

The Vicious Cycle of Sin

Romans 7:14-25

Have you ever felt like you were stuck in a vicious cycle of sin, but you couldn't figure out how to get out of it even though you wanted to?

You did that thing that you hate. You felt ashamed. You confessed your sin before God. You resolved never to do it again. You love the beauty of God's holy standards. But before too long, the temptation returned, you were weak in the flesh, and you sinned again. Oh, the utter frustration of it all!

That's what Paul describes in Romans 7:14-25 about his spiritual experience: he hates what he is doing, but he does it anyway. He knows that God gave us the law; it's spiritual and good; it's the right thing to do. The problem is, he *can't* do it perfectly. He doesn't have the power to get out of the vicious cycle of sin.

As I said last time, I believe in this passage that Paul is describing his experience as a believer. Paul makes some statements that an unbeliever could not make. He loves God's law and wants to keep it from the heart (7:22). He hates his own sin. Paul is describing his own frustrating experience as a believer.

Paul's main point in the context is to show that God's law is holy, righteous, and good, but it is *not* able to deliver us from the power of sin.

As you read Romans 7:14-25, the cyclical structure of the text is apparent. Paul seems to repeat himself. Each cycle begins with a statement of his condition, then he gives the confirmation or proof of it, and finally he gives a conclusion. Listen for this outline as I read our text.

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.**

First cycle (7:14-17): The struggle to live up to the law of God.

Condition (7:14): **“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.”**

Confirmation (7:15-16): **“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.”**

Conclusion (7:17): **“But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.”**

Second cycle (7:18-20): The struggle of repeated failure.

Condition (7:18): **“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells”**

Confirmation (7:18b-19): **“for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find”**

Conclusion (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.”**

Third cycle (7:21-25): The struggle of the war within.

Condition (7:21): **“I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.”**

Confirmation (7:22-23): **“For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind”**

Conclusion (7:25): **“So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.”**

As you can see, in the second and third cycles, Paul repeats many things from the first cycle, which is why I’m describing Paul’s experience here as a vicious cycle of sin. He’s doing the same thing over and over, in spite of his good intentions to the contrary. He wants to stop, but he can’t. He wants to obey God’s law, but he’s not always able to do so. Sin reappears again and again.

So today, let’s look at this vicious cycle of sin.

I. The struggle to live up to the law of God. (Rom. 7:14-17)

A. Condition: The law is spiritual, I am carnal (7:14)

The law is spiritual. In other words, it is of the Holy Spirit. It is the product of God, the Holy Spirit. It is not derived from man, it comes from God Himself. It is a reflection of His character. It is holy, just and good, says verse 12. It is important for Paul to make this clear because what he has just written seems to devalue the law. Paul wrote in verse 4 that we are dead to the law and in verse 6 that we have been delivered from the law.

But Paul is making it clear here that the problem is not with the law. The commandments were intended by God for life. It was sin that abused the law to bring about death.

The law does a good work. It doesn’t save and it doesn’t sanctify, but it does convict of sin. As verse 13 says, **“But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.”**

The law shows the sinfulness of our sin. The law is spiritual. But in contrast to that, **"I am carnal."** What does Paul mean by that? The word carnal means fleshy, I am of flesh. I am earthbound. I am physical. He does not say like he did in verse 5 **"in the flesh."** *In the flesh* describes the condition the unsaved, someone who is still in Adam, someone who is totally controlled by the flesh. It is what we were before we were in Christ. No, Paul is no longer *in the flesh*. But he is still *of flesh*. He is still living in a physical body of flesh. He still has all the sinful trappings of mortal flesh.

What does this mean in our battle with sin? Look at the end of verse 14 Paul says I am **"sold under sin."** Now how can Paul say he is sold under sin when in Romans 6:14 he said, **"For sin shall not have dominion over you."** And in 6:18 he wrote, **"And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness."**

I think it's important for us to understand that this truth about Paul here in Romans 7 is not the whole story, but it is a part of the story. The struggle against sin is a real experience of the Christian life, but it is not the only experience. All the truth that we learned in chapter 6 is still true about us. We have died to sin with Christ, we are raised to newness of life. Sin shall no longer be our master.

But here in chapter 7 Paul is showing us something else about the Christian you might have been tempted to overlook or deny if you only had heard what he said in Romans chapter 6. Paul describes his own experience here to show us a part of the Christian life that all of us experience but we rarely talk about when we come to church on Sunday morning.

Paul restates this in verse 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."** There is a sense in which sin can still put me in bondage. When we choose to sin, we put ourselves in bondage to sin, we are captive to sin. That's why Paul urges us, even commands us in Romans 6: **"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts."** It is entirely possible for believers to sin, and when we do we are letting sin take us captive. In Romans 6:16 Paul explains how this works, **"Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?"**

B. The Confirmation: I do what I hate (7:15)

Here is the proof of the condition in verse 14. Paul says in verse 15, **"For what I am doing, I do not understand."** What he is doing makes no sense. Do you ever feel that way? I do.

