

The Struggle with Sin

Romans 7:14-25

Before I start today's message, I want to make a confession to you. I've been pastor here at New Covenant for almost 7 years and there is a man who is a member of this church who has given me more trouble than anybody else I've ever met! I often get angry at him. Sometimes he makes me so miserable I don't know what to do! And this morning I want to point him out to you.

The guy I have more trouble with than anybody else is my wife's first husband! His name is Richard Sipes. That's right, it's me. Do you know why? Because I really want to be a great husband, a great father, and I really want to be a great pastor! But many times what I do doesn't match up with what I really want to do. I have trouble with me, myself and I.

My problem is that I have sin dwelling in my flesh that I still struggle with, even though I am a believer. In our passage in Romans 7 we see that the apostle Paul had same problem. He also had an "I" problem with a capital "I". In fact, you may notice as I read these verses Paul uses the first personal pronoun (either I, Me, My or Myself) almost 40 times in this short passage! This problem is personal. This passage is the personal experience of a soul in conflict. The struggle with sin is very real. It is intense, it is heart-wrenching.

As you listen to these verses see if you can relate to Paul's inner conflict the way I do:

Romans 7:14-25

14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

15 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

16 If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good.

17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.

19 For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.

20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.

22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.

23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

25 I thank God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

Every Christian who is honest with themselves and with God knows that even though I have died with Christ, even though I am a new creation in Christ, even though sin's dominion is broken and sin no longer has mastery over me, sin is still a problem. Why do I still have a problem with sin? And, How can I win the battle with sin? If you struggle with issues like that as a Christian, then Romans 7 is for you. I know it is for me.

Before we dig into the meaning of the text one preliminary question needs answered.

Who is this wretched man?

Is Paul describing his own experience here? If so, is it his experience before he was saved, or his experience as a believer? Godly theologians and preachers down through the centuries have different views on this passage. Some teach that Paul is describing the conflict of an unbeliever. Others teach that Paul is describing a believer. And within these two major views there are even varying interpretations.

View 1: The wretched divided man is an unbeliever.

This was the position of many of the early church fathers in the first three centuries of Christianity. Augustine held this view earlier in his Christian life, but later argued that it refers to believers. John Wesley and many in the Arminian camp hold to this view.

The main reason that they hold to this view is that the language that Paul uses to describe himself in this section appears to contradict what he has already said is true of believers. For instance in Romans 7:14, Paul writes, **“I am carnal, sold under sin.”** The phrase “sold under sin” refers to being enslaved to sin as a master. But in 6:14, he concluded, **“For sin shall not have dominion over you.”** He reinforces this in 6:22, **“But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.”**

Also, in Romans 6:6, he says that we were crucified with Christ so that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin. But in 7:24 he cries out, **“Who will deliver me from this body of death?”** In 7:18 Paul says, **“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells.”** How could a man indwelt by the Holy Spirit say such a thing? In 7:23 he says that he is in **“captivity to the law of sin.”** How could a believer who has already been redeemed by Christ cry out (7:24), **“O wretched man that I am!”**

Do you understand the problem? We will answer these objections as we go through Romans 7. But let me just say here that I think those who hold this view not only do not understand chapter 7, they miss the point of chapter 6 as well. Even in chapter 6 we saw that even though we are united with Christ in His death and resurrection so that we are dead to sin and alive to God, although we are free from sin’s dominion and we serve God in righteousness—Paul still commands us in Romans 6:12, **“Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts.”** Why would he need to urge us not to let sin reign in our bodies if there was not a possibility that it could? And again in 6:13 he commands us, **“And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin.”** The command not to implies that you could do that.

So the wretched, divided man in chapter 7 is not really different than the new man in chapter 6. Paul is just describing what every Christian knows by experience, that even though we are united with Christ, dead to sin, and sin no longer is master over us, sin is nevertheless still a problem.

View 2: The wretched divided man is a believer.

This was the view of Augustine later in life, as I already mentioned. It is also the view of Luther, Calvin, and most of the Reformers, along with many good theologians down through the centuries, such as John Owen, Charles Hodge, James Boice, and J. I. Packer.

This is the way that I understand this passage. Some of the reasons why are:

- A. Shift from past tense to present tense.

Paul makes a very obvious shift from past tense verbs in 7:7-13 where he

describes his experience before Christ, to present tense verbs in 7:14-25 where I believe he is describing his ongoing struggle against sin as a believer.

- B. Paul's attitude toward the law is that of a believer.

Look at what he writes about the law. Verse 14: "**For we know that the law is spiritual.**" Verse 16: "**I agree with the law that it is good.**" Verse 22: "**For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.**" So the Law is "spiritual" and "good" and a "delight." He is seeking to obey the law, not just outwardly, but with the "inner man"

How many unbelievers do you know who have that attitude toward the commands of God? Unbelievers may put on an outward show of obedience, but their hearts are far from God (Matt. 23; Mark 7:6-13). Unbelievers do not seek after God (Rom. 3:11) or desire to please Him (8:8).

