

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 22, 2016**

STRUGGLES OF A SAINT

Romans 7:7-25

Can you identify with the sense of inner conflict and frustration that Paul describes so bluntly in these verses? Do you feel this kind of frustration and discouragement that approaches despair in your spirit because of the gigantic gap between your desire to do what is good and right and pleasing in God's sight, and your actual performance? Do you experience this ongoing struggle in your life?

If you answer "yes" to any of the above, there are two things I want you to know right from the get-go today. The first is that you're not alone. You have plenty of company. Most, if not all of us who name Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord and who desire to live a holy life that is pleasing to God, can identify with the struggle Paul describes in these verses. If the picture Paul paints reminds you of the person you see when you look in the mirror, you're not the only one. You're in good company.

The second thing I want you to know is that you don't have to remain in this condition of "wretchedness," as Paul puts it in verse 24. The word Paul uses there is the Greek word *telaiporos*, which occurs only a few times in the New Testament – twice in Romans (3:16 and here in 7:24), twice in the Epistle of James (4:9 and 5:1), and once in the Book of Revelation (3:17), in the letter from the Lord Jesus to the "lukewarm" church in Laodicea. Its basic meaning is *wretched, miserable, or pitiful*. Paul is saying, in effect: "Because of this constant battle going on within me, a battle I just can't seem to win, I feel like such a loser! I feel miserable in my spirit because I know God must be terribly disappointed in me, and I'm disappointed in myself."

Do you feel this way at times? Feel like you're stuck in the mud and muck with no way out? I have good news for you: There is a way out. You are not doomed or condemned to stay there. Listen again to Paul: "What a wretched, miserable man I am! Is there any way out? Am I stuck here forever? Is there anyone who can rescue me from this pit of defeat and despair?" That is the cry of the struggling saint – the struggling Christian – in verse 24.

But notice what Paul does not say. He does not say: "*What can rescue me?*" Or: "*What will deliver me?*" Paul knows that our hope of victory in the ongoing battle with sin is not a *what* (such as the law or our obedience to it) but a *Who* – or *Whom* – whichever is grammatically correct.

Paul does not leave us to wallow in our misery. Nor does God. The answer to the cry of the Christian who continues to struggle with sin is found in verse 25: "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Yes, thanks be to God for the gift of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ:

- Who can and does rescue us from the futility of trying to win the battle against sin in our own strength;
- Who can and does give us victory over sin as we trust in Him and surrender our lives daily to His sovereignty and love;
- Who can and does set us free from the impossible task of being good enough to earn His love and favor by our obedience to His law with all its rules, regulations, and requirements.

Jesus did not give His life for you in order to relegate you to a life of futility, frustration, and failure. He would never do that. He did not endure the cross and everything that came with it so that you could have a miserable, wretched life. He did not shed His blood for you so that you would have to endure this endless tug-of-war in your heart, a tug-of-war that too often ends with you on the losing end. He did not come to give you a life of quiet (or not-so-quiet) desperation because of your moral and spiritual impotence. No! There is victory in Jesus. There is victory through Jesus. For Jesus has won the victory over the power of sin and guilt and death through His vicarious suffering (which means that Jesus took our place; the word *vicarious* means that He was our substitute). Through His suffering, atoning death, and bodily resurrection from the dead, Jesus has won the victory for you and me.

Which is not to say that we do not or will not have spiritual struggles in this life. We do. And we will.

But. Does Jesus want you to be a spiritual failure? Is that what He wants for you and me? Of course not. Having won the victory for us, He wants us – He wants *you* – to experience the victory. So, if you identify with the wretchedness of verse 24, the misery caused by the record of failure Paul describes in his own testimony, I want to encourage you to take heart. There is hope for spiritual strugglers like you and me. You don't have to stay where you are.

