



# 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

5<sup>th</sup> July 2020

## *The War Within and Without*

Genesis 24:38,42-49,58-67 | Psalm 45:10-17 | Romans 7:14-25 | Matthew 11:15-19,25-30

**What a terrible failure I am! Who will save me from this sin that brings death to my body? I give thanks to God who saves me.**

**He saves me through Jesus Christ our Lord.** Romans 7:24-25

### **Intro |**

Have you ever had to go to a destination, which you were aware required you to travel through a particularly difficult patch of road? It is easy for me to think of examples, travelling from Sydney's northern suburbs to the Airport, one needs to know which lane to be in, otherwise you could end up in totally the wrong part of the city. Or, if need to go to a place like Galston ... you need to drive through Galston Gorge, a hairy section of road with five hairpin turns with sharp drops on either side of the road.

Well as we journey through Paul's letter to the believers at Rome, we are confronted with the necessity of travelling through the embarrassing valley of our struggle with sin – where we are forced to admit to ourselves our utter powerlessness to win our struggle.

### **Point 1 | Even though we have been set free from sin's power, the inward struggle against sin remains**

Two weeks ago, we heard Paul teach on Jesus' complete defeat of sin's power over our lives (Chapter 6). We were reminded, not to let sin control the way we live. Instead, we are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive and free to offer ourselves to our new master Jesus.

That's great, I hear you saying inwardly! 'But, just the other day, I failed in this righteous and worthy quest ... I found myself doing something, or saying something, I knew I should NOT be doing NOR saying.'

Yes, I hear you. And thank goodness, Paul knows your frustration as well. You're not the only one who fails to live in the wonderful freedom which Christ obtained for us.

Today we read Paul's personal confession, his inward battle, with himself and his old sinful nature – a real war in which Paul admits to frequently not winning.

Before we look at Romans 7, we must remember that this portion of Paul's letter is not the whole story of the Christian experience - it is a part of the story. It is a significant and necessary part – like a windy road which descends into a dark, scary valley, which we must travel through, if we want to embark on climbing the mountain top of Romans 8.<sup>1</sup>

**Illustration:** In talking about journeys, I find again, that Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* offers a helpful analogy of this portion of the Christian life. Christian had just enjoyed a delightful rest in the Beautiful Palace, representing a time of refreshment and learning. But, the next section of his journey required him to descend a steep path down to the Valley of Humiliation, a path which Prudence advises, "often causes people to fall badly". The Valley of Humiliation, and the enemy Christian later encounters, is recognised to represent the struggle against sin.

By being brutally honest about his own struggle, Paul puts the microscope on our own struggle, and highlights three failures to which we often succumb.

### **Point 2 | In our struggle against sin, we fail to live up to God's righteous law**

Paul knew the law of God, and knew that God's law was good, holy and perfect. Yet, again and again he admitted to failing to do what he knew he ought to do.

He identifies that the reason is 'indwelling sin'.

As long as we are living in this world dominated by the power of sin and death, we will never be immune to the temptation of sin that is inside.

It is sin that makes us fail to do what we know is right.

It is sin that makes us fail to stop ourselves from doing what we know is wrong.

It is sin that makes us fail to live by faith.

Paul also reveals two more aspects of the struggle we too face as disciples of Christ.

### **Point 3 | In our struggle against sin, we fail to admit our powerlessness to defeat sin through our own efforts**

We also fail to admit our inability to defeat sin through our own efforts.

**"the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (v 19)**

Paul was admitting that no matter how hard he tried, no matter how many hours he prayed, no matter how many sermons he preached, there was an ever-present evil that was present within him.

This is often hard for us to understand. We know that we are called to submit ourselves to God's righteous laws, and allow God's Spirit to do a work of transformation in our lives. We know that we have been set free from sin's bondage. So, why is this evil still present?

