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Romans 7:15-25

THE FRUSTRATING BATTLE THAT RAGES WITHIN ME

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He was called “a man after the Lord’s own heart.” He defeated the Philistine giant Goliath. He fought many wars in the name of the LORD, emerging victoriously as God granted him the victory. He was the second King of Israel who led God’s people. He was a man of faith. He composed many of the Psalms. 3000 years later God’s people still sing these words: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want...Surely goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.”

And then one day as he was looking down from the roof of his palace, he saw a woman who was very beautiful. There was nothing wrong with that. The wrong thing was that she was already married to another man. That did not stop King David. He committed adultery with her and she became pregnant. They tried to cover their affair up, but that didn’t work. Finally, David gave the order that would end the life of Bathsheba’s husband.

How could such a thing happen? If David was a believing Christian, how could he fall so deeply into sin? Is that possible for a Christian to do? The answer is “yes!” If we study the Scriptures, we see lapses, serious lapses into sin. They were committed by people that are called great heroes of faith. Abraham tried to pass his wife off as his sister to avoid trouble. Moses killed an Egyptian and hid him in the sand. Samson allowed himself to succumb to Delilah’s charms. Peter was a human roller coaster, experiencing the highest highs and the lowest lows, including cursing and swearing that he had never heard of any Jesus of Nazareth. And there are many more. But I want you to look at yourself right now. If you look into your heart and are honest, you know that you fall into the same category. There are many times when you look into the mirror and ask, “Why did I say that? Why did I do that? I didn’t want to do or say such things, but I did them anyway. I knew the right thing to do. Why didn’t I do it? I know the wrong thing. Why did I do that?” You are not alone. This morning we see the reason for THE FRUSTRATING BATTLE THAT RAGES WITHIN ME.

The Apostle Paul is speaking autobiographically in this text. Is he speaking before or after his conversion? There are people who believe that after you become a Christian, you don’t sin anymore. Or perhaps you do, but it’s just a little slip. You are incapable of any major sin. And there are those who are always accusing Christians of major hypocrisy. They go to church on Sunday morning but during the week, they act just like everyone else. They lie and gossip and do all kinds of things that supposedly are bad. They’re no different from anyone else.

I do have people come up to me at times and say, “Pastor, I get it already. Jesus died for my sins. He gives me forgiveness. He prepared a place for me in heaven. That’s all good. Now let’s move on. Let’s get to the next phase. You need to preach more Christian living. Show me how to live. Show me all the good deeds I should be doing.”

Let’s get one thing clear. Jesus took care of our problem of sin forever. He lived the perfect life that we were unable to live and his death on the cross of Calvary paid the ransom price for all our sins. Because of Christ’s righteousness, God no longer sees my sins. He declares me righteous and holy for the sake of his Son. My justification, my standing with God is 100% complete and it has nothing to do with me. Christ did it all.

My sanctification, my Christian life is a different matter. That is always a work in progress. We have good days, and we have bad days. We are always going to be growing throughout our lives. But our Christian life is never completed in this life on earth. In fact, our Christian life is marred by frequent lapses into sin that call for repentance and forgiveness. The very first of Martin Luther's 95 Theses states: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent!' he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

The great apostle Paul admits the continuing force of sin in his life. "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but I hate what I do." Has this ever happened to you? You are determined never to sin anymore. Today is a brand-new day. You are going to follow God's Law in the Ten Commandments to the letter. You really want to do that. Before you've left the breakfast table, you realize that you've already broken five commandments. It really doesn't matter whether you've broken one or all ten. The Law is an entirety. If you break one Commandment, you've broken them all. They demand perfect love for God and for our fellow man. All of us are guilty!

We know better, don't we? We know what God wants us to do and we know what God doesn't want us to do. What God wants us to do, we want to do. But in reality, we do the very opposite of what we should be doing. Are we saint or are we sinner? The answer is that we are both saint and sinner simultaneously. We have our old sinful nature, the Old Adam, and we have the new man, the man of faith. Both of them are present in us at the same time. Paul says the same thing in his letter to the Galatians: "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want."

The fault for my conduct is not the Law. Since my new man desires to follow God's Law, I can put my stamp of approval on that law as something good. The Law tells me what God wants me to do. My problem is that I can't keep it, no matter how hard I try. The reason is that sin lives in me. Sin is always there. No matter how much I wish that my sinful nature was gone, it will remain with me until the day that I die. There will be some battles that I lose because the sinful nature overpowers the new man for a time.

We all have those battles. We know the good things we want to do. I believe that every one of us wants to study the Scriptures daily, pray often, present a Christian witness to everyone we see and live a life of love toward everyone. I don't think that any one of us wants to be angry with our spouse, children, or parents. We all want to be honest, kind, respectful, caring, and content with what we have. We don't want to tell lies or spread rumors. I'm sure that somewhere along the line you may have been told that you have a problem with your temper or that you're too stubborn or that you're awfully selfish. You may recognize those same things. You know that you have a problem with lust or gossip or greed. You truly want to change. But those sins jump up and bite you and often at the worst possible time. You don't want to succumb to those sins, but you do, over and over again. And often it is the same sins that trouble us. I have particular sins that attack me, and you have particular sins that attack you.

"As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me." Paul is not excusing his sin. He is acknowledging it. The sinful nature will always be with us in this world, an unwelcome intruder in our lives. We recognize that sin. The sin overpowers our will and leads us to think, say, and do things that we really don't want to do.

"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." Another translation for "sinful nature" is "flesh." This reminds us that by nature all of us are sinful. Not a single one of us can live up to the demands of God's Law. As our Lord told Nicodemus, "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit." Yes, if we want to live, we must be born again. That is why Holy Baptism is so important. Baptism washes away our sin and makes what Christ did by his life, death, and resurrection our own.

“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.” Paul wants to do what is right according to God’s law. His actual performance is another matter entirely. And Paul’s performance is my performance, and it is your performance. We are all sinners. Sin is not merely bad things that we occasionally do; it is what we are.

So, stop sinning! Do only what is good! Think only good thoughts! We all want to be there, but we can’t. “So, I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For 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.” Our new man in Christ delights in God’s Law. We look for new ways to please and serve our God. But sin is always there. God’s Law shows the new man how to display love for God and for our neighbor. The law of sin shows the sinful nature how to show love for the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. Both of them are there within our bodies, fighting and struggling every day of our lives. We fail and we fail too often. We fail so often that we can’t even keep count.

“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The solution to our problem is found in the forgiveness of our sins. As long as we live in this world, we will not only be sinners, but we will be sinful. Our evil Old Adam will live within us. But the time will come when we will be rescued from this body of death. We will leave this world and be with our Savior in heaven with a perfect, glorified body no longer subject to sin and death.

Then we will no longer have this inner struggle. But until then we will still keep doing evil things that we don’t want to do. We will still fail to do good things that we want to do. Believe it or not, that can be a comforting thought. We realize how imperfect we really are. We realize that we cannot make it on our own. We realize that we never reach the point where we leave the nest and fly without Jesus. We keep him with us. Forgiveness is always there. No matter what we have done, he has forgiven us.

The perfect sanctification we seek will never be with us here in this world. That is why we must always keep the main thing the main thing. That is why we must always keep pointing you back to your baptism. That is why we must always go back to confession and Holy Absolution. That is why we must always stress the blessings of the Lord’s Supper. We are both saint and sinner. But Christ gives us the victory for all time. AMEN.