

BROOMFIELD

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The War Within

The Battle for Holiness, Part 3

We have been engaged in a four-sermon series on Romans that we have titled The Battle for Holiness. It is not possible to praise the book of Romans too highly; many consider it to be the pinnacle of the apostle Paul's work. John Chrysostom, the fifth century's greatest preacher, had Romans read aloud to him once a week.

Paul brings together all the Bible's greatest themes: Sin, law, judgment, human destiny, faith, works, grace, justification, sanctification, election, the plan of salvation, the work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, the Christian hope, the nature and life of the church, the place of the Jew and non-Jew in the purposes of God, the philosophy of church and world history, the meaning and message of the Old Testament, the duties of Christian citizenship, and the principles of personal godliness and morality.

It is no wonder that the study of this book, or the preaching through it can literally take years.

Last week the point was made that Romans builds to a climax in Chapter 8. The movement is from justification to glorification: Chapter 5: Justification by Faith, Chapter 6: Antinomianism Chapter 7: The purpose and limits of the Law, and Chapter 8: Glorification. And it was pointed out that this natural flow is parenthetically interrupted by the need to refute Antinomianism and to explain the proper use of the Law.

As Greg began this series, he titled the first sermon The Believer's Passion. Our passion is to be for holiness. He answered the question "why?" considering first the consequence of sin contrasting the world's seeking after pleasure, fun, and enjoyment with the powerful reminder that unbridled pursuit of the world's activities leads to death; fourfold death: Physical, moral, spiritual and eternal.

We were further reminded that this should be our passion on account of the consequences of sanctification. Everlasting life was explained as "life pertaining to the age" not something for later, a by and by, pie-in-the-sky reward, but something that begins here and now and continues for all eternity. The benefit is that holiness leads to a peaceful life.

Lastly, we were reminded of the content of salvation. It is the free gift of eternal life for we are no longer slaves to sin but have, as we learn in our LOGOS class, definitive sanctification for God has declared us sanctified by, through and for the completed work of Christ.

The conclusion of all this is that we cannot lose! The outcome is sure! The victory is won!

Regarding last week's sermon, one of the theologians among us summarized it like this:

“Both the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace are in view here. Our “default programming” is to believe that we are justified by works and then to believe that we are sanctified by works as well.”

That is exactly the case. We must fight off our tendency to depend on our own flesh for justification and sanctification and to depend wholly on the completed work of Jesus Christ.

As the founder of our denomination put it so succinctly and so well in his last telegram: "So thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."

Now we must turn our attention to the ongoing war within ourselves.

Romans 7:21-24, “I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?”

The Fifth Column

Perhaps you have heard the phrase “fifth column.” The general commanding four loyalist columns moving on Madrid during Spain's civil war referred to his militant supporters within the capital as his “fifth column.” He certainly meant those within the city that were actively working to support him and defeat his enemies.

It is not unusual to see “underground” efforts during wartime whose mission is to seek to destroy the enemy from within. When these groups or individuals are allied with us, we see them as heroes, such as the French Resistance during World War II. We know well that spies were planted within even our own intelligence organizations by the Soviets during the cold war. We were outraged when we found in the 1990s that both the CIA and the FBI had traitors within for decades.

If we are deeply angered by a fellow citizen's betrayal of our country, how much more emotion should be stirred when contemplating the war that rages within us between our sinful nature and the new creature we are in Christ? Is this a battle that can be won? The subject has been hotly debated throughout church history.

The entire current issue of *Christian History* magazine is devoted to the subject of the Holiness Movement. The idea of how “sinless perfection” could be achieved swept nineteenth century America, spawning denominations that are still heavily influenced by the roots of this movement and impacting many others denominations as well. Para-church ministries have been caught up in it, as some of you familiar with the “blue pamphlet” know.

The last sermon was based on James Montgomery Boices' work and this continues his study of these important verses. At the beginning of the last sermon I said that there are few passages in the Bible over which good Bible students have divided more radically than the last half of Romans 7, beginning with

verse 14. Now you can probably see why. In that study, we worked through the four main interpretations of these verses, asking the important question “Who is the ‘Man’ of Romans 7?” We saw that the options are: (1) An unsaved person, (2) A “carnal Christian,” (3) A person who has come under conviction as a result of the Holy Spirit’s work in his or her life, but who is not yet born again, and (4) A mature Christian.

