

Romans 7:15-25a
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
July 9, 2023

We live in a fractured society. We lament the polarization that surrounds us. Political views color education, science topics and health issues. It seems you can't discuss anything and disagree, for as soon as a different opinion surfaces you are an enemy, an evil person.

Internally we are filled with conflict also, although this struggle is truly one of good versus evil. The Apostle Paul experienced it and shows us

IT'S A BATTLE TO THE END

- I. We have right desires
- II. Our sinful nature interferes
- III. Jesus brings victory

While we have right desires in the battle between good and evil, it didn't start out that way. All of us enter life on the wrong side. We have original sin, a condition inherited from our parents all the way back to Adam and Eve. It soon shows in our actions. No one needs to teach children to be selfish, demanding attention, and later dishonesty, with quick denial when confronted with obvious wrongdoing, "Not me!"

Our native condition has been changed by God's grace. The Holy Spirit entered our hearts through the gospel. Whether it happened in infancy through baptism or through later exposure to the Word taught to us, we came to recognize our condition and were led to repentance and faith. We now know and trust Jesus as our Savior, who did everything that was needed. He conducted a perfect life and offered an innocent death in payment for our load of sins. They are forgiven, gone from the record. We are viewed as holy by our God. Paul was speaking of himself as an example but all of us have the same gift. What a relief! What comfort it gives us! Joy fills our hearts.

The Savior's work changes our eternal prospect. Not the flames of hell that never end but the joys and beauty of heaven await us and peace forever.

What Jesus has done for us impacts our every day. We are not afraid of God and his punishment. Jesus endured it for us. We know he will direct everything for our good. We are filled with joy and have a purpose for each day. That purpose is to glorify our Lord and Savior. We are grateful to him. We praise him, giving all

credit to him for all we have and are. We worship him. Our lives show that worship of him as we strive to obey him. We turn to his law to define what honors him. “In my inner being I delight in God’s law,” Paul declared and with him all Christians agree. We wish that was the end of the story, that we lived happily ever after.

II.

However, the Christian life is not a fairy tale. Our sinful nature interferes. You see, it is not gone. It was defeated, yes, drowned in our baptism and buried with Christ is how Paul described it in the previous chapter, but with more than the proverbial nine lives of a cat it keeps popping up and stays with us until our last breath.

You know the struggle. As Paul shared, “What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” We start out the day fresh. How soon do our plans fall apart? You stub your toe on the dresser, cut yourself shaving, the toast burns and soon you are crabbing and taking it out on your family, your co-workers, drivers, checkouts or other service people. Or it can be sparked by others and how their behavior eggs you on. People say and do nasty things. “I don’t deserve that kind of treatment,” we think. We’re ready with a comeback that digs into them. Then we feel good for a moment. “I really told them off!” Soon we regret it as we reflect. How did that help them know Jesus and his love? How did it open the door for me to share my faith with them? I blew it again. We lament with Paul, “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.”

We can’t blame others for our behavior. Plenty arises on its own: impure desires, greedy craving, selfishness. We stand guilty.

We realize our makeup. Paul wrote, “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.” He’s saying that sinful guy is not the real me. We have a split personality. The real me now is the Christian but as long as we walk on this earth “evil is right there with me.” We can’t shed it. Beating the body won’t do it. Martin Luther learned that as he struggled with his sinfulness in the monastery. You can shut yourself off from the world and temptations still arise. Living on a remote, uninhabited island will not escape sin.

Even when we do something good, evil mixes in. If we obey God’s law, we may feel pride and think we’re pretty good. We help another person so seek a favor in return or some recognition, that the recipient or even God owes us now. “I deserve

something good.” That pollution of our obedience with wrong is why the prophet Isaiah noted that “All our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” Even our best is tainted with sin.

Identifying our Old Adam as an alien part, not the real me, is not an excuse and does not eliminate our guilt. We still did the wrong and are responsible for the fallout and whatever consequences come.

It’s not a pleasant situation we find ourselves in. It’s frustrating. It’s a struggle. Paul called it “waging war” and spoke of being a “prisoner of the law of sin.” A real battle goes on inside of the Christian. (Note I said, “Christian,” for unbelievers have no such struggle between good and evil. They always follow Satan. That’s why it can seem the easier road.) Realize that Paul was writing this letter as the dedicated missionary for the Lord, not describing his pre-conversion self. We might think someone like that, who endured so much for the sake of the gospel would have it all together, but we can hear his frustration as he burst out, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” We echo his despair daily. Self-help books won’t solve the problem. Looking for some inner strength of character won’t do it either. We lack the power. Remember that the sinful nature takes its cue from Satan, who was originally an angel, a superhuman being. He will beat you every time you try to stand against him alone. We know and confess our sinfulness. It is a battle to the end.

III.

There is an answer as Paul exclaimed at the end of the text. Jesus brings victory. In fact, he has already won it. Remember his life. He “has been tempted in every way just as we are—yet was without sin,” the Bible says of him. He was our perfect substitute. He defeated Satan at the outset of his ministry when tempted those forty days after his baptism, using the Word of God. His actions there did not merely set an example. He did it for us. The sinless life continued throughout his earthly walk. He corrected false ideas in his foes and among his own followers. When the disciples argued about who was the greatest, he pointed to the servant mentality. His clear victory over the devil was visible when he cast out demons.

Opponents set traps for him, trying to get him into a misstatement or at least to take an unpopular side of an issue, but he always knew the answer and directed people to the Word of God. Move on to the end of his earthly mission as he faced death. His time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane was a real struggle as the horrible prospect of death on the cross bearing the sins of the world and suffering the pains of hell awaited him. Satan surely was attacking, urging the easy way out. “You

don't have to do this. Those sinners don't deserve it." Jesus prayed. Strength was given him to say, "Not my will, but yours be done."

He went to the cross in obedience to the plans made in eternity in the divine council of the Trinity. He offered the payment in full for the sins of the entire human race on that Good Friday, breathed out his last, but by early Sunday morning he rose from the grave. Now for sure Satan is defeated. No wonder Paul burst out, "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

It was all the work of Jesus but he gives it freely to each of us. In the Gospel reading for today he invited us to come to him for rest. We need respite, for the battle with our sinful nature wearies us and the defeats we suffer, the sins we commit, make a heavy burden. Jesus forgives every one of them. He paid the price already; we will not suffer for them. Peace is ours, peace for our troubled souls. Come to him daily for it, for we sin daily. Confess your sins and receive his mercy.

Know also that the ultimate, lasting victory is yours. Awaiting you is heaven where the struggle with the sinful nature will be over. No more temptations will attack so there will be no failures to plague your conscience. You and I will live in perfect service to our Savior, in the fulness of joy. We will be 100% Christian, 0% Old Adam. The battle will be over. The words of the text will reverberate in our minds and come joyfully out our lips, "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

As we live now in awareness of Christ's victory and our eternal future we are strengthened for our daily struggles with our sinful nature. We don't give up in the battle because Jesus lives in us. Through his power we will win some skirmishes as we look forward to the eternal victory. It's yours in Jesus.