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In the lengthy prayer that St. Paul has for us today in the second reading, he prays that we be “filled with the fruit of righteousness.” Righteousness is a foreign word for us. We often think of self-righteous people, those who are convinced of their own greatness and holiness and let us know it. In fact, righteousness is not supposed to have a negative connotation. It is supposed to be positive, like morally right or just. One definition I saw was conformity to God’s love, that is to say, the person acts like God wants them to act.

Most people realize they are not righteous, that at times they fall short of the moral law. I want to speak about a few of the ways we are tempted to get this wrong, some pitfalls in the spiritual life. The first option is to refuse to examine their life because everyone is basically about the same, decent, so why probe too deeply. Everyone lies, sometimes. Everyone loses their patience, sometimes. Everyone cheats in school, sometimes. I’m basically a good-person. In so many areas of our life we strive for excellence, so why not the moral life? Because it seems hard. However, it should seem impossible apart from grace. Saint Paul tells us today that God who has begun the good work in us will bring it to completion. It is not as if it all depends upon us. God does it in us. He promises in the first reading today from Baruch that we will be clothed with the splendor of God’s glory. This is our calling, to share the divine nature by grace. If we do not get purified in this life, we will have to do it in purgatory. Mediocrity is not good enough.

The next pitfall is despair. Most people do not want to do wrong. If they are struggling with a sin, they feel bad about it. Whatever it is. If they hate their parents, they feel bad that they hate their parents. If they know they used and hurt someone, they feel bad about it. If they are greedy, they wish they weren’t. Whatever it is. They come to see that the darkness of the world that Christ entered into is the human heart. They think, “If people knew the darkness in my heart, they would not like me. I am not worthy of God’s love.” They are like the young man in the story of the Prodigal Son who says to the Father, “I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But he lavishes the gift of his love upon his son, getting him a robe, and restoring his true dignity. In fact, the gift of God’s grace is free and does not depend upon our prior action. He gives it because he is good and loves us. It is a freely given gift.

The last option is they pretend (or they come to believe) that since weakness means they are not perfect (and they are quite fragile), they must fake being perfect. They wear a mask. They think so positively that acknowledging faults is impossible. They are the person who can never apologize, never admit they are wrong, and never repent. In point of fact, they become a narcissistic. Narcissists think very highly of themselves, but they are in fact just as fragile as I am saying. Since they cannot be content as a creature, they need to be a god. That was also

Satan's fault. It was what he offered to Adam and Eve: you can be like God, to be great on your own apart from him. Being gifted the divine nature is not enough. Being a creature is not enough.

Christianity offers an antidote to this. It is the Catholic both/and. Ever heard of that before? Both faith and works, or both Scripture and Tradition. In this case, it is both God's love and our sinfulness. Yes, you are broken as a result of Original Sin and your own complicitness in sinning, but God loves you anyway because he made you good. It does not mean our sinfulness is okay, but it means it is not all that we are. We are not defined by our sins. I am a big fan of the Godfather movies, parts I and II. III not so much, but there is a great scene in III that illustrates this. Don Corleone, who has become quite an immoral man over three movies as we have watched him ascend to be the godfather, is in a courtyard and is invited to make a confession to a cardinal. He says, "I am beyond redemption." The Cardinal tells him, "Your *sins* are terrible. Your life could be redeemed." We are never defined by our sins.

There was a twentieth century Catholic psychologist who I think is very good on this point, Dr. Conrad Baars. He was firmly convinced that much of the psychological problems that people experience was a result of not receiving the affirmation at the core of our being during teenage years, which is why many psychological problems set in then. Then, for the adult who missed it, the cure is that true affirmation that we can only receive from God, who gives us our true identity: you are my beloved son, you are my beloved daughter. Your sins are forgiven, go in peace.