

Romans: The Believer's Struggle with Sin (1)

Romans 7:13-25

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June 3, 2001

If you have your Bibles, I would invite you to turn with me to Romans 7. As we do so, let me just make three or four introductory remarks about this great passage. Paul, so far in Romans 7, especially in verses 7-12 has made it clear that the believer's attitude towards the law as a gauge of the vitality and reality of his faith and that the believer's view of the law has to have two parts. Every believer has to look at the law in both of these ways simultaneously. First of all, every believer needs to understand that the law is not the solution to his or her sin. Indeed, we need to be rescued from the condemnation of the law. But secondly, the believer must understand that the law is good and it is designed for his benefit. Now Paul has been speaking in this great passage about the role of the law and indeed the role of the law for the believer.

In this passage, we come to what most commentators quickly confess is the most controverted portion of all of the book of Romans. It may be the hardest section to understand in all the book of Romans. Because of that, I am going to do something a little bit different today. Something that I don't normally do. And that is, I am going to do a verse-by-verse exposition of the passage. We are going to walk through, verse-by-verse, and simply see if we can follow Paul's argument. The reason I am doing that is, first of all, I think this will become apparent to you as I read this aloud, if it hasn't already become apparent to you, as you read this to yourself, that Paul's argument can sound or can look at first glance or at first hearing convoluted. He repeats himself. And you wonder, well, does that relate back to what he just said three verses ago. How did it relate to that? What exactly is he saying? He uses terminology that is difficult to get into. And if I outline for you what Paul says and you are not convinced that you can see that that is how Paul says it and that is what he is in fact saying, then you will have less confidence in the comforting application of this truth. And so, we are going to look at this passage twice. Today we will just walk through it verse by verse, so that you can follow Paul's argument for yourself, because though it is hard in some ways, it is not impossible. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to appreciate what Paul is saying here. The other reason I do this is because it is so important for the Christian life. And I will make my argument for that in just a few moments. But just remember this, as we walk through this passage, today, Paul's

general subject in Romans 7, is how the believer is free from the law, and of what the role of the law is in the believer's experience. If you will bear that in mind, it will help you greatly in understanding Paul. With that as introduction, let's look at Romans chapter 7, beginning in verse 13. This is God's word.

"Therefore, did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be, rather it was sin in order that it might be shown to be sin by affecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment, sin might become utterly sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual. But I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For that which I am doing, I do not understand, for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing that I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the law, confessing that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me that is in my flesh. For the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good, is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. But if I am doing the very thing that I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then, the principle that evil is present in me. The one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then, on the one hand, I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh, the law of sin."

Amen. Thus ends the reading of God's holy word. May he add his blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we need Your help. We confess with Peter that some of what Paul says is often hard to understand. And at the same time, we confess that you did not give us Your word to confuse us or confound us. You meant it to be understood. So by the Spirit open our eyes that we might understand what Paul is saying, what You are saying to us. And then give us some inkling of just how important it is and its specific relevance to our own day and age and our daily lives. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

A famous and godly man climbed up the steps to the pulpit of a Bible college chapel and he began to preach a sermon in which he promoted to the students and commended to them the view that believers ought to live a higher life, a victorious life, in which they get a victory over sin, which sets them free from conscious sin, and in the course of his sermon, he said to this gathered assembled group of students, "I have not sinned in three years." And in the group of the people who were attending that particular message were two young folks. They had just been married for about a year. They had met at the Bible college. They were both committed to the Lord. They wanted to go into missions. Both of them had come to that desire before they ever met one another. When they met

