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Connection! Self-Control

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Romans 7:15-25

Depending on your definition, there are 20—30 civil wars being fought right now around the world, according to Harvard History Professor, Dr. David Armitage. He was interviewed by ABC last month. Civil wars are the most frequent and ferocious form of human conflict in history. And they are the #1 form of conflict we have going on right now in 2008. David Armitage says we've got to understand them. Some draw in outside powers to fight, some because of the amount of suffering. The big solution to civil war that has come over the centuries is politics. Our own Civil War did bring long term stability and an end to slavery of that type, but at an enormous cost. The death toll was higher per capita than all the wars since WWII combined. And today, with 20—30 wars, the world is mostly ignoring them. And with all that history, what does Professor Armitage see as the issues? The key one is "Who are we? What's our community? And they fight. They find it worth fighting. And the annual cost? \$120 Billion.

And I would add that there are more than 30 civil wars going on. I'd add that there's one for every person who's trying to break out of the prison their old way of thinking put them in. The key question? Who am I? What's my community? What's worth fighting for? I believe it's a universal civil war for every person seeking to follow Christ. You may only be considering taking the step to walk in His steps, so you may not have declared war yet, but for anyone seeking connection to God, this is it: The universal civil war: Who is ultimately in charge of my life? Who has control? Do I, or does God? And if I believe I can have control of my life, do I really, or do my emotions, or my appetites, or my hang ups control me? And if I claim God has control, then why do I struggle so much? Maybe you're in your own civil war too. It can look like most anything: Arguments over what seems like nothing. Drinking too much, using drugs. Other stuff. Interfering where you had no business interfering. Running my mouth when I shouldn't have said anything. (See what I mean? It's universal! That's why we say "No perfect people allowed in this church!") We've run over people because we have failed to restrain ourselves. We all suffer from it: lack of self-control.

But God knows. And even writers of Scripture know. Listen to Paul's words: *15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. 16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. 17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. 21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; 23 but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God— through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Listen to some of it, as the Message paraphrases it: *"21-23 It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up. I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge. 24 I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do*

anything for me? Isn't that the real question?" 25 The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different."

We're in a fight, and most people fight it in the shadows, out of sight, and feeling all alone. No wonder so many of us feel defeated by sin and want to give up. Proverbs 25:28 *"Like a city that is broken into and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit."* If you have no control, it means something else does. Galatians 5 boils it down to one 5-letter word: FLESH. The flesh is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit contrary to the sinful nature of the flesh. And **the flesh vs. the Holy Spirit is the universal civil war.**

Here's the deal: When you put your faith in Christ, your inner self was re-created, and God now sees you the way He sees His own Son: holy, perfect, and blameless. And it's true: Everything changed for you, whether you were aware or not. Now this doesn't mean "your body is evil" and your spirit is "all good." That's an ancient Greek philosophy which also manifests in some eastern religions. But Scripture says we're all one: body, mind, spirit. The flesh is all that.

If you are truly a believer in Jesus Christ, you have the Spirit of God dwelling within you. Yet believers also have an old nature—a habitual, sinful way of thinking—that Paul called "the flesh." Let's put it straight. The flesh is the self-serving, non-believing, godless mindset that lives by animal instinct. Its natural stance is facing away from God. Remember the things Paul calls "deeds of the flesh." Here's his list of raw realities in Galatians 5:19-21 *It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on" The Message*

"I could go on..." Ha. As if that isn't enough! Scary isn't it, that this isn't all. This is only a selective list! And here's the thing: if the flesh wins enough in your civil war, you begin losing your soul. Christians aren't immune to sin just because we have the Spirit of God living within us. Everything before can still defeat me now because I can still choose the same old nature. It doesn't improve. It never repents. It's your whole inclination prior to coming to Christ.

Letting go of the things of the flesh is tough. It's rotten, but only because we've chosen to buy in so much. (Like buying into too many apples or bananas, you can't get to 'em all before they turn rotten on you. It's the same with the stuff of the "world.") Aren't you tired of it? Quit buying in so much!

