

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 01, 2006

What does it mean to "struggle" with something?

In recent years I've noticed a sharp increase in the language of "struggle." We don't say that we have "sinned" in a particular area; we say we are "struggling" with it. Whether the increase is actual or just my perception is a question I will leave aside for the time being. What interests me is identifying what this word actually means in religious discourse.

I suggest that the meaning of "struggling" lies somewhere between "sinning" and "suffering."

To struggle is not the same as to sin. That should be obvious. But what is confusing about the two terms is that "struggle" is often used in conjunction with particular "sins." For instance, it is not uncommon for someone to say they are struggling with pornography. Assuming pornography-use is a sin in some sense, what could it possibly mean to struggle with pornography? Does this mean someone is using pornography? If so, would that action not be a sin to confess? But to say one is struggling with pornography lessens the blow. This way one is not confessing a sin to be forgiven; rather, he is sharing of an aspect of his journey.

To struggle is not the same as to suffer. That too should be obvious. But it is confusing again because the term "struggle" often refers to situations of suffering. Following the same example, someone says they are struggling with pornography in the sense of an addiction. Sure, they may be using pornography. But the focus is not on the behavior in this case. The focus is on the fact that they are trapped in an addiction and trying to work their way out of it. But it is easier to say one is struggling because "suffering" sounds so weak and helpless. This way one is not admitting to suffer at the hands of another; rather, he is sharing problem which he is in the process of overcoming.

The alternative category of "struggling" is certainly helpful, especially because it makes it easier for people to be open to one another. We

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proud folk prefer to not admit that we are sinning or suffering. We don't want to look bad or weak. More importantly, such a category creates space for certain behaviors which fall short of the ideal Christian life but may be permissible as stages along life's way. Addictions in particular are good candidates for this kind of alternative category. Whether the example of pornography should be placed in this category is another matter. What can be affirmed is that "struggle" is at least a logically plausible alternative category to "sin."

The problem is that the language of struggle threatens to overextend its use so that sin and suffering language disappear altogether (or at least are relegated to extreme cases). Without both the language of sin and suffering, we will be left to ourselves as "strugglers." Why? Because sinners and sufferers need salvation. Sin and suffering imply a dependency on someone else to solve the problem. Not so for strugglers. Strugglers do not need saved. Strugglers do it on their own. Even when they ask for help, they are in control of the situation. Struggling is ultimately about me, my problems, and my solution to those problems.

So I conclude that the language of "struggling" can be a useful category between sin and suffering, but should not be allowed to swallow up these other two indispensable terms.

Any thoughts?

How do you use the language of struggling, sinning and suffering?

Would you differ with my description?

Do you see any additional advantages to the language of struggle?

Do you see any additional disadvantages to the language of struggle?

What else is lost by the decreased use of sin and suffering language?

Labels: [Christian Life](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 5:40 PM

[11 comments](#)

11 Comments:

At [9:01 AM, February 02, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

In my mind the term struggle, when used in the sense described here, seems to assume at least an element of sin or at least strong temptation to it. It seems that struggle seems to parallel the concept of "besetting sin". There are certain sins that I occasionally and randomly are tempted by or commit but there are others with which I wrestle on a much more predictable basis. These are an ongoing struggle not just a once off bout of temptation. I think the real issue with this language what we see ourselves struggling with. Do we struggle with our weaknesses or "I'm only human-ness" or do we call it sin and see the only real solution to it in Christ.

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At [1:38 PM, February 02, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

the aj,

Your comment on frequency is illuminating as to the use of the term. Thanks.

You hit the nail on the head with your final question: with what are we struggling? That's the key!

Any thoughts?

