

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Romans 7:18-25 on August 3, 2014 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Good Questions – Honest Answers

Today's Focus: Why Is It So Hard to Do What I Should?

“Grace that ~~saved~~ saves a wretch like me.”

Many of you know this about me... I love strawberries. It may not seem like much but I think it's a real treat when I get handed a little Styrofoam cup after church filled with strawberries that are left over from the hospitality table at the Victory Cafe...if there are any left of course! I just never get sick of strawberries.

That's why I got so frustrated this year when the weeds took over the strawberry patch in our garden. The weeds. Were. Everywhere. Thistles...everywhere. One foot high. And this malicious viny weed tangling itself around the strawberry plants. In just one week while we were gone camping earlier this summer those weeds had begun to strangle the strawberry patch so severely that you couldn't even tell it was a strawberry patch anymore. There were still a few berries, but they were buried in the tangled mess. I've never seen it that bad.

So you know what I did? At first, nothing. I mowed the lawn and with each pass by the strawberry patch I looked at it in disgust. And I thought, “Why bother? The berries were great a couple years ago but it's been a constant struggle lately. What's the use? Maybe I should just kill it all. I've got some of that stuff in the shed that'll do the job. And then I'll just till it all under. Start over. Because do I really want to keep fighting what seems to be a losing battle?”

Friends, do you ever feel that way about your spiritual life? Do you ever have the best of intentions but then fall short of them or fail to follow through with them? I mean do you ever look at the list of things you want to do and think, “Why bother trying to be a calmer more patient person while driving on my daily commute? Why put in the effort to be a more attentive parent when I'm at home? What's the use trying to be a more loving spouse anyway? Why bother trying to fight against this or that temptation when no one else seems to even care anymore? Do I really want to keep fighting what seems to be a losing battle anyway? I've resolved to try harder and I've tried telling myself, “Come on, do better!” but I keep failing to follow through. Why can't I do what I want to do?”

Friends, you ever feel like this? Like you're looking at your spiritual strawberry patch looking for juicy red berries and all you see is thistles and weeds?

This might come as somewhat of a surprise to some of you, but I do sometimes. In fact a lot of times. I do...and I'm a pastor. Oh sure I can stand up here on a Sunday morning and smile, but that doesn't mean I don't have my own struggles come Monday. I have to admit it that my own heart is made up of the same stuff as yours.

In fact today I'm going to introduce you to a man just like you and me...except, well, he's in the Bible. Check that...he actually wrote part of the Bible. He wrote these words today that we find in a letter that he wrote to Christians in Rome (Romans 7:18-25). Listen to what he says:

¹⁸ *For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* ¹⁹ *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.* ²⁰ *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.*

Did you hear that? Here's the first thing that I think is really important. He says, *I have the desire to do what is good.* I'm assuming that if you're here at church today, you hear that and think, "Yep, me too. I want to do what's good." "I want to learn how to stop hurting the people I care about." "I want to learn how to better show love to my spouse so that my actions will be received more as loving." "I want to find the strength to break free from the addiction that enslaves me and the patterns of behavior and the poor choices that I keep making that set me back." "I want to go to church more, start reading the Bible, maybe even pray even." Perhaps even, "I'd like to figure out how to confidently talk to people about Jesus and find the courage to help others learn about God." "Yes I want to do good, Pastor Ben!"

Well friends, me too. There is so much good I want to do...and not just as a pastor, but in my other roles like as a husband. Or in my role as a father. In my role as a friend and a next door neighbor. I want to encourage people more. I want to spend more of my time helping others. I want to be more diligent having personal devotions and praying through prayer request cards and reading my Bible. I want to be a good husband, a good dad. I have the desire to do what is good and pleasing to God.

But here's the problem. Here's what our friend in the Bible says, and you'll have to decide for yourself whether this is true in your life too, ok? *For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.* ¹⁹ *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.* Now here's the thing. You know who's saying this? A guy named Paul. The Apostle Paul. Ever hear of him? Converted by Jesus Christ himself. Paul...one of my biggest role models in fact. See, Jesus has given me the amazing privilege of getting to start a church from scratch, with his help of course. I am so blessed. I get to preach to you. I get to start a church.

Well Paul got to start...dozens. He preached the gospel to thousands. He also suffered so much for the sake of Jesus and the cause of His church. So, humanly speaking, Paul's the man. We're talking like 1st team All-Time Missionary. Hall of Fame Pastor. Inspired Biblical Author. I mean I've got a silly little blog and about 30 people each week read it. Paul though, he wrote 13 books of the Bible that have endured for over 2,000 years and have been read by billions.

