

‘Surrender to Win’

Psalm 4:1-8; John 8:31-38

April 18, 2021

I found something out this week which kind of took me aback. Turns out, that bear wrestling is an actual thing. I mean that there are people, still to this day, who get into a ring with a bear and wrestle with them. Believe me, PETA doesn't like it and I'm not sure I do either. After all, the bear is muzzled, its claws removed. There is a high degree of danger but, nevertheless, the bear almost always loses.

It doesn't sound like a fun past-time to me but hey, neither does Tik Toc so take that for what you will. But what if that bear weren't chained and muzzled and declawed? Well, that fight would end a different way, wouldn't it? The bear would win, all the time, hands down.

Now consider for a second, that you were a bear fighter, and not one of those namby-pamby ones who wrestles bound bears. No, you wrestle those bears full-on, without the protective measures. How would you fare?

Not so great, I assume.

But what if, after a particularly nasty loss, on in which you were torn and bloody, so thoroughly beaten that any onlooker would assume you'd never get back onto the mat with a bear. Imagine their surprise when you head back and, yet again, take another whipping? What if you did it, again and again?

It's preposterous, really. At some point, you'd get the memo, latch onto the idea, truly understand – there's no getting on the mat with a bear without losing horrifically. Wouldn't you?

Well, I think most of us, given that situation, would be wise enough to stop wrestling. Why? Because we're wise like that....

Or are we?

The fact of the matter is that if you swap out that bear for sin, then you've got a pretty good portrait of ourselves. After all, who here hasn't wandered back to some forgotten sin of the past. Finding whatever it is that leads us away from God comforting at first, it's easy to believe that we've got the wrestling match in hand. Oh, but then the bear's muzzle and chains are removed and, well, you get the tar beat out of you yet again.

And, in a manner of speaking, it's a subtle form of insanity. There's a phrase that captures this dynamic perfectly. Although it's often attributed to Einstein, he himself swore he never said it. The saying is this – insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. While not the words of a genius, they sure are genius words. To my mind, nothing so much captures the insanity of sin than that.

Whatever it is that we do that isn't of God's will always ends up badly for us, and for others. Maybe we gossip about other people. Perhaps we tell lies, looking to bolster other people's opinions of us. It could be that we use alcohol or drugs or pornography excessively, causing harm to ourselves and others. It really doesn't matter what sin or sins are particularly potent in our lives the bottom line is this – we know we shouldn't be doing something but find ourselves doing it. nevertheless.

The church has classically described 7 types of behaviors as deadly sins. Think of these as kind of the main categories of sin. As such, particular sins all fall into one of those 7 categories. Greed, anger, lust, gluttony, sloth, envy and pride. IF, for example, we are able to help someone and then don't, then he sin in sloth, apatheia, unconcern for another's suffering. If we have a habit of staring lasciviously at members of the opposite sex, that would be a manifestation of lust. See how it works? But the key thing to keep in mind is that these seven deadliest are potent.

Lethal, if you will. Romans 6:23a – **“For the wages of sin is death.”** As in sins can kill us, mentally, physically and spiritually. Sin has the ability to empty joy out of our lives faster than a greased pig.

These are our bears, you know, the ones that are constantly kicking our butt but we keep climbing back into the ring to take another licking. Perhaps the worst part of it all is that we keep thinking that one day, perhaps soon, that we'll emerge victorious. That, somehow, someday we'll finally manage to beat the bear.

But we won't. Not by ourselves we won't that is.

And let me share with you some good news right quick, especially if you've just stepped out of the ring bloody and beaten, so to speak – *Bear wrestling is NOT what God has in His mind for you.* Getting beaten, badgered and bullied by sin is the exact opposite of what God desires for you. Believe me when I tell you, you were not brought into this world to be bound mercilessly to what is unholy.

So, what must we do to be free of sin? What steps must we take in order to become what the Apostle Paul calls slaves to righteousness?

Well, the first step is not getting back into the ring with sin. Surrendering. Saying, “no mas.”

That’s right, in order to be truly Christian, we all must reach the point where we surrender to the facts. And the facts, according to the Scripture are this. First, that we are sinners and second, we have absolutely NO ability on our own to avoid it by ourselves.

Paul talks about this in **Romans 7:15-19** (selected verses) – *“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”*

Is it any wonder that the numbers of Christians in America dwindle precipitously by the minute when we realize the first step toward becoming Authentically Christian is by *self-denial and asking for help*? After all, we are enmeshed in a culture which prizes two things very highly – self-esteem and strength. It is almost a modern American axiom – “No matter what, you must feel good about yourselves.”

Could it be that this drift is exactly why we see so many behaviors and actions that have historically and Biblically considered sinful being “rehabilitated” into new societal virtues? Pride, sexual activity outside of marriage, rudeness all come to mind rather quickly. There are others, of course.

After all, when you honestly believe that feeling good about yourself and your behaviors in the key to a contented life, you’re forced to make the truth a lie and a lie the truth because, otherwise, you just can’t account for your sin. Here, you have a number of options when it comes to your own sin. You can “explain it away,” if you will. As in, “I ate the whole cheesecake because I didn’t want Natalie or the kids to eat too much.” Or you can simply do what the world does anyway, take what’s bad and declare it good.

When we’re not finding new ways to justify our sin, even when we confront it, head-on, we believe we can do it on our own. That’s why we climb into the ring with the 600 lb. bear. Can Christianity in the West survive when in order to rise above sin, you’ve got to pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Part of the American mystique is that we’re lone wolves, self-reliant and never have to ask anybody for anything. In such a culture, the necessary admission of failure as it relates to sin is anathema.

