

Delight in God's Law vs. Indwelling Sin: Romans 7:18-23

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We're studying Romans 7, and we're learning about the struggle of the Christian life. As I mentioned last week, there is debate about this passage, as to whether Paul is describing the experience of an unbeliever or the experience of a believer. There are strong arguments on each side, and there are solid proponents of each view. But I am convinced that Paul is talking about his own struggle as a believer. Indeed, as a mature believer, as an apostle! Therefore, if Paul talked about himself in this way (and he was much farther along in the Christian life than any of us, I think it's safe to assume), then this is definitely the case for us as well.

We are part of a struggle, and we will be until the day we die, or until Jesus comes back—whichever comes first. I'm hoping He comes back real soon! The cry of verse 24 expresses that. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" In other words, Jesus, please come back and bring me to glory!

We're part of this struggle, and we have to have a realistic perspective on this. This is hard for us, because we don't like struggle. We want things to be easy. And in our culture we are tempted to assume that anything can be easy. We see advertisements for all kinds of gadgets and gizmos that will make your life easier. It might be an apple corer / slicer / peeler, or a robot vacuum cleaner. There are easy cookbooks, easy diet books, easy fitness books, easy budgeting books. There are easy loans, easy education programs, easy self-help strategies to get your life on track. There's also easy abortion, and easy divorce.

Anything that becomes a struggle, or threatens to become a struggle, we are convinced that there must be some easy way out. And we're prone to approaching the Christian life the same way. Where's the "easy" Christian life program? That's what I want to be in. That's what I want to sign up for. Where's the church that will make this easy for me, that will erase the struggle aspect to the Christian life? Where's the Bible teacher who will tell me that it doesn't have to be so hard, who will tell me that it can be easy—just follow these 10 simple steps, and you'll be experiencing the victorious Christian life?

If you go looking for that kind of church and that kind of teaching, you'll find it. But you'll know that it's not the real deal.

You might be able to find easier ways to slice an apple. There might be products that can remove some of the struggle involved in cleaning your house. But living the Christian life is not something that any program or teacher or book is going to make easy, in the sense of removing the intense struggle against sin.

Another skewed way of looking at this would be to recognize the challenge, but then assume that you're equal to the challenge. You're up for it. You're capable of triumphing over the struggle. If you just work hard and be disciplined, then you can get this. You hear the word struggle, and you say, "Yeah, bring it on." You're like Peter, when he told Jesus, "Lord, I am ready to go with you both to prison and to death." He thought he could handle anything. But do you remember what Jesus said next? Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the rooster will not crow this day, until you deny three times that you know me." (Luke 22:33–34, ESV) Wow! That's devastating. But it was part of the plan to humble Peter for future service. It shows us that we can't be naïve and arrogant to think that we can just buck up and be victorious.

We have to see how intense the struggle is. And we have to acknowledge our weakness. We still have this flesh. We still have the old self clinging to us. We still have these deceitful desires rising up within us. And there's no easy way to be rid of them. And we're not capable of totally defeating them.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us at the foot of the cross. There's no other place to go. It leaves us, with arms outstretched to Jesus, saying, "Deliver me from this! Help me! Save me!" Jesus is our only hope. We are in a desperate situation, with no easy way out. And we are weak and helpless.

Before we go any further, I just want you to realize how strange this message is. Do you see this? Do you have a sense for how uncomfortably this message lands on our culture? In a society where we want everything to be easy, the Bible is telling us that the Christian life is agonizingly hard. And in a society where we all want to think we're strong enough for anything and we don't need anybody else's help, the Bible is telling us that we are goners unless rescued by the man who was tortured on the tree—Jesus Christ.

