

At Trinity Lutheran Church, there is a quiet war going on. It pits two powerhouse forces against each other. Some of you here this morning are loyal to the amazing Blue. The University of Michigan Wolverines. You have a deep love for the school and its sporting program. You wear T Shirts, and go to games. You have an inner dislike toward Michigan State University. On the otherhand, there are some of you here today, who are Michigan State Spartan fans. You wear your T-shirts and attend games. “Go Green, you say.” Likewise, you have a deep-seated dislike toward the University of Michigan. Some of you know that I am a Michigan State fan, and you regularly let me have it, at appropriate times. A little dig here, a little dig there. And I have to be honest, that I have said to some of you after a Michigan loss, “my deep condolences”, and you know that I am being sarcastic. Obviously, there is a war going on in this congregation between Wolverine and Spartan.

Now I would like to believe that I could convert all of you Michigan fans to become Spartan fans, but its just not going to happen. Michigan fans will be Michigan fans until death. The same holds true with Spartan fans.

In our story for today, we are going to see that there is a similar war going on inside every one of you whether you’re a college football fan or not. You might say, it is like two dogs fighting inside of you. The one you feed the most gets the strongest. We are like Dr Jeckl and Mr. Hyde. We encounter this war every time we hear ourselves saying, "I shouldn't do this...think this...want this...say this...and we do." The Apostle Paul certainly understood the internal clash of forces. Today, he encourages us, “Win the War Within!”

Are you surprised to hear one of the greatest Christians admit that he continued to struggle with sin after his conversion? It isn't that Paul fell into sin “once in a while”; he was constantly sinning, doing that which he knew to be wrong and failing to do that which he knew to be good.

Can you relate to Paul's struggle? Have you ever woken up on a Saturday morning and said: “Alright. This is the day. I'm going to clean my room without being asked. I'm going to let my brother play with my Gameboy as long as he wants. And I'll smile when Mom asks me to take out the garbage.” In short, you resolve to live like a Christian. But do you even make it to the breakfast table without impatiently kicking the dog for being in your way, or shoving your sister so you can get to the cereal boxes first? Parents, have you ever made an early-morning promise to be patient with your children the whole day only to lose it with them over a little spilled milk at breakfast? Have you ever determined not to speed on the way to work or talk about a co-worker behind her back only to commit these sins without batting an eye?

If you struggle with sin as Paul did, don't despair. A Christian struggles with sin. But I thought Christians were like so and so at church – always cheerful, never mean, ever forgiving. Oh, we may look like that to each other. You may think, for example, that the pastor is doing so well on his diet. What you don't know is that I have recently rifled through a ½ bag of pretzels just like that, ate 15 liqorices in 10 minutes, when I know I shouldn't eat them. I have my days when I am impatient, and grumpy. Ask my wife or secretary Kathy about that. The good I want to do, I don't do. How can I call myself a Christian much less a pastor?

Why are we this way? We are this way because we carry in us the sinful nature in which there is nothing good, explains Paul. The sinful nature always wants us to do the opposite of what God wants. The only reason a Christian ever manages to do anything remotely good is because at baptism God gave us a new nature – the part of us that now wants to do God’s will. The two are at war within us. The new nature will spend an afternoon stringing lights on our heart to show others God’s love but just as he is about to flip the switch the sinful nature will cut through the power cord making a mockery of the afternoon efforts.

In the early days of our country an evangelist was preaching at an outdoor meeting. A flippant young man interrupted him and mockingly said: “You talk about the burden of sin. I’ve never felt it. How heavy is it?” While some people assembled laughed and others sat in stunned silence, the startled preacher paused momentarily and then replied, “Tell me, if you laid a hundred-pound weight on a corpse, would it feel the load?” The youth sneered: “No, of course not, because it’s dead.” To which the preacher answered, “And that soul is dead too that feels no load of sin.” If we’re no longer bothered by the fact that we continue to sin so long as we are in the flesh then we will know that our sinful nature has won out. But so long as the battle continues and the Spirit of God is at war inside of me against my sinful nature I can rest assured that I am a Christian.

So how can we ever consider ourselves Christians if we keep sinning? Although we will never stop sinning this side of heaven, a Christian will never stop struggling, that is, wrestling with the sinful nature. Notice how Paul did not say: “The good I want to do I don’t do...oh well.” Neither will Christians today say things like: “Yeah I’m grouchy and touchy. What do you expect when you have to live and work with the people I do.” No, a Christian hates his sin and will humbly repent of any outburst no matter what the cause. And he will keep fighting against the sinful nature so he doesn’t fall into that sin again. The only way to fight against the sinful nature is to starve it. We starve the sinful nature when we do things like turn off the TV or the computer when smut appears on screen. Or genuinely say I’m sorry when we are irritable or say something hurtful. At the same time we’ll want to feed the new nature by studying God’s Word and regularly receiving the Sacrament so that we will want to do God’s will more than the sinful nature’s will.

But go ahead, do these things. You still won’t be able to kill off the sinful nature. He’ll always be right there pushing you to do the opposite of what God wants and it will be frustrating. It was so frustrating for Paul that he cried out: “24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24) As a Christian Paul knew that he needed rescuing. He knew that there was no chance of his getting into heaven on his own – not just because of his past when he persecuted Christians but because of his present. On his journeys with Luke, Silas and others he must have snapped at them. He must have cursed those who persecuted him instead of praying for them.

Still Paul was a Christian. Why? Because he not only continued to struggle with sin he continued to stand with Christ. When Paul asked: “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24b) he answered his own question like this: “25 Thanks be to God—through

Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25a) It’s only because of Jesus that God considers us good. For through Jesus we have forgiveness. Although our sinful nature had taken us captive and was well on its way to delivering us to hell, Jesus rescued us. He did this not by busting us out of prison but by serving our sentence. He walked into sin’s dungeon and said: “Heavenly Father, punish me for their sins. Let them go free while I suffer in their cells.” Jesus served our time when he hung on the cross to pay for our sins. So it’s only through Jesus that we’ll ever make it to heaven. A Christian understands this. He doesn’t think that he’s going to heaven because he’s been a good parent or a valued neighbor. No, he despairs of himself and throws himself on Jesus.

In a dream, Martin Luther found himself being attacked by Satan. The devil unrolled a long scroll containing a list of Luther’s sins, and held it before him. On reaching the end of the scroll Luther asked the devil, “Is that all?” “No,” came the reply, and a second scroll was thrust in front of him. Then, after a second came a third. But now the devil had no more. “You’ve forgotten something,” Luther exclaimed triumphantly. “Quickly write on each of them, ‘The blood of Jesus Christ God’s son cleanses us from all sins.’”

Satan uses the same approach on us. At times he’ll spread out all of our sins before us too. He wants to convince us that there’s no hope – that Jesus couldn’t possibly forgive us for all of the sinful things we’ve done. You see he wants us to believe that there’s no hope for us so that as a result there will no reason left not to satisfy every sinful desire and every immoral desire. That’s why we give thanks that God continues to crush the temptations of the devil and the inclinations of our flesh. He crushes those desires as he terrifies our flesh with the eternal consequences of sin through the preaching of his law. Then in his grace He continually raises up the new man of faith that is strengthened through that universal, timeless gospel truth – that the blood of his Son, Jesus Christ, cleanses us from all our sins too.

Friends, are you truly a Christian? If you’re satisfied with your spiritual life like the self-righteous Pharisees often were, I can tell you that you’re in deep trouble. A Christian does not say: “How good am I,” but “How wretchedly sinful I am.” If we don’t think we struggle with sin, it’s because we don’t understand what God says is a sin. If not, it’s time to get back into his Word. Find out what God says about sex outside of marriage, or downloading music we haven’t paid for, or taking medication that hasn’t been prescribed for us, or grumbling about our meals. He hates all these things.

On the other hand if you don’t think you’ll ever make it to heaven because of your sins, then remember what makes for a Christian. What makes us good is not the life we’ve lived but the life Christ lived for us. God the Father has given us credit for Jesus’ perfect life and through him has forgiven all our sins. So you’re not just good; you’re perfect in God’s eyes! Keep standing with Jesus through faith and you’ll keep struggling against your sinful nature. Thanks be to God for he shall rescue us from these bodies of death so that we might live with him eternally. Amen.