**The Sinning Saint**

Text: Romans 7:14-25

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Job 19:23-29; Romans 7:7-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 95b, 507, 138, 491, 531+532

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#14 – Articles 5.1-3)

**Theme:** The ongoing presence of indwelling sin in the life of the regenerate who are powerfully preserved by God’s enduring grace.

**Proposition:** Humble yourself when daily sins and weaknesses spring up, striving for greater godliness, and trusting wholly upon God’s powerful preserving grace.

**Introduction**

Many people are put off from Christianity because they know what Christians are like, either by direct experience or by reading the history of the church. Brothers and sisters, Christians, ‘saints’ as the Bible calls us, continue to sin after professing that we belong to Christ. We can see this reality in others – often very clearly! (Matt 7:3) We can see this reality in ourselves – with the help of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8). We can see this reality revealed in Scripture: *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*” (1 John 1:8).

Let’s face it, ongoing sin in the life of a saint is a problem for a variety of reasons, including:

* It means that we present a far-from-perfect image of who Christ our Saviour is.
* It means that others may judge the effectiveness (or rather what they may think of as ineffectiveness) of our Saviour by what they see in our lives.
* It means that our salvation is in question: is a sinful ‘Christian’ actually saved?

Down through the history of the church, theologians have sought to deal with this last question in a variety of different ways, including:

* Teaching that true Christians do not actually sin after they are saved. This is termed ‘perfectionism’ and was a key part of the Wesleyan ‘Keswick theology’ or ‘higher life movement’ which taught that a ‘second blessing’ of entire sanctification was attainable in this life.
* Teaching that ‘purgatory’ is the place where sins committed in the Christian life are finally fully paid for so that salvation is still achievable for sinful saints. If salvation is dependent upon good works, then some mechanism for removing the effects of sin, other than Christ, is necessary. The system of purgatory, the treasury of merits and the sale of indulgences were generated by the church to deal with the problem of sinning Christians.
* Teaching that salvation can be lost if a person sins. This was one of the errors of the Remonstrants – who followed the teachings of Jacobus Arminius.

They taught that ‘truly regenerate believers’: can be lost forever (error 5c.); can commit the sin that leads to death or the sin against the Holy Spirit (error 5d.); and in the absence of special revelation, can have no certainty of future perseverance (in the faith) in this life (error 5e.)

In our progress through the Canons of Dort, we now come to the final section, the ‘P’ of TULIP known as ‘the perseverance of the saints’ – the eternal security of the Christian believer. This doctrine answers the theological, pastoral, and very personal question: “*Once a person is saved, can he or she lose their salvation?*”.

The word ‘perseverance’ in an English dictionary means ‘*continued effort to do or achieve a goal despite difficulties, failures or opposition*’. When the word is used in the phrase ‘perseverance of the saints’ it is not the saint’s (i.e. Christian’s) perseverance that is meant, but rather God’s sovereign work to achieve His goal of saving all His elect, despite difficulties, (their) failures and opposition. For this reason, some people prefer the phrase ‘*preservation of the saints*’. That is a good alternative, and it preserves the ‘P’ of TULIP too😊

The deeply theologically, rich and comforting truth of the preservation or perseverance of the saints can be simply expressed in the simple phrase ‘*once saved, always saved*’. Those who are truly born again by the Holy Spirit will most certainly continue to trust in Christ forever. The true believer is eternally secure because God is eternally faithful. God’s elect are “*sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory*” (Eph 1.13b-14). God always completes His work (Phil 1:6) so that not one of His chosen people are ever eternally lost (John 10:28-29).

I have entitled this sermon ‘the sinning saint’ because we will be looking at the reality of sin in the life of a Christian. This is not to be confused with the phrase ‘carnal Christian’ which has been used to describe those who believe that since they are eternally secure, they can live in any way they chose. The so-called ‘carnal Christian’ believes that they may sin as much as they please, and they will never lose the salvation they think that they securely have. It is true that some mistakenly apply the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints to themselves so that they have a false security which is ‘*harmful to godliness, good morals, prayers, and other holy exercises*’ (error 5f.). The right response to this glorious truth of eternal security in Christ is not to proudly sin, but quite the opposite as we’ll see under these three points:

1. Free, but not yet entirely
2. Improving, but not yet perfect
3. Still somewhat sinful, but never lost
4. **Free, but not yet entirely**

Positively, freedom can be defined as ‘*the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants*’. Negatively freedom is ‘*the state of not being imprisoned or enslaved*’. We enjoy many freedoms in New Zealand, although our liberty does have limits. In fact, as human beings even the greatest degree of physical freedom has bounds. For example, you and I are not free to jump, unaided more than a short distance up from the ground. We cannot overcome gravity. We are also not free to live on this earth beyond a certain, finite age. Recently the oldest person in the world, a Japanese woman, died at age 119. That is old, but even though her life was long, it was still of a limited duration.

Jesus said, "*If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free*." (John 8:31-32). Believing the Word of Christ, which is ‘true truth’, results in freedom from slavery to sin (Rom 6:17). In Christ we are no longer bound to necessarily follow what Scripture calls the ‘*desires of the flesh*’ (Gal 5:16). Some of these are listed in Gal 5:19-21: “*sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these*”.

In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, reveals the glorious freedoms of those who are saved by faith alone in Christ:

* ‘peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (5:1).
* ‘slaves to righteousness’ (6:19)
* Indwelt by the Spirit of God (8:9)
* Free from divine condemnation (8:1, 34)
* Unable to be separated from the love of Christ (8:35)

Yet Paul also writes these words in Romans 7: “*So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 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 in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*” (v21-24) This does not sound like the testimony of a free person! So much so, that some have suggested that Paul is speaking here about the time **before** he was converted.

Yet what he writes about himself in verses 14 onwards is in the present tense. His words fit the experience of all Christians who, whilst free from the condemnation of the law, **do not yet** completely fulfil the requirements of that law. Rather, they, we continue to sin. Whilst we truly have freedom in Christ, we are **not entirely free**. The reality is that Christians, whilst being free not to sin, are unable to completely exercise that freedom in this life. We are not entirely free from the desires of our sinful nature which remains within us.

The result is an internal battle within the individual Christian- like a wrestling match between the old sinful nature and the new nature in Christ. The Scriptures reveal that this internal battle is the normal experience of God’s people in this abnormal, fallen world. The Word of God is clear though that we are not to give up in battling with our sinful nature, but rather the Lord calls us to persevere (e.g. Phil 2:12; 2 Tim 4:7; Heb 12:1) through to the end of this life on earth. It is not that this perseverance is the means to gaining salvation, but rather that being able to continue to live by faith in Christ alone is one of the ways in which we gain greater assurance that we are truly saved, truly free in Christ (James 1:2-4)

The Canons of Dort teach what the Scriptures reveal, that in Christ, God “*certainly sets free from the dominion and slavery of sin, but* ***not entirely*** *in this life from the flesh and the body of sin*”. They also teach that God’s elect experience, ‘*daily sins of weakness*’ – which brings us to our second point:

1. **Improving, but not yet perfect**

The late theologian RC Sproul once commented that it is easy for a person to become converted to an institution like the church, rather than to Christ Himself. Church life can be very attractive. The covenant community can provide a place of belonging in a world which is full of isolation and loneliness. Christian fellowship which seeks to generously care for, and support others can be a wonderfully attractive setting in which to receive many good things. Hearing the assurances of salvation in Christ preached and taught within the church is comforting and securing for troubled souls.

But how can you and I know whether or not we are actually saved? The answer is by how we respond to the call to repentance. The first thing is to openly acknowledge both to God and to ourselves that we are not perfect; that we continue to sin (1 John 1:8). This is not merely a generally confession: ‘yes, I am imperfect, everyone else is too’, or ‘it is just the way I am’. It is a heartfelt sorrow that, yet again, I have failed to honour Christ in my life. Ongoing sins in the life of a saint are ‘*a constant reason to humble ourselves before God, to flee to the crucified Christ’* (Canons of Dort 5:2).

Genuine humility before God and a commitment to continue to actively put to death the earthly, sinful desires that we become aware of as we live this life (Col 3:5) are evidences of true faith. Recognising that we are far from perfect but, by God’s grace, improving in Christlikeness, is one of the ways in which we gain greater assurance of our own salvation. Peter puts it this way: “*make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love*” (2 Pet 1:5-7). “*Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to make your calling and election sure, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall*” (2 Pet 1:10).

