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Sermon

War Within: The Flesh vs the Spirit

Romans 7:15-25

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The journey through Romans has taken us from thinking that we will be saved by good works to trusting Jesus to save us. We have been shown that we are no longer under Law but under grace. A danger have been skirted: to think that sinning more increases the glory of God's forgiveness.

This next portion of Romans 7 is one of the most debated pieces of scripture. How are we to understand the Paul's stance? ¹

It is argued that Paul wrote about:

1. life as a Pharisee under the Law of Moses;
2. humanity in general, conscious of sin;
3. himself as a Christian struggling with his own sin and failure to fulfil the law of the Spirit, the law of Christ and the law of love;
4. a Christian who tries to defeat sin in his or her own strength, rather than by walking in the Spirit.

The Reformers and many of the Church Fathers believed this was Paul's own experience. Here are some reasons:

1. Its place in Romans: Here he is writing about the believer's sanctification. If it were a pre-Christian struggle, he would surely have brought it into chapter 2.
2. Its present tense: Earlier in the argument he wrote in the past tense; here in the present.
3. Its personal pronouns: He refers to "I", "my", "me" nearly fifty times in 19 verses. He also confesses his struggle with covetousness.
4. Its practical experience: The passage portrays the ongoing struggle that all Christians experience with sin and their hatred of it. Have you ever met a non-believer who was concerned about not obeying God's law?

For these reasons, I think this passage is most likely to be Paul speaking of his struggle and ours as a Christian to conquer the sin that the Spirit of God and the law of Christ have exposed inside him.

This passage teaches us that human nature is not essentially good; that sanctification (being made holy) is not by means of keeping the Law; that we are unable to do right simply by willing it.

¹ See Ponsonby S., 2013, "God is for Us", Monarch Books, Oxford, p205ff

What Paul describes is a battle; it is civil war with us. On one side is the flesh. The flesh is that part of our nature which loves sin. Paul also calls it the “old man”, the spiritual inheritance from Adam. It is the nature which tends towards selfishness and disobedience. It controls the unsaved person.

On the other side of the internal battle is our spirit made alive in Christ. Our spirit desires God’s will and his ways. Our spirit hates sin. The human spirit of the Christian wants to do good and that which is right; it wants to avoid wrong. Yet something else, the flesh, fights against these good desires and too often wins.

We may think we love God and his righteousness. In fact, when faced with the holiness of God, there is still something in many of us which cannot stand that purity. Smith Wigglesworth was a famous Pentecostal preacher from Bradford in the early 20th century. In his biography,² George Stormont wrote:

“In 1922, Wigglesworth was in Wellington, the capital city of NZ. One afternoon at a special meeting, eleven prominent Christians gathered for prayer at Wigglesworth’s request. One after another they prayed, until all had taken part except the visiting evangelist. He then began to pray for their city and country, and as he continued, the sense of God’s presence and power so filled the room that one by one the others left, unable to continue in the blazing light of God’s holiness.

“One minister hearing of this from one who had been there, greatly desired to be in a similar meeting – but with the determination that whoever else left, he would not. An opportunity soon came for him to attend such a meeting. Several people prayed, then Wigglesworth began to pray.

“As he lifted up his voice, it seemed that God himself invaded the place. Those present became deeply conscious that they were on holy ground. The power of God in its purity was like a heavy weight pressing on them. One by one, the people left until only the man remained who had set himself to stay.

“He hung on and on until at last the pressure became a compulsion, and he could stay no longer. His own testimony was that with floodgates of his soul pouring out a stream of tears and with uncontrollable sobbing, he had to get out of the Presence or die. He added that Wigglesworth, a man who knew God as few men do, was left alone in an atmosphere in which few men could breathe.”

We are fool ourselves if we too readily think we are pure within. God’s holiness is orders of magnitude greater than ours and in his presence we become aware of our lack.

This strength of this inner struggle is described by C.S. Lewis in his book, “Mere Christianity,” like this:

No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, ... you find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist.³

You may have thought you were the only one struggling with temptation. But the Bible clearly tells you that you are not alone. The fact that Paul writes of this inner struggle between the flesh and the spirit is encouraging for us all. We can breathe a sigh of relief and say, “You too, Paul? I am not alone.”

But the message of this passage is not that we battle hopelessly. Paul writes in verses 24-25, “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

² “Smith Wigglesworth: A Man who walked with God” by George Stormont, published by Harrison House Publishers, 2009.

³ Quoted from “Mere Christianity” by C.S. Lewis.

Simon Ponsonby writes⁴:

“The power of self-will cannot overcome the inherent, insistent will of Adam. ... We need someone stronger. When we look to ourselves, look inside ourselves, rely on ourselves, we lose. We need to look ‘to look to the Lord’ – when Paul takes his eyes off himself, his sin and his struggle, and look to his Saviour, he is delivered. ... We need a saviour and a sanctifier. And we have one.”

“Deliverance, transformation, overcoming of the craving and programming of the flesh, is progressively possible through admission of need, dependence on God, and active rejection of the vice.”

Some sins are immediately relinquished when we come to Christ, others seem to require a struggle. Which are easy and which are difficult is peculiar to the individual.

Trying not to sin by yourself for God is doomed to failure. The important thing, I think, is to continue the struggle depending on God. We were saved by utter dependence on Christ, why would we think that we can suddenly live righteously without his help? Missionary, Stephen Olford in his book, “Not I, But Christ”, says “The victorious life is the victorious Lord living in you and me in utter mastery.”⁵

The wonderful thing is that his grace extends to help us in this, that everything might be to his glory and not ours.

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

⁴ Ponsonby, 2013, p211

⁵ Quoted in Ponsonby, 2013, p212

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