

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, July 15, 2012**

VICTORY IN THE STRUGGLE

Romans 7-8 (Selected)

A VISIT TO HARVARD

Rebecca Pippert (best known for her book *Out of the Saltshaker*, which has become a classic on relational evangelism) writes in a more recent book, *Hope Has Its Reasons*, about a visit some years ago to Harvard University – which, of course, just happens to be in Cambridge, MA, the town where Tim and Alice Colegrove seek to minister to homeless teens. On one particular day, Pippert says, she attended two very different events. One was a graduate-level psychology class at Harvard. The other was a Christian Bible study held off-campus. In the book, she makes some interesting observations about how these two groups addressed, or failed to address, their personal struggles and problems. Listen to what she says:

“First, the students [in the psychology class] were extraordinarily open and candid about their problems. It wasn’t uncommon to hear them say, ‘I’m angry;,’ ‘I’m afraid,’ ‘I’m jealous’ Their admission of their problems was the opposite of denial. Second, their openness about their problems was matched only by their uncertainty about where to find resources to overcome them. Having confessed, for example, their inability to forgive someone who had hurt them, [it seems they had no idea how to] resolve the problem by forgiving and being kind and generous instead of petty and vindictive.”

Later the same day, she “dropped in on a Bible study group in Cambridge.” The contrast between the psych class and the Christian group, she says, “was striking. No one [in the Bible study group] spoke openly about his or her problems. There was a lot of talk about God’s answers and promises” – which is good! – “but very little about the participants and the problems they faced. The closest thing to an admission [of a personal problem or an ongoing battle with some sin] was a reference to someone who was ‘struggling and needs prayer.’”

Listen closely to Pippert’s concluding observation: She notes that “the first group” – the psychology class – “seemed to have all the problems and no answers,” while “the second group” – the Bible study group – “had all the answers and no problems.” Or, at least, none they were willing to admit and talk about.

A MORE EXCELLENT WAY

I think there is something wrong with this picture. Don’t you? Neither of these is the way it is meant to be. Fortunately, these are not the only alternatives. There is another way, a third way, a “more excellent way,” as the apostle Paul says in another context (1 Corinthians 12:31), a truly Christian, God-pleasing way. In this more excellent way, we do not put on masks and try to hide the fact that we are all sinners, every one of us, that we all struggle with particular sins and with the pull of our old sinful nature – even though we have been justified

in God's sight by grace and grace alone. *God's* grace. In this more excellent way, we do not have to pretend that we have it all together. We can freely admit that we are sinners in desperate need of a Savior. And we have found the Savior we need in Jesus, who is the only Savior there is. In this more excellent way, we are free to admit that though we belong to Christ, and the Holy Spirit has come and taken up residence in our lives, we continue to struggle with sinful desires and habits. Sometimes, as Paul put it in Romans 7, what we want to do we do not do, and we do what we do not want to do (7:15, 16).

In this more excellent way, we acknowledge our problems, our struggles, our sins. We do so because we know the church, at its best, is a place of grace. We know that grace is not something you earn. Grace is not earned, it is given free of charge – to people who don't deserve it and never will. People like me and you. Church is meant to be a place of grace because the God we worship and love and serve and proclaim is big on grace. And grace – well, we all need it. Lots of it.

So, like the students in the graduate psychology class at Harvard, we can honestly admit our problems and struggles. We can be real with one another. We can care for one another and support one another in an atmosphere of mutual love and respect. But, unlike the students in the psych class, we don't have to grope in the dark looking for answers. We know where to find the answers: in God's Word. We know the One who has the answers: God does. We know the One who is Himself the answer. The answer is Jesus.

THE STRUGGLE IS REAL

The ongoing struggle we talked about last Sunday between the old sinful nature and the new life that is ours "in Christ" is something every Christian experiences to some degree or another. The struggle is real. And the pull of some particular sinful desire or habit or even addiction, or the attraction of some particular temptation, may be so intense, so strong, so ingrained, and so irresistible, that it just seems hopeless. No matter how hard you try, no matter how firm your resolve, winning the tug-of-war with sin seems impossible – which it is, as long as you're relying on your own efforts and trying to do it in your own strength. Chuck Swindoll says you can push yourself to fatigue (or even exhaustion) trying hard to conquer sin and be like Christ, but if it is a self-improvement project carried out in the energy of the flesh, you will have an easier time, he says, catching rainbows. Or leaping over tall buildings in a single bound.

NO CONDEMNATION IN CHRIST

But here is the thing: Though the struggle with sin is real and ongoing, as we saw and sang last Sunday, Paul makes this game-changing declaration in Romans 8:1 that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." No condemnation now or ever! Peterson expresses it beautifully in *The Message*. In response to the cry of the struggler in Romans 7:24, wondering if *anyone* can do *anything* to deliver us from our predicament, verse 25 in *The Message* says: "The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different."

A “life of contradictions” is a good way to put it, don’t you think?

That is how chapter 7 ends. But Paul’s train of thought continues in chapter 8, which, in *The Message*, begins this way: “With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma [between the good I want to do and what I actually do] is resolved. Those who enter into Christ’s being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation.”

THE KEY TO VICTORY

This new power, Paul goes on to explain, is the power of God the Holy Spirit, who possesses power you and I do not. You see, victory in the struggle is not found in a self-improvement plan. It is not found in a three-step, five-step, or twelve-step program, though God can and does use them at times. The key to victory is not a list of do’s and don’ts, or should’s and shouldn’ts. Victory in the struggle is found in a person, not a program. Victory is found in Jesus and what He did for us in His life and death and resurrection from the dead.

