

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 8, 2012**

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A STRUGGLER

Romans 7:14-25

When you read this passage of Scripture from Romans 7, or hear it being read, can you – do you – identify with the internal conflict and frustration Paul describes here? Do you feel, or have you ever felt, this same kind of frustration and a discouragement in your spirit that gets close to despair because of the gi-normous gap between your desire to do what is good and right, and your actual performance? Do you experience this ongoing struggle in your life?

If your answer to any of the above is “yes,” there are two things I want you to know right at the start. The first is that you’re not alone. You’ve got lots of company. My guess is that many of us, most of us, maybe even all of us who name Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord and who desire to live a holy, God-pleasing life, can identify with the struggle Paul depicts 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’ve got plenty of 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 *talaiporos*, which occurs only a few times in the New Testament – twice here in Romans (3:16 and 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: “Because of this relentless 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 disappointed in me, and I’m disappointed in myself.”

Do you feel this way at times? Or maybe all the time? Feel like you’re stuck in the muck with no way out? There *is* a way out. You’re 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 struggler in verse 24.

Notice that Paul does not say: “*What* can rescue me?” Or: “*What* will deliver me?” Paul knows that our hope of deliverance is not a *what* (such as the law or the fulfillment of it through our obedience) but a *Who* – or a *Whom* – whichever is grammatically correct.

Paul does not leave us to wallow in our misery. Nor does God. The answer to the struggler’s cry is given in verse 25, where Paul says: “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Yes, thanks be to God for the gift of His Son, our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ ...

- Who can and does rescue us from the futility of trying to win the battle in our own strength;

- Who can and does give us victory over sin, as we trust in Him and surrender our lives 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 us in order to relegate us to a life of futility, frustration, and failure. He did not endure the cross and everything that was a part of it so that we could have a wretched, miserable life. He did not shed His blood for us so that we would have to endure this endless tug-of-war in our hearts, a tug-of-war that usually ends with us on the losing end, or live lives of quiet (or not-so-quiet) desperation because of our moral and spiritual impotence. No way! There is victory in Jesus, 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 He was our substitute), His atoning death, and bodily resurrection from the dead.

Does Jesus want us to be spiritual failures? Is that what He wants for you and me? Of course not. Having won the victory for us, He wants us – you – to experience the victory. So, if you identify with the wretchedness or misery of verse 24, take heart. There is hope for spiritual strugglers like you and me. You don't have to stay where you are. If it is not clear to you yet, I hope it will be before we all leave here today.

Let me add this before we dig deeper into these verses: If you can't relate to the kind of demoralizing experience Paul describes in this passage, if you can't identify with this struggle in the soul that produces such spiritual distress, then you probably don't need to hear this message. On the other hand, maybe it will be good for you to listen anyway, so you can better understand, encourage, walk alongside, and otherwise bless the plethora of your brothers and sisters in Christ for whom this struggle is so real.

You see, becoming a Christian is a turning point in a person's life. Sometimes it is a dramatic turning point, depending on the kind of life you have lived prior to becoming a Christian, before you came to faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, and received the gift of salvation and forgiveness by grace and grace alone, through faith and faith alone, in Jesus Christ and Him alone. Sometimes, when a person is born again through the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, God gives instantaneous deliverance and freedom from addictions, sinful habits, secret and not-at-all secret sins that have characterized and plagued that person's life. Sometimes, but not always. In the life of every believer, the residue of sin remains.

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 and more like Jesus in the way we think and feel, listen and speak, care and give and serve and live – is ongoing. It doesn't happen instantaneously. For each of us here today, this process of sanctification is unfinished. We are not there yet. But we know and believe, as Paul writes 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 kingly power and glory, whichever comes first.

Having said that, there are some things I want to call to your attention in this passage.

A SIDE NOTE ON GOLF

First of all, just as a side note, some wise guys (e.g., 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: “What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” Those of you who play golf, let me ask you: Doesn’t this pretty well sum up how it goes, maybe not always, maybe not every round or every hole, but pretty often out on the course? 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 more often than not, for more golfers than not, it doesn’t work out quite the way you want, right?

