

The Christian's Most Dangerous and Decisive Battle.

Text: Rom 7:14-25

1) The nature of this battle

Suggested Hymns:

2) The cost of this battle

358, 371, 352, 207, 347

3) Winning this battle

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Romans 7:14–25, ***14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. 15 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. 16 If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. 17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. 19 For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.***

20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. 22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God — through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

Approaching the end of his life, St. Paul looked back upon that part of it which he had spent as a Christian and said, ***“I have fought the good fight.”***¹ These words tell us two things. First, St. Paul was a fighter, and secondly, he was a good fighter.

It may sound strange to you, but it is a fact, every Christian must be a fighter. The Bible, when it speaks of the life of the Christian, is thickly set with

military terms. Jesus, our Leader, is called a Captain. Captains lead the soldiers into battle. The Christians are told that they must contend for the faith; they must fight for it.² Paul calls to that young man Timothy, “*Fight the good fight of faith.*”³ Again, St. Paul tells all Christians that they must have on the ‘*breastplate of righteousness and must take the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit.*’⁴

Now, what is this fighting to which these terms refer? Which battle, fight, and warfare does Paul mean? Our text tells us just that, and adds valuable instruction.

Let us therefore study this whole matter, asking God the Holy Spirit Himself to teach us that art by which we may conquer and obtain the victory. Our theme is *The Christian’s Most Dangerous and Decisive Battle*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Christian’s Most Dangerous and Decisive Battle

The Nature Of This Battle.

Firstly, let us consider what it is not.

It is not a battle such as the armies of one country fight with material weapons of offence and defence against the armies of another country. The Scriptures tell us that “*The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but spiritual.*”⁵

Nor is it the battle that is carried on between contending parties through pamphlets, writings, articles, editorials, during political campaigns, when one political party fights against the other. They do not use material weapons, as guns and swords and gases, but they use the press, TV and the radio. But that is not the battle spoken of here.

Nor is it such a battle as people fight in court, when one party fights against another to gain legal title to a piece of property or to gain possession of an inheritance, etc.

Nor does St. Paul mean that battle which sometimes goes on within the mind of a person, when he is torn to and fro by conflicting interests, such a battle as we see raging in David when he had to fight against Absalom. On the one hand, he knew he had to defend himself against this wicked son of his; but on the other

hand, his fatherly love and interest in his boy caused him to dread any harm that might come to Absalom.

We are therefore told that David said to his generals when they left for the war against Absalom: *“Deal gently for my sake with the young man Absalom.”*⁶ And when he had gained the victory over Absalom, instead of rejoicing, he lamented because his son Absalom, his bitter enemy, was dead, and he cried out: *“O my son Absalom! O Absalom, my son, my son!”*⁷ That is indeed a severe inner conflict, which has confused the reason of many people. But even this is not the battle that St. Paul means here in our text.

Nor does Paul mean that battle which goes on at times in a person who is fighting a bad habit. On the grounds of natural reason he sees that his bad habit will ruin him, and yet again and again in his cowardly weakness he gives way to that bad habit. Many a person has been torn to and fro by such conflicting interests in his life. But none of these are the battle that Paul speaks of here. What is it then?

Yes, let us now consider what the nature of this battle is.

St. Paul describes the nature of this battle when he tells us, ¹⁵ *For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.* And again, ¹⁹ *For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.*

Again, ²² *For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.* ²³ *But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.*

There you have the description of this battle which takes place in every Christian. Every Christian has learned what St. Paul learned, and which he expresses here in our text, that there is something good which he wants to do, namely, that he delights in the Law of God after the inward man.

The Christian does not want to be a thief, he wants to be honest, after the inward man. The Christian does not want to worship gold and silver; he wants to worship the true God, the Triune God, whom he loves, and in whom he believes.

The Christian does not want to curse and use profane language, swear false oaths, and consult fortune-tellers, but he wants to love the Word of God and

rejoice in it. He knows that, that is the truth, that it is the food and drink for his famished soul.

The Christian does not want to be an adulterer, a filthy outcast; he loves purity and wants to be just as pure as the angels, as pure as God would have us. He therefore prays: ***“Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.”***⁸ The Christian knows it is shameful to wish evil on our neighbour and to wish to dispossess our neighbour and to take from him his goods and blessings. According to the inward man, therefore, the Christian’s greatest joy is in goodness, in following after goodness, in learning about it and practising it.

But that is not all there is to a Christian. In every Christian there still lives what lived in St. Paul, which St. Paul expresses when he says: ***“I am carnal, sold under sin.”*** O what a fearful confession that is!

“I am carnal,” that means, I have my old carnal nature; I am flesh, born of the flesh. I have that sinful, wicked, depraved, and corrupt nature in which I was born; still lives within me! I feel it, it is not perfectly dead. Sin is a living thing which moves itself within me and troubles me and causes me to do the very things I hate. I hate idolatry; it is so low and shameful and contemptible. I want to say to the true God, as written in Psalm 73:25, ²⁵ ***Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.*** But again and again there arises in my heart the love of money, the love of honour among men, and the ambition to be praised by men.

