

The End of the Struggle

by Stanley Voke

A little boy came home from Sunday School one day and said, “*Mama, we had a new hymn today. It said that Jesus knows all about our struggles.*” Then he added thoughtfully, “*You know, that isn’t right. We don’t struggle, only snails struggle!*”

This reminds me of two pictures that appeared in a Christian magazine, one of a snail crawling, the other, of a bird flying. The caption under them read: “*What are you, snail or bird?*” During the Ugandan Revival, a group of Christians were returning home after a conference. They were singing and their faces were full of joy. Some of the people who saw them passing said, “*Look at those Christians! They are like birds flying!*” But those happy believers knew how different it had been *before* the conference when their hearts were not right with Jesus. Then they had felt more like snails—earth-bound, self-bound, struggling, instead of soaring.

All of us must look at the perfect law of God and run, wounded, to the sinner’s place. But if we remain there, feeling sinful, we will become “spiritual snails”—struggling. Seeing our sin cannot set us free; we need to see Jesus! “*For every one look at your sin, take ten looks at Christ!*” counseled Robert Murray McCheyne, the great 19th century Scottish preacher. It is *looking at Jesus* that makes Christians “fly!” But, many of us have “looking problems!” Why is that?

THE STRUGGLE FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Doctor J. B. Phillips translated Romans 10:4 this way: “*Christ means the end of the struggle for righteousness!*” Think about it: There is in you and me a fierce struggle to earn and keep our own righteousness. *That* is the reason it is so hard to come to, and keep returning to, “The Sinner’s Place.” Looking is painful.

This struggle is as old as Adam, Eve and Eden. When God charged them with sin, they first blamed one another and then the serpent—all the while wearing the clothes of fig leaves they had made to try to cover themselves from the holy eyes of God. By the time Jesus came, man’s struggle for righteousness had become a highly developed system designed to earn righteousness by “*the works of the law.*” Paul lamented that his Jewish kinsmen were always “*going about to establish their own righteousness*” rather than submitting themselves to the gift-righteousness of God.

Aren’t we all that way? If you have been to the ocean, you have probably built, or seen others build “castles” of sand. The problem is that the tide always comes in. No matter how you try to reinforce your sand house, the relentless waves eventually pound it down. We do the same thing (spiritually) when we labor to build up defenses against the “waves” of other people’s criticisms. *For some of us, life becomes one long struggle to be what we know in our hearts we are not.*

THE STRUGGLE FOR ATTAINMENT

One way we can struggle for our own righteousness is by struggling to reach some standard of perfection. Of course God’s law holds up a perfect standard, but the danger is that our lives may become just one prolonged attempt to reach it. Then we become Christians living under law instead of grace—under tension and guilt, instead of the peace Jesus’ righteousness can give us as a gift.

Sometimes we set the standard ourselves. We picture in our minds the kind of Christian we think we *ought to be*, then chase after this ideal image. It is like seeing this person we “ought” to be standing on a high mountain. He urges us on as we struggle vainly up the slopes, but never offers a helping hand.

Or, we may let other people set the standard for us. People are forever telling us what we ought to be. We hear good sermons and read “how-to” books that show us the kind of Christian we should be—which only makes us feel guilty if we’re sensitive, and self-satisfied if we’re not. People put us on pedestals expecting this and that of us—until life can become one long struggle to be what others demand. So, we labor on under their law, trying to keep up their standards —while behind us is God’s relentless law never letting us off, never lifting us up.

Are you a Christian living under law? Do you live under a sense of condemnation because you feel all the time you ought to be a better Christian, who “prays more, does more, gives more?” If so, you are chained to a moral yardstick and living under a yoke and a burden, and all the while Jesus wants to give you rest! “Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for my yoke is easy, my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

THE STRUGGLE TO EARN AND KEEP OUR REPUTATION

Another aspect of this struggle for righteousness is the quest for *reputation*. All of us are “reputation conscious!” Some of us *have* a reputation— it may be for holiness, efficiency, leadership, preaching, good housekeeping— anything! Others of us *wish we had* a reputation, but once acquired (or assumed), it can haunt us, dog us, beat us down, and wear us out. Bondage to reputation is sheer slavery, and we need to see it for what it is—just another form of the struggle for our own righteousness. It makes us unwilling to be seen as weak in, or failing at anything.

THE STRUGGLE FOR APPEARANCE

Our struggle for reputation inevitably becomes a struggle for *appearance*, since at some point we end up being dishonest about who we really are. Jesus said of the Pharisees, “*Everything they do is done for men to see.*” For them, *appearance* was everything. A teacher illustrated this to children by using three eggs, each with a label. One egg was labeled “STALE,” declaring that it was not what it *used* to be. The second egg was labeled “HALF-HATCHED,” announcing that it was not what it *hoped* to be. The third was labeled “ROTTEN.” It *looked* good, but it was honest enough to admit that it was not what it *appeared* to be.

Like me, do you sometimes pretend to be what you are not? *That* was the Pharisees’ game, and their struggle for appearance inevitably led them into hypocrisy. These clever men succeeded in appearing righteous in the eyes of men, but they failed miserably in the eyes of Jesus who always insisted on judging them by what was in their hearts! (Matt. 23:13ff) The trouble with this sort of success is that we dare not ever be failures—for if we are to *keep our reputations* we can never admit to ignorance or sin. That would be like destroying our own house of sand *before* the tide comes in! No, we feel that it is better to struggle on—even to the breaking point—rather than admit to some need that would let others see who we really are.

The tragedy of these vain attempts to produce righteousness is this: as we slip ever deeper into the notion that we can (and must) earn favor with God, the Gospel loses its power in our lives. Romans 10:5 tells us: “*The man who perfectly obeys the law shall find life in it*” (Phillips). In theory, if we *could* keep the law perfectly, we would be blessed, but we cannot, so, although we try, we end up being cursed. And, when we consider that Jesus and Paul taught that the law is nothing more or less than loving God and others perfectly, we see how utterly impossible God’s standard really is (Matt. 22:37-40; Rom. 13:8ff). Because we are sinners, the law will always be a “means of death”—not because the standard is faulty, but because we are hopelessly unable to reach it.

CHRIST—THE END OF THE STRUGGLE

What a relief it is when we see Jesus as the end of all this! “*He is the end of the struggle for*

righteousness” — since He not only fulfilled the law for us, but was cursed for us as well. He not only attained our perfection but atoned for our imperfection. There is nothing more to struggle for! He has done everything for us, and God asks nothing now but our repentance and faith in Him.

“All the fitness He requires, is to feel your need of Him.”

Joy Davidman (wife of C.S. Lewis) put it beautifully: *“The only way to get rid of sin is to admit it. Without such honesty, repentance, forgiveness and grace are impossible. The Christian does not go around all the time feeling guilty. For him, sin is a burden he can lay down, for he can admit it, repent, and be forgiven. It is the unfortunate creature who denies the existence of sin in general and his own in particular who must go on carrying it. The way to freedom consists in honest confession and repentance that can open our hearts to the Comforter.”*

To open our souls to God’s grace means that He not only saves us from being the people we are, but changes us into who we ought to be! *How simple it is!* *“The only way to get rid of sin is to admit it!”* Why is this so hard? Surely because it means letting go of our own righteousness— which is the very thing we do not like doing. Yet, how can we believers have Christ’s perfect robe of righteousness if we insist on weaving our own? We can’t.

Jesus is our perfect righteousness. When we come *to Him*, we need no other. The struggle for righteousness is over and *he* is our reputation and our glory! There is no need to fear coming to the sinner’s place, for when we do, we come to the Cross, lay down our own working, stop trying to be what we are not, and admit instead what we are. *At that point* we can trust in Christ’s righteousness once again and so be free from the struggle for our own. This is the place of grace, rest and peace the Gospel was designed to give us. Wonderfully, this rest in the Gospel gives us the tireless energy we need for serving the Christ who died for us and lives for us! So, isn’t it time to . . .

“Lay your deadly doing down, Down at Jesus’ feet. Stand in Him — in Him alone, Wondrously complete!”