James Montgomery Boice, a great preacher who has gone to be the Lord, said in a sermon on this passage, "a gospel in which we must do everything possible to attain a victory over sin—but in which, in spite of all we do or can ever do, the victory when it comes is by God alone and not by us or for our glory—a gospel

like that must be from God; it could never have been invented by man. The very nature of the gospel is proof of its divine origin.”¹

What a great observation! Nobody would make up a religion like this. Nobody would make up something that is so hard, and yet we don't get any of the credit. Either it should be easy. Or, if it's hard, we should at least get some recognition that would feed our pride. But to be called to something tremendously difficult, and something which does not feed our pride, but rather crushes our pride, that's a God thing. And it's actually very good news, because it rescues us from the delusion that we are good enough in ourselves, and it opens up a whole new world to us—a world in which I am not the center. God is the center, and He is way, way more satisfying to look at than myself.

My hope for each one of you is that you will taste the goodness of this message about the Christian life. It's not easy. It's not self-glorifying. But it is the best thing that could ever happen to you. And it's the only path that leads to everlasting life in the presence of Jesus.

Last Sunday we looked at verses 13-17 and saw this struggle that is part of the Christian life, and how that struggle attests to the fact that God's law is good. When we are struggling against sin, hating the sin we do, desperately wanting not to sin, we agree with the law, that it is good. And that's the bigger point that this discussion falls into.

This morning we'll cover the next several verses—18-23. Next week Tom Dyba will be preaching, because I'll be away on vacation. And then the following week I'll finish the last two verses of Romans 7.

The focus for today is the tension between delighting in God's law and indwelling sin. In verse 22 Paul declares that he delights in the law of God, in the inner being. He also speaks of desiring to do what is right (vv. 18, 19, 21). But he also speaks of the flesh (verse 18), sin that dwells in me (verse 20). He says that evil lies close at hand (verse 21), and he refers to the law of sin that dwells in his members (verse 23). This is the difficult tension of living out the Christian life in this fallen world. We have been changed in our inner being to have a delight in God and His law. But we are still fleshly.

I want to start by talking about indwelling sin, and then we'll talk about delight in God's law.

¹ Romans, vol. 2, page 770.

Indwelling Sin

In Romans 6 we talked about how we are no longer in bondage to sin. We are dead to sin. But we see here in chapter 7 that there is still sin dwelling in us. We are still fleshly. This flesh is still with us. The old man, the old self, must be thrown off.

Have you heard this phrase, “indwelling sin”? Well, it’s simply a way of referring to what Paul is talking about here in verse 20. He says that when I do what I do not want, that’s evidence of the sin that still dwells in me. I’m a new creature. I have new, holy desires. But there’s still sin dwelling in me that overcomes me at many points, and makes me do what I don’t want to do. This is the agony of wanting to be holy but still feeling the effects of our sinful flesh.

In verse 18 Paul says, “I know that nothing good dwells in me.” This is the lament of the believer who is wrestling with sin. It doesn’t mean he is an immature believer. In fact, as a person matures in the faith, he or she will actually come to see their own sin more clearly.

As we grow in holiness, we will be more aware of our sin. As we come closer into the presence of God, and we see His purity and holiness and majesty, our response will be like Isaiah when he beheld the glory of the Lord. He said, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5, ESV) Or Job, after the Lord spoke to him. Job said, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:5–6, ESV)

John Murray, in his book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, said this about the recognition of sin in the life of the believer. “Indeed, the more sanctified the person is, the more conformed he is to the image of his Savior, the more he must recoil against every lack of conformity to the holiness of God. The deeper his apprehension of the majesty of God, the greater the intensity of his love to God, the more persistent his yearning for the attainment of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, the more conscious will he be of the gravity of the sin that remains and the more poignant will be his detestation of it. . . . Was this not the effect in all the people of God as they came into closer proximity to the revelation of God’s holiness?”²

² quoted in Grudem, page 753

Think of it like this. If you're doing one of those adventure races where you run through mud pits and through the woods and climb over obstacles, by the time you get to the end of the race, what's a little more dirt or mud on you? If a car drove through a mud puddle right in front of you and soaked your clothes, it would be no big deal. But what if you're in a suit or a tuxedo or a wedding gown, walking to your wedding? Well, that would be a whole different story. You would be very careful to avoid stepping in a muddy puddle. Similarly, as God increasingly sanctifies us, cleans us up, we have an increasing sensitivity and repulsion to sin.