The very thing that Jesus condemned in the Pharisees, namely, that they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God, that I see in myself.

And that cowardice that you see in Peter when he denied the Lord, that cowardice lives in my heart. There are times that I know it would be difficult for me to confess my simple faith in Jesus. And envy and jealousy are so silly and childish and wicked; yet before I know it, there arise envious thoughts and jealousy within my heart.

I know that I would be much happier if I were content; I know that discontent is shameful ingratitude toward the Giver of every good gift, and yet, and yet, — discontent arises in my heart.

I know that I ought to love my neighbour as myself, — I expect him to love me as he loves himself, — but I would be a lying hypocrite if I should say that I love my neighbour as I ought to love him. I cannot say that, when I hear evil of my neighbour, I feel just as distressed as if I heard it about myself. I cannot say that when success and prosperity come to my neighbour I feel just as happy as if it had come to me myself. See, how carnal I am, ***“sold under sin”!***

Oh, how difficult it is for me to forgive my neighbour his simple offences, when God so graciously forgives me everything every day! How carnal I am, ***sold under sin!*** I have often said about the Word of God: ***“More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.”***⁹ That is when the new man, the inner man, was speaking in me. But there have been times when I have been tired or weary of the Bible, unwilling to go to church. I preferred something else. Oh, how carnal I am, ***sold under sin!***

And now this is the fight: these two natures, the inner man and the carnal nature, live in every Christian, and these two battle for supremacy. How they fight! The carnal nature wishes to rule and throttle the inner man, and the inner man rises and fights against the carnal nature. Every Christian is conscious of such a battle going on.

Any one who tells you that he has no such carnal nature, that he feels nothing within his heart except true love and devotion to his God, and true unselfish love toward his neighbour, such a person is no Christian at all.

He is entirely in the power of the devil, who has blinded him to such an extent that he does not even know that he is a sinner. He is so blinded with wickedness, so steeped in filth, that he never prays: ***“Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, And cleanse me from my sin.”***¹⁰ He is such a liar that he even deceives himself, as the Bible says in 1 John 1:8, ***“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”***

It is true, sometimes, while under the influence of God’s Word and the company of edifying Christian friends, singing the hymns of the Church, the inner man grows so strong for the moment that a Christian may almost persuade himself that his carnal nature is dead. But it is not very long before he finds out

the carnal nature is not dead. Soon thereafter some self-denial is required of him and he is so unwilling to perform it.

Instead of being able to say, *“I delight to do Your will, O my God,”*¹¹ he would rather say, *Let somebody else do that; I have done enough.* Again, a Christian at some time may say, I am willing to bear my cross. O, yes, if the cross is not very severe, then it is not so difficult to say: *“Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?”*¹² But when God presses to your lips the bitter cup that seems to take every earthly joy from you, and gives you in its stead physical suffering, mental distress, loss, and misery, then you are not so willing to pray that most difficult of all petitions, *“Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven.”*¹³

O, let us not deceive ourselves. If we are true Christians, this battle goes on within us every day — this very battle described here in the text by St. Paul. And, praise God, it is true, according to the inner man we delight in the Law of God, we consent to the Law that it is good.

But after all, we are *“carnal, sold under sin.”* It is only after a constant struggle that we even partially and imperfectly obey God’s Law. Dear Christian friends, that is the nature of this battle which we daily fight, — sometimes very hot, sometimes not so severe, but always there, — fighting the fight that Paul fought, that the Christians fought before us: the battle between the sin which so easily besets us and the spirit which delights to do God’s will. Do you yourselves know something of this fight?

2. The Christian’s Most Dangerous and Decisive Battle

The Cost Of This Battle

We would make a mistake if we did not now pay attention to something of which the text also speaks. When Paul mentions this battle, he cries out, *“O wretched man that I am!”* In these words he calls attention to the cost of this battle, to its fearful suffering, and to its distress.

Think of what Paul suffered. He tells us in one of his letters that he suffered many things; he fought with wild beasts at Ephesus. My friends, that was no small matter to be face to face with a wild beast and to have a shouting crowd enjoy the spectacle. But note well, when Paul speaks of that, he does not call out: *“O wretched man that I am,”* that I must endure such things!

Again, Paul suffered physically. Of the Jews he was beaten five times with thirty-nine stripes each time. Three times he was beaten with rods. That was the Roman way of whipping. People were often whipped to death with rods. Once was he stoned. He was in perils among heathen, in perils by his own countrymen, in perils among false brethren; he was in weariness and painfulness, in sleeplessness, in hunger, thirst, fastings, cold, nakedness; but all these things did not move St. Paul to cry out: ***“O wretched man that I am!”***

If ever there was a man of courage, valour, and endurance, Paul was that man. He faced death again and again unflinchingly. He faced the most painful distress without a whimper.

But this battle of the inner man and the carnal nature almost crushed him. That is what made him groan: ***“O wretched man that I am!”***

Do you not see from all this what a painful, fearful, costly, and distressing fight this is? If that battle has given you very little trouble, there may be doubt about your Christianity.