In some ways, the last seems hardest to accept. But I tried to show reasons why the fourth of these possibilities is the right one and why it is necessary for us to know it, if we are to move ahead realistically in the Christian life. If we are Christians, we will never get anywhere by assuming that the seventh chapter of Romans is written about someone other than ourselves—someone who is not yet saved or not yet “mature” in the faith, as we are. Paul is writing about himself as a mature Christian and therefore about all who are true believers.

I ended the last sermon by stating that sanctification is the process of coming increasingly to see how sinful we are so that we will depend constantly on Jesus Christ. And that is not easy! The Christian life is warfare, a warfare within against our inherently sinful natures, as well as a warfare without against external forces. It is extremely important that we see this.

I think that Paul must have been concerned that we see this and that he recognized that it is difficult. I say this because in these verses Paul goes to considerable lengths to teach these truths to us.

Notice that in verses 14—24 Paul says almost exactly the same thing three distinct times. The first time is in verses 14—17. The second is in verses 18—20. The third is in verses 21—24. Each of these begins with a statement of the problem: “I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin” (verse 14); “nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature” (verse 18); and “when I want to do good, evil is right there with me” (verse 21). Each section then provides a description of the conflict: “what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (verse 15); “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 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” (verses 18—19); and “in my inner being I delight in God’s law; 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” (verses 22—23). Each section ends with a brief statement of why the problem exists: “it is sin living in me” (verse 17); “it is sin living in me” (verse 20); and “this body of death” (verse 24).

What distinguishes these three sections is that in the first Paul states the matter generally, in the second he states it in terms of his doing what he does not want to do, and in the third he says that he finds it impossible to do what he does want to do: “when I want to do good, evil is right there with me” (verse 21).

I repeat that this describes the conflict of a mature Christian man, in fact, the conflict of an Apostle of Jesus Christ in his later years. So the struggle Paul speaks of is a struggle we all face and will continue to face — if we are Christians. And the defeat he speaks of is the experience of all — even when we are well along in the Christian life — apart from the Holy Spirit.

However, Paul is not writing these words to excuse our defeat, still less to encourage it. He is thinking of the victory that can and will be ours.¹ He wants us to achieve victory in the struggle against sin by the Holy Spirit. But the point here is that the victory we want comes only through this struggle and not by some secret formula for success or by some easy way of avoiding it.

¹ Compare Romans 7:25 and Romans 8

I believe that at this point we Americans particularly need to hear what Paul is saying, for we hate conflict and are usually trying to avoid it by any means possible. Let me suggest three ways that American Christians try to avoid the struggle against sin, which (according to the teaching of Romans 7) will always be part of our lives.

Formula Christianity

The first way we try to avoid struggle in the Christian life is by hunting for some easy formula that will bring victory. This takes various forms: discovering a Christian book that will tell us what to do, following a three-step or four-step recipe for growth in the Christian life, ceasing to do some easy things (like going to movies), or starting to do more difficult things (like attending seminars). You know what I mean:

- “Get out of Romans 7 and into Romans 8.”
- “Let go and let God.”
- “Get ‘self’ off the throne of your life and put Christ there.”
- “Just let Jesus take control.”

The underlying motivation for these attempts is our lazy optimism — the expectation that life is meant to be easy, not hard. So, if we do find the Christian life hard, we assume that we are merely missing the right formula. Someone should be able to tell us what the formula is. If we do not find it — and we never will if ease is what we are seeking — we tend to get angry with our instructors or even with God.

Experiential Christianity

The second way we try to avoid struggle in the Christian life is by hunting for some new spiritual experience. This can be a charismatic-type experience — speaking in tongues, perhaps. It can be what used to be called “a second work of grace” in which we pass forever out of a defeated Christian state into a victorious one. Or it can be something as straightforward as an emotional experience in worship. In speaking of emotion in worship I do not mean to suggest that this is bad. It is not. We have hearts as well as heads, and we are undoubtedly to worship with both. But emotion, even in worship, is bad if it is thought of as a substitute for or an escape from the fight against sin, which is an inescapable part of the life-long process of sanctification.