one another they both had a desire to go the mission field. They very quickly fell in love with one another and they got married and in the course of their studies, they were preparing to go together to the mission field. But like many Christians they were struggling with sins, sins from their past, sins that were impacting their relationship and giving them enormous struggles. As they sat there and they heard this man say that he had not sinned in three years, they heard him go on to say this: "And if you're still struggling with sin, it is because you don't have enough faith. If you only had enough faith, you would have the victory over sin, and you could live the higher life, the blessed life and experience perfect love." They began to ask some of their friends who were at the message, "Have you experienced this higher life? Have you found victory over sin?" "Oh, yes," they were assured by their friends around them. They began to wonder, "Is there something wrong with us? Are we the only people struggling on this mundane plain with sin? Have we just because of a lack of faith failed to achieve the higher life?" That is the impression that they got from their teachers and from their classmates. They came to Reformed Theological Seminary a year later under enormous, enormous emotional and psychological pressure from the sense that they were somehow failing God, because they were continuing sin in their life. They were muchly relieved to find that this teaching that they had heard was not in accord with the Scriptures, and that the Scriptures' teaching actually liberated them from the false guilt they had, in order to deal with the real guilt that they needed to deal with. And so, you can see how an understanding of the believer's life and the ongoing struggle with sin in the believer's life is far from an academic question. We are not going off to the Ivory Tower of the theologians today to pick nits. This is something that hits you where you are and it hits all of us where we are everyday.

And by the way, there are many variations on the theme that that particular chapel speaker gave in that chapel message that day. For instance, imagine this scene. A daughter who has had a difficult relationship with her mother over the years goes home to confront that particular mom about some of those issues with the desire of clearing the air, dealing with sin, and having the kind of relationship that the two of them have always wanted to have, but which has been obstructed because of unconfessed sin. The daughter, with fear and trepidation, raises some of the issues which have brought a barrier between her and between her mother. But unfortunately her mother has imbibed teaching based upon Romans 7:13-25, which says, that she is no longer a sinner. She doesn't sin; it is the flesh that sins. And so, when her daughter raises these things, she says, "Well I don't sin. It is the flesh that sins in me. You can't ask me to ask you for forgiveness because I didn't do it. The flesh did it." The daughter is crushed because she was fearfully raising these questions with a genuine desire of restoration and yet she is sidestepped by her mother who claims that she didn't do it and that it was the flesh in her and she appeals to the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 7 for support for her particular view.

Or perhaps worse, we could imagine this scene. A Bible teacher has collected a

group of people to follow him, and in the course of teaching them, he explains to them, that he in fact no longer sins, because it is no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him, and he no longer sins. And the group is somewhat confused by that, but compelled by his personality and they are lead astray in their teaching. Or perhaps it is someone who comes to this passage, and says, you see, if Paul had only understood that he was free from the law, he wouldn't have bothered with sin. His conscience wouldn't have bothered him. The fact of the matter is that Paul is still trapped under a sense that he needs to obey the law. That is why he has a guilty conscience. Well, my friends, there are a thousand different permutations on misunderstanding of this passage. And those misunderstandings directly impact the way that we live as Christians. And so it is well worth our time to work through this passage together and appreciate what Paul is teaching.

As we do so, all I want to do is two things today. I want to stress two applications and I want to walk you through the passage. The two applications are this, and I am going to tell them to you at the outset, because I am not going to finish this. The two applications are this. First of all, believers still sin. Mature believers still sin. Godly, growing, not backsliding believers still have an ongoing struggle with sin in life. Paul makes that amply clear here. Secondly, the law is not the answer to the believer's struggle with assurance. It is not the answer to the problem of salvation or assurance. And indeed apart from Christ, it is part of the problem. And therefore, the believer must run some place else other than to the law in order to find true assurance. Now those are the applications that I am going to make for the passage. But what I would like to do is walk through the passage with me and just follow Paul's argument.

Now before we do that, let me say just one last word of preface. We know that Paul in this passage is a mature Christian for at least three reasons. First of all, because in verses 13-25, unlike verses 7-12, Paul speaks in the present tense. He speaks looking back to the past in 7-12. In verses 13-25, he speaks in the present tense. Notice over and over again, how he says this. "I am of the flesh." Verse 15, "for that which I am doing, I do not understand. I am not practicing, I am doing the very thing, I do the very thing, I do not wish to do. I agree with the law. I confess it as good. It is no longer I who am doing it, but the sin. I know that nothing good dwells in me. The good that I wish, I do not do. I practice the evil that I do not wish" and so and so on. He is speaking in the present tense. He is not looking back to the misty past. He is speaking in the present tense.

