

# WHAT I HATE



A little over half a century after the birth of Christ, and a little less than halfway through his densest, most technical epistle, Paul made an observation familiar to anyone who's lived as a human: "For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to *do*, but I am doing the very thing I hate." Romans 7:15 (NAS)

Even if it hasn't been in entirely the same context as Paul experienced this feeling, I'm confident that we've all replayed moments in our lives, saying to ourselves, "What I am doing, I do not understand...I am doing the very thing I hate."

This is confusing because if I'm the person doing a thing, it seems like I want to do it. And often looking back, I can see that I *did* want to do what I did, even as I also didn't. How to make sense of this contradiction? Moral philosopher

Harry Frankfurt suggests that it's a conflict between two different kinds of desire. We have desires about what we want to do, what we want to see, read, hear, eat, and so on; these are first-order desires. We also have desires about our desires, and Frankfurt calls them second-order desires. In other words, second-order desires are what we want to want.

For instance, say I want to eat something. I act on that desire by opening the fridge. Inside I find a quinoa and tofu salad, and two pieces of pizza. I've lost a little weight and would like to lose some more, so as I assess my options, I realize that I have a stronger desire for pizza, but the quinoa salad lines up with my desire to eat healthier, less-fattening foods. I don't want to want the pizza.

Unfortunately, much of the time, I don't act on my desire to desire quinoa salad. I act on my desire for pizza. So I scarf the pizza, and end up staring in dejection at my bathroom scale, thinking that this irresponsible consumption is the very thing I hate.

This same dynamic plays out in other parts of life, among them my relationship with God. I want to be more filled with the Spirit, to pray with passion and power and confidence, and to want to want to fast and pray and take more time with scripture.

But I normally don't want those things, no matter how badly I want to want them. And often, instead of acting on

my second-order desires, and doing the things I want to want to do, I just do the things I want to do, and waste my time and energy, and wind up frustrated.

So, how to change? How do we act on our second-order desires instead of our first? It starts with giving up. That is, as we invite him to, the Holy Spirit works to change our hearts and minds, and make us more like him. He's faithful to answer, when we pray as the Psalmist does, "Create in me a clean heart, oh God," (Ps. 51:10). His strength is perfected in our weakness, and by confessing our weakness, we invite him to show us his power in our lives, and to move toward completion the good work he has started in us (Philippians 1:6).

At a basic level, this work of the Spirit most often takes the form of showing us how deeply we are loved by God, which inspires us to respond. In other (better) words, "we love him, because he first loved us," (I John 4:19). We respond to our knowledge of his love.

That response is the second way to stop doing what we hate: we follow where Jesus leads. We take the changes God makes in our hearts, and turn them into action. It's not about achieving change on our own—it's about obeying God as he prompts us.

Sometimes, that's hard. We enjoy when God empowers us to want the right things all in a holy instant. More often, though, he molds us slowly and we have to start with small steps and proceed with patience and persistence.

You might be tempted to think that that looks similar to changing under your own power. It is similar, but with two crucial differences. The first is that you're not depending on yourself for the patience, persistence and motivation. You're depending on God's infinite resources. Second: the results. Depending on yourself is a shortcut to running out of patience, persistence and motivation. When God changes us, he enables us to stay changed.

Can we achieve complete consistency in this life? Probably not. But as we allow God to change us, and follow his leading, we can grow in consistency and live in increasing freedom from our sinful first-order desires.

