

Saved Without And Within

Isaiah 61:10; Ephesians 1:4-6

Do you feel like you have been freed from the power of sin? That sin has no control over you?

I don't.

There are times when I feel like I'm overwhelmed by sin rather than freed from its power.

That may be a surprising thing for a pastor to say, but it's true.

And I suspect I'm not alone.

It's hard to believe that you're free *FROM* sin's power when you feel enslaved to some sin.

I can't tell you how many times people have confided to me that they have been struggling with some sin for years and still can't keep from committing it.

The Bible itself speaks of this dilemma.

At one place Paul writes, "Sin shall not be your master for you are not under law but under grace."

Yet elsewhere he writes: "...in my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am!"

At one place he says, "...count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Then, at another place he says, "Everyone who sins is a slave of sin."

Now assuming that we all agree that there are times when we do sin, does that mean that we are slaves of sin?

God says so.

So are we or are we not under sin's control?

We must be because God has said that we are, but it sure doesn't FEEL that way.

I know that the earth is round, but it *feels* flat.

I know the sun doesn't actually rise in the morning and set in the evening, but I think of it and speak of it as though it does.

Our personal experience doesn't seem to square with reality.

God has told me in His Word that He loves me, that he delights in me and that He rejoices over me, and I believe it because I know that God cannot lie.

But I also know what kind of person I am, and I can't imagine that God loves *that*. He just couldn't.

So there's a rift, a rupture, a discontinuity between what I know in my mind and what I believe in my heart.

As the Christian poet, T. S. Eliot wrote, "*Between the conception and the reality falls the shadow.*"

And there's a reason for this.

The reason it's difficult for us to believe in our hearts that we are free from sin's power is that our hearts are exactly where sin's power resides.

Jesus said, "*...the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean.'* For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'..."

We don't pollute our hearts with what comes out of our minds; we pollute our minds with what comes out of our hearts.

Our hearts are where the problem lies.

Every Christian endures a lifelong struggle with the contents of his own heart.

And there are plenty of times when it feels like our hearts are winning the battle.

There was a country western song that was popular several years ago that had the refrain, "How can it be wrong when it feels so right?"

The answer: easy.

Which one among us, as we give in one more time to some habitual sin, like anger or lust or a critical spirit or lying or gossiping or greed—which one of us has not cried out inwardly: "*Why do I do this?*"

"*Why do I let sin control me this way?*"

I can assure you that this anguished thought troubles the consciences of even the most devout believers.

What it reveals is the hardness of our hearts, our deep-seated rebelliousness toward God—a rebelliousness which Luther called "*unbelief in the inmost heart.*"

The good news is that God helps us overcome this rebelliousness, this unbelief, in two ways.

One way works from the outside in, and the other from the inside out.

The "outside-in" way is described in our *Old Testament* lesson for today, which is taken from the *61st Chapter of Isaiah*: "*I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*"

Isaiah introduces an here which reappears throughout the New Testament: the image of salvation as a garment, a robe which covers the sins of all those who are saved.

Paul writes, "*...all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*"

In the *7th Chapter of the Book of Revelation*, John beholds all the saints in heaven, standing before the throne of the Lamb, wearing white robes that have been "*...washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb.*"

The idea here is that when we were baptized, our sins were washed away and we were clothed in Christ's righteousness.

God gave us this “garment of salvation” or “robe of righteousness” as a free gift so that when He gazes upon us, our sins are covered.

This was the symbolism of the baptismal chrisom, the little white gown we used to put on infants when they were baptized.

The gown was a symbol that the child was now covered and protected by Christ's righteousness, His purity.

The child was now “hidden” in Christ.

The important thing to note here is that this entire transaction is *external*, it takes place outside us, and in no way depends upon any change of heart.

God does not begin his work of salvation with us by changing our hearts: he begins it by dressing us in the righteousness of our Savior.

We are not saved BECAUSE of something that happens in our hearts; we are saved IN SPITE of what goes on in our hearts.

Jesus uses this image in his parable of the king's wedding banquet for his son, in which one guest arrives without proper attire: “...when the king came to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes.’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him out into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”

We can join the wedding feast of the King only if we are clothed in the righteousness of His Son.

The other way God applies salvation to us is from the inside out.

He begins this work by adopting us as his children and becoming our Father.

This is reflected in today's Epistle lesson from Paul's letter to the Ephesians: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us **in him** before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will....”

“Adopted as his sons.”

We who entered this world as orphans and strangers to God have been restored to God’s family by Jesus Christ, our brother.

Before we received the Holy Spirit at our baptism, we had no relationship with God.

As David confessed: “Surely I was sinful at birth—sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

Like the prodigal son, we had squandered our inheritance and chosen to live in the field with pigs rather than in our Father’s mansion.

But our Father didn’t leave us in the field with the pigs.

He drew us to repentance and called us home where he welcomed us back into His family, dressed us in fine robes and invited us in to a feast.

He not only made us His sons again—He made us heirs of all that He has.

And His first and greatest gift to us was the Holy Spirit, whom he sent to dwell within us and change us from the inside out.

And here is where we can begin to see what the struggle we go through is all about.

The first work of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of our sins.

When Jesus was telling his disciples about the Holy Spirit, he said: “*When He comes, He will convict the world of guilt on account of sin...*”

The Holy Spirit sharpens our consciences and increases our awareness of how sinful we really are.

And that is the source of our anguish: we begin to learn exactly who and what we are—and it isn’t pretty.

Between the robe of Jesus’ righteousness we wear and the Holy Spirit of God working within us, there are layers upon layers of corruption and evil intent—and this is where we spend a good deal of our conscious lives.

This is what Paul called his “flesh” or his “sin nature.”

It is a slave of sin, it often has the whip hand in our lives, and will not be denied.

No wonder we are frequently driven almost to despair: how could God love us, the worst of sinners?

But the Holy Spirit of God is greater and stronger than our sin nature.

After He shows us our sins He shows us our Savior who has died for our sins, and teaches us to love Him.

That's how he works from the inside out.

Meanwhile, on the outside we are arrayed in the righteousness of Christ and we know that when we stand before him to be judged, we will be found pure and undefiled IN Christ.

He has given us hope in this world and eternal glory in the next, and we can laugh at our sin and the devil, because they have no ultimate power over us.

Are we slaves of sin?

Only in our flesh—this “bag of worms” as Luther called it—which is not our permanent home.

Are we free from sin's power?

You bet we are, because we live in Christ, and He lives in us.

Praise the Lord!

Amen