

Dealing with Inner Turmoil

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 14th of October 2001.

The preacher is Paul Bacca. His sermon is entitled Dealing with Inner Turmoil and is based on Romans 7.14-8.4.

The problem is Christians' sin.

There was a great preacher of the Victorian era in London called Charles Spurgeon. He used to pack out what I think was called the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London.

And one woman came up to him after a service and said to him that she did not sin. She was sinless. And Spurgeon was a large man.

[1 : 31] And he stood on her foot. And he said, or wrote later, her sinless perfection departed her like the morning dew.

The problem is Christians' sin. And from time to time there are individual Christians or groups of Christians or movements within the Christian church that claim to have conquered sin in new ways. John Wesley, for example, taught a lot about holiness to the extent that some people took it a little bit further than him and claimed that they could reach the state of sinless perfection.

In England in the last hundred years there's been the Keswick movement, holiness movement. And then in other places the Victorian Christian living movements that have claimed in some sense to conquer sin.

Sometimes that happens in charismatic or Pentecostal churches where some sort of advocated second blessing means that Christians have risen above sin in their lives to some extent.

[2 : 40] But in the end the problem is Christians still sin. In Romans chapter 5 we saw a couple of months ago the penalty for sin is paid for by Jesus' death and resurrection.

So that the penalty that we ought to pay as sinners Jesus has paid for on our behalf. We are justified or declared righteous in God's sight by God.

And then in Romans 6 we saw a few weeks ago that Jesus not only paid the penalty for our sin but he's broken the reign of sin. It's dominion. And now Christians live under the dominion of Christ and not under the dominion of sin.

And so Christians where we're told in chapter 6 must not let sin reign in them. But the problem is Christians still sin.

Expose people to the law of God and what happens. Some people think that more rules, more laws will somehow limit or conquer sin.

[3 : 45] So you give people the law of God, the rules about how to live as God's people and somehow sin will be conquered or overcome in their lives. But far from limiting or conquering sin exposure to the law of God reveals sin in our lives and in some sense even makes us more sinful.

So the law says do not covet. We find that we covet. And sometimes the law that says do not covet actually stirs us up even more to covet. God's law reveals sin but is powerless to stop it or conquer it.

And we've seen that already in Romans 7 and other places. God's law in summary tells us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

But when we hear those words as we did earlier in this service we realize that we have failed that. That is the reading of God's great commandment exposes our own failure and sin.

We read the second great commandment to love our neighbor as ourself and again we realize that we have failed. God's word, law, exposes, reveals our sin.

[4 : 54] The problem is Christians sin. And even if we want not to sin even if we're determined not to sin even if when we get up in the morning we wake up with a renewed pledge and determination to live a life that is perfect and keeps all God's laws in perfection when we go to bed if we're honest

with ourselves we know that we've failed no matter how resolute our decisions were.

We fall short day by day of the glory of God. Now the struggle that Christians exercise against sin can take a number of different paths.

Some Christians just give up the fight and they blithely keep on sinning. Sometimes they reconcile that in their minds by saying well God's on about the business of forgiving.

It's his job to forgive so I'll keep on sinning because God will just keep on forgiving. And at every point Paul has denounced that sort of view. For example at the beginning of chapter 6 some Christians in their struggle against sin get discouraged because they feel inadequate.

They feel frustrated at the level of sin in their life. Sometimes it leads them to doubt God's power and reality. Sometimes it leads them to lack assurance that they belong to God.

[6 : 20] I'm never good enough for God. Every day I seem to fail Him. God can't keep on forgiving me. He must have given up on me by now. Sometimes it makes people feel that God is absent.

Sometimes it makes Christians look enviously at other Christians who seem to have their act together and their lives much more godly. So it leads those Christians down the path of despondency.

Another path that some Christians take is the path to try and find a magic formula to change. Some sort of added spiritual power to conquer sin in their lives.

