

# The Conflict of Two Natures

📖 Romans 7:14-19

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We're studying Romans 6-8, the doctrine of experiential sanctification. It's the key passage on the topic but not the only passage. We have to correlate it with other passages and we've done a little of that. We'll be doing more as we go ahead and work toward a categorical treatment of this doctrine. I'd love to be able to lay it all out for you in nice tight categories. But the problem is that the categories we formulate have to be based on exegesis and the only way to do that is by very slowly, carefully, working through the text verse-by-verse. Maybe the categories we have in our head are right, but maybe they're not right and so we have to lay aside our categories for consideration sake and allow the text to speak and from there derive the categories. Otherwise we're just making it up. That's why it's taking a while and that's why you only have some of the categories clarified in this doctrine; you know you are regenerate and you know you have a new nature but you also know that you still have a sin nature and you're not under the Law but somehow the Spirit of God is involved. It's my prayer that when we get through Romans 8 all our categories will be in place and then we can systematize them; we can put them together in a logical way. This is a very important to do because this doctrine encompasses your entire Christian life. This doctrine is what is standing behind every NT epistle. So we can't skimp, we can't just accept what we've been taught, we have to wrestle through the text and the logic that Paul is rigorously taking us through. This man was relentless in his pursuit to consider all the opposing views and to refute them so that no one could oppose God. In the end we'll put it all together but for now we're building and I have to get it right because I have a responsibility before God to get it right and I want you to know how to please God, how to live.

Take a look at what's happening here. We come to Romans 6:14 and Paul blows us away with this statement. "you are not under law but under grace." That is unacceptable as an absolute for most Christians. They cannot accept that and we'll see why. Then he says essentially the same thing in 7:4; "you were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ." I'm dead to the Law? What do you mean I'm dead to the Law? No Law? Most Christians can't accept that. Then again in 7:6 he says it with such clarity it's undeniable, "now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter." Could he say it any clearer? We're released from the Law and it would seem that if we bind ourselves to any part of the OT Law then it will be impossible to serve in the newness of the Spirit; that

the two are in opposition. That is what Paul is teaching and that is what I am maintaining. You have to let go of the Law entirely and depend upon the Spirit but it's this position that is hardly ever maintained in Christian circles.

Most scholars maintain that Paul could not mean we are not under any Law because if we are not under any Law then the only other alternative is to be lawless and that just can't be. So their interpretation of Paul is that he is saying we have been released from the ceremonial and legal aspects of the Law, but not the moral aspects. Those, we are told, are binding upon the Christian and necessary for sanctification. Now, let's take the moral law that Paul himself brought up in 7:7, "You shall not covet." I find it ironic that Paul didn't use a ceremonial or legal law to illustrate his point. He used a moral law right out of the Ten Commandments, the very kind of law that most theologians are telling us we must be under in order to be sanctified. Did it sanctify Paul? Did it anywhere in verses 7-13 indicate that Paul could be sanctified by following that law? By no means. In 7:8 what did it cause Paul to do? Sin more. In 7:9 and 10 what did it do to Paul? It killed Paul. Do you see anywhere in these verses where it sanctified Paul? No. So does putting yourself under alternative one, the moral law of the OT, laws such as you shall not covet, which was one of the Ten Commandments, prevent sin? No, it actually causes more sin. Showers says, "Thus the old covenant law actually hinders the unregenerate person from living righteously even though it demands perfect righteousness from him." If you put yourself under it you are going to remain in Romans 7 as a believer, you are going to remain a defeated Christian. But, if we're not under any OT Law, not the moral laws or even the Ten Commandments, then what alternative is there? Is lawlessness a valid alternative? Is the Christian to be lawless? We've already been given the answer in 6:15. What did 6:15 say? "Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" So alternative two, lawlessness, is not a real option. It's not a valid solution to how we should live. How then are we to live? If I'm not under Law and I am not lawless, what other alternative could there be. There is a third alternative and that is the alternative Paul is presenting. What is it? To live by the Spirit.