So why do we allow it? **Because we really don't love God first.** We love God. But we love our old ways too...sometimes *better*. And when you do that, you don't grow up in the Spirit, even though He dwells in us now. The fact is, some of us have been 1 year old Christians, 24 years in a row, rather than 24 year old Christ-followers. When you put your faith in Christ, your inner self was re-created. Everything changed for you, whether you were aware of it or not. But old habits die hard, and your flesh knows sin like you know how to ride a bicycle.

Whatever "it" is for us, it's too comfortable, we say. The flesh knows sin like you know how to ride a bicycle. It never forgets. And many of us have refused to get off our old bicycle. Can you un-train your body so that you can no longer ride a bike? No. But what if I tell you that the bike will never take you where you truly want to go? Why would you ride a bike that only takes you away from love? Away from long lasting joy? Or peace? Or patience? Or kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control? Every time you and I engage in the flesh, that's what we're doing.

But every time we go there by bike, we end up further away from Jesus. Further away from the cross. And God's grace has to reach that much further for us, Which He does, gladly, though it again costs Him everything to do so.

But when you start walking in the Spirit, in the light, God's grace can do more than just forgive you, you know. Let me say that again: God's grace can do more than just forgive you, you know. Jesus came for so much more than just forgiveness. Put your faith in Him; not because you might die tonight, but because you probably won't.

In Christ, God can transform you so that your past does not have to equal your future. And then like an apple tree producing apples, your life in God's hands starts producing... Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the fruit of the Spirit, and when you walk by the Spirit (away from the flesh) you simply cannot do anything less; like the apple tree. It doesn't have to try to produce. It doesn't have to grunt and groan to do it. It does it naturally, by God's grace. Even self-control.

In God's grace, when you practice His self-control, you learn to serve.

You learn real happiness is not about getting but giving. You can dream again.

You learn how *much* you have to give. Even you! Even me!

You learn you're free from all the judgment you heap upon yourself.

You learn you can make a real difference in people's lives!

Our Methodist heritage is to help people, to free people from society's injustices, but it has to start in God's grace. No more flesh. Get off that bike that can only take you one direction: away from Christ. Grow up in Him! Connect! So relax. Live like Christ. Trust in Him. And end the war.

Study Guide

Monday: Review your sermon notes. Read Romans 7:15-25. Does understanding the Apostle Paul struggled with this help you or frustrate you? Paul asks "Who can rescue me from this body of death?" What is your struggle you need rescuing from? Make a private list. It can be helpful to name it. And now, pray thanksgiving as Paul does, that Jesus Christ would be Lord of all, even this body of death. Pray through your "body of death" list. Pray for each struggle, and bring it to the light of Jesus. Let Him walk with you through this.

Tuesday: Read Galatians 5:16-26. Paul contrasts 2 very different outcomes: one from following the flesh and the other from following the Spirit. Which one suits you more? Notice the final fruit, or result of having God's Spirit rule in your life. Pray through the list of fruits of the Spirit. Soak in the life and true party that goes along with life in the Spirit.

Wednesday: Read Proverbs 25:28. Without self-control, you are like a city besieged. Are you tired of it? Can you find someone with whom to share your struggle? Someone to help you rebuild the walls, the parameters of your life again? Give them your specific prayer request, and ask them to pray for you daily.

Thursday: Read Romans 8. This was the founder of the Methodism, John Wesley's favorite chapter in the Bible. Soak it in! If you are "in Christ Jesus," there is no condemnation from God. Now ask yourself this: are you condemning yourself? If God doesn't condemn you, then you can stop condemning yourself. Let that be your prayer, knowing that "nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Make sure you read the whole chapter to know what we're talking about).

Friday: Read 2 Timothy 3:1-7. This is a tough one. Consider Paul's advice to Timothy. Read his description of the last days. How does it compare with 2008? Reread v.5. He says "Have nothing to do with them." Pray through your list of friends. Are there some who are "lovers of themselves?" Are there friends you need to move away from in order to grow in Christ? Pray for strength and to be led by His Spirit, as you seek to connect with Him more.