And so they look in different places for spiritual power. Maybe in some sort of sect or some sort of manifestation of spiritual power or miracle or spiritual gift or something like that.

sometimes it means that people will cut themselves off from the world and become part of a holy huddle or sanctified sect to be free from the potential threat of contamination from the evil influences of the world.

[7 : 25] But none of those paths are the paths for Christians to live. We're not to go down the path of blithely sinning thinking God will just keep forgiving. We're not to go down the path of despondency and despair as though God is absent and we're not good enough.

And we're not to go down the path of looking for spiritual power in other places either. The struggle against sin in our lives is real and it is intense.

It's true that the penalty for sin is paid for by Jesus. We're forgiven. It is true that the reign or dominion of sin is broken by Jesus. He now exercises dominion.

But still, despite those things, sin remains powerful in our lives. The problem is Christians still sin.

And the victory of Jesus over sin through the cross and resurrection is in one sense not fully realized. What God has done for us in Christ is to make us citizens of heaven under his dominion.

[8 : 32] We saw that in chapter 6. He's transferred us from slavery to sin as our master into slavery to God as our new master. We've changed dominions from the dominion of sin to the dominion of God and that has been done by the work of Christ.

But the old master and old habits still attract. The old master's sin still exercises a grip. He doesn't want to let us go from his dominion into the dominion of God.

We belong in heaven under God's dominion. But we still live in the world where sin is a powerful force. And that is a daily tension for every Christian to face.

Some people think that becoming a Christian is the answer to all of the problems of life. Become a Christian, life will be easy. It will be full of blessing. And all the problems that we face will disappear.

But in one sense when you become a Christian actually you get more problems. So be careful if you're thinking about becoming a Christian. Because when you become a Christian you come to live a life of tension that you did not know before.

[9 : 40] Because a person who's not a Christian can live their lives for themselves fairly happily in effect. But become a Christian and find yourself under the dominion of God and you suddenly find that your life is in tension between living under God's dominion and the grip of sin.

And becoming a Christian means that suddenly you realize that your life is full of a tension that you maybe didn't realize before you became a Christian. It's that tension that is addressed in this section of Romans chapter 7 and into chapter 8.

The issue in effect is the powerlessness of God's law. If you haven't got the Bibles open you may like to open to page 918. In the pew Bibles in front of you under the seats in front of you page 918 Romans 7 verse 14.

A Christian Paul says is somebody who desires to do God's law but is not able to do so. The spirit is willing that the flesh is weak is the saying that we sometimes use and that could well describe what

Paul is saying here.

So he says in verse 14 that we know that the law is spiritual. It's a good thing the law of God but I am of the flesh sold into slavery under sin.

[11:02] I'm a sinner. The law is good. It points to the perfection of God. It points to what I ought to be doing but I sin. The tension gets unraveled a bit further in verse 15.

I do not understand my own actions for I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate. That is I resolve and intend to do what God's law requires because that as a Christian is what I want to do but I find that I fail.

Paul I don't think is saying here that at every single action and thought he fails but that he fails completely to do what God's will entails. He falls short of God's glory time and time again.

That is he's beginning to realize the depth of his own sinfulness and surely we can resonate with those words. Surely we know times when we resolve never to treat our husband or wife badly like we did last time and then maybe days or weeks or minutes later find ourselves falling into the same trap.

Maybe we resolve to love our children better and not to be angry with them as it happened the day before and we find a few days later that we have fallen into the same pattern.

[12:18] Maybe we resolve not to lie or evade the truth and then find that we fall into the same pattern. Maybe we resolve not to continue into falling into sexual temptation and then find some time later falling into the old habits and sins and failures of the past.

The list could go on and on but surely we are aware of things that we have done that we know are wrong and we kick ourselves when we do it yet again and we resolve not to do it but find that we are weaker than we thought.

One of the great con jobs I think of modern times is to think that we are strong people that humanity is strong and capable but morally we're not. Morally we're weak and bankrupt and Paul is expressing that in verse 15.