Let me add this before we go any further: If you can't relate to the kind of demoralizing experience Paul recounts in these verses, if you can't identify with the struggle in the soul that produces such spiritual distress, then you probably don't need to hear this message. On the other hand, you may need it more than you think. Either way, it will be good for you to keep listening, so you will be better able to understand, encourage, walk alongside, and otherwise bless your sisters and brothers in Christ for whom this struggle is so real.

Taking the step of faith in Christ to become a Christian is a turning point in a person's life. It is the defining moment of all defining moments, no matter when or how it happens. Sometimes it is a dramatic turning point, depending on the kind of life you lived prior to becoming a follower of Christ. Sometimes not. Sometimes, when a person is born again through the work of the Holy Spirit, God gives instantaneous deliverance and freedom from addictions, sinful habits, secret and not-so-secret sins that characterized and plagued that person's life. For example, when he surrendered his life to Christ, Louis Zamperini, the hero of Laura Hillenbrand's magnificent biography, *Unbroken*, was delivered from his addiction to alcohol and from the unrelenting anger he had harbored for years. Sometimes, this is how God works. But not always. In the life of every saint (meaning, every Christian), the residue of sin remains.

As Paul reminds us again and again, we are justified (declared “not guilty”) in God’s sight by grace – *God’s* grace – received through faith, which is itself a gift of God’s grace. Our justification or salvation is a present reality. But our sanctification – the process by which we grow in grace and holiness, and become more like Jesus in the way we think and feel, listen and speak, care and give and serve and live – is ongoing. It does not happen instantaneously. For every one of us here, this process of sanctification is unfinished. We are not there yet. But we know and believe, as Paul says in Philippians 1:6, that “He who began a good work in (us) will carry it on to completion” by His power at work in us. And we know, because of the residue of sin and its pull in our lives, that our sanctification will not be complete until the day God calls us home to heaven or Jesus returns in all His royal power and glory, whichever comes first.

There are a few other things I want to bring to your attention in this passage.

THE GOLF ANALOGY

First, as a side note, some deep thinkers (including Ray Stedman) have suggested, on the basis of verse 15, that Paul must have played golf in his spare time, because, they say, the second part of verse 15 is the testimony of a golfer. Listen to what Paul says and see if you don’t agree: “What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” Doesn’t that sound like a golfer? Those of you who are golfers, you can relate to that, can’t you? You know what you want to do. You know how you want to hit the ball. You know where you want the ball to go. But way too often, it doesn’t work out quite the way you want, does it? It happens even to the best of the best. Think of Jordan Spieth leading the Masters on the 12th hole of the final round last month, on his way to a second consecutive Masters championship, until he plunked two balls into the water, causing him to finish tied for second. What he wanted to do he did not do, and what he did not want to do – what he hated – he did. It is either golf imitating life, or life imitating golf.

Paul, of course, is concerned with something way more important than golf here. He is talking about this ongoing struggle with sin that so many of us experience, even after we have been regenerated and redeemed and reconciled to God through the saving work of Christ.

THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

We saw last week in Paul’s marriage analogy in verses 1-6 that we who are now in Christ have died to the law, so it no longer has authority over us. We have died to the law – that is, to the obligation to keep the law down to the last detail – which, in Paul’s way of thinking means that we have been set free from our captivity to sin and the old sinful nature that held us in chains we were powerless to break. Jesus, in His suffering and death and resurrection from the dead, has set us free from the law with all its demands so that we can live with Him and for Him “in the new way of the Spirit” (7:6).

In verses 7-13, Paul deals with the purpose of the law. He makes it clear that the fact that we have died to the demands of the law does not mean the law of God has no positive purpose or value in our lives. Nor does Paul equate the law with sin itself, as if to say the law by its very

nature is sinful. Not so. What we learn is that the law serves an essential purpose. More than one, actually. The law is not sin. But it shows us what sin is. It reveals sin. It exposes sin. It exposes *our* sin. Not only does it define and expose sin, it prescribes righteousness. It shows us how God wants us to live. In these things, the law serves a good and useful purpose. Yet, while the law is good, it is inadequate, it is impotent to save sinners. The law is not able to make us right with God, because none of us – aside from Jesus – is able to keep the law completely. Paul has made that abundantly clear already in Romans.