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.

ROMANS 7:1-6: AN ILLUSTRATION FROM MARRIAGE

Second, to put what Paul is saying into proper context, we need to go back to the beginning of Romans 7. In verses 1-6, Paul uses an illustration from the covenant of marriage to show that the law has authority over us only as long as we are alive. God established marriage to be a lifelong covenant and union between a man and a woman. From the beginning, God intended marriage to be “until death do us part.” We know it doesn’t always work out that way. Too often it doesn’t work out that way. But the fact that many marriages fail doesn’t change the original plan and purpose of God. However, as Paul points out, if a woman’s husband dies or if a man’s wife dies, the surviving spouse is released from the law of marriage and is free to marry another (7:1-3).

Paul then applies this principle to the believer’s relationships to sin, the law, and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. For Paul, dying to sin and dying to the law – that is, dying to our obligation to keep the law down to the last detail – are the same thing. Through our faith in the atoning work of Christ on the cross for us, we have died to the demands of the law and been set free from the tyranny of our old, sinful nature, so that we might be united instead to Christ, to know and love Him in the fullness of who He is, to trust and follow and serve Him as long as we live and for all eternity. When we are “in Christ,” sin no longer rules in us.

ROMANS 7:7-13: THE POSITIVE PURPOSE OF THE LAW

Next, in verses 7-13, Paul turns to the question of the law’s purpose. That we have died to the demands and requirements of the law does not mean the law of God has no value or purpose in our lives. Nor does Paul equate the law with sin itself. What we discover is that the law serves an essential purpose – more than one, actually. The law, Paul says, is not sin. 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. This is how the law works. It serves a good and useful purpose. Yet, while the law is good, it is insufficient, it is inadequate, it is impotent to save sinners. The law is not able to make us right with God, because none of us – no one aside from Jesus – is able to keep the law completely. As Paul says so succinctly in Romans 3:23, “All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God.” *All*. The law reveals our need for salvation. But it is powerless to save us. It is like an MRI or a CT scan that reveals a cancerous tumor. It enables medical professionals to properly diagnose a disease so it can be properly treated. The law exposes the disease of sin within each of us but, like the MRI or other diagnostic tool, it does not have the power to bring healing.

Using the tenth commandment, the commandment against coveting, as an example, Paul 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 tenth commandment in particular – that brought Paul to an awareness of his inner sinfulness, so that he came under conviction of sin and his need of forgiveness (7:8).

This is what the law does: It reveals our sins and our sinfulness. It actually entices us to sin, by awakening sinful desires in us. (I’ll talk about this next Sunday, the Lord willing.) And the law condemns sin in us (7:9-11). The law itself is not sinful. The law is not responsible for sin. *We* are responsible for sin. Each and every 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 it, and our need of the deliverance that only God in His grace, only the grace of God, can provide. Only grace – which, as you know, comes free of charge to people who don’t deserve it and never will. People like you and me.

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 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.

ROMANS 7:14-25: THE STRUGGLE

Then, in verses 14-25, we come to the struggle itself. Theologians, biblical scholars, preachers, and others have theorized, speculated, 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 encountered. I’m not sure there is any way to know for sure. What I am sure of is that what he describes has been and is today the experience of untold numbers of believers in the last two thousand years, and it is an experience, as I said earlier, with which untold numbers today, including many of us right here today, can identify.

If you read Romans 7 carefully, you will note that in verses 7-13, Paul writes in the past tense, but beginning in verse 14, the verb tense changes from past to present – which suggests that,

whether Paul is writing his own autobiography or it is, as more than one scholar has proposed, the biography of every man and woman, the apostle understands the struggle to be a present reality in the lives of many believers. All of which leads me to the conclusion that, while this struggle is normal in the sense that it is common among believers, it is not normative. It is wrong, as Stott says, to regard this as a pattern of normal (normative) Christian experience. It is not the way it is meant to be. It is not the life God intends for His people. It is not what God intends for you or me. Yet it is all too common.

