

*All Roads Lead Here: What Kind of a Christian Are You? Part Two*

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*Isaiah 40:28-31; Luke 15:3-7; Romans 7:14-8:2*

Our final Scripture reading today is Romans 7:14-8:2, as we continue our study of the passage from last week. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 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. 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. 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. 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. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God -- through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”

There's a difference between a battle and a war. When I think of World War II, my mind goes to key battles we learned about in history class – Pearl Harbor, D-Day at Normandy, maybe Stalingrad or Midway. A Popular Mechanics article listed the “20 most important battles” of World War II. Go to Wikipedia and you'll find hundreds of battles listed across the world. And those several hundred battles each included hundreds if not thousands of skirmishes. It's impossible to wrap our minds around how huge World War II was. We think small because the war itself was so complex.

Last week and this week, we're studying the war inside the Christian over sin. Last week, we explored why this passage describes a Christian, not an unbeliever, and we saw how this passage can assure us in our faith and salvation. If we genuinely love Jesus, if we have given up on saving ourselves, and if we are at war with the sin nature still clinging to us, we can have confidence of God's work in our lives.

But this is not just a battle Paul is describing – it is a multi-faceted war with battles going on in our lives every single day. And because the war is between the new life God has created in our hearts and minds and the old life of sin still in us, it's not business – it's personal. We've got to understand this passage so we can fight the good fight and battle well against the enemy of our souls, relying on Jesus to achieve victory. This week, we're going to look at the text for key clues that can help us in the war.

First thought for today – *sin is alive in us, waiting to pounce, and to obey God, we've got to kill sin day after day.* See what the passage says about sin: it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin *living* in me. Nothing good *lives in me* – in my sinful nature. Sin *living* in me does it. Evil is *right there* with me. Sin is *at work* within my members. We are claimed by Christ, we are known by Him and saved by Him, but salvation doesn't kill sin within us instantaneously.

But the death of the sin nature in us is the goal. As we learned in Romans 6:2; we have died *to* sin; we aren't to live in it any more. Romans 6:11 says, "Consider yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Jesus says in Luke 9:23-24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me... whoever loses his life for me will save it." The author of Hebrews says in chapter 12 verse 1, "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles..." James writes, "Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you." 1 John 5:18 – "We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him." Jesus and His disciples consistently preach that the sin in us has to be put to death.

We kill sin not only because it is evil but it is active. It wants to destroy us. 1 Peter 5:8 says, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." Sin is Satan's stand-by, wanting to eat us alive. Before Cain killed Abel, before the first murder in history, God warned him, "If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." It will never give up, never stop searching for a way to attack us. The only way to win is to kill sin utterly.

This history of God's people shows there can be no quarter to sin. We can't take sin prisoner. When the Israelites entered the Promised Land, they were faithful to God, but they made fatal errors. They were tricked into a peace treaty with some of the Canaanites. They didn't conquer all of Canaan as God commanded – they decided, "Oh, here's good, we have enough land." They didn't do all God told them to do to wipe evil from the land they inherited.

What happens? Sin springs up among the Israelites when the remaining Canaanites lead them to marry their daughters and worship their gods and trade in their godly ways for the ways of demons. Israel's history is one story after another of God rescuing His people after they make a mess of things because they haven't dealt with sin from their midst. Whenever they play with sin – boom – they find themselves in chaos again, in chains, oppressed by their enemies.

This is a war, not a battle, and the fight is intense. Jesus said we are to take our cross and die to ourselves daily. Countless battles make up a war, and each day is combat against sin. Some days we move three steps forward; other days we move two steps back. Yet killing that sin off whenever we see it, working to destroy it in our lives – that's the goal. Sin still lives in us, but we are no longer its slave – we are its enemy, determined to destroy it.

And that leads us into our second key point: *the transformation of our souls takes time*. Paul is not a baby Christian. He has fought sin for a while. We come back to the place described by this passage time and again. We kill off a particular temptation; we no longer feel compelled by an area that once troubled us; we've killed off a foot soldier of sin. When that happens, when we win a victory against sin, we rejoice. We know God's love and enjoy it.

But inevitably, some other sin we haven't dealt with pops up – usually not a new temptation, but one God points it out to us. We've gained ground and now we've moved into a new theater of battle. There are so many sins and temptations and ways our sin nature tries to spring up that we can't deal with them all at once. We couldn't; it would be too overwhelming. But God deals with each one in turn. As that next sin rears its ugly head, we come back to this spot – first we lament that there is still sin in our life, we cry out to God, we go to war, and we slowly but surely gain ground against it.

Think about the apostle Peter. Peter was bold and brash and proud, a braggart. He was quick with an answer and brave with his words. But that pride was sinful; he counted on himself rather than God. It showed up when he told Jesus he'd never let the Jewish authorities kill him, and again when he told Jesus he would never ever deny Him. What happened? Peter denied Jesus three times. He is utterly broken. Jesus has to restore Peter after the resurrection. We see a different Peter at that point – he's strong but humble, confident not in himself but in his Lord.

Fifteen years after the resurrection, a new sin pops up for Peter. Let's be honest here: the people of Jesus' day were really racist. When Jews and Gentiles worshipped Jesus together, that was an amazing breakthrough. But a group pops up that says, "You can't follow Jesus unless you follow Jewish customs." At first, Peter sides with them. Paul has to go to Jerusalem and call Peter out for backsliding on God's command to reach all people. Peter comes around and the church rejects the idea of following Jewish tradition. But Peter hadn't reached perfection.