So, the law reveals our need for salvation. But it is powerless to save us. Think of it like an MRI or a CT scan that reveals a cancerous tumor. It is a tool that enables medical professionals to diagnose a person's condition, so it can be properly treated. The law reveals the disease of sin within each of us, but, like the MRI or some other diagnostic tool, it does not have the ability to bring healing that is needed. Make sense?

Paul uses the 10th commandment – the commandment against coveting – as an example to illustrate his point. He says he wouldn't have known what coveting is apart from God's definition of it in the law. It was the law, and the 10th commandment in particular, that awakened Paul to his sinfulness, so that he came under conviction of sin and his need of forgiveness (7:8). For you and me, it could be coveting or it could be something different, like pride or gossip or lying or lust or idolatry (which is allowing anyone or anything other than God to have first place in your life).

This is how the law works. It brings our sins and our sinfulness out into the light. It actually entices us to sin. It serves to awaken sinful desires in us by telling us what we are not to do. Think about it and you will see what I mean.

In addition to exposing our sin and awakening sinful desires in us, the law also condemns sin in us. The law condemns us by condemning the sin in us. It does this, Paul says in verse 12, because “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.” The law is not sinful. Nor is it responsible for sin. *We* are responsible for sin. Each one of us. In the words of F. F. Bruce, sin is the villain, not the law. Sin in us. The law reveals our sinfulness, our inability to keep the law, and our need for the deliverance that only God in His grace, only the grace of God, can provide. This grace, as I hope you know, comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Like me. And you.

As John Stott points out, it is our fallen, sinful nature that uses the law to cause us to sin. So, he says, we are left with these three principles regarding the limits of the law:

1. The law is good, but it is weak (and so are we).
2. The law is holy, but it is unable to make us holy.
3. It is right to look to the law for moral guidance, but wrong to look to it for saving power.

Got that?

THE STRUGGLE

We get to the struggle itself in verse 14. Theologians, biblical scholars, and preachers have theorized, speculated, discussed and debated for centuries about whether, in using the pronoun “I” in Romans 7, Paul is describing his own experience or personalizing the experience of other Christians he has known. I don’t think there is any way to know for sure. Nor is there unanimity as to whether Paul is talking about his (or someone else’s) present struggle as a follower of the Lord Jesus, or if he is describing a pre-conversion struggle of the soul.

Maybe we cannot know these things for sure, but of this I am sure: What Paul describes here has been and is today the experience of untold numbers of believers in the last two thousand years, and it is an experience with which untold numbers today, including many of us here this morning, can identify.

If you look at Romans 7 carefully, you can observe that in verses 7-13, Paul writes in the past tense. Starting in verse 14, though, the verb tense changes from past to present, suggesting that Paul understands this struggle to be a present reality, whether in his own life, the lives of other believers, or both. Nevertheless, while this ongoing struggle with temptation and sin is common among Christian believers, it is not normative. It is normal, perhaps, but not normative. As Stott says, it is wrong to regard this as a pattern of normal (normative) Christian experience. It is not the life that God intends for you and me. Yet it is all too common.

The answer to this struggle with sin is not to just try harder. The answer is not more will power. The answer is not greater self-denial. The answer is grace. The answer is the grace of the gospel. The answer is not my power or your power but God’s power – the power He gives us in the person and work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

I want to talk more about this with you. I don’t want to sugar-coat this struggle and lead you to think that overcoming sin and temptation in your life is a piece of cake. But I do want you to know today that:

1. God is with you in the person of the Holy Spirit;
2. God is for you (Romans 8:31); and
3. God is at work in you according to His good purpose (Philippians 2:13).

So do not lose heart. Do not be discouraged. Do not give up. Put your hope in God. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Confess your sins and your need of His grace. Do it early and often. And give thanks for the victory that is yours and the victory that is still to come through Jesus Christ our Lord. Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.