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Romans 7:14-25 “The Struggle Within”

Intro. I suppose that most every Christian has experienced a real struggle in seeking to live the Christian life. On the one hand, you have an idea of the kind of life that you *should* live. You want to live right in conformity to God’s Word. But yet, you no doubt have found that living such a life can be so difficult. It can be discouraging trying to live the Christian life when you experience failure, even repeating the same sins all too often.

Christian people may respond to this struggle in different ways. Some seem to give up and quit. They just can’t seem to live the Christian life, so they no longer profess it. I wonder how many inactive church members fall into that group? Then others keep on with the struggle, and yet they go around with a defeated look because they fail so often. Their life is not a good witness for the Lord. But some, like Paul, have learned the path of victory. Though we will not overcome sin completely in this life, we can make significant headway in the battle against sin to live a godly life. So this morning I want to describe the sin problem, and begin to lay the groundwork for understanding the true way of victory.

Now most would agree that this text of Scripture is autobiographical. Paul shares his own experience with the battle to overcome sin and please God. Yet who does he represent? It is much debated whether the experience recounted is that of Paul before he became a Christian or after. Douglas Moo¹ asserts that he and most Pauline scholars believe this text describes Paul’s experiences as an unconverted Jew, a Pharisee devoted to the law of Moses. One reason is due to an obvious lack of the Holy Spirit’s power in the struggle described here. The present tense that Paul keeps using does not necessarily exclude this viewpoint, for authors employ the present tense to create drama and vividness as they describe past experiences.² So if Paul is speaking of an unconverted Jew who is seeking to obey God’s law, his main point is to show the ineffectiveness of the law and human willpower and that only Christ offers the deliverance from the bondage of sin, and the bondage of the will.

Yet the use of the present tense, in contrast to the past tense used in vv.9-13, leads many to conclude that Paul *is* writing of his experiences as a Christian.³ What Christian would deny that they have experienced the same kind of struggle described in this text? Furthermore, would the last of v.15 describe an unbeliever, that he “hates” sin? Does v.22 describe an unbeliever, “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being”? That certainly describes the attitude of a Christian far more than an unbeliever. Yet a Pharisee would claim to hate sin and delight in the law of God. In fact, Paul says in 10:2 that Jews “have a zeal for God” (cf. Acts 22:3). So that is not decisive. Yet consider the broader context. Paul asks in 6:15, “What then? Are we to sin because we are not

¹ He says, "What ultimately is decisive for me is the fact that Paul's description of the person and 7:13-25 is contradictory to his description of the Christian in chapters 6 and 8" (p.235). Yet the immature Christian view explains that contextual difference well. Moo also says that the Jew living under the law is the focus of this text and Paul is explaining why the Jew fails to live by the law. The fault is not with the law but the bondage of indwelling sin. This doesn't apply to Christians because we are not under the law (pp.240-241).

² This is called the historical present tense. For example, in John 6:19 he wrote that the disciples “see” (instead of “saw”) Jesus walking on water. While the historical present tense can be used in both English and Greek, it was used much more liberally in ancient Greek (www.bibleversesstudy.com/historical-present-tense.htm).

³ Greek scholar Wuest says, “It is clear that Paul is recounting his experience as a saved man” (p.121).

under law but under grace?” That could well point to a desire to continue to address the problem of sin in a Christian’s life.

So if we embrace the position that Paul is describing his experiences as a believer, we then have to decide if he is speaking of his experience as a new Christian still living under Law, or even as a mature believer. While the present tense may favor the later view, it seems more likely to me that Paul is describing the early time period of his Christian life, before he learned the truths of Romans chapters 6 and 8.⁴ We would expect that Paul would initially carryover most of his Jewish beliefs into his Christian faith. If this text describes a Christian, it describes a defeated Christian looking for an answer to his spiritual defeat and the ineffectiveness of the law.

No matter which view we take, I believe we can pull from this text timeless truths that certainly apply to Christian believers. Even many unbelievers, especially religious ones, can identify with the struggle described in this text. There is an answer to the bondage of sin described here.