Secondly, we know that this is a mature Christian Paul because of his estimation of the law. He calls the law spiritual and he calls the law good. Now both of those are signs that he has come to view the law like God views the law. The law is spiritual and the law is good, and this is an indication that Paul is speaking as a mature Christian believer. And finally we see that he is a mature Christian believer in this passage. If you will look at verses 22 and 25, because of his description of his relationship to the law. How does he describe himself as

relating to the law? Well this is what he says, I joyfully concur with the law in the inner man. Now ever met a Pagan who said that? That he joyfully concurred with the law in the inner man? And then he goes on to say, that he is serving the law in his mind. Now only a Christian can do those things. Only a Christian can serve the law of God in the very depths of his being.

And so for all these reasons, the apostle Paul it is clear, is speaking of himself as a mature believer. Why do I say that? Because many interpreters argue that Paul here is speaking as an unconverted man. Or as a man under conviction of sin but prior to conversion. And some even suggest that this is an immature backsliding apostle Paul at the beginning of his Christian experience but not as a mature believer. And I want you to understand that that is a major mistake in the approach to this passage for each of those three reasons. I well remember one of the godliest men I know, Robert Rayburn, standing up at a chapel and preaching on this passage and saying, "If the apostle Paul is not a mature Christian in this passage, then I am not a Christian." It made a real impact on all those present. And I appreciate that particular indication, because of the importance of that to understanding this passage for us today. So, let's walk through it verse by verse together and see if we can follow Paul's argument.

Verse 13, Paul says, therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be. Rather it was sin in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting death, my death through that which is good, so that the commandments, through the commandments sin would become utterly sinful. Now Paul is telling you two things in that verse. First, Paul is telling you that the law of God was not the cause of his death. Sin was. The law of God was not the cause of his death. Sin was. And Paul is telling you that not just because he wants you to know something autobiographical, not just because he wants to tell you a human interest story, but because that is the case for everyone. For everybody, it is not the law that kills you, it is sin. The law is not the cause of our death, sin is.

Secondly, he wants you to understand this. That the very sinfulness of sin is seen by the fact that it uses something so good, the law of God, as a weapon against us. We see the sinfulness of sin, the insidiousness of sin, that it takes something good and holy and honorable and pure like the law and uses it against us. By the way, isn't it interesting that Satan and the flesh will take this good law of God and use it as a weapon against us? And it might seem, as it were, to overthrow God's plan. But think of this my friends; God shows His sovereignty in overruling even sin and using that for the good of His people. Think of it, the most wicked deed ever performed in the history of humanity was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and it was God's stratagem to conquer sin. So if Satan uses the law to thwart the purposes of the law that is life in order to promote sin and death, God trumps him by using even evil, for ends which are ultimately for His glory and for His people's good.

At any rate, Paul's argument continues in verse 14. We know that the law is spiritual, he says, but I am of flesh. Again, Paul is telling you two things in this passage. First, he is telling you that the law of God is spiritual. That is capital 'S' my friends. In other words, it is of the Holy Spirit. The law of God 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. Secondly, however, this is how he characterizes himself. Paul says, I am of the flesh. Now I want to say two things about that. Paul is not saying here, I am fleshly and immature, like he uses a similar word in the book of I Corinthians. Paul is saying here that he still has a human nature. A sinful human nature. When he says, "I am of the flesh, I am sold into the bondage of sin," he is saying, you need to know two things about me: I have died to sin, and I have been raised to newness in Christ and I still have a sinful nature. You remember he has already told you the first thing in Romans chapter 6. Now he says, let me tell you one more thing about me. I still have a sinful human nature. I am not entirely sanctified. I am not completely perfected. I am not without sin. I still struggle with sin. So when Paul says, I am of the flesh, he is not telling you everything about him, because he has already told you that he is a new man in Jesus Christ in Romans 6, but he is telling you something else about him that you might have been tempted to overlook or deny if you only had heard what he said about himself in Romans chapter 6. So the law of God is spiritual and Paul still has a sinful human nature. That is what he tells us in verse 14.

