

The Battle Within

Scripture: Romans 7:13-25

Introduction

Have you ever wanted to do something and just could not do it? For instance, you go to a gym and you want to impress your wife with your strength and try to lift a set of weights only to realize that you are not superman. Maybe you want to save some money and fix a problem in your house, like a plumbing leak, and realize that you are just making a bad situation worse. I suspect there are many things in each of our lives that we wish we could do (or do better), but do not have the ability to do. Some want to sing and cannot do it well. Some want to play music and do not have the talent for it. Some really want to be able to tell jokes and make people laugh and consistently fall short of that desire. In this passage, Paul presented a situation in his life in which he wanted to do what was right but could not do it. We, too, sometimes fail not because we do not want to do what is right, but because we are incapable of doing it. Yet, some of us think we are Superman (or Super-Christian) and can do these things on our own.

So far in this letter, Paul has been defending the idea of *justification by faith*, that we are declared righteous with God, not by what we do, but rather by faith in Jesus Christ. Paul spent much time telling us that we cannot make ourselves right with God by following the righteous demands of the Law. In doing this, he had gotten himself in trouble. Paul mentioned that the Law of God *arouses* sin within us — it brings to life the desire to sin. It is like the sign that tells you to “Stay Off the Grass”. All you want to do, then, is walk on the grass. Paul also said that using the Law as the basis of your righteousness leads to death. This sounds like Paul was saying the Law of God is bad. If the Law is sin, then God is a sinner. If the Law leads to death, then God is a killer. If that is true, then there is no Gospel from God. We may as well enjoy the life we have now for there is no hope of a future. To counter this claim, Paul affirmed that the Law was good and at the end of chapter seven, he described a situation we all face with the Law — a war within us.

Sin is Alive and Well

There is a principle throughout Scripture that we all need to understand: *all of us are sinners and fall short of what God wants*. That includes every person on the planet. Another principle we need to understand is this: *even if you have accepted Christ, you are still a sinner and fall short of what God wants*. There is a sinful nature that dwells within each believer. Paul mentioned this in verses seventeen and eighteen:

Romans 7:17-18 ¹⁷ *So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.*
¹⁸ *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.*

If you have trusted in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, did you begin to live exactly as God wanted you to live? Put another way, did you stop sinning when you became a Christian? If you did, let's talk about it, because I need to find out what you are doing.

There is not a single person who has trusted in Jesus Christ, who was saved and forgiven, who also suddenly stopped sinning. You did not *become* righteous when you accepted Christ. If you have truly accepted Jesus Christ, God has *declared* you righteous based on what Jesus has done for you, but you still have that sin nature within you. In this passage, Paul wrote about “sin dwelling within me.” This means that sin is alive within you. Sin continues to dwell within you even though the penalty of death and the guilt associated with sin has been removed by the cross of Jesus Christ.

I am amazed that some people believe they become sinless, meaning they do everything God desires them to do, when they become a Christian. There are some who say they can be sinless, or righteous or good, by doing everything God has told them to do. Another principle in Scripture that we need to understand is this: If sin is alive and well within you (and it is!), then you are incapable of not sinning. Even the good you do or want to do is tainted by wrong desire. Our most exalted moments in life, those things that draw the greatest praise from others, do not fulfill God’s righteous demands. The prophet Isaiah wrote, “We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags.” (Isaiah 64:6) All of us, Christian and un-Christian alike, have and do still fall very short of God’s glory. What filthy rags are you hiding? Is it fame? Is it recognition of your talents, skills or accomplishments? Is it money? Is it possessions? Is it desiring the favor of others over the favor of God?

As in many other places in Paul’s letters, this passage reflects an emphasis on both the “already” aspect of salvation (that believers have been saved) and the “not yet” aspect (that believers will be saved ultimately and for all eternity at the return of Christ). Even after a person places faith in Jesus Christ, there is no part of a person that is sinless, there is no place without sin’s presence, and there is no ability within us to keep the whole Law. There is a concept in the reformed tradition of the Church called *total depravity*. What that means is that every part of your being is corrupted by sin. It does not mean that you never do anything good, for even atheists can and do good things. What it means is there is no part of your life that sin has not corrupted. You are totally depraved. The only good in a believer is the presence of the Holy Spirit.

There is a War Within Us

Last week, I mentioned that your sinful nature is at its core a battle of desire. It is the desire for what you should not have (to covet) that causes problems. Even Christians have competing desires. There is a war on sin that occurs within each believer.

Romans 7:23 *I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.*

As long as you recognize the existence and power of sin in your life and you constantly struggle against it, you are not enslaved to it. As long as there is a battle between sin and what God demands of you, you are living in the Spirit. Paul did not say that you should give up. He did not say that you should let sin have its way because you are powerless to stop it. Acknowledge that it is God’s power and work that sanctifies you,

but fight the good fight between those sinful desires and the Godly desires. When God gives you the Holy Spirit after you have trusted in Christ, He begins to work in your life to remove all that junk and fleshly desires in your life. God wants you to be like Jesus and this will bring conflict and it will sometimes bring pain. If you are not battling sin in your life, it may be in indication that you are not where you need to be with God.

