
Romans 7:15-25a. ¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. ²¹So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²²For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Summer Sermon Series: The Book of Romans

The Basics of the Christian Faith: One Word at a Time: Battling

Our sermon series on the basics of the Christian faith continues today. Our word for today is battling. As we consider this concept of a battle, familiar pictures and songs may come to mind. The marching beat of *Onward Christian Soldiers* quickly fills our heads or we start to hum, *Fight the good fight, with all your might*. As we think of battle we might anticipate taking on our enemies of the devil and the world around us and so we envision ourselves following Paul's encouragement to put on the full armor of God as we guard ourselves against the devil's schemes. In the book of Ephesians, Paul speaks of taking up arms in such battle, and he speaks in almost elegant terms. We remember these words as he describes the noble armor that God has given us, to prepare us in our fight against evil.

³Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. ¹⁷Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

We are indeed called to such a noble spiritual battle. We are made ready by the Word of God and his gift of faith so that we may be ready and prepared to take on our spiritual enemies of the devil and the world around us. However, there is another aspect of spiritual warfare that Paul addresses here in Romans chapter 7. In these verses Paul speaks in gritty and very personal tones of the *inner* struggle, the inner *battle*, that we all face. ***¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do... ²¹So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.*** Our struggle is certainly against the devil and the world around us, but there is a battle that takes place each day, underneath the armor, so to speak. We may be poised to take on the devil and the

world around us, but we must not be caught unprepared to take on this very personal internal struggle. For this is a battle that takes place in the hearts and lives of those who belong to Christ. This is the battle of the new self vs. the old self. This the struggle between our old sinful nature and the new person that dwells with us through faith. In chapter 6 Paul speaks of that gift of new life, he speaks in those dramatic and meaningful terms, we died to sin, how can we live it any longer. And so now that we have been brought to life, we will fight against sin, we will resist temptation. Paul describes it this way, ***For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.*** There's a war raging inside of us; and this can be exhausting. At times, we can feel like a prisoner to sin, held captive by our own sinful flesh. Even when we fight off temptations and the desires of the flesh it can leave us weary and worn. But while the fighting may be fierce, this is always the final and triumphant encouragement that we have, our Savior is there to rescue us, to help and strengthen us, and he is there to give us rest. ²⁵ ***Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!***

Have you ever had this kind of conversation with yourself? The good that I want to do, I do not do it. The bad things that I don't want to do, those things I keep on doing. The things I want to do, that I know are good and right and that I should do better, or more, those things I don't do. I want to be a better husband. I want so bad to be a better neighbor, to be a better parent, to have more patience, to have more self-control. I want to do more nice things for others, to put others before myself. I know I should do this. I want to do that. But I don't. Instead, the bad things that make me so ashamed, that are selfish and sinful, those things that put a strain on my relationships, the sins that I know are there, and I know I should avoid, the anger, the lust, the hatred, the greed; those things I keep on doing.

I think this is a conversation that we have all had and it's a miserable conversation, isn't it? The frustration that we feel, the failure that we lament, make it a reluctant and yet regular reality in our life. We have this conversation with ourselves, maybe we have it often, and it is miserable. But what if I told you that this is a good thing? What if I told you that I am glad? To be clear, I am not glad that you are miserable, per se, but as your fellow Christian, as your pastor, I am glad that you are having these types of conversations with yourself, because it shows you faith is alive. As Christians, there ought to be this internal struggle, this battling, because we are now alive in Christ and dead to sin. This battle, that rages, within the heart of the believer is a good thing.

This is something that runs very much counter to what our culture is preaching. More and more the world tells us to do whatever feels right. Whatever you feel is right, whatever makes you happy, do that! And while that can be a light and cheery slogan for a young person who is seeking a career, this is a saying that not just deficient but downright dangerous when applied to overall life of a believer. It is as if the world says, "Avoid this miserable struggle against sin and instead do what comes naturally!" Such a plan can only lead to death and disappointment, for by nature we are sinners, who were dead in sin. If given license to sin, to do what comes naturally, such a plan, such a motto, only leads to a deeper darker slavery to sin, lives that are driven away from God and his will, for human hearts are inclined toward evil, by nature the sinful mind is hostile to God.

However, God's Word tells us that through Jesus and his gift of saving faith, we have been given a new nature, a new heart and new spirit. We have been given a new self who is created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. In his great love for us he rescued and redeemed us and he sets us apart to be his own, and now we his, called to live for him who loved us. And as those who belong to Christ, who have been reconciled to God, and made to at one with our LORD, we love what he loves. Now we hate what he hates.