Victory is found in the indwelling presence and power of God in the person of the Holy Spirit, who comes, as Jesus promised, to take up residence in the life of every believer, and is at work in our lives to give us victory over sin and to make us more and more like Jesus. John Stott observes that indwelling sin is the lot of all the children of Adam (meaning, the entire human race). We are all natural-born sinners. The privilege of the children of God, though, is to have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us to fight against and to subdue indwelling sin.

Not everyone, you understand, has the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. But if you belong to Christ through faith, if you are “in Christ,” then the Holy Spirit lives in you. His power is at work in you to enable you more and more to overcome the pull of sin and to live a life pleasing to God. Not all at once. It doesn’t happen overnight. It happens day by day. Moment by moment. Step by step.

The victory does not come by virtue of our hard work or zeal. It comes through Jesus. It comes through what He has already done for us once-for-all in His saving work on the cross, and through what He is doing in us right now through the agency of the Holy Spirit to make us holy. To make us fully and wholly His.

FIX YOUR EYES ON JESUS

I love what Charles Spurgeon says about this as He urges us to “fix our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:2). Listen to this:

“It is ever the Holy Spirit’s work to turn our eyes away from self to Jesus; but Satan’s work is just the opposite of this, for he is constantly trying to make us regard ourselves instead of Christ. He insinuates, ‘Your sins are too great for pardon; you have no faith; you don’t repent enough; you will never be able to continue to the end; you don’t have the joy of His children; you have such a wavering hold on Jesus.’ All these are thoughts about self, and we shall

never find comfort or assurance by looking within. But the Holy Spirit turns our eyes entirely away from self. He tells us that we are nothing, but that ‘Christ is all....’

“Remember, therefore, it is not *your hold* of Christ that saves you – it is Christ; it is not *your joy* in Christ that saves you – it is Christ; it is not even faith in Christ, although that is the instrument – it is Christ’s blood and merits. Therefore, don’t be fixing your eyes so much on your hand with which you are grasping Christ, as on Christ. Don’t be looking at your hope, but to Jesus, the source of your hope. Don’t be looking to your faith, but to Jesus, the author and finisher of your faith.

“We shall never find happiness by looking at our prayers, our doings, or our feelings; it is what *Jesus* is, not what *we* are, that gives rest to the soul. If we would at once overcome Satan and have peace with God, it must be by ‘fixing our eyes on Jesus.’ Simply keep your eye on Him. Let His death, His sufferings, His merits, His glories, His intercession, be fresh upon your mind. When you wake in the morning, look to Him. When you lie down at night, look to Him.”

(Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*, June 28)

“Fix (your) eyes on Jesus,” for He has won the victory over sin and death for you in His own suffering and death on the cross, and in His resurrection from the dead. And He will give you the victory – He will give you grace upon grace, all-sufficient grace, grace that is greater than all your sin – as you trust in Him for salvation, for life, for time and eternity.

NO CONDEMNATION AND NO SEPARATION

If you take a panoramic view of Romans 8, if you look at the big picture that encompasses all the riches of God’s grace expressed there, you will observe that the chapter begins with “no condemnation” in verse 1 and ends with “no separation” in verses 35-39 – declarations of grace which, in both cases, are for those who are “in Christ Jesus.” No condemnation and no separation.

Paul poses the question in verse 35: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” *The Message* says it this way: “Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us?” That’s the question. Here’s the answer: “There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture.”

Then, going on to verse 37, we find Paul’s firm declaration of fact and faith that begins with the words “in all these things ...” In what things? In *everything* you and I will ever experience in this life, in the best and the worst life throws at us. In *everything*. “In all these things we are more than conquerors” – more than victors – “through Him who loved us.” Through whom? Through Jesus, the Son of God and Savior of sinners. You see, He is the key to victory. It all depends on Him.

Then Paul brings it all to a final climax in verses 38 and 39, declaring triumphantly that nothing in life, nothing in death, nothing in the whole universe, can ever separate us from the immeasurable, incomparable, unconditional, unchangeable, unstoppable love of God for us – the love made incarnate in His Son Jesus Christ our Lord. No condemnation and no separation. How is that for good news?

Here is how a woman named Ruth Calkin expressed it in the form of a personal profession of faith:

God, I may fall flat on my face.
 I may fail until I feel old and beaten and done in.
 Yet Your love for me is changeless.
 All the music may go out of my life;
 My private world may shatter to dust.
 Even so, You will hold me in the palm of Your steady hand.
 No turn in the affairs of my fractured life can baffle You.
 Satan with all his braggadocio cannot distract You.
 Nothing can separate me from Your measureless love –
 Pain can't, disappointment can't, anguish can't.
 Yesterday, today, tomorrow can't.
 The loss of my dearest love can't.
 Death can't. Life can't.
 Riots, war, insanity, hunger, neurosis, disease –
 None of these nor all of them heaped together
 Can budge the fact that I am dearly loved, completely forgiven,
 And forever free through Jesus Christ Your beloved Son.

(Quoted in Ray C. Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory*, Vol. 1, pp. 311-312)

Yes, the struggle with sin is real and ongoing. It will continue until this mortal life is over. But there is victory in Jesus. Jesus, in fact, has already won the victory. And He can give you victory in the struggle. May you experience the victory in your life.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.