Then in verse 15, he says this, "for what I am doing, I do not understand. For I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very things that I hate." Again, two things that Paul is telling in verse 15. He is complaining here, first, that his actions are not in accord with that new heart, that new mind, that new spirit that God had given him. We have all died to sin in Christ. We have all been raised to newness of life. And the apostle Paul is saying here, my actions are not consistent with my being a new creation. They are out of accord with it. That is why he can even say, I don't understand them. It doesn't make sense.

Secondly, he is saying, that the fact is that some of these deeds that he is doing, these sinful deeds are out of accord with what he really desires to do in his heart of heart. The things that he really wants to do and the things that he really doesn't want to do don't necessarily reflect themselves in what he ends up doing or not doing. In other words, Paul is showing you that he is a new man from the fact that he has a desire to do what is right. But he is showing you again, experientially, that he has a sinful nature, because he doesn't always do that which he knows he ought to do and that which he really wants to do.

In verse 16, he expands on this. He says, "if I do the very thing that I do not want to do, I agree with the law, confessing it as good." Now you may be looking at the verse and saying, "Well, help me understand how I am confessing the law to be good by sinning." Well, here is the argument. First of all, it is crystal clear that Paul is saying here that the law is good. If Paul wanted to argue that the law was

the problem this was his chance. In this verse, he could have said, "you see the whole problem was, you see, I still care about the law. And if I would just forget about the law and I would go on just having a good personal relationship with Jesus Christ, everything would be solved." But Paul doesn't do that. He says not, "the law is good. There is nothing wrong with the law." The law is right when it says that is right and that is wrong. And I have got to deal with that. But look this is how he gets there. He indicates that his conscience actually bears witness to the fact that the law is good, by reminding him of the difference between what he knows that he ought to do and what he really wants to do on the one hand, and on the other hand, what he actually ends up doing. In other words, Paul says, every time I don't do what I know that I ought to do and what I want to do in my heart of hearts, I am being reminded again that God's law is good, and I am the problem.

In verse 17, he expands on this. And by the way, friends, in verses 17-20, Paul is going to work the same theme over and over and over again. So don't get confused. In fact, verse 20 is a recapitulation of verse 17. But this is a very important verse because every heretic for the last two thousand years has hopped on verse 17 and verse 20 to come up with some crazy doctrine, so listen closely. Verse 17, "so now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells within me." Now Paul is not trying to get himself off the hook here. He is not making excuses. It is not that someone has come to him and said, "Paul you have sinned," and he said, "ah, the devil made me do it." He is not saying, "oh, that wasn't me, that was someone else. That was the old man still in me." You know, sort of as if there was this autonomous being within him creating a split personality. That is not what Paul is saying. His point is not to get himself off of the hook.

Why is he telling you this? Well, for three reasons. Look at the three things that he asserts. First, he is asserting the new creation and he has already said that every believer is a new creation in Jesus Christ and we are raised to newness of life, Romans chapter 6. He says the sin which is still in him, is not the product of that new creation. He says, when you look at me, and you see me still sinning, you need to understand this; that sin doesn't come from the work of the Holy Spirit in me, in which I came to saving union with Jesus Christ. That is not where that sin comes from. That is the first thing that he wants you to understand.

Secondly however, he wants you to understand that there continues to be a sinful nature in him. He does go on sinning. And the presence of that new man does not mean that he does not sin. And third and finally, he wants you to understand where that sin comes from. It is the continuing product of the sinful nature. That nature does not represent his truest self. It doesn't represent the deepest part of his being, which has been impacted by the new man, but it is still there. And so Paul affirms all three things in verse 17.

Then in verse 18, he says, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my

flesh. For the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not." Paul here, again, makes it clear that his still sinful nature leads him to affirm that nothing good dwells in him. You all remember the quote from Augustine in *The Confessions*, he is going along in *The Confessions* and he pauses with a little prayer to the Lord. He says, "Lord, the good in me, You wrought. The rest is my fault." That is how he sums up his whole life. "The good in me, You did. The rest is my fault." That is a little bit of what Paul is saying here. He is affirming that nothing good dwells in him. But again, he is not characterizing his deepest self; the new creation because he says there is nothing good that dwells in me, that is in my flesh. And so Paul doesn't say, well, there is no good in me in the inner man, because he knows that God in His grace has wrought good in him.