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, when Romans 7 is read or preached, it is interpreted that Paul was describing his struggle with sin BEFORE he became a serious disciple of Christ, or before he became a Christian. This interpretation leads people to believe the struggle against sin describes a "sub-normal", or "unspiritual" Christian life, which must be disregarded so more attention can be given to Romans 8's life in the Spirit. However, I don't believe this is the approach Paul would want us to take. When we see how Paul describes his struggle, his repeated use of the pronoun 'I' in the present tense, leads most to believe Paul is presenting a unified pathway in which Romans 6, Romans 7, and Romans 8 are each crucial portions of the same road. For more on whether Paul was talking about his pre-conversion state, read <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/clarifying-romans-7-14-25-as-christian-experience>

The process of sanctification has been explained this way: the more mature as a disciple of Christ, the less you will sin, yet the more of a sinner you will realize yourself to be. Or, as you mature in Christ, your sin will become less obvious to others, yet greater will be your understanding of how deeply sinful you have been and you truly are.

This is why the aged and mature disciple of Christ, John Bunyan, included in his allegory, the battle of which Paul spoke about.

**Illustration:** When Christian venture into the Valley of Humiliation the enemy which he encountered is Apollyon. Bunyan himself admits that the combat Christian encountered with this evil character represented his own struggle with temptation and pride.

So, once again we are confronted with the reality of our inability and powerlessness to defeat on our own. All our striving, our good works, our Bible reading ... are futile in their ability to defeat our struggle against sin.

#### **Point 4 | In our struggle against sin, we fail to acknowledge our indifference to the sin in our lives**

Paul admits in verse 15, **"I do what I hate to do."** In other words, the law of God had done the good work of revealing the sin in his heart, yet it had also developed a deep and holy hatred of that sin.

This led Paul to despair, "what a terrible failure I am!" (v26).

Paul had caught sight of the utter ugliness of his sin. Because of his honesty, we also can catch a glimpse of the most insidious aspects of our struggle against sin.

That is, we often fail to confront our indifference to sin's lingering presence in our lives.

If you are like me, you may have grown up in the church. So, this will not be the first sermon on sin you have heard. Yet, the more we hear about sin, the harder our hearts can become, and we end up becoming quite insensitive towards the confession that we say each week.

When we say - **"we are sorry for our sins and turn away from them"** we can become a bit blasé, not giving serious attention to addressing our sinful habits, our weaknesses, which we intimately know are present, because we struggle with them on a daily basis.

After a while, we become so used to sin being in our lives, we become quite clever in rationalising its presence.

There are several ways we rationalize our sin.

We may begin to compare ourselves to others, using their sin as an excuse to make us feel better about ours.

Or we may claim we only sin in moderation, then we feel good about ourselves at our success in 'managing' our sin.

Or we may deliberately delay confronting our sin, taking for granted God's patient and graceful nature.

Lastly, we can try to explain our sin in 'spiritual' terms so that it sounds 'good and proper' rather than confront its ugliness.

No one likes having their sins pointed out. Our pride makes it easy to be tempted to defend ourselves in such situations. However, we must rise above this temptation and always be willing to deal honestly with the sin that is in our life.

**Application | Let's take seriously the sin that is present in our lives, have courage to confront it, confess it and seek to grow further in our journey towards maturity.**

The seriousness of my sin and its impact on my spiritual growth became a vivid reality to me about 10 years ago. I was in the middle of my Bible College degree and was studying the subject called Discipleship and Spiritual Growth. To aid our study we were asked to complete a self-assessment on where we were in our growth to maturity as a disciple of Christ.

When I completed the self-assessment questionnaire, I was shocked to discover, that I was not as mature as I thought I was. It was confronting and hard to swallow.

Yet, from that point on I became a lot more serious about my growth and set about to learn about the stages of spiritual growth in a disciple's journey.

Today, I have included with this message a similar self-assessment questionnaire to the one I was asked to complete.

Over the next four weeks I would like us to look more closely at what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and more specifically at the five stages of growth, from infancy to spiritual parenthood.

Over the coming weeks I'll also recommend some discipleship courses and material which you may like to work through on your own or in a group.

God is vividly aware of our struggle with sin because our struggle is meant to drive us into the arms of Jesus Christ. The Lord wants to strip us of our self-reliance and begin to trust in God's Spirit alone.

Does the fact that you struggle make you a failure? No.

Does it make you unspiritual? No.

Does it make you a sub-standard disciple of Christ? No.

Do you know what it makes you? It makes you an excellent candidate for the transforming grace of God.