- C. The battle is between the new inner man and the old outward flesh.

Unbelievers only live in the flesh, but believers have a new Christ like nature and the indwelling Holy Spirit that war against the flesh (Gal. 5:17, **For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish**).

Every Christian who is honest acknowledges this inner struggle against sin that goes on throughout life. When Paul writes (7:18), "**For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells,**" he indicates that there is more to Paul than just flesh. He has a new inner man that longs for God and His holiness, although he has not yet attained it.

A believer lives in two extremes. He lives in this world as a man of flesh and subject to the fallen conditions of mortal life. But spiritually, he has passed from death to life. He shares in Christ's death, burial, resurrection. He is a new creation in Christ Jesus and a partaker of the divine nature. But sin hangs on in his humanness, in his flesh, and so he is conscious of the presence and power of indwelling sin. In his new heart he hates sin. But in his body of flesh he still sometimes gives into sin. This is the man in Romans 7.

What is the main point of Romans 7:14-25?

As I said over the last two messages, the major theme of chapter 7 is the law. Paul is answering two important objections to his teaching of salvation by faith apart from the law. Paul has argued passionately for justification by faith and against justification by works of the Law. We cannot get right with God by law-keeping, but by faith alone. Paul has even seemed to say that the Law is part of our problem, not part of our rescue. For example: Romans 3:20, "**Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.**" Or Romans 3:28, "**Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.**" Or, even more shockingly, Romans 5:20, "**Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound.**" That makes the Law sound like the accomplice of sin.

In chapter 7 Paul says that if you want to bear fruit for God - that is, if you want to be sanctified as well as justified - you have to die to the Law. Romans 7:4, "**Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another--to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God.**" You can't bear fruit for God if you don't die to the Law. Law-keeping does not give the power to bear fruit to God. Being joined to the risen Christ gives the power to bear fruit to God.

This teaching might lead some to conclude that the law itself is the problem. So Paul asks in verse 7, "**What shall we say then? Is the law sin?**" And again in verse 13, "**Has then what is good become death to me?**" In other words, if you have to turn away from law-keeping to the righteousness of Christ to be justified, and if you have to

die to the law and be united to Christ to be sanctified, then isn't the law sin and isn't it the cause of death? Paul's answer to both of these of course is "**Certainly not!**" (7:7, 13).

The purpose of Romans 7:14-25 is to defend that answer. If the law is the problem, then I am not responsible for my sin, it's not my problem. But if the law is holy, righteous, good, and spiritual, then it convicts me of sin which is my fault. Paul uses his own experience with indwelling sin as a believer to show that the law is not sinful or deadly, I am in my sinful flesh. The problem is not with the law, the problem is with me.

Paul's main point is: Justification by faith apart from works of the Law does not mean that the Law is sin. And sanctification by faith through death to the Law does not mean this either. Christians do not become lawless people who continually live for sin. Instead because we are united with Christ, Christians love the Law of God, esteem the Law of God, and delight in the Law of God. We do not blame the Law for our sin. Instead the Christian admits that there is in all of us Christians, as long as this fallen age lasts and we live on the earth, the reality of "indwelling sin" (7:17, 20).

Romans 7:17, "**But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.**"

Romans 7:20: "**Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.**"

Romans 7:21: "**evil is present with me.**"

So on the one hand Paul is proving by his experience that the Law is good, and on the other hand that indwelling sin is the problem in the Christian life. The point is not that we should make peace with sin in our lives because we are not under law, but that we should make war on sin in our own lives because we are under grace. Under grace the law is not a drudgery, it is a delight. Under grace we love the law of God and we hate our sin. In other words, the Law does not cause our defeats, the Law shines the light on our victories. Indwelling sin causes our defeats. And Christ Jesus is the source of victory over sin.

Next time we will dig into this passage in more detail, but today I just wanted to lay the groundwork for our study.

So I will conclude with just a three thoughts from Romans 7.

1. **There is an intense struggle with sin inside every Christian.** The Christian life is never free from the struggles that Paul describes here. We have to do battle against indwelling sin as long as we live. If you do not hate your sin and struggle against it, you need to question whether you are really saved. If you can shrug off your sin as no big deal, you might not be born again. A life of ongoing repentance is the mark of the new birth.
2. **This struggle should drive us to despair over our sin and to cry out to God.** God wants us to come to the end of ourselves so that we will be driven to trust in Him alone. We cannot conquer sin by our own will-power and effort. If we could, we'd boast in our holiness! Peter had to learn that painful lesson by denying the Lord. We have to learn that the victory is not in us; it's in the Lord.
3. **Your struggle with sin means there is hope for deliverance.** Your defeats do not necessarily mean that you are not born again. We will never be sinless in this life, but we should be sinning less as we grow to maturity in Christ. If you learn to walk in the Spirit, you will not carry out the desire of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

So wherever you're at today, there is hope in the Lord. If you are not saved, cry out to God: "**Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved**" (Rom. 10:13). If you are defeated by sin, so was none other than the apostle Paul. But he found victory in Christ, and so can you!