So let’s begin by examining in more detail:

I. THE PROBLEM OF INDWELLING SIN

Why do you sin, even as a Christian? Paul answers that question in this chapter and it has a whole lot to do with indwelling sin. You see, when an individual comes to faith in Christ, God plants a new nature within him that longs for the things of God and despises sin. Yet it is clear from this text of Scripture and our own experience that a rather strong evil influence continues to dwell within us. Becoming a Christian does not eradicate the sin nature. We see evidence of this truth in our text today. Paul says in the last of v.17 that the problem he was experiencing was “sin that dwells within me.” He made the same statement in the last of v.20. Then he said in v.21, “So I find it to be a law⁵ that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.” He found or experienced something within that caused him to act contrary to his better judgment and desires. While wishing to do good, he was still subject to evil.

One of the other terms that Paul uses for indwelling sin is some form of the word “flesh,” first used in v.5. There is something in man—even regenerate man—which rebels against God’s Law and seeks to be independent of Him; this “something” is what Paul here calls his “flesh.” He says in v.14, “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh....” He is not using that term to refer to the physical flesh. One evidence of this is the fact that in Gal. 5:19-20 Paul uses the phrase, “works of the flesh,” in reference to sins which have no connection with the body, such as envy, pride, seditions, heresies, etc. When he says, “I am of the flesh,” he means “I am under the power of the fallen and corrupt nature of man.”⁶ Then he said in v.18, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh....” If he is speaking as a Christian, that qualifier is essential. The “flesh” is wholly sinful. He also mentions the flesh in the last of v.25, “with my flesh I serve the law of sin.” Gal. 5:17 proves that the Christian still faces a spiritual battle due to the “flesh,” for the indwelling Holy Spirit is working against the “flesh,” or sin nature.

⁴ This is basically the view of Martin Lloyd-Jones (pp.229-257). Note also the contrast of “now” in 8:1.

⁵ Here Paul uses the term “law” in the sense of something that sought to control him. This evil principle is called a law, because of its permanency and its controlling power. Contrast “law of God” in v.22, and then the other contrast in v.23 of “another” [*heteros*] law seeking to control him.

⁶ In the language of the New Testament, the spiritual are those who are under the control of the Spirit of God; and the carnal are those who are under the control of their own nature.

Indwelling sin is a reality of the human condition. Many want to blame bad behavior on our environment, or lack of education. Or we say, “The devil made me do it.” While these can be factors in sin, the Bible points to the sin nature of man as the primary culprit in why we do wrong. If you want evidence of the fact that we have a sin nature, consider this: How come vices are more habit-forming than virtues? [Illus.#C-8].

It is also clear from these verses and chapter 6 that Paul recognized that in this life believers will constantly have to battle sin on account of the sin nature that remains within us.

We need to find a way to overcome this sin problem, for it creates a number of problems. First of all:

A. Indwelling Sin Still Seeks to Enslave Us – This is the primary analogy that Paul uses in this text and even the context. For example, in the last of v.14 Paul says, “I am... sold under sin.” That is a clear reference to slavery, which was so common in Paul’s day (cf. Mt. 18:25). The sin nature is so strong and powerful it feels as though we have been sold as slaves under the controlling power of sin. It is an ongoing enslavement with lasting effects, for the verb “sold” is in the perfect tense. Paul uses similar language in the last of v.23, where he says he felt that some force was “making me captive (*aichmalotizo*) to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” In the context he is speaking of warfare in one’s soul, and in those days, those who lost a war were often sold as slaves. When Paul refers to the “law of sin” he is using “law” in the sense of a regulating and controlling authority.

Then, the overall language of the text describes someone who has to act against their will, like would be the case with a slave. He said in the last of v.15, “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” He said in the last of v.18 and v.19, “For I have the desire⁷ to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.” He wanted to live right, but sin so controlled him, he found himself doing wrong even when he wanted to do right! He had the will to obey God, but he lacked the power to obey God. For all his desire to obey God’s law, he is compelled by the malignant power within to disobey it. The power seemed to be on the side of indwelling sin. At least, that was Paul’s experience at one time in his life.