At [4:21 PM, February 02, 2006](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

I'm not sure how to get more specific than sin. I guess the question I would need to wrestle with next is what are the differences and distinctions between the sin nature/old man, etc and a besetting sin and what are the connections. Why does my fallen nature tend to pull me in a particular direction repeatedly while leaving others all alone? Why doesn't there seem to be more variety in most peoples experience with temptation? I'm working on a theory that involves the idea that our sinful nature prays upon our amoral weaknesses and uses them against us. I think most people's areas of chronic temptation have some corollary to their personality. There is also the "crime of opportunity" approach where if you are constantly around people who are annoying your temptation might be unkindness or if you are exposed to sexual stimuli frequently you temptation may be to lust, or if you receive a lot of encouragement the temptation may be to pride etc. ok that's all I've got for now, I spent the afternoon painting a backdrop for our youth rally and my head is a little swimmy.

At [4:49 PM, February 02, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

a few thoughts...

struggle seems to imply a dissatisfaction with the current circumstances. not implying anything by my example, but, it is the difference between someone saying "i'm a smoker," or "i struggle with smoking." on the one hand, they are fine with it and have resigned themselves to the fact that they ARE something. on the other hand, they are admitting they do something but do not particularly love the fact that it is a PART of them.

struggle indeed softens the blow. it is an easier way of admitting you are screwed up without saying "i am an alcoholic" or "i am an angry

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person" or "i am addicted to porn." it is a gentle way of saying "i am a sinner" without saying it. BUT IS THAT GOOD? isn't admitting who and what you are an important part of moving past it? isn't it that confessional honesty that is almost liberating in itself? would we dare sit in front of Jesus and tell Him "i struggle with sin and could use some help..." instead of admitting we are sinners? I don't know, to be honest.

that leads me to my last point. we lack accountability and discipline in our Church world. that's my opinion. if we allow our brothers and sisters to get wishy washy with their language to the point that we are changing meanings and implications, we are not holding someone accountable. this is just a theory, but one i have thought a good deal about. i think it is ok to be approachable and allow someone the grace and freedom to admit to a problem with diminished/reduced words, but we should not let them become the definiton of our problems.

please give me feedback as this is something that i am VERY interested in.

At [1:22 PM, February 03, 2006](#), [Sniper](#) said...

Just. Jay's thoughts on the positioning (if I can use that term) that occurs by using the word "struggling" is very helpful to me personally. When someone says "I am struggling" with a particular vice/sin, habit, thought, etc...they are expressing a desire to move past it. And even more so, I see it as a call for the Body to intersect their lives and lend a hand. For example, if someone said to me "I sin. I lust." Where do I go from there? Lead them through the "sinner's prayer?" They have identified themselves with the condition of being a sinner, but haven't really shown me any remorse or inkling to move past their present state. But if they said "I am struggling with...", I hear a cry of need. I recognize it, HEAR it, mobilize, and act appropriately. I come alongside them. Granted, this could happen regardless of the phrases one uses when approaching me.

This dialogue is going somewhere and I like it. My next question would be: How much of this can we apply, even if it is more accurate? If someone says struggling, are we really going to stop and say "well, really, you are just sinning?" When put in action, or placed in circumstance, I really wonder how much we would even use the conclusion we come to on this topic. Keep it going guys.

At [11:03 AM, February 04, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

John, thanks for reminding me of these shifting terms--and their potential usefulness and other implications.

To me the term "sin" seeks *forgiveness or deliverance* while "struggle" seeks for *help*. Calling a thing sin tends to make we want to "deal with it decisively" (either by forgiveness in a moment or deliverance in a moment). On the other had, "struggle" admits to myself and others that I am in an ongoing process of recovery and what I need is not instantaneous forgiveness or immediate and complete deliverance but I need ongoing help and support (from God and others) as I hope to gradually gain victory over "the problem."

Thus in your example of pornography, one might say, "I struggle" with porn to communicate this: "I use porn and it is probably wrong and I think I should stop but not all at once but rather gradually reduce the use of porn through God's help and the help of others until some day I will use porn very little, or maybe even not at all."