Although I don’t necessarily embrace all of his thoughts, Soren Kierkegaard had a great insight on this. He divided a “healthy life” as being divided into three distinct parts. The first stage is the aesthetic stage. That’s when you’re young and are into music and movies and you yearn to experience a great number of things.

But what happens to most people is, well, that life gets boring after a bit. I mean, it may be fun to go para-skiing once or twice but, by the third time, it’s likely lost its’ luster. It’s at this point most, but not all, people enter into what Kierkegaard calls the “ethical” stage of life. Here you move from prizing specific things (like artists and experiences) into moving into embracing general things (obligations, family, etc.).

Sounds good, right?

I mean, not living hedonistically is a great thing so it is an improvement. But it should be noted, it isn’t the high point of our lives. Why is that? Because as we set out to become a quote-unquote “better person” or “settle down” we’re confronted with an annoying fact – we can’t live up to our own image of who we wish to be. We may feel family a chore or our obligations too draining. Worse still, we have a dreadfully difficult time of avoiding the sins of our past. Even as we’re trying to improve, we find ourselves lifting up the ropes and climbing back into the ring with that bear.

The end of the ethical stage of life comes as we realize – *we can’t live up to our ideals, not on our own we can’t*. The wonderful life we imagined for ourselves is turning out to be anything but. It’s in those times of desperation that it’s easy for us to become depressed, despondent even.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. Not at all. In fact, freeing us from enslavement to sin is exactly why Jesus came, died and was resurrected – to free us from sin and open us up to a life of righteousness through the power of the Holy Spirit.

On the cross, he freed us from enslavement to sin.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way. **Romans 6:1-4** – *“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him*

by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.”

Romans 6:18 – “You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.”

The point Paul is getting at, that, in terms of this sermon is this – Jesus has forever and eternally freed you from bear-wrestling. You need no longer live life as a slave to sin but rather, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you can be free from sin which means free to enjoy a good life, following Jesus and helping others.

And it gets better.

The cost of doing this is practically work-free. There isn’t any training course or 1,000-page manual to show you how to do this. To be free from enslavement from sin requires just one thing – believing that Jesus Christ is the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

John 8:24 – “I told you that you would die in your sins, for unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins.” What Jesus is saying here in John 8 is that, through our belief in Him, we WILL NOT DIE in our SIN! That’s it. That’s all it takes. Paul in Romans makes it clear in chapter 10:10, writing – “...because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Now look, doublespeak is rightly derided. It’s the language we use when we either have nothing of substance to say OR we are trying to hide the truth in creative language. Great examples of it are like when you say you have “negative cash flow” which really means that you’re spending more than you make. Or what about when an advertiser tells us it’s “shabby chic” they are actually telling us that the item is old and used.

On a lot of levels, surrender to win sounds exactly like that kind of thinking. And, believe me, we’re not to surrender at everything. No, there is evil and injustice in the world and, as Christians, we are called to never give up fighting it. In that way, we’re like doctors and researchers who spend their entire lives working for a cure for cancer, only to pass away before it’s actualized. We, too as Christians are to continue fighting evil in the world.

But when it comes to fighting the sin within, we’ve got to surrender to win.

There’s a book by a guy named AW Tozer that I really think highly of. It’s called “God’s Pursuit of Man.” In it, there’s a chapter called “Surrender to Win.” In it, the author writes this, “**AW Tozer from God’s Pursuit of Man** – “We might well pray for God to invade and conquer us, for until He does, we remain in peril from a thousand foes. We bear within us the seeds of our own disintegration. Our moral imprudence puts us always in danger of accidental or reckless self-destruction. The strength of our flesh is an ever-present danger to our souls. Deliverance can come to us only by the defeat of our old life. Safety and peace only come after we have been forced to our knees. God rescues us by breaking us, by shattering our strength and wiping out our resistance. Then He invades our natures with that ancient and eternal life which is from the beginning. So He conquers us and by that benign conquest saves us for Himself...”

What Tozer is getting at

I want to tell you a story I heard a while back. So, there’s this man, an awesome swimmer. He wants to show the world just how great a swimmer he really is so he devises a plan. He’s going to swim across the English Channel, the body of water which separates England from France. At its shortest point, the English Channel is about a 21-mile swim. Difficult but not impossible. But this man, he decides he is going to do it with an anvil attached to his leg. An anvil is around 75 pounds, in case you were wondering.

So, this man, he’s going to swim 21 miles across the English Channel with a 75 pound piece of iron tied to one of his legs. In preparation, the man seeks out the best physical fitness coach, to make sure his body is strong. So too does he seek out the very best psychologist, in order to make sure he’s mentally tough enough. HE works with these experts for months in advance of his attempt.

The day of the swim finally arrives. His coaches and supporters line the shore on the far side in France, waiting to cheer him in. The man ties the anvil to his leg and begins his swim. Although difficult, he’s doing great. All the preparation really is helping as his mind and his body are in peak shape. He gets close enough to the French shore. Close enough that he can hear the cheers of his supporters. But it’s then that the weight of the anvil starts to drag him down.

There he is, thrashing in the water, barely able to keep his head afloat. His physical trainer yells out some encouragement – “You can do this! You’ve trained hard. Your body is strong enough to do it.”

Still though, the man flails in the water. It looks like he'll drown.

Next, the man's psychologist cries out, "You can do this! Your mind is sharp and capable!"

Still though, the man thrashes in the water, fighting just to live.

Finally, a white-haired, middle-aged paunchy pastor yells out – "For God's sakes man, UNTIE THE ANVIL!"

The swimmer does and he makes it safely to shore.

So, untie the anvil. Stop wrestling the bear. Accept that you are a sinner that stands in need of Grace and you've taken the first step towards becoming authentically Christian.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen.