The Battleground

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[0:00] One of the most profound things that I have ever learnt as a Christian was that following Jesus is and always will be a battle, at least until Jesus comes back.

It's going to be challenging. And I remember during a series that we actually did here at St. Paul's a few years ago, looking at the book of Revelation. Revelation is the final book in the Bible.
It's a prophetic vision that God gives to John about the end times. And there were two really significant things that I walked away from that series with. The first one was that heaven is going to be better than I've even begun to imagine.
It's going to be more exciting and more satisfying than even my wildest dreams. There'll be no sickness, no pain, no hurting, no goodbyes, no tears. It will be amazing. And I can't wait to get there.
But the second thing that I learnt or that sharpened for me in that series was I realised that right up until that moment when Jesus returns and comes to fix things that are broken and right wrongs, until then, life will be broken and wrong.
[1:04] Until heaven, our earthly existence as people who are trying to follow Jesus, trying to live for him, will be marked by opposition.

The opposition that's out there, the people who try and limit our ability to love and follow Jesus, to worship him. The opposition of a world that is marked by the consequences of sin in the form of things like sickness, natural disaster, all of which can sometimes make it more difficult to stand up and say, God is good.
God loves me. God is gracious. And there's a whole other sermon series right there. But the other opposition is internal opposition.
The other thing that can make following Jesus a battle is our own weakness and our own failure. It's our own doubt. It's our own anger at God for not working the way that we want him to.
The point being, following Jesus is a battle. Now that's not supposed to scare you off. Heaven's worth it.
[2:09] What Jesus did on the cross is worth it. Jesus himself is worthy. The point's not to scare us off, but to focus us, to open our eyes.

Given it's a battle, how do we battle well? How do we stand in the midst of the fighting and persevere and stand firm? How do we live now that we've been forgiven, that we are adopted, that we're in the family and that we're waiting for heaven?
How do we do that well? That's the struggle for the Galatians. They've heard the gospel. They've started following Jesus. They were excited. Their lives changed drastically.
But then they realized it's actually harder than we thought. It's hard to stay the course. There's people trying to convince us to do other things. There's our own questions, our own doubt. It's the question that every follower of Jesus must ask.
It's the question Paul wants to wrestle with right now. How do you battle well as a follower of Jesus? How do you stand firm in the freedom that Jesus has purchased for you?
[3:13] Well, let's look at three things in this passage. Firstly, how do you battle well? You need to know where you are. It took me all of a month, but you're about to get your first marathon illustration.

After this, you might be excited that I'm leaving. When I was running my half marathon a month ago, there was a lot of things conspiring to try and make me give up. It's fairly unpleasant, to be perfectly honest with you.
The lack of conditioning in my muscles, the capacity for my blood to carry oxygen to all the parts of my body that need it, dehydration. But the biggest barrier in the half marathon was in my head.

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Because it's literally nearly two hours of arduous physical exertion. Just the same thing, step after step after step. 21 kilometers, and every kilometer feels like it's getting longer and further away. And I find myself having this internal discussion as I'm running. There's nothing else to do. Internal discussion about, will I keep going? Should I give up? Is this worth all the effort?
[4:18] And every time I pass a kilometer marker, there'd be a big number on a bit of cardboard. There's a burst of optimism. I'm suddenly thinking, I'm making progress. Off I go. A little bit quicker for 100 meters.

And each one of these markers is about five minutes apart at the pace that I run. And that's five whole minutes of focusing on how uncomfortable I am and doing a million different little mathematical equations about how far there is to go, looking for an answer that might be slightly encouraging.
Trying to break it down into ridiculous little segments or something like that. And in amongst this internal discussion, I catch myself hoping that every time I can't see around a corner, or every time there's a hill where I can't see the other side, I start hoping that this next corner or this next hill will have another kilometer marker.
Now, the reality is, I've only been running for about 10 seconds since I passed the last one, but you start to lose track of time when you're just thinking about markers for two hours straight. And it's that hope that I'm almost there that costs you more than anything because it's false hope.
I mean, it's completely unrealistic hope. It doesn't make sense at all. If I turned around, I could see the marker that I just ran past. A thousand meters is a long way, just quietly.
[5:34] One kilometer is an uncomfortable distance, especially when it's kilometer 15 or 16. And so it's completely ridiculous that I would think just around this corner, this would be the shortest kilometer in the history of the world.

But I convince myself that it's going to be there. And so I pep up. And then as I come around the corner and it's not there, and suddenly I can see hundreds of meters down the road and there are no markers, I feel incredibly crushed.
It feels like an eternity since the last marker, but there is none coming. And so I'm not as far progressed as I thought. I'm not as far progressed as I want to be, as I need to be for a little bit of affirmation and encouragement.
And it's the same when it comes to following Jesus. We start following Jesus and we trick ourselves into thinking we're through the worst bit. We're through the hardest period of change.
We're through the hardest bit of opposition. We're through the hardest bit of realizing that there's stuff in us that's embarrassing and shameful that we need to repent of and confess. And we trick ourselves into thinking we're nearly there.
[6:41] One more challenge. One more sin I've got to overcome. One more family member making fun of the fact that I follow Jesus. We think all the hard work is done and that if we just get through this one struggle, it will be easier.

But when you're around the corner, there's another struggle. There's another sin that you are not on top of, that you need to confess. There's another part of your life that you probably need to repent of and acknowledge to God and start working on.
And the reality is that what the Bible teaches is until we get to heaven, there will always be another struggle. There will always be parts of our lives, parts of our own desires that will be pushing us away from God.
Things we have to fight. There will always be another hill, another corner, another sin, another doubt, another challenge. Following Jesus is and will be a battle. And so when Paul says in verse 16, walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.
It sounds so simple. Just walk by the Spirit. And then you won't do all these things that you're embarrassed about or that you're ashamed of or that you've been doing your whole life. The instruction sounds easy, but then he follows it with verse 17.
[8:02] He says, The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit. And the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. And here's the key bit. They are in conflict with each other. So you're not to do whatever you want.

It's important if we're in a battle, and we are, to know that we're in a battle. It's important to have our eyes open to that reality.

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Conflict is where we live as followers of Jesus. This new life, this freedom that God has won for us, this desire and opportunity to please and to serve God, is fighting with everything that we used to be.
It's fighting with a lifestyle, a learned lifestyle, that puts us at the centre, that loves ourselves and our own comfort more than it loves Jesus. Deb mentioned this last week.
She took us to Romans 7, where Paul talks about the torture of deep down wanting to serve God with every minute of every day, but knowing that so much of the time you compromise.
[9:06] You say, I'm going to serve God with everything, but first there's a few things that I need to do to look after me. Conflict is the reality for the Christian. So we need to expect it.

In fact, if there's a lack of moral conflict and inner wrestling in your life following Jesus, that's probably not evidence that you've made it.
It could be a sign that you've conceded defeat. Your default setting will be to go back to your old way of life, and conflict is the reality of the one who is progressively becoming more like Jesus.
The only time that that old desire, that old way of life will be fully destroyed is when we get to heaven. Conflict is the reality for those who follow Jesus.
Internal conflict. But this next verse is really, really important. Verse 18. If you're led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.
[10:14] Let me say this really clearly. Where you are as a Christian in this battle, there is conflict, but there is no condemnation. There is conflict, but there is no condemnation.

You will struggle, you will wrestle, you will fall sometimes, but there is no condemnation. This is more a paintball skirmish than an actual war. If you've never done paintball, it hurts, it's uncomfortable, it'll leave a mark, it'll do some damage, but it won't kill you.
If you succumb to temptation, it'll be painful. There'll be consequences. You might damage relationships, but it can't undo what God has already done for you.
It can't uncrucify Jesus. It can't put him back in the tomb. So as a Christian, you battle with life insurance. You battle with a guardian angel.
You battle with a medic team. You battle in such a way that you are safe. We battle as those who have been adopted. And so we struggle and grow slowly, but surely completely secure that we are and will always be loved by our heavenly father.
[11:30] In our great moments of victory over sin and temptation, and in our moments of despair and failure, still secure in the love of our heavenly father, battling well means knowing where you are.

You are in conflict, but there is no condemnation, which means when you fail, you're secure.
It means when you realize that you haven't grown as much as you wanted to, when you catch yourself falling back into an old habit, you have the security to confess that, to admit it, and to get up and try again.
You have the freedom to hand over guilt and to take the next step, to face the next challenge, to have the perseverance to keep going around the next corner. Knowing where you are spares you the disappointment of thinking life was supposed to be easy and then being shocked when actually you need to fight.
You need to battle. You need to persevere if you want to become more like Jesus. If you want to live in the freedom that God has got for you, know up front, it will be hard.
[12:44] It will be difficult, but you can do it secure in the love that God has for you and with your eyes focused on the destination that you're hoping for. Battling well means knowing where you are.

Second thing, it means focusing on the real issue. Have a look at verse 19. The acts of the flesh are obvious.
Sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like.
I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. So Paul's digging into this conflict for us a little bit, giving us a deeper view and we experience this conflict in the two halves.
So the first half is what he calls the acts of the flesh and when Paul uses that word flesh, he's kind of meaning our basic carnal desires, our default human setting, the thing that everyone in the world goes after until they meet Jesus and discover that he's better.

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[13:54] It's our internal default instincts, it's the way we operate before we meet Jesus. But there's two really interesting things in these verses. First, have a look at what's listed in these verses.

You've got some obvious ones, some ones that we all assume God's not going to be happy about, idolatry, witchcraft, sexual immorality. But there's also a couple of more subtle ones, maybe even things that we would see as kind of acceptable in small doses.
Envy, jealousy, the odd bit of drunkenness. selfish ambition is even sometimes considered a virtue in our culture.
Look after yourself, get what you deserve. But look where the focus is in this list. See, the emphasis isn't on those specific acts, it's just a list of examples.
The focus is on the source of those acts. acts. They come from the flesh. They're evidence of a life that is driven by rejecting God.
[15:02] They're evidence that the center that makes the decision, the center that desires things and then pursues things, is not in line with God, is not submitted to Him as King.

The real issue is not the acts. He does the same thing when he moves on to the positive half in verse 22. He says, but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.
Against such things there is no law. So you've got the acts of the flesh and then you've got the fruit of the Spirit. That is acts and fruit that are produced by.
They're the result of something that's going on deeper inside. See, the conflict that we experience as Christians, the battle that we need to fight in, that we need to commit to, that we need to struggle in, the disagreement that we feel, the tension between our old way of life and the new life that we have in Jesus is not a battle that is waged in our hands and feet.
It's not a battle that is waged in your eyes or your mouth. life, it's deeper. It's a battle for your heart. It's a battle for the very core of you.
[16:22] And so if we spend our energy in this battle focusing on our hands and feet, focusing on the acts, focusing on the fruit, we're missing the real issue. See, the jealousy that I feel or the jealousy that I act on, the kindness that I don't feel or the kindness that I don't act on, they're both the result of what's going on in my heart.

Which means I can't fix them by just trying harder or changing my behaviour. It might kind of put on a show for a little while. I might be able to feel really jealous and pretend that I'm not.
I might be able to fake kindness. But if drunkenness is my issue, I might somehow force myself to stop drinking and that's a good thing but I actually haven't dealt with the issue.
There's a reason that I'm doing that. I have to dig deeper. That's why in verse 24 he says, those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.
What's called for here is not a slight change in behaviour but it's a killing of sin, a destroying of desires that drag us away from this new life that Jesus has purchased for us.
[17:44] We need to put that sin to death and in order to do that we've got to ask the question, why do I get drunk? Why am I jealous?

Why am I immoral? Why do I look at things that I know that I shouldn't? What is it that I desire that I think getting drunk or being angry or jealous or whatever it is will deliver for me?
That's the heart question. Only if we begin to engage that question can we begin to deal with the actual enemy. Heart change is what is needed and heart change is something that can only happen by the grace of God and in the power of the Holy Spirit.
Here's what the process looks like. As you ask that deeper question and maybe there's something in your life right now that you can insert in this process. As you dig behind the acts of the flesh or the absence of the fruit of the Spirit and you discover what it is that you want that you're hoping those things will deliver, the Spirit whose main role is to help you and me and all of us know and see Jesus in his all satisfying joy-giving majesty, the Spirit shows you how Jesus meets that desire more completely and more fully than whatever it is you're doing instead.
But you need to know what that desire is before you can go through that process. Otherwise all you'll ever focus on is am I being envious, am I being jealous, am I being kind, am I being good and you can try to do those things but deep down you'll still be jealous and you still won't be kind and eventually you'll get weary and you'll go to your default.

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[19:42] If you never dig down to see the why behind your sin, if you never look into where the battle is really raging, then the hatred you feel for some annoying person will be really difficult to see how Jesus has anything to do with it.

You need to ask why. Because in the gospel, in Jesus, we have everything we need. Our problem is we haven't worked out what it is we're chasing and so we can't see how Jesus provides and satisfies.
Conflict in the Christian life, the battle to live as people worthy of the name Jesus is not a battle that's fought in our hands and feet. It's a battle that goes on in our hearts.
And because you lack the power to change your own heart, focusing here means that we can battle well by being humble and dependent on God for that transformation. It means rather than keeping our weaknesses and our failures and our sins secret and trying to fix them before we let anyone else know that they're an issue, instead of doing that which won't work, we can go to God first and regularly and say, God, I failed, I need your forgiveness, I need your help, and I need you to change my heart.
I need your spirit to help me see that Jesus is better. I need your spirit to grow in me a love for Jesus that drives my actions, that produces fruit.
[21:14] I need your help to be loving, kind, good, patient, joyful, peaceful, faithful, gentle, self-controlled. They're called fruit of the spirit because they grow slowly but surely in the life of a Christian who is being led by the spirit that's in them.

Battling well means knowing to expect conflict but not condemnation. It means focusing on your heart, which means depending on God to do the work of transformation.
And the last thing, battling well as a Christian, means getting ahead of the game. Or to use Paul's language, it means keeping in step with the spirit.
Verse 25. Since we live by the spirit, that is since we've been given life by the spirit, that's what Galatians has taught us, let us keep in step with the spirit.
Now it took me a month to give you the first one, you're going to get two in one day, two running illustrations. The other running that I do, apart from trying to do a half marathon, is a weekly park run with a bunch of people in this room.
[22:27] There's a bit of healthy competition amongst us about who can be the fastest. It's supposed to be a race against yourself, but nobody actually believes that. And you get a time every week as to how fast you can run the five kilometres.

If you don't believe me about the competition, note how many people are talking about their times at morning tea. Anyway, it's a five kilometre time trial. And in my marathon training, a good win about investing all those hours was that my times got better and better and better and I had something to brag about and gloat about.
And then I set myself a bit of a target about what time I would get to. I wanted to get faster than 22 minutes. And I got kind of close and I was pretty happy with that.
And then after my marathon I thought that's where I'm going to focus my energy. And I had a couple of weeks break because my body was kind of exhausted. But the first time I went back I ran like quite a bit slower than I'd been running beforehand.
I was very frustrated and so I went home a little bit disappointed and agitated and I thought I'll go back next week and I'll get that goal. Because once I've got that goal I can relax. Job done. The next week still nowhere near my 22 minute goal.
[23:32] Very disappointed and frustrated. And as I'm running around the five kilometres trying to beat this time I'm getting angry at myself. Like what are you doing? Just put some extra effort in. Run faster.

But there's some physiological issues like having to throw up next to the track that were limiting me getting to my time. And that's because the reality is what I do in that moment actually counts very little in the scheme of things as to whether or not I can actually produce the result that I want.
The factors that influence whether or not I can get that goal and get victory if you like in that moment is the work that's done beforehand. It's the whether or not I ate KFC the night before I did. It's whether or not I ran during the week or two weeks or actually three weeks beforehand I didn't. The preparation is where the victory is won. In the battle you might have all the willpower in the world but if you have not prepared yourself and strengthened yourself you will lose.

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You will be defeated. We have life in the spirit so the call is to keep in step with the spirit. To constantly be led by the spirit.
[24:47] To have the spirit shaping us and equipping us so that when the temptation comes we know that Jesus is better. When the failure comes we know that God is gracious and will still forgive us.

So what does it look like to keep in step with the spirit? How do we do that concretely? How do we prepare for the battle? Two things. Sharing and sowing.
Sharing and sowing. Firstly sharing. Spirit led life is community life. Have a look at verse 26.
Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. Brothers and sisters if someone is caught in a sin you who live by the spirit should restore that person gently.
But watch yourselves or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens and in this way you fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks they are something when they are not they deceive themselves.
[25:52] Each one should test their own actions then they can take pride in themselves alone without comparing themselves to someone else for each one should carry their own load. Spirit life, living by the spirit, being led by the spirit, keeping in step with the spirit has to do with how we live together.

The first thing that Paul goes to after saying keep in step with the spirit is how we perceive ourselves and how that impacts the way we relate to and love one another.
Don't provoke each other out of some sense of superiority. Don't envy each other out of feelings of inferiority because both attitudes reflect conceit or self-absorption or focus on me.
This echoes back to chapter 5 when Paul talks about being free and what it looks like to live free is to lovingly serve our neighbours. The spirit that God has given us didn't draw us into this little quiet private one-on-one relationship with God.
It drew us into a community that would be the people of God. Plural. The point being that keeping in step with the spirit requires you to be engaged with the people of the spirit.
[27:14] Engaged with Christian community. Preparation for the battle in your heart, the battle to resist temptation, the battle to deal with your failures is best done in partnership with your brothers and sisters in Christ.

Carrying each other's burdens. Gently correcting one another. Not comparing ourselves but pointing each other to the freedom of the gospel, to the obedience that the gospel enables.
And here's a little challenge for us in this. I think it's much easier for us to carry someone else's burden with them than it is for us to ask for or accept help for our own burdens.
We're happy to offer help but accepting help is a little more difficult. It's much easier to recognise sin in someone else and to gently seek to restore them than it is to have somebody recognise sin in you and gently seek to restore you.
We live in a culture that prides itself on independence. But we serve a God who delights in and designed us for interdependence.
[28:32] The challenge for us as a community and as individuals, will you ask for help? Will you share your burden? Will you hear correction?

I remember when we were having kids in that crazy bit when they're first born and you just don't know which way is up and you can't sleep. And lots of people graciously and generally offered meals, offered to babysit Bailey when Hudson was born, offered to do whatever we needed for help.
And we'd have conversations about that and we're like, oh, that's really nice. And some people really graciously forced their help on us. And I mean that when I say it. They forced their help on us and we had to receive it.
But I remember having conversation. We'd be sitting there going, surely somebody else needs help more than us. We're surviving. And we were. We were tired, but we were surviving.
But what if that's not the goal? What if God's goal for you is not that you survive in your own strength? What if in that moment what we were doing was actually robbing ourselves of the blessing of journeying together and robbing our church family of the blessing of doing what we're instructed to do when it comes to living in line with the Spirit?
[29:56] Keeping in step with the Spirit requires us to be in Christian community. And that doesn't mean attending church once a week. Being in Christian community means having substantial,

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honest relationships with other Christians.

Having people that you feel secure enough to ask help from. People who you trust enough to confess sin with. Maybe the people in your community group.
Maybe others that you have long-standing relationships with. But either way, ensuring that you are there to share the burden when they need it. And they are there to share your burden when you need it.
We are in a battle. And the Spirit's power to win that battle is built into the kind of Christian relationships that are described in these verses.
Where we journey together. So keeping in step with the Spirit, staying ahead of the game means sharing your life with your brothers and sisters in Christ so that you don't battle alone.
[31:00] And the second bit it means keeping in step with the Spirit is about sowing. Have a look quickly with me at verse 7. Do not be deceived. God cannot be mocked.

A man reaps what he sows. Catch the seriousness of that soundbite there. Be easy to just skip past it and focus on the reaping and sowing. God cannot be mocked.
It's a timeless principle. You get out what you put in. You sow apple seeds, you get an apple tree. You sow rocks, you get nothing. As followers of Jesus, it is mocking God to sow that which is not honoring to him into your life and then to act surprised or disappointed when you don't see the fruit of the Spirit being produced.
Verse 8, Whoever sows to please their flesh from the flesh will reap destruction. Whoever sows to please the Spirit from the Spirit will reap eternal life.
The things you fill your life with, the things you watch, the people you spend time with, those are the things that you are sowing into your character.
[32:12] Those are the things that will produce either the acts of the flesh or the fruit of the Spirit. If you spend all your time with people who encourage you to be dishonest or arrogant or competitive or to compare yourself, if you watch things on TV or movies that fill your mind with violence or hatred or immorality, what do you think you will reap?

Now the point isn't that we should all go live in the desert and hide away from the big bad world out there. Remember the battle's in here so we're taking the battle with us even into the desert. Plus God sent us into the world to call people out of darkness into light with the hope of the gospel.
The point is you reap what you sow. And so if your heart's desire is to truly live a life that honors God, a life that shines so brightly that others are drawn into the hope and joy of the gospel, then you need to be sowing to please the Spirit.
Spirit. And the Spirit's desire is to make much of Jesus. So if you want to please Him, fill your life with Jesus.
Fill your mind and your heart with Jesus. Soak in His Word. Pray. Spend time just hanging out with Him. Avoid the things that you know will lead you away from Him. Walk out of the movie that you've paid good money to watch if you can see that that movie is sowing into you things that are going to lead you away from Jesus.
[33:44] Stop doing that hobby if it's become something that is sowing selfish ambition or jealousy in you. Gather with and invest in Spirit-filled, interdependent relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ.

Serve and allow yourself to be served. Confess your sins and entrust yourself to Jesus who died and rose again so that you could be forgiven even as you battle, even in your moments of doubt and failure.
Walk with Jesus who has already won the war. We are in a battle. So we need to know that there will be conflict.
And yet we are secure. There will not be condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We are in a battle. And that battle is not fought in our hands and feet but deep within us, in our hearts.
So we need to pray. We need to depend on God and on the power of His Spirit within us to shape and mould us to win the battles, to stand firm. We are in a battle.
[34:58] So we need to get ahead of the game. We need to listen to the Spirit. We need to share our lives with one another, journey together, share burdens and we need to sow for a future harvest.

We need to take the things in that will produce the fruit that we desire most. Since we live by the Spirit, since we have been given life by the Spirit, we have been brought to life through the death

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and resurrection of Jesus which gifted us the Holy Spirit.
Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with it.

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