To come home from a church service saying, “Didn’t we have a worshipful experience?” means nothing unless we have acquired the biblical knowledge with which we can fight against sin and a renewed commitment to do so.

Avoidance Christianity

The third way we try to escape struggle in the Christian life is typically “American”: avoidance. That is, when we are defeated, rather than girding up our loins and turning to attack the problem again, we turn away from it and try to fill our minds with something else. Often this “something else” is television or other entertainment. Sometimes it is empty busyness—even in Christian activities. Just as with unbelievers, avoidance may be through alcohol or drugs for some.

Spiritual Realism

What I want to commend to you as we face the fact of the war within us what J. I. Packer calls “spiritual

realism.” He talks about it toward the end his study of the various Christian views of holiness. As Packer defines it, “Realism has to do with our willingness or lack of willingness to face unpalatable truths about ourselves and to start making necessary changes.” In light of Romans 7:14—24, I want to suggest four statements with which this spiritual realism should start.

Lifetime Struggle against Sin

When God called us to be Christian people he called us to lifetime struggles against sin.

This should be evident from everything Paul says in this passage. But we seem to take extraordinary measures to avoid this truth. One way of avoiding it is by a kind of unrealistic romanticism in which we kid ourselves into thinking that everything is well with us spiritually or is at least well enough for us to get by with for now. This is particularly easy if we are affluent and do not need to worry about having enough to eat or paying the mortgage and if we can always battle occasional bouts of depression by going out for dinner or by taking a vacation. “No pain, no gain,” we say, yet we labor rigorously to avoid spiritual growth pains.

We also avoid this truth by shifting the blame, as Packer suggests in his discussion. It is what Adam and Eve did when God confronted them with their sin in the Garden of Eden.

Adam blamed Eve, saying, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it” (Gen. 3:12). But since he pointed out that it was God who gave him the woman, Adam was really blaming God for his trouble.

Eve blamed the devil: “The serpent deceived me, and I ate” (v. 13). But since God had apparently allowed the serpent to come into the garden, this was only a slightly gentler way of also blaming God.

Packer says, “We are assiduous blamers of others for whatever goes wrong in our marriages, families, churches, careers, and so on. . . . Romantic complacency and resourcefulness in acting the injured innocent are among the most Spirit-quenching traits imaginable, since both become excuses for doing nothing in situations where realism requires that we do something and do it as a matter of urgency. Both states stifle conviction of sin in the unconverted and keep Christians in a thoroughly bad state of spiritual health.”

The starting place for achieving spiritual realism is to recognize that we are called to a constant spiritual warfare in this life and that this warfare is not easy, since it is against the sin that resides in us even as converted men and women. Realism calls for rigorous preparation, constant alertness, dogged determinism, and moment-by-moment trust in him who alone can give us victory. Here is the essence of the matter in the words of a great hymn by Johann B. Freystein (translated by Catherine Winkworth):

“Rise, my soul, to watch and pray.
From thy sleep awaken;
Be not by the evil day
Unawares o’ertaken.
For the foe, well we know,
Oft the harvest reapeth
While the Christian sleepeth.

“Watch against thyself, my soul,

Less with grace thou trifle;
Let not self thy thoughts control,
Nor God's mercy stifle.
Pride and sin lurk within
All thy hopes to scatter;
heed not when they flatter."

I do not know any hymn that describes the battle within us better or in more realistic language.

We Cannot Achieve Victory by Ourselves

Although we are called to a lifetime struggle against sin, we are nevertheless never going to achieve victory by ourselves. This is another point that Americans in particular need to grasp. For while we are as a people very susceptible to simple, quick-fix solutions or avoidance, we are also very confident of our ability to handle even the most difficult challenges.