Now we're not exactly there yet but Paul already mentioned this solution in 7:6. Note that he said there, "that we serve in newness of the Spirit." So I'm not jumping the gun too much to go ahead and throw in this third alternative. The Spirit is the only way to live. The problem is Christians struggle to understand this way of living because for them it is so abstract. They can't get their arms around it. That's what we're going to try to do in the coming weeks, make it as concrete as possible. We've just been introduced.

But Paul is not done with explaining that we are not under Law. In 7:5-13 he only secured the argument that when we were in the flesh we could not obey the Law. If you note in 7:5 he says, "while we were in the flesh." His point by that expression is to say 'while we were unregenerate.' So from 7:5-13 Paul is proving that the unregenerate man's attempt to keep the Law resulted in defeat. Showers says, "If Paul were to stop at verse thirteen, his argument would be incomplete. Thus far, in his attempt to show the necessity of a person being released from the law, he has demonstrated the effect of the law upon the unregenerate person only. Since the

primary thing with which Paul is dealing in Romans 6:14 and Romans 7 is the concept of Christians not being under the law, Paul must deal with the effect of the law upon the regenerate person if his argument is to be complete." This he does in 7:14-25. Without 7:14-25 someone might argue that while the effect of the old covenant law on the unregenerate person resulted in death, now that we are regenerate the effects may be different, especially now that we have a new nature or disposition to please God. Perhaps all we need is this new disposition to fulfill the old law and thereby be sanctified by keeping it.

Thus, Paul writes 7:14-25 to discount this possibility. Yes, as Christians we have a new nature but we still have a sin nature dwelling in our flesh as a consequence if we put ourselves under law we will fail miserably. So 7:14-25 is designed to complete his argument by showing that the Christian cannot be sanctified by law.

Now I won't pull the wool over your eyes. Romans 7:14-25 is very heavily debated among Christians. What's the debate? The debate is whether Paul was speaking of his struggle with sin before his conversion or after? As unregenerate or regenerate? Murray states the issue: "The main question in the interpretation of verses 14-25 is one on which there has been deep-seated difference of judgment in the history of interpretation. Does Paul continue to delineate for us his pre-regenerate experience as in verses 7-13? Or does the present tense of verse 14 indicate that he has made a transition to the description of his present experience in the state of grace?"<sup>1</sup> The majority think that Paul is continuing to speak of his struggle while unregenerate. The chief support for this conclusion is the expressions Paul uses of himself. In verse 14 Paul says, "I am of flesh." Doesn't this mean Paul is still speaking of himself as "in the flesh" and therefore unregenerate? In verse 14 he also says, "I am sold into bondage to sin." Surely this expression refers to Paul as unregenerate. A. T. Robertson certainly thinks so, "The words "sold under sin" in verse 14 seem to turn the scale for the pre-conversion period."<sup>2</sup> Added to this are Paul's words in verse 18, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me." Could a Christian really say that? And finally verse 24 Paul's statement "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" These expressions combined give good cause for many notable scholars to conclude that Paul is reflecting on his struggle with sin as unregenerate.

However strong these reasons may appear to be on the surface, there are better reasons to conclude that Paul shifted in verse 14 or at least 15 to speak of his struggle as a new convert. In verse 15 Paul says he was confused because the thing he wanted to do to please God he could not do. Since unbelievers are not trying to please God it is not possible that this verse refers to Paul when he was unregenerate. Similar statements are repeated throughout strengthening this argument. In verse 22 Paul says "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man." Regardless of how we interpret the "inner man" it can in no way be said of an unregenerate Paul. In verse 25, the expression that "on the one hand I myself with my mind and serving the law of God" cannot by any stretch of the imagination be referring to an unregenerate Paul. These and other expressions give better cause to conclude that Paul is turning in verses 14-25 to recount his experience as a new convert trying to be sanctified

by self-effort keeping the law. At that early time he did not understand the principle of living by the Spirit which he recounts in chapter 8.

