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up"* (Galatians 6:9).

Sam Shoemaker, the great Prayer Warrior, offered this simple advice: **"Don't pay any attention to whether you believe or not. Just pray every day for thirty days that God will meet you at the point of your greatest need . . . and see what happens to you."**⁹

⁸ A.W. Tozer, *Leadership Weekly*, October 9, 2002.

⁹ Miller, p. 36.