We have been made alive in Christ. We have been made new. We have been connected to Christ, buried with him in baptism. And as part of this life with Christ, part of connection to Christ we are taught and instructed in his Word as we grow in him. And as we learn more about our God, and about his will for our life, by reading and studying the Scriptures, the natural knowledge of right and wrong is elevated and refined by the revealed knowledge of God's holy will. As we sit at the feet of our Savior, as we hear the voice of him who called us out of darkness and the empty way of life passed down to us from generation after generation of sinners, as we learn more and more about the life he has called us to the more willing we are to take up arms in this fight. And it is a fight against sin, and the devil, and against the world around us; but to be clear it is also a struggle against that sinful nature, that clings to us, that hangs on to us. As so refreshed by our baptism, reminded of this gift of life that we are given in Christ, encouraged that we are dead to sin, this is the life that we are compelled to live. It is a life that celebrates the daily drowning of the sinful nature in our baptism, and it is a life that finds joy and satisfaction in struggling against the sin that so naturally springs up from within us.

And the list is extensive. Greed, theft, fraud, lying, cheating, stealing, dishonesty, being spiteful and unkind, refusing to forgive, being unloving, harboring adulterous thoughts, giving ourselves over to lust and impure actions, improper behavior and being cruel, failing to be compassionate, hating our fellowman, thinking, and acting, and speaking in hatred and bigotry, despising God's word, profaning God's name, being coarse and unkind in our speech, putting things before our God, these are things that naturally dwell with in us. And God's Word makes it clear that these are things that our holy God hates and therefore these are things that we now hate. These are the things that we do by nature, but given a new nature in Christ, these are the things that we resist.

It is probably worth noting that this battle, this struggle, changes, and morphs throughout the years. The devil attacks us from different angles. Our flesh becomes susceptible and vulnerable in differing area, as life changes. Lust and desire during our younger years is coupled with greed and materialism and a slew of other sins. As we get older the temptations that we are more susceptible to are gradually geared more toward materialism or holding on to personal grudges and refusing to forgive. However, there are also sins that just continue to nag at us, sins that go with us through life, sins that we think we have conquered and then suddenly are right there again wanting to master us and enslave us. We know Paul's frustration all too well, the exhaustion that he voices in these words from Romans chapter 7. ***18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin***

living in me that does it. ²¹ So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. . ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

We too have this miserable conversation, we too can relate oh so well, to Paul's emotionally outpouring in these verses. And so what's the answer? What's the solution? We can't save ourselves, sin is always there, evil is always right there alongside of us. Our good intentions will fail. Our self-control will falter. Do we just give up? Do we just give in?

Paul has poured out his soul in these verses. He passionately wrestles with this complex reality, going through the back and forth that we all know and can relate to, but then he declares this simple and refreshing conclusion. He simply declares the name of Jesus. A weary soul simply calls upon the name of Christ and there is hope, there is relief, there is refuge, and peace, answers, and rest. Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ is Lord.

How fitting the words of our gospel lesson for today, as Jesus himself speaks these wonderful words of comfort and rest! ²⁸ ***"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."*** (Matthew 11:28-30). In this battle against the sin within us, we find great joy and relief, peace and rest, in the fact that Christ is with us. We are yoked to him. We walk with him and he walks with us, carrying our load on his mighty shoulders. And therefore, the path of obedience and faith while often difficult, is not just bearable, but it is desired, it is good, it is lovely. For such labor to resist sin and live for God is a labor of love. It is a labor of communion with Christ, and therefore it is rewarding. While difficult, it brings satisfaction. Such a life of obedience and a commitment to struggle against sin is something that we take on gladly. Like Paul, we are honest, we are realistic. We know that the road may often be weary and frustrating. We know that we will fall, that we will fail, but we walk on regardless, for we know the one who walks with us. We look to Jesus for forgiveness. We look to Christ our Savior for strength. Our LORD will not leave us, he will not forsake us. He who lived and died for us, invites us to come and find rest in him, and his presence gives us peace. His presence gives us rest. And so, we live for him. We battle to his glory. We battle against those foes that attack us from the outside, and we take on that inner battle against the flesh, knowing that one day this labor will end. One day this struggle will be over. However, until that day comes, we will rise and go about the work that God has called us to do as we live our lives to his glory.

There is joy, there is satisfaction, in the struggle. This is very much, part of the Christian life. The road may leave us weary and worn, but there is peace and rest in Jesus who walks with us. There is honor. There is nobility in being part of the battle, even as we battle our own sinful flesh. We will continue battling, knowing that this struggle is evidence that Christ has given us life and that Christ lives in us. Thanks be to God - through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.