

I once asked my friend, “What if you could have \$100,000, but your worst enemy would also get \$90,000?” My friend, having heard this one before, immediately responded, “Why wouldn’t I want \$190,000?!” And really, how many of us have failed to accomplish something, or failed to accomplish it on the schedule we first set out? And how many of us can blame anyone but ourselves? I know my dinner table is half-covered with papers, my Web browser has 20 open tabs, I’m overdue for changing my HVAC filter, and I still end up finishing sermons late on Saturday nights more often than I would like. The only one stopping me, is me.

The song, “My Own Worst Enemy,” was prominent in the soundtrack of my adolescence, but the insight into the tendency of individuals and societies to sabotage our goals and defeat our own interests has been part of literature and wisdom from ancient times. We should bear this in mind when we read the many appeals in Scripture, like today’s from Jeremiah, where the writer begs God to intervene against his enemies.

We should bear this in mind, not because we should insist on reading every demand for rescue or justice as a stylized and metaphorical demand for self-improvement — in most cases, the author is sincere, if not desperate, for relief from an external threat. But rather, we should remember that Scripture expresses a tension between a straightforward understanding of ethical behavior, as expressed in today’s passage from Romans, and a more existential understanding that “no one is good but God alone,” like we see in the Gospel today, where Peter’s good intentions earn a stern rebuke and a seemingly paradoxical set of sayings from Jesus.

St. Matthew tends to portray the disciples more kindly than the other Evangelists, so Jesus’s rebuke comes off as shocking not just for its content, but because of the expectations the reader has built up by this point. Remember that just before this, Peter made his great profession of faith. But the exchange makes a bit more sense in Greek. For some reason, when Jesus explains that he must suffer and die before his resurrection, our translation has St. Peter responding, “God forbid it!” When the Greek could be translated literally as, “Mercy!”

And Peter has every reason to suggest mercy as an alternative course of action. The best reason, of course, might be his own experience with Jesus up to this point, where Jesus had been teaching and healing in the relative tranquility, security, and familiarity of Galilee. Mercy certainly seemed desirable, or at least plausible, so I don’t think I can fault Peter for wanting Jesus to continue doing what had seemed to be working so well.

But of course, God does not need our help in deciding what to do or how or when to do it. And Jesus, being fully human as well as fully divine, would have felt the temptation to avoid suffering and death as strongly as anyone else would. That’s why he associates St. Peter with Satan, humanity’s true worst enemy, who had previously tempted Jesus with an easier path, a path that would have Jesus avoid suffering and

dying for the redemption of the world. Jesus would not allow himself to be distracted from the way of the cross, and neither should we.

The sayings which follow are so challenging that Jesus must have said them. Sometimes we try to explain away hard sayings, but there would have been no reason for a well-meaning Evangelist to invent them. Some have pointed to the last one, “there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom,” in order to cast doubt on Jesus’s divinity or the story’s historicity.

It’s true that the Second Coming has still not happened, and all of the eyewitnesses to Jesus are long dead. But most, if not all, of the eyewitnesses had died when St. Matthew was writing, roughly 50 years after Jesus’s public ministry. If Matthew thought Jesus had gotten this wrong, he could have tactfully left it out. But it’s only wrong if we assume Jesus was talking about his final reappearing at the end of days. We shouldn’t make that assumption because in this saying, Jesus is talking about what will be witnessed by “some standing here,” and I’m pretty sure the Second Coming will be seen by all. Instead, the very next thing that happens in St. Matthew’s Gospel is the glorious vision of Jesus in his divinity that we call the Transfiguration, which was witnessed by, you guessed it, some of the disciples Jesus was addressing with this saying.

Being open to new possibilities, new ways of thinking and living, is essential to discipleship. While we can’t realistically expect to eliminate all of our self-defeating tendencies, we can at least examine our assumptions and get rid of those which are proven false. Scripture consistently reminds us that our understanding of God’s goodness, grace, and mercy are too narrow — indeed, a god who could fit within our limited understanding would hardly be a god at all. But as it is, our God is transcendent, and that is why God is our hope.

Remembering this is how we can deal with the seeming contradiction between unattainable expectations of self-improvement and resignation to a permanent state of inadequacy. While we should strive to be better people, and should expect that our efforts at becoming more virtuous will not all be in vain, paradoxically, part of being a good person is recognizing that we’re all sinners, and only God is perfect. Therefore, we find our best selves not within ourselves, but in God, by following Jesus so closely that we lose ourselves in him, and delight in exemplifying goodness, grace, and mercy to the best of our ability.

Apart from God, our best intentions, like Peter’s, will never get us to the eternal life and joy that God intends for us. But all Jesus asked of Peter was to get behind him, that is, to return to his proper role as a follower. When we follow Jesus, allow him to set our itinerary, our agenda, it no longer matters that we are our own worst enemies, because the conflict within ourselves is no longer distracting us or pulling us in the wrong direction. And we don’t have to wait for the Second Coming to see Jesus in his kingdom; all of us can see him glorified when we follow him, when we worship him and

serve people in need.

Worship and service and self-improvement glorify God and are good for us, but they don't earn us God's favor. God already and always loves us more than we can understand. So it doesn't matter what we've done or left undone because Jesus is bringing us to a better place, a better life, than we ever would have found on our own, for his way, the way of the cross, is none other than the way of life and peace.