So we will attempt to understand Romans 7:14-25 as Paul's reflection on his life as a newly converted Jew who put himself under the Law and by self-effort tried to be sanctified. Note the evidence of Paul's self-effort in these twelve verses. Scan through the text. How many times do you see Paul use the personal pronoun "I"? It turns out twenty-four times. By contrast how many times do you see Paul talk about the "Holy Spirit?" Not one time in these verses. But in 8:1-17 we find the "Spirit" mentioned thirteen times and "I" is not found once. This confirms that in 7:14-25 Paul is reflecting on his Christian life as a new convert who was trying by self-effort to keep the Law in order to be sanctified. This he found to be impossible.

In verse 14 Paul says, **For we know that the Law is spiritual.** This was the conclusion of the previous section and the conclusion of all sober believers. The **Law is spiritual** because it comes from God who is a spiritual being. It could therefore be nothing else. In contrast to the Law which is **spiritual** Paul says, **but I am of flesh.** The Greek word for **flesh** is *σαρκινοϛ*, it is sometimes translated as "carnal." It is from the root word *σαρξ*. It is used only four times in the NT, here once, Heb 7:16 once and twice in 1 Cor 3, verses 1 and 3. In all references the use is made of a believer. Paul did not say he was "in the flesh" as he said earlier in 7:5 of his unregenerate experience but "of flesh" in the sense of being "merely human." Paul is saying that, even though I am regenerate, I am still merely human. It is this sense of flesh which Paul spoke of in Galatians 2:20, "the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." The point being that even though I am regenerate I am beset by human weakness and therefore cannot depend upon self-effort in order to realize victory. Instead I must live by faith. And the life of faith would be characterized as the normal Christian life. So when Paul says in Romans 7:14 that he is **of flesh**, he is emphasizing the fact that, though he is regenerate and has a new disposition of holiness, he is still merely human. We must conclude then that victory in the Christian life cannot be won simply by being regenerate and having a new disposition. Something more is necessary and that something more is the need for the empowering Spirit. Therefore the phrase **I am of flesh** is not really that troubling. It should be obvious that though we are regenerate people and desire to please God, we are still human and beset with the weaknesses of human nature so that we are not capable of achieving the good by self-effort.

In the next phrase of verse 14 Paul says, **I am...sold into bondage to sin.** This expression may seem more problematic since Paul said earlier in 6:6-7 that we were no longer slaves of the sin nature, having been freed from it. How can he now turn around and say I am sold into bondage to sin if he said earlier that we are no longer slaves to the sin nature? Three things should be pointed out. First, Paul does not use the word **bondage**. The Greek merely says, "I am sold under sin." This means Paul as a new convert realized that he was still under the principle of sin. Second, by sin Paul uses the article and so is referring to the sin nature. The principle of sin is the sin nature. Paul realized he was still under the principle of the sin nature. Third, the verb **sold** is in the perfect tense. The perfect tense is one of the Greek past tenses. It refers to a past completed action with ongoing results

reaching into the present. Paul is saying I have been sold such that I remain sold under the sin nature. Putting together what Paul is saying we would conclude that Paul, as a descendant of Adam, was conceived with a sin nature and so as unregenerate was under the sin nature and even though now regenerate he was still under the sin nature. The simple point is that regeneration does not remove the sin nature. We remain under the principle of the sin nature as long as the "I" is the one trying to achieve the good. The expression **I am...sold under sin** really does not mean any more than that.