I can understand why some interpreters have a hard time accepting such language as true of the believer, who has died to sin, and of whom Paul wrote in 6:14, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” (See also 6:6, 18, 22). So sin should not continue to exercise Lordship over the Christian. Yet Paul understood that in that same context he had to appeal to believers in v.12 saying, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.” Indwelling sin will continue to exercise dominance over the believer who fails to trust in the resources of grace that Christ has provided for him, including the ability to obey.

Do you find yourself committing certain sins against your better judgment? Have you found it difficult to break free of certain bad habits? By definition you are enslaved when someone else controls you against your will. Sin will still try to enslave you, even as a Christian. It is not your friend. So keep listening and I will show you the pathway of freedom.

Now let me warn you of another problem:

B. Indwelling Sin Creates Inner Conflict – We have already noted the presence of indwelling sin that wants to control us. But on the other hand, we also have within our mind a

⁷ The present tense suggests a habitual desire.

conscience that tells us we ought to do right and not do wrong. We not only have a conscience that should be trained by the Word of God, but as Christians we also have a new, regenerate nature. When we are born again, our new nature will have new desires (Php. 2:13). Furthermore, we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. The conflict between the flesh and the Spirit is described in Gal. 5:17, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.” Paul is clearly speaking of the Christian experience there. So compared to an unbeliever, there is more within us as a Christian that wants to resist the old sin nature. This sets the stage for a great, ongoing struggle where we are pulled in two directions. Every new believer needs to be warned of the reality of this inner conflict.

In this text of Scripture Paul laments about this inner conflict to demonstrate how we too often act against our will. Not only do we sin against our better will, but also there are good things that we want to do like pray, read our Bibles, witness, and engage in good works, but too often we don’t as we should. Then in vv.22-23 he uses vivid language to describe this inner conflict, “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.” Paul speaks of his sin nature “waging war” against the law of his mind and “my inner being,”⁸ his new nature. On the one hand, he wanted to obey God’s law. Yet over and over again he found himself disobeying God’s law. So the sin nature creates inner conflict between indwelling sin and our mind. In the last of v.25 Paul concludes by saying, “So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”

Haven’t you found this struggle to be true of you? You may say, “I determine here and now that I will not commit that sin any longer.” Yet, before long, you find yourself disobeying God again. The battle is unrelenting. As Paul says in the last of v.21, “when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.”

For example, someone pays you a compliment. That can be edifying and encouraging and yet sin always is present within to turn that into an opportunity to sin. A well-meaning complement can be turned into pride. A complement can be perceived as a flirtation that leads to lust in the heart or eyes. Yes, as Paul said, “when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.”

How can we be victorious in the struggle against our sin nature? Is an ongoing, raging battle inevitable? Well let’s see next of all:

II. ONE PROPOSED SOLUTION: LEARN AND OBEY GOD’S LAW

Keep in mind that the Law of God is one of the main topics of chapter 7. There are about a dozen references to God’s law in this one chapter. So we should not be surprised that Paul examines whether or not the Law can help us overcome sin. After all, Paul came from the background of Judaism. The Rabbis acknowledged the good and evil natures of man (*Yetser hatob* and *Yetser hara*), but asserted that a believing Jew could freely choose to obey God’s law; that the law was an antiseptic to the evil impulse (Barclay, pp.101-102). Furthermore, Paul was still trying to reach Jews who believed that sin could be overcome by diligent obedience to the Law of God. Shall we who are Christians use that same approach to overcome the power of indwelling sin? Shall we turn to the Law as the means of victory over the controlling power of sin? If we learn God’s law, including the commands of Christ, can we just exercise enough willpower to obey God’s law? Consider what Paul says here. On the one hand:

⁸ This term in Greek (ἔσω ἄνθρωπον) is only found elsewhere in Eph 3:16, referring to the inner being of the believer.

