

When Pastor John showed me the scripture, I wasn't sure what to think. It is not as long as some of our scripture readings lately but it seemed like a lot to unpack. For me, it is helpful to put things in context. The scripture today comes from a letter written by Paul to the Christians in Rome. He was planning his first trip to Rome and this letter was his way of introducing himself and laying out his understanding of the Gospel message. None of us are without sin, it is our nature. Paul points out how that nature is no friend to God. It is "hostile to God", "does not submit to God's law" and "cannot please God". A sinful mind is death. None of that sounds very good. I really don't want to spend a lot of time dissecting our sinful nature. We all fall short of living a life of sacrifice to the level that Jesus emulated. But we can work on moving in that direction. So how do we do that? Paul points out "the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace". Now we're getting somewhere. Mind control. I have seen those movies. People get hooked up to electrodes that affect brain waves and control how the mind thinks or a person with a super power is able to project their thoughts onto others. I saw a news program the other night where they are exploring how Artificial Intelligence can read our minds or affect our thoughts. That of course is not what Paul is talking about. I think when he talks about mind control he means having power over it. How can we get power over our minds so our thinking reflects the Spirit of God? How can we set our minds in such a way to reflect the power and love of God. When people talk about things coming naturally to them, they are usually saying it's easy for them. If sin is our nature, it probably doesn't take much for our minds to go there. Conversely, developing a Spirit of God mindset will take some effort. It may be a mistake to just assume our minds, our thoughts will reflect God's will just because we believe in God. Paul talks about the Spirit "living in us". I think a good first step in making that happen is to actually ask God to live in us. Be intentional about that. Prayer would seem a good approach to God for this request. Clear your thoughts as best you can, then ask with an open heart to be filled with God's light and love. Okay, there you are. Mission accomplished. That, of course, is not necessarily so. This request is not a one and done type of thing. Our nature can interfere with this all the time. The good news is prayer, this invitation, can happen regularly. Any time, any place. Whenever you think your connection to God needs to be reactivated, the mindset reinvigorated, prayer can do that. There have been times when I felt out of touch with God, with my spirit. Making an effort to reach out in prayer has always been the answer. I discovered God had not gone anywhere. I was the one who left. He was just waiting for me to ask him back into my life.

So the act or practice of prayer helps bring our mind back to God. A mindset needs to be practiced in order to actually get set. Practice strengthens our focus which dictates our mindset. And focus can be a tricky deal. Sometimes, dare I say it, my mind can have a mind of its own. I can have a number of thoughts running around in my head at any given moment. I can get up to do something only to have lost that thought by the time I get into the next room. What did I come in here for? Webster's Dictionary defines focus as "a center of activity, attraction or attention". Our focus has a lot to do with what we pay attention to, what we are attracted to, what drives our actions. And it can

change at a moment's notice. I can be driving along focused on getting where I need to go and someone cuts me off. Suddenly my focus is on this other car. My mood is now fear and anger. Some choice words come to mind and yes even might come out of my mouth. A spirit of love and forgiveness is no where to be found. This is where practice can be our Godsend in getting our focus back on what's important. If I have gotten into the practice, the habit of praying to be filled with God's Spirit when feeling disconnected, lost, confused, angry, fearful, sad; then chances are I can stop my tirade with a quick prayer. It is a quick prayer because remember, I am in traffic.

I wonder how much Paul was aware of the behavior, the mindset of the Christians in Rome. He seems sure the people he is writing to are controlled by the Spirit Maybe just because they are Christians. As Christians, we have a responsibility to reflect the teachings of Jesus in our actions. Focus guides our actions but focus is hard to maintain. We see examples all the time of people who identify as Christians not behaving very Christian-like. I suspect they have lost their focus for the moment. You have heard the saying "practice what you preach". We have already talked about how important practicing prayer can strengthen our focus on the Spirit. Practicing actions that reflect our Christian mindset will also guide our focus on a regular basis. Attending church, in person or online, can reinforce where our focus goes. Being of service to others like volunteering to make lunches for the Poverello Center, or being an usher at community events, or delivering Meals on Wheels. Being of service and having an attitude of service to others can strengthen your Christian focus. Indeed, service work in the community can be a very important activity. You might encounter all types of situations that will lend themselves to practice a Christian mindset. One of the attributes Jesus practiced on a regular basis was kindness. Someone is rude to you. You are kind back to them. Someone needs a little extra help with something, you gladly pitch in. You are patient and kind to the person who is having a difficult time. You let someone in ahead of you in traffic. Not only is that a kind gesture but your kindness has helped avoid potentially losing your focus.

Finally, Paul references both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. As Christians, we of course embrace Christ as the Son of God and take him into ourselves. I would suggest being intentional about that as well and prayerfully ask for Christ to be in you. Concurrently, God, the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you. A mindset consisting of prayer, practice and kindness strengthens a focus anchored in both God and Jesus. You are alive spiritually. A Spirit of God and Spirit of Christ mindset cheats death from a sinful mind because of the sacrifice Jesus made for us all. Which is another whole sermon. The good news is God is good and forgiving. He relishes in our activity to be close to Him. We need to do our best to practice and strengthen our focus on a Christian mindset. What are you focused on these days?