And yet he says, *For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.* Can you relate? And this isn't like Paul the frat boy talking here either. This is Paul the veteran missionary. Mature Christian Paul. He writes this towards the end of his life, more towards the twilight years of his ministry when, I don't know about you, but I'd expect him rather to say something more like, "Dear brethren, I have arrived. I've come to that point in my faith journey when I've finally discovered the secret of sinless living. No longer do I face temptation. No longer do I have to struggle. The good I've always wanted to do this I now keep on doing every day all the time."

See friends, do you understand this? We're asking the question today, Why Is It So Hard to Do What I Should? And one thing we need to ponder is just this fact: It's always gonna be hard. A struggle. Christianity wasn't designed to be a smooth, easy, yellow brick road to glory. It's more like the yellow brick road with flying monkeys overhead and a wicked witch lurking around the corner. It's a path to glory all right. But it's a path marked by temptation and trial and the cross. It's a strawberry patch full of thistles and weeds. It's a journey on which we face a constant struggle as we engage three big enemies: the devil, the world, and our sinful nature. And this sinful nature, that's what Paul's talking about here. He's saying this sinful nature you and I will always have with us.

And here's what it's like. It's hostile to God. It customizes temptations armed against you like trained terrorists hell bent on sabotaging your soul. It's why so often even in the good things that we try and do, we often discover that we do them tainted with some self-serving motive. We say something nice because we hope to get something in return. We do something kind because we want to get something in exchange.

Yet even here as we are confronted with the reality that our faith journey will be a constant struggle, we get our first glimmer of real hope. Did you catch it? Paul says, ²⁰ *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.* Did you get a sense of what he's saying? It's subtle. But it's significant. He says, "When I do what I don't want to do, that's not really *me* me doing that bad thing. That's my sinful nature doing it. That's not who I am. That's just sin living in me. That's the sinful nature part of me. But that's not the real me."

Friends, this is huge! When Paul says, "*It is sin living in me that does it*" you know what he's implying? He's saying, "Folks, I've still got a sinful nature and I don't like it. Yet at the same time there's something else I've got. Let's call it, The Real Me. You see, It's who I really am." Well what's that, Paul? "You might call it the New Self. It's my Christian self. My identity in Christ." So what are you saying, Paul? "I'm saying this means I am saint. Who I really am is a saint—someone who is fully forgiven and totally perfect and seen as completely holy through Jesus Christ. I am a dearly loved child of God through holy baptism. I'm a son of the one true King who has placed his family name upon me in love, who has adopted me as his own and now says, 'Ah my dear son, well done, good job, for everything good that I want you to do I see that you have already done since now I see you covered with the goodness of your brother Jesus who lived for you and bled for you and won the victory over sin, death, and hell for you.' So who am I? I'm a saint in God's sight... a saint who happens yet to also still be a sinner."

Friends, can you relate to Paul? There's a struggle here, huh? A tension. A battle. Maybe even in certain areas of your spiritual life it's more like a long, drawn out siege. And this isn't necessarily a bad thing. It's a good thing. To continue to struggle against sin is a healthy, yes even necessary, part of the journey to heaven. And so I'm going to put out it there to you like this: If you feel no tension anymore, if you sense just a wee little struggle against your sinful nature, if you're not locked into battle against the temptations that Satan and society wants to use to sabotage your soul by arming your sinful nature against you, then dear brother or sister, consider this your spiritual reality check today.

If you are going down a path in life and there's no sign on the road that says, "Struggle up ahead!" then you may not be on the path that leads to glory. And I know what some of your pushbacks are on this. But it won't do any good to say, "Yeah but this is just how I was raised. Or this is just how my dad treated my mom. This is how my mom dealt with her problems. This is just what people in my family say to each other." And it won't do any good to say, "Well I was just born this way and you can't tell me something's wrong if it feels so right." And it won't do any good to console yourself with thoughts like, "As long as no one gets hurt, what does it matter what I do in the privacy of my own home or in the thoughts of my mind?" It won't do any good. Here's why. Here's what Paul goes on to say:

*²¹ So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; [Remember... "I want to do what is good!"] ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. Those are pretty intense words pictures aren't they? *Waging war* and *making me a prisoner*.*

So where does this lead us then? Where should it lead you if what I've said today hits home for you and you think, "Yes, I can relate to this guy, Paul. Sin has waged a war against me and many times I have surrendered my ground. I too have failed to do what is good. I too have done what is evil. I too have a sinful nature and sometimes I'll freely admit... I have grown weary in my battle and I have made excuses and I have felt like giving in or giving up."