Now as we come to verse 15 remember that Paul is reflecting on his early experience as a Christian. He is not stating his normal Christian experience. Alva McClain says, "There is one view of this chapter that is terribly mistaken and that view is the one that says what we find in here is the Christian's normal experience." The experience here is one of defeat, utter and total defeat. "...if you are meeting defeat in your life... then at least be concerned enough about your defeat and your lack of victory to cry with Paul, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Therefore Romans 7 we would not characterize as the normal Christian life; we would characterize it as the defeated Christian life. If you find comfort and encouragement because you identify with Paul in his struggle in Romans 7 you need to stop finding comfort and be very concerned. It means you are by self-effort trying to live the Christian life like Paul was by self-effort trying to live the Christian life. Yet this was Paul's early Christian life when he knew nothing but defeat. There is no comfort here, only distress and defeat. You are supposed to move on to the normal Christian experience in Romans 8 and identify with Paul in his victory in the Spirit.

Now it's clear at the beginning of verse 15 that Paul was very confused about his early Christian experience. He says, **For what I am doing, I do not understand.** The Greek says, "What I am achieving, I do not understand." Paul was confused because what he was achieving was not what he set out to achieve. In fact he was achieving just the opposite. His confusion arose from the fact that he thought he would be able to keep the Law if he was regenerate and had a new nature that desired to please God. But when he tried; he failed. This was not something Paul expected. The problem was he was trying to do it by "self-effort." Note how Paul says **what I am doing. I** is the chief problem. It is the key word in this section. I am of flesh, he said, I am merely human, he said. So don't forget verse 14! I am still in view and so if I, as a mere human who still has a sin nature, try to by self-effort to keep the Law, I will not achieve it. I will fall flat on my face. Paul did not understand why he kept falling on his face.

Now the NASB translators of verse 15 have used a tremendous amount of circumlocution to translate what is really quite simple. They have done this to promote the false theological concept that true believers will not habitually sin, but only occasionally sin. If you note the word **practicing** and the word **doing? Practice** is *πρασσω* and **doing** is *ποιεω*. We are told that one has the sense of habitual action, that's the idea of **practicing** and the other has the sense of a single action; that's the idea of **doing**. So the translators are trying to convey the

idea that Paul was trying to habitually practice the law but every once in a while he failed to do so. That, in my estimation, is a terrible interpretation of the text. This passage is all about defeat, not about occasional defeat. The original Greek simply says, "For the thing I wish, this I do not, but the thing I hate, this I do." It is short, it is terse, it is powerful. If I am the one doing it, I fail. There is not a particle of difference in the original between habitual practice and once in a while. The two Greek words translated **practicing** and **doing** have been highly discussed throughout church history and the two are both used together again down in verse 19. Trench in his *Synonyms of the New Testament* has a long discussion of the two words. Some think that in some contexts *πρασσω* always refers to doing something evil while *ποιεω* refers to doing something good, but if that is so in some passages, it is not in this one, for in verse 15 the reverse is true, *πρασσω* is used of doing something good and *ποιεω* of something evil. So after careful research, in this context, the two words are used as synonyms. The point is clear, when Paul became a Christian he thought he could achieve the Law but he found that when he tried to do the law he broke the law. Paul was a defeated Christian. The reason? Paul was the one trying by self-effort to keep the Law. **I was getting in the way!**

In verse 16 Paul concludes saying **And if I do the very thing I do not want, I agree that the Law is good.** Paul could not escape this conclusion. If he wanted to do the **Law** but he could not by self-effort do it, then he agreed that the Law was good. His experience of defeat confirmed what he said about the Law earlier in verse 14, that "the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh (a mere human), sold under the sin nature, (still subject to the sin nature when I am the actor)." This is the key point.

Verse 17, **But now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.** By **it** Paul means from verse 16, **the very thing he does not want**, that is, a violation of the Law or sin. That is not what Paul wanted to do. But Paul says if I don't want to do it but I do it anyway then I am not the one doing it. It sounds like he is evading personal responsibility for his sin. What do you mean Paul, that you are not the one doing it? Well, that's not what he's saying. What he's trying to communicate is that the source of the sin is not his new holy nature but the **sin nature which** continues to  **dwell in** him. The sense in the Greek is that the sin nature has a life of its own within the regenerate believer. It is constantly working to try and fulfill its lusts. We have not been freed from the presence of the sin nature. It is alive and well and can only be subdued by the Spirit of God.