I do not understand my own actions. I do not realize until I'm exposed with God's law just how weak I was. I'm unable to do what God requires.

Now ironically Paul's failure to do what the law requires actually leads him to say how good the law is. Good because the law points us to the perfection and the law reveals to us our failure.

[13:36] That is a good function of the law. He says in verse 16 now if I do what I do not want I agree that the law is good. It's not bad because it exposes my failure and sin.

It is good because it's a good thing to have your sin and failure exposed and the perfect standards of God revealed. And then he goes on in verse 17 but in fact it is no longer I that do it but sin that dwells within me.

Paul is analyzing this tension as though he in his innermost being wills and intends to do what God wants. But he finds his physical fallen body keeping on in the patterns of sin.

And he says in effect it's not me that does that it's sin dwelling within me. Now we could say well Paul's just abrogating responsibility here. He's saying well it's not me that's at fault it's sin it's his fault don't blame me.

I don't think that's what Paul is saying but Paul I think is saying that the real Paul at his heart is now a Christian. He belongs to God and he loves and intends to do what God wants.

[14:44] He delights in God's law. But he finds his old person is still sinful. The real Paul is a Christian. But the real Paul is also still a sinner and it's sin in him that leads him to keep on practicing sin.

Paul is in effect describing as though he's torn apart by two forces. The force of desiring to love God and the force of sin or evil within him.

His inner self is inhabited by God's spirit as he'll go on to say in chapter 8 but his physical nature keeps on practicing old habits. Paul reiterates what he said in verses 18 to 20 in effect.

For I know that nothing good dwells within me that is in my flesh. I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do.

Now if I do what I do not want it is no longer I that do it but sin that dwells within me. Sin in the past had been reigning. It had been exercising dominion.

[15:52] But Jesus' death and resurrection had broken that dominion. But the full effects of that are not immediate much as we may wish they were. And so the tussle goes on as sin refuses to let go its grip.

It's lost its dominion. Jesus has conquered. But sin still wants to keep hold. Notice how Paul describes that in verses 21 to 23. 23. So I find it to be a law or a principle that when I want to do what is good evil lies close at hand as though sin is like a personal force almost.

For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self but I see in my members my physical body if you like another law at war with the law of my mind making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members in my body.

In June 1944 the Allied forces won a decisive victory in World War II. I think that's about when they landed in Normandy.

But it was another 11 months before VE Day occurred in May 1945. And in those intervening 11 months though it was apparently fairly evident that the Allied forces had now finally won the war many of the bloodiest battles of that war were fought.

[17:14] To a point that is a helpful analogy for understanding what Paul is on about here in Romans. D-Day the decisive day the day from which the victory was evident is the day of the resurrection of Jesus on the cross from the dead 2,000 years ago.

The reign of sin is broken Christians are transferred to the dominion of Christ but it's not yet VE Day or V Day sin is still powerful and still fighting some of its bloodiest battles we might say.

The final V Day is yet to come the day of Jesus return when God's people will be taken perfect at last to God's heavenly kingdom. And we live in the tension of the two ages between what we might call D-Day and V Day.

The decisive victory is won for us already. We don't need to fight a victory. We don't need to look for another victory. The victory is won. But the mopping up operation is underway.

The full effects of the victory are yet to occur. And we live in the tension between those two days as though a civil war is raging within us. Jesus is exercising his dominion over us as Christians and yet sin is still fighting against us and keeping some sort of grip.

[18:35] How does Paul say we respond to this tension? Not by yielding to sin, giving up and just blithely sinning, thinking it's God's job to forgive. Not by giving up our faith in despair that God is actually being defeated or is absent or weak.

And nor should we be looking for power elsewhere, another victory through some other means. But rather, Paul says, we should respond to this tension by longing for, aching for, if we like, the final V-day, the day when Jesus will return and the day when Christian people will be taken perfect to heaven.