There are times in my life when I do something stupid or say something stupid. When I think about what I did I think, "Why did I do that?" or "Why did I say that?" It was so out of character with who I am in Christ and who I want to be that I think, "I don't know why I did that." Something in me seemed to take me captive and I did it and I don't really understand it. Sin always clouds our minds and causes us not to think clearly.

Listen to how Paul describes it in verse 15: **"For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do."** Paul feels that there is a continual civil war going on in him. It was not that Paul could never do anything good or that he could never obey God. I am sure that much of the time Paul was faithful to God. What he is describing here is the inner battle that was going on constantly in him. In his heart where he is a new creation Paul sincerely desired to fulfill the perfect

law of God. But in his flesh he kept seeing that he was unable to live up to the Lord's perfect standards even though it was his heart's desire.

William Barclay entitles his commentary on this passage *The Human Situation* and he's right. This is truly the human situation. We know the good, but we don't do it. We know what's wrong and we fight against it and then we do it anyway.

C. The Conclusion: Sin dwells in me (7:16-17)

Paul agrees with the Law, confessing that it is good (7:16). Even though he is defeated by sin, he still recognizes that God's ways are right and his own ways are wrong. He isn't disputing with the law, as if it were unfair or even wrong.

What then is the source of his problem?

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

Paul is *not* saying, "I'm not responsible for my sin. I'm just a helpless victim. I didn't do it; sin did it!" Rather, he is acknowledging the powerful inner struggle that takes place in every believer. He is acknowledging that when he sins, he is acting against his new identity in Christ, which is his true new person. The good news is that Paul is **"no longer"** who he used to be.

All true Christians have this testimony. We have a "no longer." Before we came to Christ we were dead in trespasses and sins. We were enslaved to the flesh and the things of this world. Ephesians 2:3 says, **"we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath."**

But that is no longer who we are since we came to Christ. Paul says it is no longer I. That's not the new Paul. He has died to sin with Christ. He is raised to walk in newness of life. That is who he really is on the inside. He has a new heart and a new spirit, born again as a child of God. Sin no longer reigns in his life. Sin is no longer his master.

But sin does dwell in his life. It survives in his flesh. As long as we remain in these mortal bodies we will be subject to temptation and sin. And sin has a powerful tug because of our unredeemed flesh. That is why even though the law of God is good, just trying to obey it in a legalistic way is so frustrating. The believer who tries to live under the law will not eradicate sin in the flesh, he will only activate it.

Sure, you can resist sin outwardly by sheer will-power, but it will keep wearing away in your inner man until it wins. In other words, outward morality is not enough. The Pharisees were outwardly moral, but Jesus nailed them for their hypocrisy and the evil that was in their hearts (Matt. 23).

Sin is so powerful that Jesus graphically portrayed dealing with it as cutting off your hand or plucking out your eye (Matt. 5:29-30). To live in consistent victory over indwelling sin, we need nothing less than the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Which is the solution that Paul gives in chapter 8. But these verses should show us that we're dealing with a powerful force that is out to control and destroy us. We need more than will-power.

In large part, verses 18-20 are a repeat of verses 14-17. And verses 21-25 repeat the struggle again. That is why I have titled this sermon, *The Vicious Cycle of Sin*. Paul is explaining further the conclusion of verse 17, and his conclusion in verse 20 is almost identical with his conclusion in verse 17. He's in this vicious cycle and can't get out of it by his own strength. We need nothing less than the very power of God to overcome the power of indwelling sin.

It's hard for us as believers to come to grips with what Paul is saying here. Many have tried to come up with some spiritual formula that will get us out of Romans 7. But I don't see anything like that in the text. What I see is that you've got to face your helplessness in the conflict or you will never receive the help that Christ can give.

God has to show us that we cannot save ourselves by our own righteousness or good deeds. God only saves sinners who cast themselves upon His mercy in Christ. And He has to show us that we cannot conquer sin by our own will-power and effort. If we could, we would boast in our holiness instead of praising the Lord! Peter had to learn that painful lesson by denying the Lord. We have to learn it by going through the Romans 7 vicious cycle of repeatedly failing to do the good we really want to do, until we learn that the victory is not in us; it's in the Lord.

Remember, as a believer Romans 7 is not your whole story, but it is part of your story. The struggle that you are undergoing in your life now doesn't mean that you're not saved. God intends for you to struggle with sin so that in your struggle, you would be stripped of your self-reliance and begin to trust in God and God alone. Does the fact that you struggle make you a failure? No. Does it make you a loser? No. Does it make you a sub-standard Christian? No. Do you know what it makes you? It makes you an excellent candidate for the grace of God.

If you are struggling with sin, first, turn your life over to Jesus Christ if you've never done so. Then number two, if you are a believer, hold on to Jesus and never let go. Hold on to Jesus. Run to the cross and there find forgiveness and strength and healing. Cheer up, Child of God. Your struggles are part of God's plan to make you holy. Your struggles are his strategy to make you like Jesus Christ.