

Up to this point in the book of Romans, Paul has presented us a very high standard. He says that we are now dead to sin and alive to God. He says that we have been freed from sin and are now bound to God, so that God expects nothing less than perfection from us as Christians. And yet every one of us recognizes how far short we fall of that standard. We recognize that what we are called to be and what we actually are are two very different things. And Paul in our reading for this evening shows us why this is the case. Paul shows us why we fall so short of what God calls us to be as Christians.

And the problem, Paul tells us, is not the standard. The problem is not the law, what God expects of us. Because I think sometimes we might be tempted to say that the bar is simply too high, that there's no way that we could ever reach perfection, and yet this is what God asks us to do. And that's true. No one can reach that standard. But that doesn't make the law bad. It doesn't make it evil. The law is holy and righteous and good, as Paul tells us very clearly. And I think that's something we really need to emphasize, because I think sometimes we can come away with this impression that the law is somehow bad. That the law is given to us to trip us up, to make us stumble, to make us fall, so that then we can go on to what is good, namely, the Gospel. And the worse that the law makes us feel, we might think, the better the Gospel is as a result. And unfortunately, we as Lutherans can fall into this thinking as well, to treat the law as if it is something bad.

But the law is not bad. The law is good. Perfectly good, in fact. And it is because of the law, Paul tells us, that we learn what sin truly is. Because the law is like a light shining into a dark room. Before the light comes on, you can't really see what's going on in there. You can't really tell if anything's gone wrong. But you turn on the light, and now we can see everything clearly. That's what the law does for us. The law is also like a mirror, so that when we look into it, we see ourselves as we actually are. Not like what we think we are, but as we actually are, warts and all. Because without the law, we don't really understand sin. We don't see it for what it actually is. But when the law comes, then we see that sin clearly. And then we learn what it means to covet, as Paul says. Then we learn what it means to steal or to lust or whatever it may be. By setting the will of God before us clearly, the law shows us how far short we have fallen. And it doesn't hold anything back.

But this kind of clarity is painful for us. This kind of clarity is like a light shining on our eyes after we've grown used to the dark. We don't think that anything's wrong, but once that light shines in our face, we think it hurts. Not because the light itself is painful, but because our eyes have become so accustomed to seeing in the dark. The law is the same way, Christians. The law itself is not bad. The law itself is something good. The reason why it hurts to see ourselves clearly is because of sin. It is sin that causes all of our problems. It is sin that causes us to fall short. And it is sin, ultimately, that kills us.

Because before the law comes, Christians, sin lies dead. What Paul means by that is that we don't think it's sin. We could live our whole lives and think that nothing was wrong, to think that everything was just a-okay, because we don't see sin correctly. But as soon as that law comes and shines a light on the sin, so that we see it for what it actually is, then the sin flares up. It fights back. It feels like it's cornered, and so it wants to do something to get rid of the light. This is why it comes alive and becomes even worse than it was before. Think of this way. If you had

been doing something for a very long time, and then someone comes along and tells you, "You can't do that anymore. That's wrong," what's your inclination? What do you want to do? You want to say, "I'm going to keep doing it! You can't tell me what to do. I'm going to do it harder simply because you told me to stop doing it." That's exactly what sin is doing, Christians. It's flaring up. It's fighting back. It's waging war against us. And that's exactly why we struggle as Christians.

Because the law does not bring us death. The law is good. It cannot bring death. It is sin working through the law, or rather abusing the law, that kills us, that brings us death. And this is why life as a Christian is something that gets harder and harder over time, not easier. Because ultimately, Christians, there is a war going on, a civil war, a war within ourselves between our mind and our flesh. This is what Paul means when he says 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." Because of this war within us, because of this conflict, we know what God wants. We know what he wants us to do. We know what the law says, but we so often find ourselves doing the exact opposite. I know, for example, that God says I should be patient, and yet how often do I find myself angry or flying off the handle for no reason? I know that God wants me to pray, and yet too often I make excuse after excuse after excuse why I don't have time to do it. I know that God wants me to speak up against evil, and yet I convince myself that I'm doing the right thing if I don't say a word. This contradiction, this war goes through everything that we are. And it causes us pain to even know that it exists. Because then we're left asking: "Why can't I shake this sin? Why do I keep going back to it, especially after I've been away from it for so long? Why do I keep doing the things that I know are wrong?" And the fact that we recognize that they are wrong shows that we know that the law is good, that the law is right. But what is happening within us, Christians, is sin, sin dwelling within our flesh.

But when we are Christians, then our minds belong to God. We know what is good and right. We have the law of God in our minds, and that's a good and delightful thing. This is why Psalm 1, for example, says that a righteous man "delights in the law of the Lord." Or why Psalm 119 talks about rejoicing in the law over and over again. Or even verse 22 of our reading, where Paul says: "I delight in the law of God in my inner being." When I am a Christian, I say, "I love you, Lord! I want to make you happy. I want to do what you want me to do. I want to make your will mine, because I love you with everything that I have." If we don't have that kind of mentality, we should check ourselves and repent, because then we might very well be in danger of falling away. But being a Christian means that I love God with everything that I have: with my mind, my body, my soul, everything. And I want to please him in everything. It means I want to keep the law.

But my sin lurking in my flesh fights against that. It wants nothing to do with it. My flesh is captive to that sin. And there is a war going on. Because the sin in my flesh wants to be the master of everything. It wants to be in complete control. It's not satisfied with half a victory. It's not satisfied with a truce. What it wants is to rule everything, including my mind. And it will do everything that it can to win that victory. But my mind, on the other hand, also wants the victory. My mind wants to be in complete control, to not have a half victory or a truce, but to win over everything and make it all belong to God. And so we are caught, Christians, in this life and death struggle, in this life and death struggle that will go on as long as I am in this flesh. This is why

Paul often says being a Christian is a battle. It is wrestling. It is running. It is striving. It is waging war. There is this conflict that goes on within us as long as we are alive, and it will only end at death. Is it any wonder that Paul says in verse 24: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

But Christians, there is deliverance. There is victory. Just not in ourselves. There is victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Because believing in Jesus does not mean that the battle will somehow come to an end. Far from it. Believing in Jesus does not mean that things are going to get easier and easier the longer I live. Far from it. Believing in Jesus, however, means that there will be victory in this war. Because Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who lives within us, the same Spirit who prays with us, the same Spirit who leads us into all the truth. And this Spirit is at work in this war, helping us to fight. The fact that we are fighting against our sin shows that God is at work within us. Because if we weren't fighting, then we would not belong to God. But we fight because we belong to God, because we have the Spirit. And Christ promises a crown of victory to those who struggle and fight. So our war against our sin, Christians, is not pointless. It is not fruitless. It is something that Christ helps us in and helps us to see it through to the end. We may even see small victories over sin while we are still alive. But whatever it may be, Christians, Christ has set us free, and he has given us the weapons for this fight so that we are not alone.

So fight, Christians! Wage war against yourselves. Fight against your anger. Fight against your laziness or your sloth or your greed or whatever it may be. Fight back against these things with all that you have. The harder you fight, the more it's going to hurt, I recognize that. But fight back with all that you have because you are not alone. Christ is with you. Christ has set you free in this fight. And Christ will finally deliver you from this body of death. Those who trust in him by faith will overcome in the end.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, to set us free from bondage to sin. Help us always to fight back against our sinful flesh so that we may do what is pleasing in your sight and finally obtain the victory in him. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.