

Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 5, 2016

## HOPE IN THE STRUGGLE

Romans 7:14-25

### PREVIOUSLY

Let me begin today by reminding you of a few things I talked about two Sundays ago. As Paul describes this tug-of-war in the heart between the desire to please God and the sometimes latent, sometimes blatant lure of sin in Romans 7, he speaks of the miserable, wretched condition this war can produce in our hearts (7:24). To one degree or another, all of us, I think, can identify with this misery. But this seemingly endless battle within is *not* the end of the story. The good news is *not* that Jesus died for you so that you could live a life of perpetual futility, frustration, and failure. Jesus did *not* endure the cross with all its suffering and shame so that you could live a miserable, wretched life. That is *not* the good news of the gospel. Jesus does *not* want you or me to be a spiritual failure or to have a miserable life because of the residue of sin in our souls. That is *not* the way it is supposed to be.

The struggle is real, yes. It would be silly to deny that we continue to struggle with sin when it is so obvious that we do. But the good news is that there *is* victory in Jesus. There *is* victory through Jesus – victory over the power of sin and guilt. The battle within us may continue – it *will* continue to one degree or another – until we take our dying breath. But the outcome is assured. The ultimate victory is assured. Whatever the nagging sin(s) may be with which you continue to struggle, Jesus, as we will see announced so beautifully and triumphantly in Romans 8, has won the victory over sin for us. The battle rages on in this life, but the outcome – the victory – is guaranteed.

### THE LIMITS OF THE LAW

We noted what Paul says in verses 7-13 about the purpose of the law, leading to these three principles concerning the limits of the law (courtesy of John Stott):

1. The law is good, but it is weak (and so are we).
2. The law is holy, but it cannot make us holy.
3. It is right to look to the law for moral guidance, but wrong to look to it for saving power.

### THREE BIBLICAL TRUTHS: GOD IS ...

I also shared with you three biblical truths to hold onto as you encounter and struggle with the pull of temptation and sin in your life, even though you are a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ and are trusting in Him for your salvation. These truths are:

1. God is *with* you in the person of the Holy Spirit. The battle is not yours to fight alone. God Himself is with you. As the Lord has said: “Never will I leave you; never will I

forsake you” (Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5). The Holy Spirit is *God with us* – God with you and me – right here, right now. And He will not abandon us to fight the fight alone.

2. Not only is God *with* you, God is *for* you, as Paul declares in Romans 8:31.
3. God is at work *in* you to will and to act according to His good and gracious purpose (Philippians 2:13).

Don’t ever forget these truths. Hold onto them for dear life because they are true.

### **SPIRITUAL GUERRILLA WARFARE**

But why, you may ask, if these things are true – why, if Jesus has already won the victory for us over the power of sin and guilt in His saving work on the cross – why do we continue to struggle with sin?

I mentioned to you two or three weeks ago that our Haiti team small group is reading Jerry Bridges’ book, *Respectable Sins*. Bridges makes the point that while sin has been dethroned as the reigning power over our lives through the redeeming work of Christ and our faith in Him, it still continues to wage a kind of spiritual guerrilla warfare in our hearts. Paul describes it in Galatians 5:17: “The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want” (Bridges, 44).

Paul is not suggesting that these conflicting forces – the Holy Spirit and our sinful nature – are equal in power. That is not the case. The power of sin does not and cannot rival the power of the Holy Spirit. Why, then, does sin seem to have its way in us so often and so easily? It is *not* because the Holy Spirit is weak. It is because *we* are. It is because we try to handle the lure of temptation and sin in our own wisdom. We rely on our own instincts. We trust in our own resolve. We think we’ve got it under control. We think we can deal with it in our own strength, rather than by relying on the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. That is where we go wrong so often.

### **THE FISHING ANALOGY**

A few weeks ago we talked about Paul’s marriage analogy in verses 1-6 of Romans 7. Two weeks ago I shared with you Paul’s “golf analogy”, describing in verse 15 this predicament with which every golfer is intimately acquainted, namely: “What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” Today I want to share with you another analogy. Call it the fishing analogy.