St. Paul is not the only one who has called out: ***“O wretched man that I am!”*** Read of the battles of St. Augustine. A bold man in his best years, an educated man, who certainly was not easily moved to tears; and yet he tells us there were times when he threw himself upon the ground and wept bitter tears because of the sin that still moved within him and polluted his thoughts and his emotions and caused him to struggle to be what he wanted to be, a perfect man, delighting in the Law of God.

Luther tells us that the battle between the flesh and spirit, the battle between faith and unbelief, in him it was so severe at times that he came near perishing. He tells us that he does not doubt that such a battle may cause the death of a person.

That is the reason the Bible speaks of this struggle as a ***“crucifixion of the flesh,”***¹⁴ as ***“self-denial,”***¹⁵ denying your very own self and what you desire with intense desire and what you long and crave for. There have been foolish and deceived people, who thought that they could gain this battle by maiming themselves, by slashing themselves with knives, and by starving themselves. That is mere childish trifling.

God does not want your body to be hurt, He does not want you to slash yourself with a knife, He does not want you to starve yourself unnecessarily; but He wants pride crushed, He wants laziness put to flight, He wants jealousy and envy to be killed off and that bitter feeling of revenge against an enemy — that is what is to be crucified. Why, even the amputation of a hand, the loss of an eye, a cut within the body, is a small matter compared with tearing out of yourself this carnal nature and from day to day continually saying, No, no, no, and nothing but no, to your sinful nature.

No wonder St. Paul cried out, ²⁴ ***O wretched man that I am!*** Why do we sing in church, “*Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy*”? Why do we pray with fervour: “*Forgive us our trespasses*”? Why do we plead with God: “*And lead us not into temptation; But deliver us from evil*”? It is because this wild beast, this carnal nature, lives within us and we must fight with him every day.

All this moves some people to conclude that the battle is too severe for them. They are almost ready to surrender because they believe they cannot gain the victory. The conflict seems too much for them. But that is a mistake. That is a deception of Satan. Let us bear the suffering, knowing that it means the death of sin and the rising of the new man. And what a joy this victory of the new man is!

3. The Christian’s Most Dangerous and Decisive Battle

Winning this battle

This man Paul learned that he gained the victory in this battle. Therefore, although he cried out: ²⁴ ***O wretched man that I am!*** he added at once, ²⁵ ***I thank God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!***

Now note very carefully how St. Paul gained this victory, for that is precisely the way we shall win. It was not by his own strength, but by the strength which God gave him through Christ. St. Paul recognised his own weakness, his carnal nature, his wretchedness; but he knew where to find the weapons of defence and offence in this battle.

He therefore also tells us in 2 Corinthians 3:5, ⁵ ***Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God.*** That is the explanation of that paradox in which he says: “*When I am weak, then am I strong.*” What does that mean?

That means this: Paul saw his weakness, he knew that he was lost without Christ, and therefore he threw himself entirely upon his Saviour Jesus and trusted in God's help, and in God's deliverance. That is what made him strong.

See, dear Christian friends, that is the way in which God wants you to win the victory also. Ask God to do your fighting for you. Notice how Paul gives all glory to God alone here in our text: ²⁵ *I thank God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

Does that not remind you of that other thanksgiving wherein St. Paul exclaims: ⁵⁷ *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*¹⁶ O let us learn this lesson well. *And this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith.*¹⁷ Faith, not in ourselves, but in God's grace, in His power, and in His Word.

Note well also the weapon which we are to use, the Word of God; that is the sword of the Spirit. Our faith protects us because it trusts God's Word. This sword of the Spirit defies the enemy because it is God's Word, which has in it the power of God.

Let us keep in mind: "*With might of ours can naught be done; soon were our fall effected.*"¹⁸ But looking to our Redeemer, who died for us and who has redeemed us to God and who can save to the uttermost all who come to God by Him, His precious Word and Sacraments will sustain us. Thus will we also learn to say with St. Paul, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*¹⁹

It is true, in this way every night we shall be more humble because of our shortcomings; but every morning we shall be stronger through the power which works in us, the power of the Word, which sustains us.

Let us pray to God that He would give us the victory as He gave Paul the victory, as He gave it to millions of His saints who fought as fierce a battle as we ever fought, in many cases fiercer than we ever fought.

Let us pray in the words of the hymnist,²⁰

I am weak, but Thou art mighty;
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.

Let us pray to God that, when our end approaches, we may be able to say with St. Paul as written in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, ⁷ *I have fought the good fight, I*

have finished the race, I have kept the faith. ⁸ *Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.* Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 2 Timothy 4:7

² Jude 3

³ 1 Timothy 6:12

⁴ Ephesians 6:14-17

⁵ 2 Corinthians 10:4, Ephesians 6:11

⁶ 2 Samuel 18:5

⁷ 2 Samuel 19:4

⁸ Psalm 51:10

⁹ Psalm 19:10

¹⁰ Psalm 51:2

¹¹ Psalm 40:8

¹² John 18:11

¹³ Matthew 6:10

¹⁴ Galatians 5:24

¹⁵ Matthew 16:24

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:57

¹⁷ 1 John 5:4

¹⁸ Hymn 195 v 2

¹⁹ Philippians 4:13

²⁰ Hymn 347