Pastor R.C. Sproul related how he dealt with this ongoing battle in his own life. When he became a believer in college – not having been raised in church – God changed certain things in his life immediately. His language cleaned up; he no longer felt compelled to some of his previous sins. But his vice was smoking – and he knew God was calling him to give up. It took him 45 years to kick the habit completely. In his commentary on Romans that he wrote in his 70s, he mentions he still confesses his sins daily because he still battles them.

Patently fighting the war on sin has always been difficult, but in our instantaneous era, it's even harder. We don't have to wait five minutes to eat between microwaves and fast food restaurants. Things we had to learn in a library are now on the Internet. You can shop, date, and talk anywhere on your phone. You can blaze through a season of a TV show in a day. We don't know what it is for things to take time. Everything's fast and convenient. But killing sin in our lives is neither. There is no way to rush the process. It happens on God's timeframe because He works to kill sin in our lives and shows us things along the way that transform us.

Don't fall for the lie that you have sin in your life that's hard to overcome because you haven't prayed enough or read your Bible enough or fasted enough or served enough, or that you can speed up the process by doing those things. They are means of grace in our lives, we can and should and must do them, but they don't speed up the process...they *are* the process. God wants us to do those things in order to grow closer to Him. As we grow closer, sin has less of a pull on us. But the process takes time.

No matter how much you practice, you can't become a master musician overnight. To get a bachelor's degree in engineering, you have to take years of math classes. To consistently have victory over the sin that's been a part of your life for decades will take time. It is a gift from God, but also a skill that requires practice.

When we hear that, we wonder, do we have enough time? What if I'm not transformed into Jesus' likeness by the time I die? And the answer to that is not to worry. If you are doing the work, if you are participating in the means of grace, if you're on the path, even though you won't finish killing off sin before you die, you will be OK. Here's why, the last line of today's passage: "*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*"

It is going to take us our whole lifetimes to be free of sin, and while we consider *ourselves* dead to sin, *sin itself* isn't dead. But we can live in joy. We can shout with Paul, "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" It's summed up in those two words – no condemnation. We do not sit under God's judgment despite our failures because God has chosen to rescue us.

The secular world believes Christians are hypocrites. On Memorial Day, a married couple from our gaming group came to our home. One went to a Pentecostal church, the other a Catholic church, but they are now both atheists. The lynchpin for the gentleman was the hypocrisy in his own family. A relative who never read the Bible called it "his favorite book" on Facebook. His extended family threw extravagant parties while not helping others, rarely attending church, yet still calling themselves "good Christians." It was painful to hear about.

The worst publicity for the Christian church are those who aren't Christians at all but who use the church for their own ends, using it as a means of judging others and hurting people. I fear for those people. As our call to confession from 1 John 1 said earlier, "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." If we believe going to church is good enough, if we condemn others but think we are just fine, we are not Christians. Jesus' harshest words were to the Pharisees. His condemnation of them was about their hypocrisy.

But the accusation of hypocrisy isn't fair for genuine Christians. And there is no condemnation from God for those who are in Christ Jesus. Why? Because of the second half of the call to confession from 1 John: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Think about Paul here: he is anguished that he does not do what he desires to do in Christ. He despises his doublemindedness and cries out to God for mercy and help. The cry of the Christian is, "Lord, I'm not who I want to be and not who you made me to be. Work in me so that I have integrity through and through."

It's not hypocritical to say one thing and do another if you admit it and are convinced of your need to change. It's not hypocritical to not live up to God's standards if you are honest about your sins and you seek God's redemption. The words of my former handbell director, Dr. Parker, still ring in my head constantly: we are not perfect performers but forgiven followers. If we claim to be perfect performers, then we are condemned; we are hypocrites. But if we claim no righteousness of our own, if we trust we are saved by God's grace alone and cry out to Him for salvation – God is faithful and just to forgive.

No condemnation. Do you live in the reality of no condemnation? For a lot of us, that's just as hard as fighting sin. We think back on things we've done, the lives we've lived, the sins we've committed, and we think, "How could God possibly love me? I've lied, I've cheated, I've stolen, I've slandered, I've done cruel things out of anger, I've lusted, I've disrespected my parents, I've coveted what my neighbor has. I've broken all the Ten Commandments, in spirit if not in explicit detail. I deserve to be miserable."

But God doesn't see it that way. God sent Jesus to us not so that we would feel guilty – we were already guilty. God sent Jesus so we would be free. God sent Jesus to pay our sin debt so He could welcome us into His family and wrap His arms around us and show us the depths of His love. God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – values us, cares for us, and loves us with an everlasting love. For everyone who belongs to Jesus, there is no condemnation, just the richness of a relationship with Him that will last forever.

We honor our parents on Mother's Day and Father's Day, but they are hard holidays too. Lots of us didn't have the greatest relationships with our dads – or we did and they're gone now and we miss them terribly. Not easy. But there is a reason the first person of the Trinity calls Himself Father. He is the perfect father – we can call Him "Abba," "Daddy." He does what is in our best interest. He only disciplines us for our own good and growth. He doesn't call us names or belittle us -- the only names He calls us are "son," "daughter," "dear child," "beloved." He calls us to obedience so we might experience the blessings that naturally come from following His ways. And when we fail, there is no condemnation – just the call to continue coming to Him, walking with Him, knowing His love and sharing it with the world in return.

The war with sin isn't easy, with more battles than we can count. But because of Jesus, we know who will win. So let us fight the sin nature within us with boldness and confidence, settling for nothing less than total victory – because that victory is ours through our Savior and Lord.