Dear friends, if this is where you've been led today, then let me lead you yet to Paul's conclusion. Listen to what he says, ²⁴ *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?* Now there's a flattering self-assessment, huh? But this is what he's saying. "Because I have a sinful nature that is thoroughly saturated with sin, a sinful nature that brings upon all that I do the curse of death, I can in no way save myself. Not now. Not ever. I am a poor, miserable sinner. I am wretch who needs to be rescued."

Friend, is that how you would describe yourself too? Well maybe not in quite those same terms I suppose. But if you recognize your great need—that you too have a part of you in which you would say there is no good thing, then these final words of Paul belong just as much to you. Hold them close to your heart for they are yours! They are a present gift wrapped for you by the Holy Spirit who inspired Paul to confess: ²⁵ *Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

In another place Paul says it like this: *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1 Corinthians 15:56-57). Did you hear that? Victory! God gives us the *victory!* How can this be? Because everything good that God's law says we must do, we can legitimately say that we have done through our Lord Jesus Christ! You see as a human being like us, Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, yet he was without sin. As the sinless Son of God, Jesus went to the cross, and he overcame. He took on the devil's temptation to give in or to give up, but he pressed on. He took on the jeers of the crowds and the temptations to come down from the cross, but he hung on until with his very last breath he cried out, "It is finished!" And he won!

His death paid the price to buy your forgiveness. His resurrection from the grave was the proclamation of your victory and your freedom and the spoils of a war won which he now freely gives to you and me by faith. Peace with God. A place in God's family. A clear conscience. The privilege to pray. The passport of your baptism. Citizenship in heaven. And a new perspective on life that the struggles that you face while you are still in this body of death are worth it. The biggest battle has already been won. Now Jesus wants to walk right with you through the skirmishes that you still face.

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. Let me try and explain this with a story.

During the Civil War era in our country there was a Northerner who bought a young slave girl at a slave auction. As they left the auction, the man says to her, "You're free!"

In amazement she looks at him and says, "You mean I'm free to do whatever I want?" "Yes," he said. "And to say whatever I want to say?" "Yes, anything." "And to be whatever I want to be?" "Why yes indeed!" "And to go wherever I want to go?" "Yes, of course! You're free to go wherever you'd like!"

And she looked at him intently and replied, "Then I will go with you¹."

Dear brothers and sisters, since we are free in Christ, we are now free to go through life with *Him*. This is what the Real Me, that New Me, the Who-I-Really-Am wants to do. "I will go with you, Jesus." This is what Paul means when he said earlier, *in my inner being I delight in God's law*. And this is how it works. As you spend time with Jesus through his word, over time, he will teach you how to better show love to God by loving others. He will help you figure out, "What does love look like right here, right now to be Jesus to this person?"

Jesus will help you stay strong in the face of the various temptations that you will face. He will give his Holy Spirit who will teach you how to pray. He will help you to carry your cross no matter how uniquely shaped or unfairly heavy it might seem to you.

And as you walk through life with Jesus by coming regularly to church, you will hear his called servant of Jesus, a sinner just like you, just like yours truly, who will constantly remind you of how your sinful nature was dragged to the font and drowned through the sacrament of holy baptism; Your pastor will assure you of how much Jesus loves you as often as you receive his body and blood in holy communion—that price so infinitely precious and valuable that he paid to set you free.

And so then as you walk through life with Jesus, the struggle against sin will always remain, but God's grace will always remain too. For you are no loser in the sight of God. You are a winner, dearly loved, through your Lord Jesus Christ. God's amazing grace that once saved a wretch a like me...will continue to be God's amazing grace that saves you all the way to glory. Amen.

¹ Story titled "Freed!" found on page 118 in a delightfully written and illustrated little book called "Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing" by Sally Lloyd-Jones. Published by Zondervan, 2012.

My Next Steps

Points to Ponder: There is nothing that God wants you to do that you have not already done in Christ!
#ActiveObedience #Gospel #ImputedRighteousness

Treasure to Share: ²⁴ *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?* ²⁵ *Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Action to Take: In what area of your life right now has the devil customized his battle plan to take advantage of a particular weakness of your sinful nature? Understand that this battle may feel more like a siege. It may even be a lifelong struggle against this or that sinful tendency. Your battlefield of temptation may be different than someone else's. And on many days—until the day you die—you will know from the experience of your heart some bitter defeats at the hands of temptation.

However, as a dearly loved child of God, He invites you to pray for His strength on that very battleground where the devil wants you to surrender. He invites you to remember that because Jesus won the victory in your place through His perfect life, death, and resurrection in your place, you are an overcomer who is forgiven! A winner! You have been set free by a Savior who loves you. As you go with Jesus your Savior and armed with His word, He will give you His strength to renew the battle against temptation each and every day until He finally calls you home to heaven—all by His amazing grace.