Of course we use this approach (as you noted) for "lighter sins" (Augustine) and not major ones. I doubt if a man would try this approach on his wife for "mortal" sins (e.g. "I'm struggling in an affair and eventually hope to reduce the number of infidelities with God's help and yours so eventually I'll not cheat at all on you.") But for venial sins we seem comfortable using it. (Like you, I leave aside the matter of classifying this or other sins in the mortal-venial or heavy-light category for the moment). My point is mostly observing that the "struggle" term expects more gradual recovery and calls for continuing help rather than immediate forgiveness or deliverance.

(I am, of course an expert at labeling "sin" by other terms in order to make allowance for unlovely thoughts, words and deeds... I am a child of the "Holiness movement" where we honed this skill to perfection-pun intended) ;-)

At [4:46 PM, February 06, 2006](#), [Just . Jay](#) said...

great point by Drury the Elder.

seriously, does using the word "struggle" imply that we expect small incremental change? perhaps it does! not so much deliverance, but a 12 step program?

however, to me, if someone tells me (and they have) that they struggle with pron, that tells me a few things:

#1 they aren't "past" the struggle/temptation/addiction

#2 they DON'T LIKE the fact that they "struggle" or wrestle. they probably hate it, or they wouldn't call it struggling.

However, again... KD makes a really good point about what kind of deliverance or salvation are we even looking for? Salvation should be something that only God can do, and He does it in a way that is best described as miraculous. right? i suppose not all deliverance appears to be miraculous on the outside, but the creamy filling is 100% miracle if it is of God.

so... is it lowered expectations of God to struggle for years?

At [4:38 PM, February 07, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

I thought I would comment without reading the previous posts. I want to interact with them but I wanted my own thoughts to be more immediate...unfiltered first. Struggle... a word I have used. I use it to mean not only have I sinned, I have done something more. I have sinned tried to stop, sinned tried to stop, and sinned again. So for me to place struggling between sin and suffering doesn't work. Struggling fits in too many places. I might be struggling to believe God's love. Certainly no sin I don't think. But something I have been working on for years at one level or another. I might also be struggling to keep my eyes where they belong at a theme park. No sin, just a fight/struggle against temptation. Then again I might be struggling against judgmentalism (which I am). That is an ongoing sin.

So here is what I think on struggling. It transcends discussion of sin and suffering because it is our identity. As a grafted in Gentile, I think of myself as one who struggles with God (Isra-el). That's my identity as one of the people of God.

Struggle with suffering. Struggle with temptation. Struggle with sin. Struggle with community. Struggle with faith. Struggle with doubt. Struggle with life and eternity.

Great thought provoking blog.

dave

At [4:45 PM, February 07, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

I like KD's comments here in many ways. I think it is appropriate after all to expect salvation and deliverance to be somewhat of a process. Why not? As a traveling preacher of course I believe in the power of the decisive moment. But my decisive moments are almost universally pointed toward a continuing process in the future. I often say "I am giving you directions not destinations." When someone "gets saved" aren't they just moving a significant step along the way of salvation? When someone surrenders their life aren't they in need of a multitude of ensuing surrenders? To say I struggle is an admission of

humility I think not just a softening of the blow (though I agree John it does do that.) It says, I need help...I can't do this alone. I tried and I am still struggling. God and community help me I am still struggling.

So for me, I think the emergence of struggling language is a life-giving reality for Christian community and calls us back to "working out" our salvation. I am not sure it's either "sin and suffering" or "struggling". They are all three powerful scriptural realities. Sounds like a three point sermon...we just need a poem.

Dave

At [9:32 PM, February 07, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

When I say, "I'm struggling to lose weight" it means, "Some weeks I eat healthy and lose two pounds; other weeks I eat everything in sight and gain four." I'm not necessarily sinning or suffering, I'm trying to change my eating habits for good and want someone to commiserate with me on the difficulty of doing so.

At [6:29 PM, February 08, 2006](#), [Nathan](#) said...

i dated a girl in college who over-used the word struggle, so i am bothered whenever i hear it.

especially last weekend, when i found out that my White friend, who is dating a fantastic guy from Ethiopia, has a mother who is "struggling" with the fact that her daughter is dating a Black man.

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