Like putting a man on the moon, we figure that, however tough the problem may be, with enough energy, skill, resourcefulness, and determination we can solve it. Live a victorious Christian life? Of course we can do it — if we really want to. So we say, "When the going gets tough, the tough gets going!" or, "You can if you believe you can."

In this we are perhaps more like the apostle Peter than anyone else in the Bible. Do you remember Peter's boast that, whatever might be true of the other disciples, he at least would never betray Jesus? "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death," said Peter (Luke 22:33). And he meant it! Peter loved Jesus, and he believed that the sheer intensity of his love would enable him to stand firm even in the midst of the greatest spiritual struggles.

But Jesus knew Peter, just as he knows us, and he replied, "I tell you Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me" (Luke 22:34).

In himself, Peter was unable to stand against Satan's temptation even for a moment. When the temptation came he fell. But fortunately this was not all Jesus said to Peter. Although Peter was boastful and self-confident and was wrong in both, Jesus had also told him, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:31—32).

If we could rephrase those words to express what Peter would probably say to us if he were here today, it would go like this:

"When Jesus told me that he had prayed for me so that my faith would not fail, he meant that apart from him I could not stand against Satan even for a moment. I could not go it alone. However strong my devotion or determination, when the chips were down I would deny him. I did! And so will you—this is what I am to tell you—unless you are depending on Jesus every moment. Moreover, in the great battles of life it is certain that you will fall away and be lost unless he prays for you, which is what he has promised to do. 'Apart from me you can do nothing' is what he told us. I proved the truth of his words by my denial, and you will, too, unless you are depending on him constantly."

Unprofitable Servants

Even when we triumph over sin by the power of the Holy Spirit, which should be often, we are still unprofitable servants.

Why is this so? It is because our victories, even when we achieve them, are all nevertheless by the power and grace of God and are not of ourselves. If they were, we would be able to take some personal glory for our triumphs, and when we die we would bring our boasting into heaven. But our victories are not of ourselves. They are of God. And since they are not of ourselves, we will not boast either on earth or in heaven but will instead give God all the glory.

Consider that great scene in Revelation in which the elders who represent the saints lay their crowns before the throne of God, saying, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power" (Revelation 4:11). Why do you suppose they do that? And what does the scene mean? Clearly, the fact that the crowns are the elders' crowns means that they represent the elders' own victories over sin and God's enemies. But, by taking them off and laying them before the throne of God, the elders indicate that their victories were achieved, not by themselves, but by the power of the Spirit of God that worked within them. In other words, in the final analysis the triumphs are God's alone.

The Means of Grace

And yet, we are to go on fighting and struggling against sin, and we are to do so with the tools made available to us, chiefly prayer, Bible study, Christian fellowship, service to others, and the sacraments.

We are never to quit in this great battle against sin. We are to fight it with every ounce of energy in our bodies and with our final breath. Only then, when we have finished the race, having kept the course, may we rest from warfare.

Isn't that what the Bible tells us everywhere?

Ephesians 6:10-12, "Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

Philippians 3:12-14, "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus. Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

Hebrews 12:1-4, "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin."

Let me close by suggesting that a gospel in which we must do everything possible to attain a victory over sin—but in which, in spite of all we do or can ever do, the victory when it comes is by God alone and not by us or for our glory—a gospel like that must be from God; it could never have been invented by man. The very nature of our gospel is proof of its divine origin.

Left to ourselves, what do we do? We do one of two things. Either we create a gospel of works, so that our salvation depends upon our own righteousness and our sanctification likewise depends upon our own ability to defeat sin and choose righteousness. Or else we retreat into passivity and say, “Since the battle is God’s and there is nothing I can do to achieve victory, I might as well just sit back and let God work.” To our way of thinking it seems that it must be either of those two choices. But the Bible, through Paul, says something quite different: “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12 -13).

The Christian life is not easy. No responsible person ever said it was. It is a battle all the way. But it is a battle that will be won. And when it is won, we who have triumphed will cast our crowns at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ who worked in us to accomplish the victory, and we will praise him forever.

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About the Preacher

Ken Banks preached this sermon on July 11, 2004. Ken is an Elder at Broomfield Presbyterian Church.