So Paul says in verse 24, wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death? He's looking forward to a future act, not another victory because he's talked about the victory of Jesus already breaking the dominion of sin, but he's looking forward to that time when he'll be released in effect from this sinful body on earth and taken perfect to heaven, the day of Jesus' return.

His cry here is not a cry of despair, though some have understood it that way, but of eager longing. It's not a cry of hopelessness, but indeed full of hope.

He is looking forward to future rescue when sin is finally eradicated in all its forms. Notice how Paul immediately answers his rhetorical question in verse 25.

[20:09] Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Paul is longing, he knows the victory is won already by Jesus, and he's longing for that day when that victory will be complete in its effect in his life.

Notice too that the power for this victory comes from Jesus, not another source. He's not pitting in a sense a Holy Spirit's power against Jesus' power. The victory comes and will come through Jesus Christ.

His frustration at his own failure makes him look to Jesus, and that is how we should be dealing with the tension of sin in our lives.

And this is not an immediate end for sin. Paul is not anticipating that Jesus is about to return, or that somehow he's about to click into sinless perfection. So he immediately goes on to say the end of verse 25, so then with my mind I'm a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I'm a slave to the law of sin.

He knows Jesus has won the victory, he's looking forward to the day when the victory is complete, but in the meantime he knows that he is facing this tension or inner civil war, being a slave to the law of God in his mind, but a slave to sin in his flesh.

[21 : 26] He knows that there is no immediate end to the problem of sin in his life. Some people find that hard to work out.

How can he give thanks to God through Jesus Christ and then immediately say those words? So there are some liberal scholars who say, well this must be a later edition, we must take it out of our Bibles. It's a fairly small minded thing I think.

Ours is a world of instant gratification. What we want, we want now or yesterday. and everything is now instant. Patience is a virtue that is in sad decline, it seems to me.

Now we cannot be sure, perhaps, why Christians are not made instantly perfect the day or minute they become Christians. But certainly the perspective here is that the frustration that we have with sin in our own lives ought to be developing within us patience, faith, trust, longing for Jesus' return. We'll see more of that in a fortnight when we deal with this middle part of chapter 8. There's one other response that Paul is anxious that we do not fall into as we struggle with sin.

[22 : 43] That is, he is keen for us to evade the feeling that we are condemned. And that's easy to feel. Every day we sin, every day we go to bed thinking we have failed in some way to God.

Every Sunday we confess our sins. It is easy to undermine God's forgiveness and think, really, I'm just not good enough for God. I stand in the end condemned.

He must have given up forgiving me. Surely I've exceeded 70 times 7. But yes, we continue to sin, but no, we are not condemned for our sin.

chapter 8 begins, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And oddly, that verse is tied into what precedes it.

There is therefore now no condemnation. It might look a bit illogical to say that. Here am I struggling with the tension of sin, Paul says, therefore I'm not condemned. You might think that doesn't quite logically follow.

[23 : 45] But given the wider perspective of Romans, it does. Because we do continue to sin, but because of what Jesus has done for us, we are not condemned by God. We are justified, we are declared righteous in God's side, even though we are still sinners.

Paul is in fact emphatic here when he says, nothing condemns us, nothing at all condemns us, no condemnation is there, is the emphasis of chapter 8 verse 1.

And notice too that this assurance that Paul has in this verse is not grounded in us. Paul is saying there's now no condemnation for me because I've finally achieved sinless perfection.

Far from it. Nor is he even saying there's no condemnation for me because I'm a basically good person. Far from it. He's just said there's nothing good within him. But the reason he can be so confident and assured of his standing with God is because of what Jesus has done.

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. not those who are good, not those who have conquered sin, but for those who are in Christ Jesus.

[24 : 54] He has won the victory and in him there is no condemnation. Paul goes on to add one more thought to this. He goes on to show that God does not entirely leave us weak and powerless in our sin.