For example, Paul says, "I want to do the good, but I don't." This is an evidence of the flesh, the ongoing sinful nature, and thus, of his lack of ultimate goodness. That is how he proves that there is nothing good in his flesh, because he wills to do right, but he doesn't end up doing it.

Then in verse 19, he goes on to say this. "For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want." In other words, he says, you can see my lack of goodness in two ways. Through sins of omission and commission. I don't do the things that God tells me to do, I do, do the things that God tells me not to do. And so both in my not doing those things that I ought, and in doing those things that I ought not, I show that I lack goodness.

Then in verse 20, he says, "if I am doing the very thing that I do not want, then I am not longer the one doing it, but the sin which dwells in me." Now again, he is going right back to what he said in verse 17, and he is elaborating on it. And what is he telling you? Well, two things. First, the very fact of the presence of sin in his life is proof that there are two principles at work in the believer. His deepest self is the product of God, and grace and union with Christ. And is characterized by Christ and the Spirit and the law of God. But on the other hand, the flesh, the sinful nature, is characterized by sin. That is the first thing that Paul makes clear.

Secondly, notice how he refers to sin here. It is almost as if it is an alien force. He is not, again, doing that in order to try and get himself off of the hook; he is doing that to indicate that it doesn't make sense, it doesn't go with and it is not produced by the new creation that Jesus Christ has wrought in us. And so he goes on to elaborate on this in verses 21-23.

Now look at verse 24. In verse 24, he cries the cry, "Wretched man that I am, who will set me free from this body of death?" Because of his feelings of bondage to sin, he cries out in misery. Notice the believer can never ever be complacent about sin. The believer, when confronted with sin, can never say, "Nah, who cares, big deal." Paul is miserable, because the believer just doesn't want to be forgiven; the believer wants to be rid of sin. The believer wants to live in a state in which we are free not only from the domination of sin, but from the presence of

sin.

The problem is that some believers think that happens now. But it doesn't happen until glory. And so the apostle Paul cries out, "Wretched man that I am," and I want you to see that in crying this, he once again proves that the law cannot give you salvation or assurance. Think of it. What is the big struggle that Paul is having? The struggle is this. He knows what he ought to do, but he is not doing it. Now help me here. How can the law help him with that? You know, Paul comes in to your office, he sits down, he says, you have got to give me some counsel. I am frustrated here. I know what I ought to do, but I can't do it. And your answer is, "Well, just obey the law." Paul says to you, "No, I don't think you understand. That is my problem. I know what the law says, and I am not doing it." "Well, just obey the law, then you will assurance of salvation." Paul says, "That can't be the answer. That can't be." And notice what his answer is, verse 25: "But thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord." In other words, the answer to my salvation and my assurance is not my law keeping; it is God's grace through the Lord Jesus Christ. So Paul, even in reminding you of the ongoing struggle of the believer with sin, is also reminding you again that salvation has to be by grace. And so does assurance. Because our law keeping will never ever measure up to what we know the law demands.

And so in this passage, Paul summarizes for us these two great principles. First, believers, mature believers, still struggle with sin. Secondly, the law isn't the answer to that problem. In fact, it is part of the problem, when we are apart from Christ. It is part of the weaponry of sin against us. So there must be some other answer. What is that answer? Jesus Christ. Now pull back one more time, friends. Remember the big topic he has been talking about? Freedom from the law. It makes perfect sense. Paul is telling you, my friends, if your freedom and your salvation and your assurance and your salvation, depended upon the law, look where even I would be, a wretched man. But thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, I am saved by grace. And so Paul, even in the present experience of the believer has showed you again how the grace of God brings you freedom from the law and we will apply that truth next week. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we thank you for Your word, and we ask that by Your Spirit, that You would help us to come to a sure grasp of its truth and rest in its comforts, in Jesus' name. Amen.

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