And that's what the apostle Paul is expressing in Romans 7. He is a mature believer, greatly sanctified, and yet brokenhearted over the remaining sin in his life.

One of the things that compels me to read this as the experience of a believer is the clarification in that statement in verse 18. If Paul had merely said, "I know that nothing good dwells in me," that sounds like an unbeliever. Because believers now have Christ living in them, the Spirit living in them, and as a result there is much good at work within us. And so Paul clarifies his statement. He says, that is, in my flesh.

Again, this is the inner turmoil. There is good within us. As we see in verse 22, "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being." That's a very powerful argument for reading this as a believer, because it's not just a superficial delight in God's law. It arises from my inner being, a sign of regeneration. So there is this good in me, but there is also still sin dwelling in me.

Perfectionism

An important implication here is to realize that we are not perfect. We will not and cannot obtain perfection in this life. Listen to the balanced and biblical way that our Statement of Faith puts this, from the 2nd London Baptist Confession.

Chapter 13. Of Sanctification

1. They who are united to Christ, effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart and a new spirit created in them through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, are also farther sanctified, really and personally¹ through the same virtue, by His Word and Spirit dwelling in them;² the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed,³ and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified,⁴ and they more and more

quicken and strengthened in all saving graces,⁵ to the practice of all true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.⁶

1. Ac 20:32; Ro 6:5-6. 2. Jn 17:17; Eph 3:16-19; 1Th 5:21-23. 3. Ro 6:14. 4. Gal 5:24. 5. Col 1:11. 6. 2Co 7:1; Heb 12:14.

2. This sanctification is throughout the whole man,⁷ yet imperfect in this life; there abideth still some remnants of corruption in every part,⁸ when ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war; the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.⁹

7. 1Th 5:23. 8. Ro 7:18,23. 9. Gal 5:17; 1Pe 2:11.

3. In which war, although the remaining corruption for a time may much prevail,¹⁰ yet, through the continual supply of strength from the sanctifying Spirit of Christ, the regenerate part doth overcome;¹¹ and so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God, pressing after an heavenly life, in evangelical obedience to all the commands which Christ as Head and King, in His Word hath prescribed to them.¹²

10. Ro 7:23. 11. Ro 6:14. 12. Eph 4:15-16; 2Co 3:18; 2Co 7:1.

I like how these three paragraphs capture the ups and downs and ups of the battle which is the Christian life. The first paragraph exults in the great transformation that happens in our lives. The second paragraph reminds us that we cannot expect this process to be perfectly completed in this life. But then the third paragraph gives us hope in the fact that by the Spirit of Christ we will persevere in this war.

R. C. Sproul tells the story of talking with a young man who was convinced that he had attained perfection. They struck up a conversation on a baseball field. And when this young man shared that he thought he had arrived at perfection, Sproul began to challenge him with the teaching of Roman 7. At first, the young man denied that Paul was referring to his present condition, but Sproul pointed out the present tense throughout the passage and other things here that would not be the case for unbelievers (like his delight in God's law in the inner being). Finally, the young man conceded that Paul was speaking of his own present condition as a believer. And so Sproul asked, "What do you think now about your assessment that you have reached a level of perfection?" And the young man said, "I am sad to hear that the apostle had not made it." Sproul was flabbergasted. He said, "Do you really believe that at age seventeen you have achieved a higher level of

sanctification than Paul had reached at the time that he wrote his magnum opus to the church at Rome?” And the young man said, “Yes, I am more sanctified at my age than Paul was when he wrote to Rome.”³

If that’s not the height of immaturity, naïveté and pride, I don’t know what is! That attitude dishonors God, because it assumes we are far better than we are. It makes us less reliant on Him, because it assumes we are less needy than we are. It gets in the way of relationships with other believers, because we would be looking down our noses at everyone who hasn’t made it to where we are. And it is a horrible detriment to ourselves, if we assume we’ve made it and don’t have any further progress to strive toward.

Please, friends, don’t head down that road of thinking that sinless perfection is something you could attain in this life. That is a dangerous and destructive and depressing attitude to have.