Verse 18, **For 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.** Now in the Greek the word for **I know** here is *οιδα* and not the typical *γινωσκω*. The sense of *οιδα* here is perceive. Paul perceived **that nothing good dwells in him, that is, in his flesh.** The sin nature is what dwells or lives in the flesh, that aspect of us which is merely human. In that aspect of us, even as regenerate, there is nothing good that dwells. The sin nature is nothing good, has nothing to commend it. That's why, as an unregenerate person, there is nothing to commend you to God, nothing of merit, nothing at all! But as regenerate Paul perceived that in the aspect of us that is merely human, there is still

nothing good living there. That is why I cannot put myself under Law and experience victory. Because when I do, the thing I would like to do I do not do, but the thing I do is the very thing I hate.

In 18b Paul talks of the new nature. He says, **for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.** The regenerate person has a new nature and this new nature Paul says is **in me.** So it is an aspect of our regenerate person. It is the source of the desiring **to do good,** but the doing of the good **is not present** in me. This is a key realization. You may have the willing to do good in you but the doing of the good is not in you but the Spirit of God. Without Him you can desire to do good and try to do good but you will always fail to do good. The last part of this verse is so valuable that it is worth memorizing. **But the doing of the good is not** present in you. You cannot do it, even though you are regenerate, even though you want to do it, you cannot do it. That is what Paul found and that is what is profound about the Christian life and sanctification, even here God does not put us on a merit system. He does not say, now I've regenerated you and I've given you a new holy disposition or nature which positively inclines you to do My will, now you go and do it. He doesn't do that because that would mean merit and that would detract from the glory of God. But Paul didn't understand this as a new Christian. Paul thought it was by grace that I am justified but to be sanctified I have to use the assets God gave me. Baloney. When Paul tried he was defeated.

Verse 19 says it all, **For the good that I want, I do not do, but I do the very evil that I do not want.** It's statements like this that make people think Paul was reflecting on when he was an unregenerate. But the problem with that view is that no unregenerate person wants to do good; they have no new nature that inclines them to do good, they want to get away with doing evil, that's what they really want and any good they may do, humanly speaking, is to get something for self. Paul clearly had a new nature here and a good inclination in this passage. He wanted to please God. His statement, **For the good that I want** indicates clearly that he had a new nature from which came his good desire to please God by keeping the Law. But as far as the accomplishing of the good he says he did **not do** it because even as regenerate that capability was not present within him. Paul was a mere man and instead, he did **the very evil that he did not want.**

All Paul is saying throughout is the same thing that he said starting in verse 14, and that is that **I am of flesh,** a mere human. Even though I am regenerate I am still just a human, beset with all human weaknesses. And **I am sold under sin,** as long as I am the energizing agent, I am under the dictates of the sin nature and I end up doing the very thing I hate even though I have a new nature and therefore want to do good. This was an enigma to Paul as a new believer. He thought that being regenerate and having a new nature that desired to do good and please God was sufficient. But he was wrong! Every time He tried to keep the Law his sin nature was aroused and it used the Law as an opportunity to express itself in a violation of the Law and Paul died. He was experiencing death as a Christian because the wages of sin is death. Oh, if we would come out of Romans 7 and move into Romans 8. That is the plea! Romans 7 is the defeated Christian experience, this is not where you are to identify, it is not the normal Christian experience. Romans 8 is where you want to go. But you cannot, you cannot come out

of Romans 7 and will not come out of Romans 7 until you understand that you are not under Law. And if you put yourself under the Law, whether it be the moral Law or the 10 commandments only, as long as you are the operative agent...you will fail to keep the Law. Therefore come out of bondage and into freedom, come out of slavery to the sin nature and into the freedom of the Spirit of God. You must learn to depend not on self-effort but on the Spirit.

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<sup>1</sup> John Murray, *NICNT: The Epistle to the Romans*, p 256.

<sup>2</sup> A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), Ro 7:15.