In his own life, Chuck Swindoll experienced this “wretchedness.” “Like Paul,” he says, “I came to a place of utter hopelessness. I felt trapped by my inability to live in a manner that God would find pleasing, a mode of life I genuinely desired. I labored under the weight of condemnation, which is perhaps the most demoralizing feeling a Christian can endure. Nothing will drag you more quickly to a halt and pull you toward sin than shame. To make matters worse,” he continues, “I was guided by well-meaning people with bad theology. Many churches today,” he says, “preach a gospel that goes strangely silent after one believes in Jesus Christ.... According to this version of the good news, Christians are left to wrestle the flesh [the old sinful nature] on their own until Judgment Day.

“Saved by grace, but sanctified by works? That’s not good news,” writes Swindoll. “After reaching my own wretched state, I surrendered to the fact that I am not able to live the Christian life.” Amen to that, my friends. Amen! It is not just Chuck Swindoll. You and I are not able to live the Christian life in our own strength or power. It can’t be done. The Christian life, by its very nature, is a supernatural life that requires a supernatural power. It is possible only through the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us, the Spirit who comes to take up residence and sovereignty in the life of every Christian.

Swindoll says it was only when he came to the end of himself and surrendered to the fact of his spiritual powerlessness, it was only then that he could embrace the answer to the struggler’s cry, the declaration of a deliverer in verse 25, and then the triumphant proclamation in Romans 8:1, that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” That, my friends, is a life-changer.

While at the beach last week, I started reading Arnold Dallimore’s biography of George Whitefield, the 18th century evangelist who was so instrumental in what is known as The First Great Awakening in England and the American colonies. As a student at Oxford, Whitefield became acquainted with the Wesley brothers, John and Charles, who were part of a group of disciples known as the Holy Club – out of which came the Methodist movement for which John Wesley, in particular, is famous. Charles, though, was actually the first Methodist. It was Charles who founded the Holy Club, but John quickly became its leader and shaped the movement as it spread.

Neither Charles nor John Wesley was a believer during the early years of the Holy Club. They hoped, by means of their rigorous spiritual disciplines and religious practices, to gain some assurance of their salvation. Both traveled to America to serve as missionaries in the newly established colony of Georgia. John Wesley confessed that his chief motive in going out as a missionary was the hope of saving his soul. But both John and Charles returned to

England with their hopes shattered by the realization that they could not achieve salvation by any expenditure of human effort. It just could not be done. Though the brothers longed for the assurance of salvation, they did not know how to receive it.

Within a few days of each other, though, in May of 1738, first Charles and then John received the gift of saving faith in Christ and trusted Him for salvation. They found the answer to their searching question of how to be saved in Jesus and Jesus alone. They found the assurance and peace they so longed for in Jesus and Jesus alone. Not in their efforts. Not in their spiritual disciplines. Not in their works. Not in their zeal or their untiring labors. The answer was – and still is today – Jesus.

Charles Wesley, you may know, is widely considered to be the greatest hymn writer of all time. In his lifetime, he wrote nearly 9,000 hymns, including many that are deeply loved today. Almost everything he ever said or wrote, it seems, must have had a poetic flair to it. In a very short time after his conversion, perhaps just a day or two after, Charles wrote a hymn to celebrate his salvation – to celebrate his Savior. It remains one of our best-loved hymns today, and includes these magnificent words:

*No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine.
Bold I approach th'eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!*

I want to talk about it more next Sunday, but today I want you to know that Jesus has the power to do for us and in us what we can never do ourselves. The answer to the quest for salvation, for true forgiveness and peace and joy and hope and life itself, is Jesus. It is found only through a trusting faith in Him. And the answer to the cry of the struggler is the same. The answer is Jesus. There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1). And there never will be. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord (7:25).

Lord, let it be so. Let it be so in us. Amen.