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“Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Luke 12:56).

In both of today’s scripture readings we see the practical and analytic side of St. Paul and Jesus, who understand well how human nature works. St. Paul describes in detail how compulsion overcomes our better instincts and makes us miserable in our attempts to be good. Jesus chides us for denying the obvious and ignoring the simple wisdom that it is better to settle our conflicts early while they are small than to let them take root.

Paul’s insight is so clear that scholars have long tried to guess what he was referring to when he wrote: “I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want.” Was he offering only a general example, or did he suffer some habitual weakness that shamed him in the midst of his otherwise exalted life, perhaps what he described as an “angel of Satan assigned to beat me, a thorn in my side to keep me from getting proud” (2 Cor 12:7).

We will never know, but what Paul’s admission opens up for us is the possibility that good people can still serve God’s purposes even if they are sinners. Rather than being shocked, we should find encouragement that God’s power is made perfect in weakness, and that the call to holiness is there even in the struggle to overcome

addictive behaviors and compulsive habits.

In today's Gospel, Jesus describes with legal imagery what failure to reconcile can do. A quarrel that might have been settled goes to "court," the place of hurt and rationalization in all of us where we brood and rehearse our case against another until it becomes an obsession. The old advice to married couples not to "let the sun go down on your anger" illustrates the damage even a small difference can inflict if left unresolved. Every family has relatives, even siblings, who no longer speak to each other over past hurts once pride takes over.

When judgment is rendered, hearts harden and both litigants are imprisoned in their remembered versions until truth and reconciliation set them free and peace is restored. Every penny must be paid.

The bad news is that few people ever overcome their deeper personality conflicts and neuroses. The good news is that grace mitigates the effects of sin and frees us to function well enough to live examined, faithful lives amid contradiction and paradox. Paul again: "Where sin abounds, grace abounds even more" (Rom 5:20). Is this not the Joy of the Gospel?

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