Paul mentioned that it was no longer him who sinned, but the sin that dwelled within him. Did Paul mean that he was not responsible for his sin anymore? Was Paul blaming the bad things he did and the improper desires he had on his sinful nature and taking no credit for it? It might sound like that. It might sound like Paul was making an excuse for his bad deeds. What I think Paul meant here was that he knew he had this sin nature and it had not gone away as result of his faith in Jesus Christ. Paul acknowledged that when he decided to follow Jesus Christ, he also accepted a *declaration of war* against the sin in his life. He wanted to do what was right, but he admitted that he did not have the ability to do it. (Romans 7:18) There was a war going on within him — on the one hand he desired to do what was right and what glorified God, but on the other hand, he still lived with the desires and temptations of the flesh.

It might sound like Paul should give up. It might sound like the Gospel has somehow failed. It has not. When we accept Christ and begin to follow Him, we enter a battlefield — a spiritual war within us. While we are forgiven and saved the moment we place our faith in Jesus Christ, there is also a call for each of us to fight the indwelling sin within us. We are saved from the guilt and punishment of sin, but we must still fight those fleshly desires to follow the old man. Therefore, wage war with it! Do not accept defeat saying sin has won. Do not call it a vice or mistake or some other term to make you feel better about your sin. Tell sin and Satan that it has no place in the life of a child of God. Tell sin that you are not bound to it anymore but are now bound to Jesus Christ. Do not give up or retreat, but fight.

The Battle is Won Through Jesus Christ

Of course this raises the question: How do we win the battle of competing desires in our lives? In this passage, Paul acknowledged the struggle between wanting to do what is right and not being able to do it. He said there was a war going on within him that prevented him from doing what he should do. So bad was his situation, Paul wrote that he was miserable. He was in a wretched state.

Romans 7:24-25 ²⁴ *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?* ²⁵ *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Do not deceive yourself by believing you can do right on your own. If Paul accepted his weakness to overcome the sin living within him, do you think you are not also weak? But on the other hand, realize that it is a battle. Do not give up. When you realize the sin within you, do not just say, “Well, I cannot do anything about it, so I’ll just leave it alone and wait for Jesus to come.” Paul wanted to do what was right and fought the sin within him. If we recognize the sin that dwells and abounds within us we are better able to

understand the grace of God that works in our lives to overcome it. If we live as if there is no problem within us, even after we have accepted Christ, our spiritual growth will be stunted. The battle will be won through Jesus Christ, though. One day, we will cast off these corrupted bodies that are drawn to sin and put on new glorified bodies.

In the section that immediately followed (Romans 8:1–11), Paul showed that the means by which Christians are delivered daily from the indwelling power of sin is by walking “not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4). We are to not “set [our] minds on the things of the flesh, but ... on the things of the Spirit” (Romans 8:5). We are also to be led by the indwelling presence of “the Spirit of God [who] dwells in you” (Romans 8:9, 11). While we must fight the indwelling sin within us, we must also realize that the power to overcome it is not ours. We cannot win this battle on our own. We must rely on the indwelling Spirit of God. We must rely on the power of the Holy Spirit working in our lives. If you find yourself fighting sin and believe you are losing the battle, maybe you are trusting in your own power. Trust in Christ. Rely on Him.

Conclusion

The theologian Karl Barth once wrote that within the Christian faith that demands that we not covet, we should nevertheless “covet earnestly the best gifts.” Let us with all the energy we possess earnestly desire what is right — namely to know and love God better. To be honest, that is not coveting, for coveting is improper desire, but the point is for us to strive by the Spirit of God to desire Jesus Christ more each day. May He be your most treasured possession, not your money, not your job, not your reputation, not even your family. May loving and knowing God be your greatest desire. The decision some of you need to make today, before you leave this building, is to wage war with the sin in your life. If you are not struggling with sin, if you are not waging war with it today, you are choosing that sin over your relationship with Jesus Christ. Is that what you want to do? You need to be on your knees praying to God.

Some of you may understand your sinfulness. You have accepted Christ and are aware of your present, indwelling sin. You may agree with Paul that you desire to do what is right, but you find yourself constantly failing to do it. Maybe you have thought about giving up. Maybe you have come to believe that what you do does not matter as long as you *have believed* in Jesus Christ. I encourage you to not give up on righteousness. God works in us through the Holy Spirit to conform us into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This is a lifetime of work. Pray for patience. Pray for perseverance. Pray for the desires of God to replace those remaining desires of the flesh. Ask yourself, “What do I desire more than Jesus?” Do not pray to God that He would help you do better things, but rather pray that He would give you new desires, new affections, and a greater love for Him. Only from God given desires will we truly produce the Fruit of the Spirit that pleases God. Pray for Godly desires to replace those sinful ones.

This is Good News. Thanks be to God. Amen!