

## The Spirit is Willing

Mark 14:38 "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

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The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

### Introduction

I stopped making New Year's Resolutions many years ago, mainly because the resolution to stop making resolutions is the only resolution I have kept. I remember, years ago, resolving to become more organized so I bought a datebook that came with a "how to organize your life" kit. It included four 3x5 cards that were each marked with a letter; "A" for the first card, "B" for the second and on down to "D" for the fourth card. On the "A" card, write your four biggest goals for the year. On the "B" card, write the four goals that aren't quite as important as the goals on the "A" card but are still important. On the "C" card write goals you would really like to address that year, but not until you've made progress with your "A" and "B" goals. On your "D" card, write the goals that would be great to accomplish that year if you get around to doing something about them. Thus you establish your priorities. I lost all the cards within a few weeks. The next year I received a similar system with my new datebook, with the same four cards marked with letters. The instructions said to fill out the four cards with my goals for that year and then to throw away the cards marked, "B", "C", and "D" because I would never get to them. I lost those cards in a few weeks. Now I use the calendar app on my phone. I may have good intentions, but I was unable to follow through on them.

### Set the stage

Jesus and His disciples are at the chief moment of crisis. Praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, they know that soldiers are on their way for them. Jesus instructs Peter and the rest to watch and pray, while He went off to pray alone. We know that He prayed that, if possible, this cup would pass from Him but the Father's will be done, not His. He finishes only to find the disciples asleep and He chides them and then goes off to pray the same prayer again. When He returns, they are asleep again and it is too late to do all this yet another time. During this episode, the Lord warns them that "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Let's look at that phrase today.

### Your intentions are better than your abilities

I think another way to say this is, "your intentions are better than your abilities" but the Lord's choice of wording carries more depth and meaning.

the spirit is willing

The spirit, the essence of us that remains after the body dies and who can be contacted by the Holy Spirit, is willing, or "ready, eager and fully engaged". The disciples wanted to be ready to stand by their Lord, and Peter, when he proclaimed that he was ready to die with Jesus, may have been very sincere. That this is the heart attitude of many

followers of Jesus is echoed in Romans 7, which finds that what we want to do we do not do, and what we do not want to do, we do.

the flesh is weak

The flesh is, however, weak. Aside from the physical, medical part of us, the flesh refers to our humanity at its weakest, most likely to sin and most likely to fail. Here's an example from Isaiah: (Isaiah 31:3) "Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord stretches out His hand, both he who helps will fall, and he who is helped will fall down; they all will perish together." When the moment of testing comes, our flesh proves to be very weak. We humans are amazingly adept at failing our best intentions, as the disciples would soon demonstrate. Jesus gives them this corrective, which I think is good policy beyond the application of that crucial moment.

### Application

watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation

The application is to watch and pray. When Jesus commanded this to His disciples, He told them to enter into the watching and praying business. It is interesting that when He found out that His disciples had dozed off, He woke them up and then went out to pray again. He needed them to be praying as well. There is something about people who pray together about something, even if they cannot be in the same place at the same time. People in ancient times knew well the practice of watching, keeping an eye on one's community or people through the night. Praying for each other continually was the last lesson Jesus taught His disciples before His arrest.

A pastor by the name of William Jones wrote this: "Satan is watching to ensnare us, the world is watching to exult over us, and God is watching to protect us. Jesus, our best friend, says to us, "Be watchful." Watch against the spirit of the world, against the easily besetting sins, against seasons of temptation, and against Satan, the sworn enemy of thy soul. Watch for opportunities to do good, for answers to prayer, for the appearance of God as a God of providence."\*

### Conclusion

There is a reason that prayer chains are valued by people in and outside of the church. There is an urgency within us to keep our eyes open and to keep watch over each other, and over ourselves, that comes from God. The spirit is willing, Jesus said, but the flesh is weak. It was true for those apostles so many years ago, and it is true for us today.

\*Jones, William New Testament Illustrations  
Hartford: The J. B. Burr Publishing Co. 1877.