The future V-Day, the day when we will be taken perfect glory to heaven, has already begun to break into the present. We have in a sense been given a guarantee, a deposit of that final day by the giving and gift of the Holy Spirit in us.

Paul will say more about this as we'll see next week. But here he goes on to say in verse 2, 2, God will walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

It's important to get this right. As we saw a fortnight ago in the first part of chapter 7, Paul is not pitting the Spirit against the law of God. As though now for Christians throw out the old law of God. You have freedom in the Spirit to do whatever the Spirit leads you. Not at all. The perspective of Paul here is that the Spirit of God applies the law to us.

[26 : 34] It empowers the law if you like. The law itself was weak. We could not keep it. The law was powerless to make us keep it. But God now, through His Spirit, applies the law to us as the Old Testament indeed anticipated.

God's Spirit would change our hearts and write God's law on our hearts to enable us to do it. Now it's not always easy to see our own progress in holiness.

Some cleaning jobs are a bit like that. If you're cleaning around the house or garden, you can spend a lot of effort and you think, I've not actually achieved very much. It looks as messy, as dirty as it was before, which is one reason why I never do any cleaning.

In some areas of my life, I can look back and see how God has changed me, how my character has been changed for the good. They're hard to find, but there are a couple of areas.

But let me say, in many areas of my life, I still struggle and seem powerless to change, and it seems that I'm a little different from how I was 10, 20, 30 years ago.

[27 : 43] And at times I am sore tempted to despair of the sin in my life. It is all too easy to say, verse 24, wretched man that I am, who will rescue me from this body of death?

But what this passage has reminded me of is this, three things. The struggle itself against sin is evidence of God's work within.

As I do the things that I hate, as I fall back into the same sins which I loathe, that struggle tells me that God is at work.

For it is far more dangerous spiritually not to struggle, not to feel the frustration of sin, to be complacent at our sin. Because if the tension is lost and we keep on sinning, then that is a more dangerous sign spiritually than feeling overwhelmed by the tension within.

The struggle itself is evidence of God's work within. Secondly, it is easy to say, verse 24, and be despondent at our sin.

[28 : 53] It is harder immediately after to say the beginning of verse 25. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Well, this passage has reminded me that I must keep longing for Jesus' return, keep looking to him, and yearn for that final rescue from sin.

But thirdly also, the beginning of chapter 8 reminds me that I must draw on the strength of God's Holy Spirit to lead me into paths of obedience.

You see, the gospel's not just about being forgiven. We've seen that time and again in Romans. The purpose of the gospel, as we saw in the very first sermon in chapter 1, is that we live lives of obedience of faith.

That's why Jesus came, not just to forgive, but so that we live lives of obedient faith. There is a slogan on cars, you might even have one on your own car, Christians are not perfect, just forgiven. It is a deficient slogan. Christians aren't perfect, that is very true. But Christians are not just forgiven. Christians are forgiven, but there is more, an essential more.

[30 : 12] Christians are forgiven, but are aching for perfection, longing for Jesus' return, and are already being changed, maybe in small measure, by God and his spirit within, for the obedience of faith.

Christians are not perfect, but nor are we just forgiven. We are longing for Jesus' return and the perfection that will bring. But even now in the interim period, God's spirit has begun to do a painfully slow, clean-up job within us.

Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for your law which exposes our sin and sinfulness and failure to keep your perfect standards.

We thank you indeed for the tension that we feel when we fail you, but yet long to do what your law requires and to meet your perfect standards. We thank you too that the victory of Jesus on the cross means that one day certainly when he returns will be taken perfect at last to your heavenly kingdom.

But we thank you too that even now as we wait with eager anticipation for that day, the spirit of Jesus within us is beginning to enable us to live lives of obedient faith.

[31 : 39] Help us to keep struggling against sin. Help us to keep looking at and longing for Jesus and help us to rely on the power of the spirit in us more and more.

And we pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen.