

## As We Are: Double Struggle

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**Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church**

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We are continuing our sermon series today called *As We Are*, and this has been all about looking into what the world is all about and how Jesus sees the world. And how does He see us? We concluded over the last few weeks that we tend to see ourselves and the world as *we want it to be*. In other words, *we are limitless*, that *we are in control*, that *we get to decide what is good*, when in reality, who we really are is we are people *who have limits*, we are people *who are not really in control*, and if we want to get really vulnerable, we recognize that *we are truly broken*. The good news is that Jesus sees us right where we are, as we are, and walks along with us.

Today we are focusing on the second one of these, about *Control*. So, will you say this with me? *I am not in control*. That was really hard, was not it? That was really hard. Say it one more time: *I am not in control*.

There are many ways in our lives that we really need to be in control. We like to have people see us in a certain way. We like to be dressed in a certain way. We like to have our house in a certain way. We like our car to be a certain thing. We like the way that we speak to be presented to others in a certain way. We like to have control over all these things because it speaks to who we are. When in reality, inside of ourselves, we are somewhat of a jumbled mess. Is that fair? Some days, it feels like there are things going on between our ears that we do not understand where they came from, how they got there, or what it is going to lead to. Sometimes we feel like we do not have control over our own situations, and it pushes us into thinking, "Well, what am I supposed to be doing? What am I all about?"

We try to take control of this, then. And it pushes us sometimes to think like this. Remember these 1950s ads? I do not remember them. Maybe

some of you remember them. I have seen them, and when I see them, I think of this time of perfection, this time where everything is just so. You see every little hair and all these children is right in place. The father is dressed impeccably, as is the wife. And look at that. What is she taking out of the oven there? Is that a casserole? That kid is really excited about whatever casserole that is. I do not think I have ever been so excited about a casserole in my life, but he is excited. Everything in this scenario is perfect. Everything is clean. Everything is just so.

Today, we see this not in advertisements, but we see it in social media. We see it in the way that our friends portray themselves. We see it in the way that we portray ourselves to the world. But is it true? Is it us trying to take control of who we are? When we know in between our ears there's very little control.

In this book that we have been walking through called *Low Anthropology* by David Zahl, he introduces this concept as Doubleness. In other words, there are competing forces going on in your mind all the time and we make decisions, and our behaviors are based on those competing forces. And this is a hundred percent the way people are. This is scriptural. This is what Paul is talking about, Romans 7. "I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want to do. I do the very thing that I hate." He goes on and says, "The things that I know are good, I do not do. And the things that I know are not good, I do do. But I do not want to do them. I do not try to do them. I want to do what is good. And sometimes I do, but then sometimes I do not. What is going on?" This is Paul. This is "the" Paul that we trust and love for the scripture, teaching us about Jesus and how much Jesus loves us. This is Paul being conflicted and confused and trying to figure out what is going on in his own mind. This *Doubleness* is all about these competing forces that are driving our behavior. And one of the phrases that we must talk about is being at odds with ourselves. We are kind of at odds with ourselves. We are of two minds. Have you ever been there? I have. Many, many times. Many times a day. So, how do we deal with this?

Paul says that this is a truth of human nature, that when we want to do right, evil is close at hand. This seems to be just who we are, a part of our human condition today to have both of these things so tightly woven together. Could that possibly be true?

As we have been talking through the last few weeks, we realize that when we take the original sin seriously, we start to see how we are fundamentally broken. We start to see how we are fundamentally not who we want to be. We make mistakes. We do things that are against our will. We do things that are against God's will. This is the original sin. When we take it seriously, we start to see that it exists, just like Paul says, hand in hand with God's will. What this does to us is we start to believe that if we just try hard enough, we will be able to get all of it under control. If we just try hard enough, we will be able to get this under control.

Last week I shared about how when I was a kid, I tried to have a perfect day. I tried to get all my behaviors under control. I tried to be just so and just perfect and I never, ever, ever made it. Did any of you get there? Have a perfect day? Didn't say anything terrible to anyone else. Didn't think anything terrible about anyone. Didn't think anything terrible about yourself. "If we just try hard enough, we can certainly get these things under control"—is this true? What Paul says is that as hard as we try to be good and perfect and follow the Lord's will, even for Paul, evil is right there too. The temptations are all there, and he acts on them. He sins. If this is Paul, what hope do we have?

Now, think about this in another way. Do you expect this not just of yourself but of other people? Think about people who are closest to you. When you look at other people's lives, do you think, "If they just try hard enough, I'm sure they can get all of this under control." But wait a second. I thought this was not true for me. How can it possibly be true for other people? Do we hold other people to higher standards than we hold ourselves? This is starting to get rough today, isn't it?

Paul says, “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells within me.” There is this war that 2,000 years ago was raging inside of Paul, and all the other disciples, and all the people who heard Jesus as He walked around Galilee and in Jerusalem. Just like today, as we hear about the goodness of Jesus, this war rages within us as well.

The war is there. Captive to the law of sin. Delighting in the law of God. It is what’s happening in our hearts and our minds. Each and every day. And this is the truth that is hard for us to understand when we think about being in control. We want to think that we can just rid ourselves of our sinfulness. And yet, the truth is, we will always be conflicted. There will always be a conflict. The war will always rage. If Paul couldn’t get rid of it, what chance do I have? The freedom that you are seeking, the release from this, has to be found somewhere else. It cannot be found in how hard you try to get rid of this because it is not going to work.

Where are we going to find freedom? Where are we going to find deliverance? This is exactly what Paul says. He follows this up and he gets to a point where he despairs of himself and says, “What a wretched man that I am.” How many of you have exclaimed that? “What a wretched man that I am.” It does not sound that way today, does it? But you’ve thought that. Similar things. You’ve had people say that to you. And in our despair, we reach out and we say who is going to deliver us from all of this junk? Because I am not in control of it, evidently.

Paul immediately realizes where his salvation is found, where his freedom is found. And he says, “Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” This is exactly where we find the freedom that we are searching for. The freedom we are trying to get when we try to have control. It is “in Jesus alone” that we find this freedom. Because what we are really trying to do when we try to control ourselves and control others is *we are expecting self-salvation*. We are expecting that if we just try hard enough, we will be able to lift ourselves out of this sin that we are in.

And we cannot. We know this. Many of us grew up Lutheran. This is what you hear every single week at Sunday school and at church. “By grace, you have been saved through faith in Jesus Christ. It is not a work of yours. It is a work of His alone.” And yet we act in our world and in our lives as if we could save ourselves.

What Jesus does is free us from expecting this self-salvation. Think about what that does for you. It frees you. It frees your heart and your mind from knowing that this conflict is always going to be here. I expect it to be here. But when I see Jesus, I’m free. And think about how that changes your relationship with the people that are closest to you. Because you have expectations of the people around you. You expect them to be good. You expect them to be sometimes perfect. And yet, only Jesus can be that and do that.

Jesus goes to His disciples when they’re struggling, when He is on His way to Jerusalem for the last time, heading to the cross. He says to them, “I have said these things to you—all these things—so that in me you would have peace.” Where to find peace? In the control they have over their situation? And over their mind and their heart and their body? No. In Jesus alone. He promises them then, “In this world you will have trouble.” Are we going to get away from the troubles of this world? Are we going to finally eradicate them by the way that we follow the kingdom of God? No. We are not going to get rid of them. Original sin is serious. It is here. We cannot get rid of it. Jesus points us back to Him. He says, but do not despair. Do not despair. Do not be hopeless. Take this with you. I have overcome the world. In this promise, Jesus releases us from expecting that we need control, expecting that we can save ourselves, and expecting that of others as well.

One of the things that I have learned over the few short months that I have been here is that it is not just us as adults, but the way that we view the people around us, our family, our children especially, is that we have expectations that are unbelievable.

We expect our children to be at the top of their class when we fully know that not everybody can be at the top of the class. We expect our kids to be the best people at whatever sport they choose. We expect them to be the best at whatever activities they choose. We expect them to try hard and to spend time so they can be the absolute best. We expect them to do all of this to be perfect. What would happen if we released them from those expectations? What would happen if instead, we pointed them to Jesus, in the midst of the craziness that is going on in their minds and their hearts today, we said, “In Jesus, you are going to find peace. All that stuff that is with you, it is going to be with you, because it is with me,” if we are honest as parents, “in the middle of it, look to Jesus. He is going to bring you peace. He is going to show you hope. He is going to show you the way in which you can walk in order to help others see Him.”

And do those good things that you want to do along the way by the power of the Spirit through you. There will be things that bring you trouble but do not take heart in your own understanding, in your own work, in your own abilities. Instead, take heart in me, Jesus says, because I have overcome all this. If we can build that into our families, into our kids, into our community, what would this world look like? What would we see? We would see kids who valued compassion and kindness over always having to be the best and never quite getting there. This is a hard one. Because as Jesus looks at our doubleness, as He looks at this in us and our struggle, He decides to respond to us through compassion. He goes to the cross and is raised from the dead, gives us new life in the midst of our struggle, not expecting us to get there first, but going there in our place. With compassion, He expects us to look out into the world, into our neighbor’s lives, and release them from the same expectations that He has released us.

What would it be if you allowed your husband or your wife to not be perfect, but to be conflicted? What about your kids and your neighbors? They are not perfect. What if we understood that and allowed that so that that is the way things are? What if in the middle of that, we released the expectation and then decided to do what Jesus did--in the middle of the

conflict, in the middle of this, He walks alongside us, helping us, showing us His way, showing us kindness and grace every step of the way--what if that is the way that we actually looked at that neighbor who really bothers us? Would that change you? Would that change your neighborhood? Would that make this world that is full of trouble have a little bit more peace, a little bit more hope?

When we take the focus off of us, and the control that we have, and we look to Jesus, and we look to Him for hope and peace, we see that He actually brings it, that He is actually the one that can give us what we are trying to get. He's the one who, through grace and compassion, brings us back to God.

We have gotten two weeks through this now. We have number three to talk about next week. This one might be a little tough. We have to say, "I am broken." Every day, every week, every time we come to worship and confess our mistakes and our sins here at the beginning of worship, this is exactly what we are saying: We are broken. We are in need of a Savior, and He is here. So take heart. He has overcome the world. And He walks with us.

Let's close in prayer. *Heavenly Father, we thank You for being with us today, for loving us as we are, for walking with us as we are, for saving us as we are. We ask, Lord, that You would allow us to not expect ourselves to earn our way back to You, to earn perfection so that either You or our loved ones or the world will love us. But instead, to see the struggle within us, that your spirit is at work, and also original sin is there too. And in that conflict, when we fall short, you forgive us. But Lord, when we follow your way, and we help people around us experience the incredible depths of your love and your hope, Lord, we rejoice with you as well. In all of this, Lord, bring us together as a family here at Our Savior's Way, so that we might walk Your way more closely. Together. Always together. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*