A. The Law Reveals the Will of God – He says in v.14 that the Law is spiritual. It is spiritual in the sense of being Divine in origin (cf. 1 Cor. 10:3-4). The written Law was inspired by the Holy Spirit. He says in v.16 that the Law is good, the Greek word (*kalos*) referring to the moral beauty of the Law. After all, it reveals God’s will and God’s character and is fully consistent with God’s holy nature. Its chief value is in convicting us of sin. That’s true both before and after we’re saved. It can be instrumental in leading a person to Christ (Gal. 3:24). V.12 says the Law is also “holy and just.” So in answer to his question in v.7, Paul affirms there is nothing wrong with the Law.⁹ Since it is spiritual and good, you would think it would be a big help in living the Christian life.

There can be value in reading and learning God’s law as revealed in the Old Testament. After all, Paul himself later said in 2 Tim. 3:16, “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” Yet is just learning God’s law enough to produce righteousness? Consider this:

B. The True Christian Wants to Obey God’s Will – At least we can say that our new nature wants to obey God’s Law. Our conscience wants to obey God’s Law. Paul said in the middle of v.25, “So then, I myself serve (*douleuo*) the law of God”

This text describes a man who is trying to be good and holy by his own efforts and is beaten back all too often by the power of indwelling sin. Why is that? It is because:

C. The Law Does Not Provide the Power to Obey – Especially when Paul was living under the Law, notice what his experience was in the last of v.18, “For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out (*katergazomai*).” He found that willingness and good intentions are not enough to overcome the power of indwelling sin. Oh, his willpower and energy may succeed for a time; but then when he least expects it, he falls again. Why? Because he tried to overcome his old nature with Law, and the Law cannot deliver us from the old nature. We have already seen in Romans that instead of being a dynamo that gives us power to overcome sin, the Law is a magnet that draws out of us all kinds of sin and corruption. No wonder the believer under Law becomes tired and discouraged, and eventually gives up! Now look down at 8:3, “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do....” The inability to overcome sin persists only so long as I, in my own strength, fight the battle. Paul finally came to the conclusion that the Law was ineffective in overcoming the power of the sin nature. After all, human will was not match for the bondage imposed by the sin nature. Indeed, we see in the last part of v.25 that willpower is not enough. Though he knows his obligation to obey the will of God, he also says, “but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.” Paul discovered that knowing God’s Law and having good intentions to obey it are not enough.

In fact, according to *The Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 36% of us break our New Year’s resolutions by the end of January.¹⁰ It has also been reported that 80% of those who are trying to break a habit will relapse within 90 days. Mark Twain once said, “I can give it up whenever I want to. I’ve done it a thousand times.”¹¹

⁹ He had asked in v.7, “Is the law sin?” His answer was, “By no means!” and then explains why. The problem is not with God’s law but with indwelling sin.

¹⁰ Quoted in *Reader's Digest*, January 2003, p. 17 [Illus.#C-531].

¹¹ *Readers Digest* [Illus.#C-149].

What, then, is the solution? If sin remains and exerts its power, in spite of all our efforts to keep God's law, it is clear that we must look for deliverance outside of ourselves.

I'm so glad that in a text of Scripture full of defeat, Paul concludes by giving us hope. So let's consider last of all:

III. THE PROMISE OF VICTORY OVER SIN

As Paul concludes this chapter, he begins to hint at the solution. But first, notice with me in v.24:

A. The Cry for Deliverance – He says, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” This is an earnest longing for deliverance. This deliverance that is longed for is deliverance from the captive enslavement of the preceding verse. In fact, the word translated “wretched” (*talaiporos*) refers to one who is under heavy affliction, one whose life is miserable, like that of a slave, who has no freedom, works long, hard hours, and typically lives in poverty and humiliation. So Paul cries out in the distress and the frustration of his spiritual conflict that so often ends in failure. Relying on self-effort and willpower is hopeless. Then he gets even more vivid when he describes his situation as being heavily afflicted by the “this body of death.”¹² Translated that way, Paul could be simply referring to the fact that the body is mortal and subject to death. On the other hand, in the original Greek Paul seeks deliverance from “the body of *this* death” (emphasis added), which likely points back to the wretched state of the living death of slavery to sin that he has been describing. He refers to the body in that phrase because the sin nature uses the body as its slave and instrument of sin (v.23). Who shall deliver him from such bondage?

