

“Winning the War Against the Flesh”

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In Romans 7:14-25, Paul clearly describes the conflict that every believer is faced with. There is a real tension between the old self that has been crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6) and the new self that is growing in its knowledge of how satisfying Christ is in His person and His work.

What Paul seeks to wake us up to is the real war that is being waged within all people of God. Our fleshly lusts, the old nature is warring against our soul.

The word “waging war” is used only here in the New Testament. It means, “to carry on a campaign against.” The language of warfare is used through the New Testament, but this particular word is used only here. It is, however, a compound word and its root word (without the prefix) is used seven times in the New Testament. There is a winner and a loser in this campaign. At the outset it is very important that we understand the victory of Christ over sin and death (Col. 2:13-15; 1 Cor. 15:55-57). The fight against sin has already been won. It is for this reason Paul describes us as having been freed from sin and dead to it (Rom. 6:7, 11). However, Paul is speaking of the “already-not yet” principle of living the reality of the cross within the context of a two nature person. Paul calls us to be what we already are judicially, but have not yet experienced in time.

In my union with Christ, I am no longer under the authority of sin (Rom. 5:21). I have been freed from sin. Yet the members of my body (i.e. the flesh) cry out for gratification in opposition to the mind. This is real warfare. Within the larger context of Romans 7:21 and 22, Paul sets forth the essential truth that conformity to any law will never bring about one’s sanctification. The law, any law, can never bring me deliverance from my fleshly fallen nature. This is why Colossians 2 reads as follows:

²⁰ “If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, ²¹ ‘Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!’ ²² (which all refer to things destined to perish with use) --in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? ²³ These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, **but are of no value against fleshly indulgence**” (Col. 2:20-23).

You cannot fight lust with law. Grace is the only victory producing means over sin.

Listen to 2 Corinthians 10:3-6.

³ “For though we walk in the flesh, **we do not war according to the flesh**, ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. ⁵ **We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God**, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ, ⁶ and we are ready to punish all disobedience, whenever your obedience is complete” (2 Cor. 10:3-6).

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There is real warfare taking place and it is happening on the soil of one's soul. Paul's charge to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1 resonates with the same principle.

¹⁸ “This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them **you fight the good fight**, ¹⁹ keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. ²⁰ Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme” (1 Tim. 1:18-20).

There is a battle being fought and it is for soul survival. He uses the same metaphor of warfare to drive home the nature of the Christian life in 2 Timothy 2:4. Peter is equally strong when he wrote the following words in 1 Peter 2:11.

“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to **abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul**” (1 Pet. 2:11).

Although the battle is temporal (since it will end in heaven), it is persistent in time. Sin working in me is dead earnest against me. No one can turn a deaf ear to it. Every child of God is faced with this determined foe. To meet it with rules and regulations is to play according to its system. The issue is not whether the battle exists. Its presence is indisputable and non-negotiable. The issue is with what will you fight. If you lean on the arm of flesh, you will fail. But if you meet sin with grace, you have won.

Believers are fighting a war that has already been won. There was a time when I could run long distances. With joy I would “race” in various city sponsored events. The distance was usually an 8K or 5 mile event. I would attempt to run as fast as I could. Throughout the race there was a tendency to give way to my fatigue and to allow my lungs and legs to control my mind. My body would beg for relief and try to convince my mind that it wanted to quit. But my mind knew what was true and would push past the temporal inconvenience imposed on the lungs and legs. And without exception the race would end and relief would be brought to the complaining lungs and legs. Throughout the race I knew what was true, that in spite of the physical protest I would not die and all of the discomfort would end.

The same is true in our race for the Lord (Heb. 12:1, 2). Our flesh protests the inconvenience of not being gratified by concession. But our minds tell us that victory is ours and that the race will end and we will receive the prize. We simply must push past the temporal appeal made by an irritated flesh. The completion of the race is guaranteed. God will finish what He has begun (1 Thess. 5:23, 24; Phil. 1:6). Let us face our flesh fully aware of the finished work. Let us treat our flesh as having no real authority over us. There is no entitlement to the flesh. Its only outcome is death and its only future is total destruction. You and I can win the war against the flesh because it has already been won for us. Now, we are simply to rest in His finished work as we fight toward a completed goal. May you find joy and peace in your continued pursuit of Him.