

Engage: Strength
Delivered March 3, 2013

About 12 years ago I went to the doctor around the time that Rita was finding out that she was pregnant with Jacob. She was pregnant, but to be honest, I looked like I might have been carrying twins at full term. I got on the scale and watched the nurse keep sliding the little metal notch further and further to the right until she hit 240 pounds. I thought something must be wrong with the scale, but it was the truth.

The truth was, I really hadn't thought too much about what I was doing to my body. I ate whatever I felt like eating, whenever I felt like eating it, sat on my rear-end for my job, and didn't exercise much other than lifting myself off the couch to go get some more chips. That doctor's visit, along with the thought of having our first child, collided in my brain to get me to think about what I was doing to my body.

From that point on I decided I was going to change my behavior. But what I've found over the years, through both successes and failures, is that thinking about changing and feeling like changing are never enough to actually produce change. Until I change my habits, my intention to change makes no difference.

About six months ago I decided that I needed to try a new routine for my workouts, and walked into our local Crossfit affiliate to challenge my body to get in better shape than ever. I love the workout because it is constantly varied, always intense, and mentally and physically demanding. They post the workout of the day online the night before, but some of the people I work out with won't look at it.

I'm a bit more of a planner, so I have to look to get myself mentally prepared. But I find that even when I'm mentally prepared, and I feel like I should be able to keep pushing myself, sometimes I get into the gym and find the same principle at work. No matter how much I want to pick up the weight, jump on the box again, or do one more round before the time is up I can't get my body to do what my mind and heart want it to do. Unfortunately I can't go to the board and write the totals based on what my mind told me I could do, or my heart said I should do – I can only write down what my body actually executed.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the same position with our relationship to God and the changes we want to see happen in our lives spiritually. No matter where we are on the the journey following Jesus we all come to a point where we feel stirred to act because something is happening in our hearts, and our minds are being changed as well but we fail to execute on those changes with our behavior. We might feel emotionally stirred by a particular service on Sunday, or intellectually stirred by a message but then fail to act on what we've felt and known. Until we get our bodies to execute on the instructions coming from our hearts and minds, we won't really change the way we know we should.

Others of us may feel a very different kind of tension – especially those of us who identify ourselves as doers first. We might actually start with the changing of actions because we feel like that's how all change happens anyway. So we listen to a message and implement it, or we don't, and when we don't we feel frustrated or even angry with ourselves because we can't just do it. Sometimes those of us who are doers miss out on the need to engage the other two aspects of our heart and mind into the process so that we can come out with transformed actions.

In either case, we will find ourselves falling short of Jesus' design for us and will frustrate ourselves in the process. All three elements need to line up to bring about the kind of change Jesus wants us to experience, and all three need to be aligned in the way the church presents Jesus, otherwise we're going to do him a disservice.

So the passage we're reading this morning from Romans 6 really addresses some of this tension we experience, and it does so from both sides of the coin. For those of us who just want to change behavior, Paul gives some needed context for how and why behavior changes for a follower of Jesus. And for those of us who want to change our feelings and thinking without changing behavior, Paul gives a strong challenge as well.

Let's read together from **Romans 6:11-14**. At the heart of our church is transformation. We believe that following Jesus changes lives. When people engage with heart, mind and strength in a changing relationship to God they are being transformed. At the core of that transformation is this reality: when we answer the call to follow Jesus then we are meant to consider ourselves dead to sin and newly alive to God because we are in Christ Jesus. That means that as a church of people committed to following Jesus we are consistently calling ourselves (and those who aren't yet committed) to come to the cross and die there with Jesus to the power of sin in our lives.

This is not the death of our physical body, but it does involve the use of our bodies. This isn't just a play for us to stop engaging in immoral behavior, or the things that get a lot of publicity from church people. This is a command to leave behind any of those actions that are primarily about serving ourselves and getting what we want (money, sex, or power) instead of getting what God wants from us and for us. If we are dead to sin, then we need to also consider ourselves alive to God through the resurrection of Jesus. Our heart, mind, and body are being made new by the power of the resurrection at work within each of us. His power transforms our lives.

So if we are dead to sin, then we can no longer serve that power with our heart, mind, or our body. To do so would be to make ourselves obedient servants to something whose power is dead, which is about the most foolish thing that you could possibly imagine. Who wants to serve something that has no power? So when we engage our bodies in the pursuit of God's purpose, and when we call our community to do the same, then we have to sometimes call out in ourselves the ways that those bodies are being used to serve sin and its power in us.

Verse 12 describes this as the offering of our bodies as instruments of wickedness. When we begin to follow Jesus our heart and mind tell us that we don't want to spend our talents, strengths and bodies on things that do not please God. That's what we did in the past, and our mind and heart agree that we don't want to go back there. So we listen, and stop offering ourselves as instruments to play the music that was about us.

So what do we do instead? Now we offer ourselves to God as those who used to be dead, but now are alive because of what Jesus has done for us. Now we recognize that in the cross and the resurrection Jesus has staked a claim to our lives that is above and beyond any claim that we even have over ourselves. We are alive because of him, and so we are alive to his purpose, will and direction for our lives because of him. The strength of my life, my whole body, now belongs to him forever. Sin is no longer our

master, so our new master, Jesus, gets to tell us what to do with our lives now. We have the privilege of offering every part of our body now as an instrument of righteousness. We don't just stop playing the old songs, Jesus gives us new tunes to play.

God seeks to change everything we do with our bodies. God gifted you with all your talents, abilities, and the strength of your body. Now he wants to redeem that strength to be used for his purpose. He takes the talents he gave you and plays them for his honor and glory. We actually believe that God wants to engage all of your strength in work for his kingdom, so we keep calling ourselves to be transformed here.

Your works don't lead you to righteousness, but they certainly are expressions of it. Your body is an instrument. It is going to make music. The question is whether or not the music will bring honor to God and his purpose or honor to you and your desires. When you submit your heart, mind and strength by faith to follow Jesus, then your instrument plays a righteous song because the one playing the instrument is righteous. So as a church we are seeking to engage our bodies in expressions of that righteousness – when we worship, give, serve, pray – the motivation for all of it is our desire to offer our instrument to God to play through us.

James famously summed this up very simply: faith without works is dead. If your faith is only in your heart and only in your head, but never makes it to the way you use your body, then it is lifeless faith. The call to follow Jesus is a call to engage every part of yourself – heart, mind and strength – in expressing your willingness to be his servant. When you engage your body in works that honor God, then you show the transformation of your heart and mind that happens from following him.

Let's just say this whether you're already following Jesus or you're still undecided: you do not want to be a follower of Jesus whose actions don't reflect the transformation Jesus wants for your heart and mind. Those people are called hypocrites, and we've all met enough of them. Our community has met enough of them. And you don't want to be part of a church that won't challenge you to change your behavior to reflect the way your heart and mind are changing either.

So this week I'm simply going to challenge you to take one area of your behavior that you know is not aligned with God's purpose for you and I want you to commit to working with God on it. It could be any number of things, and if we're all honest we could probably find more than one area to work on, but we're just going to start with one. Maybe this is the week that you decide to open your Bible and read it, or to spend a few minutes in prayer every day. It could be the week that you approach God about that secret habit you're hiding from everyone else, or the week you choose to say no to a temptation that you keep giving in to. It could be that you decide this week to begin offering one of your talents to God as an instrument of righteousness.

When our hearts, minds, and strength are engaged and aligned with God's purpose for us, the church is the most transformational place on the planet. That is the kind of church our community desperately needs, and the kind of church that I know we are becoming together!