1 John 1:8 says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

“Who can say, “I have made my heart pure; I am clean from my sin”?” (Proverbs 20:9, ESV)

“Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.” (Ecclesiastes 7:20, ESV)

And Jesus instructs us, in the Lord’s Prayer to say “forgive us our sins” (Matt 6:11-12). That’s not a prayer we can cease to pray during this life. We will always need to make confession to God and ask for Him to forgive us through the blood of Jesus.

So the one side of this passage in Romans 7 that I want us to see clearly is the reality of indwelling sin in our lives. Verse 18 refers to the flesh, that there is nothing good in my flesh. Verse 20 refers to the sin that dwells within me. Verse 21 says that evil lies close at hand even when I’m wanting to do right. And verse 23 speaks of a law or principle in my members, a law of sin that dwells in my members. Again, this is indwelling sin.

Delight in God’s Law

But then notice the other piece of what is going on within Paul. Verse 18 also says, “For I have the desire to do what is right.” Verse 21 affirms again that “I want to do right.” And verse 22 makes this amazing statement of delight in God’s law. “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being.” These are evidences

³ Romans, 224-5.

of regeneration. We have a new heart, new desires. We truly want to please God. We can now see that He will bring us infinitely more joy and pleasure than anything this world can offer us. And therefore it grieves us when we find ourselves falling back into those worldly ways.

We find ourselves living in the tension between regeneration and glorification. We have been regenerated. We are new. But we are not yet glorified. We await that glorious day when Jesus will return and we will be entirely free from presence of sin, and there will be no mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore (Revelation 21:4).

On Tuesday morning at our men's Bible study and prayer time, we had a really good conversation about this passage, and it was great to hear guys sharing about this very tension expressed in these verses. There are defeats and triumphs. There are ups and downs. There are times when we stumble and we say, "Wretched man that I am!" And there are times when we can look at what God is doing in our lives and say, "Yes, He's changing me! I am not what I once was." And therefore we can look with hope to the future, being sure that "he who began a good work in [us] will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6).

I would exhort you, as an application point from Romans 7, to be transparent with one another about your struggles and your victories. Share these things with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Sanctification is a community project. We need to work together in this battle. We need to humble ourselves to do this. We need to confess sin to one another, pray for one another concerning besetting sins. And we also need to rejoice with one another in victories.

The Apostle Paul is a great teacher and a great example for us in this. In 1 Timothy 1:15 he wrote very transparently, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, *of whom I am the foremost.*" Some might think that this is a false humility on Paul's part, but I think God had done such a work in Paul that as he looked back on his former life and contemplated the immense mercy of God, he truly considered himself the foremost of sinners. He couldn't fathom anyone else being more opposed to God than he had been. And though he knows that he is now forgiven of those sins, he remains humbled by the wickedness of his former manner of life. He writes in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain" (see also Ephesians 3:8).

Like Paul, we need to have an appropriate view of our own sin (past and present), and an appropriate view of God's mercy and grace. We have all sinned greatly, and we each continue to sin on a daily basis. And it's so important that we never minimize our sins or ignore them or think that we're not as bad as the next guy. We need to pray that God will reveal our sins to us. So often we are blinded to our sin, because we don't want to see it or deal with it. But the more we see of our sin, the more we can rejoice in the Gospel. Remember what Jesus said of the sinful woman who anointed his feet. He said, "Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). How much do you love your Savior? Do you love Him only a little, or do you love Him much? The difference will have a lot to do with how well we understand our own sin, because the more we see of our sin the more we'll see of God's mercy and grace.

In closing, let us not minimize the gravity of our sin, and let us not minimize the great work that God has done and is doing in us. When we agree with the law that it is good, even in its condemnation of our own behavior, then we are acknowledging that God's commandment is holy and righteous and good. And our lives are giving evidence that God has really done something in us to make us different. We delight in our inner being in something that highlights our wretched sin. That almost sounds a bit twisted. But it's because, in our acknowledgement of our sin, we turn away from self and cast ourselves on the mercy of Jesus. And there's no better place to be than in the arms of Jesus.