The surfacing of sin in our lives does **not mean** that we enter into a period of not being saved, rather it is, to a greater or lesser degree, the normal experience of all Christians. Over time, we should broadly expect to see our sensitivity to inner sin increase and the frequency and severity of our sin decrease. Over time, we should broadly expect to see (and/or have others see) our Christlikeness increase. In practice this can be difficult to see over a short period of time. It’s a bit like the post-COVID illness that I have had for the past couple of months. Overall I am trending better, but sometimes I’ve relapsed, and my symptoms have got worse. I described this at our AGM last week as being like ‘*two steps forward and one step back*’.

Growth in the Christian life tends to be a bit like this. Over time there is progress, but there are also setbacks. The Apostle Paul describes his personal journey of faith this way: “*Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 3:12-14).

Brothers and sisters, the awareness of ongoing sins in our lives is a cause for a genuine heartfelt sorrow that leads to repentance, but it is not a reason to despair of our failures. Ongoing sins are a reason **“***to put the flesh to death more and more through the Spirit of prayer and by holy exercises of godliness, and to long and strive for the goal of perfection*” (Canons of Dort 5:2). In fact, not being aware of imperfection, of ongoing sin in our lives, is a reason to question our own salvation and to earnestly pray that the Lord would reveal our own hearts to us so that we can grow in repentance, godliness and true assurance of our salvation. The true Christian is still somewhat sinful, but never lost, which brings us to our third point:

1. **Still somewhat sinful, but never lost**

The Lord, in His great mercy, graciously brings us to godly sorrow so that we can have true joy in Him. That’s what we see in the life of David. When the Lord revealed the depth of David’s sin to him through the prophet Nathan, the guilty king said, ‘*I have sinned against the Lord*’ (2 Sam 12:13). Yet this man, who failed spectacularly and deeply in his adultery and murder is called in Scripture ‘*a man after God’s own heart*’ (Acts 13:22).

David writes from painful personal experience. “*The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise*” (Psalm 51:17). Likewise Paul, in our text, confesses his ongoing sin “*I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate*” (Rom 7:15). He described himself to Timothy as the ‘*foremost of sinners*’ (1 Tim 1:15). David and Paul were both men who came to hate their sin and love the righteousness of the Lord. David clearly loved God’s law – as he testifies in many of the psalms that he wrote. Likewise Paul declared that ‘*the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good*’ (Rom 7:12).

David was a man who was thankful to the Lord, both in times of great peace and prosperity and when he was fearful and despairing. His thankfulness is another feature of the many psalms that he wrote, for example: “*Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!*” (Psalm 100:4). Likewise Paul was full of thanks to the Lord, as we see in Romans 7:25 “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*

These men are two examples from Scripture who demonstrate the reality that in this life God’s people are still somewhat sinful, but never lost. David and Paul were not ‘super saints’ with inherently greater ability not to sin than you and me. In essence they are both like us all. They are **not** preserved by their own godliness, but by the powerfully securing grace of God alone.

This truth is clearly expressed in Canons of Dort Article 3:3: “*Because of these remnants of indwelling sin and also because of the temptations of the world and of Satan, those who have been converted could not remain standing in that grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who mercifully confirms them in the grace once conferred upon them and powerfully preserves them in that grace to the end*”.

How can you tell if you are a sinning saint or a sinning scoundrel? Do you humbly see and accept that you are truly free in Christ, but not entirely free from your remaining sinful nature? Do you humbly see and accept that you are improving in godliness over time, but that you are yet still far from perfect? Are you genuinely sorry in your heart for your ongoing sin with a sorrow that leads you to repentance? Do you wholeheartedly believe that the Law of God is ‘holy, righteous and good’ and is the standard you are called by the Lord to live to? Are you thankful to the Lord for everything in your life? Pleasant and unpleasant, comfortable and uncomfortable, desired and not desired?

To answer ‘yes’ to all these questions is to respond as a sinning saint does – knowing that God alone saves and that He doesn’t let anyone He has found be forever lost again. Jesus said “*I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*” (John 10:28-29).

Praise the Lord for His eternally sustaining grace in securing His children so that once saved, they are always saved.

AMEN.