

Cameron's Fourth of July celebration shows off what is truly great about our country and this town. The parade, the contests, the food, the fireworks, and the music gather people of all ages. Families can enjoy the weekend together. The United States of America values freedom and democracy at home and abroad. We advocate peace and justice, health and development. We celebrate those values on the anniversary of our independence, the birth of our nation, the day we became free.

Yet, we sometimes take advantage of our freedoms. We sometimes take from society more than we give. We claim privileges; we make dangerous choices; we commit crimes; we sin. Freedom and prosperity bring temptation. Our spirit is willing, but our flesh is weak.

Saint Paul says Christians can do better than that. He tells the Romans in today's second reading, "You are not in the flesh; on the contrary, you are in the spirit." Temptation does not rule them; Christ lives in them. We all know this is easier said than done. Paul admits there is a battle between the flesh and the spirit, between temptation and grace, but he insists the two forces are not equals. It's not a game of chess where the two sides come to the table with the same strength. Sin has no chance against grace; it has no queen, no bishops, no rooks, no knights. There may be a battle for a while, but grace will win.

We all have difficult temptations – days when we feel inadequate, when evil thoughts get the better of us, and when our confidence is gone. But God gives confidence to those who believe. Paul says, "If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also." So even when we feel lost, helpless, and dead inside, the Spirit who raised Christ can still lift us.

Freedom is our grace as well as our danger-zone. Sadly, we sometimes choose to live according to the flesh, and when we do, we turn from God's Spirit. We compromise our values, and we become less than we could be. "But," Paul says, "If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live."

Independence Day can help us reconnect with our values – God, family and country; tradition and vision; work and play. A good celebration of the Fourth helps us claim who we are; it will encourage us to act more faithfully, to behave more responsibly, and to love more generously. It will help us celebrate our freedoms and use them for the common good. Being good citizens and being good Christians should go hand in hand. Both our country and our faith can help us find the inner strength to overcome our temptations. That strength is there for the taking, if we use our freedom to say yes to the Spirit of God.