John Ortberg is one of my favorite authors. In one of his books (*The Me I Want to Be*) he tells of the first time he and his wife went fly-fishing. They were told that “to catch a fish you have to think like a fish.” Their guides said that to a fish, life is about the maximum gratification at the minimum expenditure of energy. To a fish, life is “see a fly, want a fly, eat a fly.” A rainbow trout never really stops to reflect on where its life is headed. A girl carp doesn’t say to a boy carp (at least as far as we know): “*I don’t feel that you’re as committed*

*to our relationship as I am. I wonder, do you love me for me, or just for my body?"* A fish, it would seem is just a collection of appetites. A fish is a stomach, a mouth, and a pair of eyes.

While they were out on the water, Ortberg says he was struck by how dumb the fish are. *"Hey, swallow this. It's not the real thing; it's just a lure. You think it will feed you, but it won't. It will trap you. If you were to look closely, fish, you would see the hook. You would know once you are hooked that it is just a matter of time before the enemy reels you in."*

Ortberg writes: "You'd think fish would wise up and notice the hook or see the line. You'd think fish would look around at all their fish friends who go for a lure and fly off into space and never return. But they don't. It is ironic. We say fish swim together in a school, but they never learn. Aren't you glad we're (so much) smarter?" (Ortberg, 137-138)

The problem, of course, is that we aren't. Which is exactly the point. We are constantly in danger of getting hooked and reeled in by this sin or that one. Though we can't successfully resist temptation or conquer sin on our own, in the strength of our own will power, it doesn't mean there is nothing for us to do in this battle. In Colossians 3:5ff, Paul says that we are to "put to death whatever belongs to (our) sinful nature." He says essentially the same thing in Ephesians 4:22-24, where he writes to the believers in the city of Ephesus: "You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its sinful desires, to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness."

We have an essential, active, vital role to play in dealing with the sin that dwells in us. We don't just sit idly by, twiddling our thumbs, while we wait for God to complete our sanctification. This "putting to death" or "putting off" what belongs to our sinful nature is something we are to actively and persistently pursue. Without a doubt, our victory in the struggle with sin depends on the saving work of Christ *for* us, and the continuing work of the Holy Spirit *in* us. But we are still responsible before God.

### **DEPENDENT RESPONSIBILITY**

Jerry Bridges calls this the principle of dependent responsibility. As followers of Jesus, we are responsible before God to obey His Word and to put to death the sins in our lives. But we do not have the ability within ourselves to do it. We cannot carry out this responsibility in our own strength. To do it, we are totally dependent on the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. We are both responsible and dependent. It is not an either-or, but a both-and. Apart from the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, we cannot make one inch of spiritual progress (see Bridges, 45-49). *We* are not able, but *He is able, more than able*, to do immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work in us (Ephesians 3:20). He is able, more than able, to give us the victory over sin through Jesus Christ our Lord.

So, you see, our responsibility before God and our dependence on God go together.

From all of this, I hope you can see that while the struggle with sin is real and ongoing in the life of even the most sincere, devout Christian imaginable, there is hope in the struggle. Pitfalls abound in this world, but so do the blessings of God's grace – the grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. People like us.

Anglican theologian N. T. Wright paints this picture of how to avoid sin and “embrace the way of Jesus.” He suggests thinking of a creature you would really be afraid of – maybe an angry rhinoceros, a poisonous snake, or a mosquito carrying the zika virus. Suppose you unexpectedly found yourself facing it. What would you want to do? If you could, you would run away, wouldn't you? In some cases, there might be some screaming involved. As a follower of Jesus, Wright says, that is how you should feel about any and every sin or sinful pattern in your life. You should run for your life from it.

On the other hand, think how you would feel if you saw the person you loved most in the entire world, whom you hadn't seen for years, walking down the street. What would you do? You would run to him or her with arms open wide. That, says Wright, is how you should act when you think of Jesus and all that He has done for you.

How does this apply to your life? You have the Holy Spirit, who is with you and for you and at work in you. In the power He provides, say “no” to sin and run from every form of it in your life.

And run to Jesus. Trust in Him. Keep your eyes on Him. Find your hope in Him. He will give you the victory one battle at a time. And when you falter or fall, He will be there in His mercy and grace to pick you up and enable you to go forward from there.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. And thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.