I believe the first step to victory is to acknowledge a problem, not ignore it, or excuse it. Paul has done that. Then we need to look for deliverance from the oppressive problem. That's what Paul is doing here. So unable to cope with his problem within himself, in desperation he cries for help. He wants someone to rescue (*rhuomai*) him, like a slave wanted to be rescued from his living death.

Have you reached the point in your struggle against sin that you are willing to look for deliverance? We have seen that the answer is not to be found in sheer determination to obey God's Law. What is the solution, then? Paul realized that he could not free himself. Neither can you!

Back in the days of Roman slavery, it was very hard to escape slavery. The resources of both the master and the government would ensure your return. So there were two basic ways to be set free from bondage. First, by redemption. Someone with enough money could buy your freedom. Or perhaps a group of strong, armed men could help you escape to freedom. Either way, a slave needed a deliverer!

So let's look in the next verse for the answer as to who can rescue you from the bondage of sin. Note in v.25:

B. The One Who Can Deliver Us – Paul answers his own question in v.25, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” This reads like the calm after a storm providing the triumphant answer to the longing of the preceding verse. Thanks be to God, there is deliverance!

¹² Some commentators have tried to illuminate Paul's words by reference to Virgil's account of the Etruscan king Mezentius, who tied his living captives to decomposing corpses (Aeneid viii. 485 ff; see Barnhouse p.241). But Paul is not thinking of the body of flesh and blood. Rather that heritage of human nature subject to the law of sin and death which he shares with all sons of Adam.

Victory is possible. Paul's hope of victory in the struggle is not in keeping the law or by any effort of his own. Rather, Christ is the One who can deliver us, not only from the condemnation of sin, but also from the slavery of sin! He is the great Rescuer. We see especially from chapter 8 that the Christian is called upon to live a supernatural life, and the power to live that life has been made available. Don't miss the next several messages which will give a full explanation of our deliverance in Jesus Christ.

This verse may be the strongest argument that this text of Scripture describes the Christian experience. The person who gives thanks for deliverance immediately goes on reiterate his divided state in the last of v.25 (Moo, p.239).¹³

Conclusion: We all have a problem within. Even after becoming Christians, we still have a sin nature. It will still seek to control you. But don't use Romans 7:14-23 as an excuse to accept defeat. V.25 promises deliverance and victory!

The way to be free from the enslavement of sin is not through willpower to keep the law. True freedom and victory is through Jesus Christ our Lord. He is stronger than your sin nature. So look to Him. Trust in Him and the resources of His grace that I will talk about from chapter 8. Until you turn to Jesus you will remain not only condemned by your sin but also in bondage to sin.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 3, "God's Freedom" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on Romans* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1928); John MacArthur, Jr., *Freedom from Sin: Study Notes on Romans 6-7* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1987); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, Good News Publishers, 2001).

Theology of the Text: The law of God reflects God, who is spiritual (v.14), good (v.16), as well as holy and just (v.12).

Human Need of the Text: By nature we are in bondage to indwelling sin (vv.14b, 17b, 20, 23, 25b), which impacts our willpower (vv.15b, 18b-19, 25b). So religious training in the law (v.22) is not enough to bring deliverance or righteousness.

God's Redemptive Work of the Text: Deliverance from this bondage come through Jesus (v.25).

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¹³ Of course, the final and complete victory will only come when we are delivered from the sin nature that resides in our bodies. That will take place when we die, and especially when Jesus comes again and we receive our resurrection bodies, completing our total redemption.