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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. But yet, you no doubt have found that living such a life seems so difficult. It can be discouraging trying to live the Christian life. You find yourself doing the same sins all too often.

Christian people may respond to this struggle in different ways. Some seem to give up & quit. They just can't seem to live the Christian life, so they no longer profess it. I wonder how many of our inactive members fall into that group. Then others keep on with the struggle, and yet they go around with a defeated look. 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. So this morning I want to describe the sin problem, and begin to lay the groundwork for understanding the true way of victory.

Now this text of Scripture is clearly autobiographical. Paul shares his own experience with the battle to overcome sin & please God. It is much debated whether the experience recounted is that of Paul before he became a Christian or after. Those who believe this passage describes a religious non-Christian would point out that there seems to be an obvious lack of the Holy Spirit's power in the struggle described here. On the other hand, those who believe it is referring to Paul's experience as a Christian point to the frequent use of the present tense, in contrast with the past tense used in vv.9-13. Furthermore, would v.22 describe an unbeliever, “I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.” After all, Romans 8:7 says that the unregenerate person is not subject to the law of God, but rebels against it. And only a believer hates sin the way Paul describes it in the last of v.15. An even more significant question is whether this describes Paul's ongoing struggle with indwelling sin, even as a mature believer. I don't think so, except in the sense that total victory over indwelling sin in this life is not possible. However, much of this text can describe the experience of any person, saved or not, who tries to overcome sin by no more than willpower and even the directive of Law.

So let's begin by examining in more detail:

I. THE PROBLEM OF INDWELLING SIN

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 some evil influence dwells within us. Becoming a Christian does not eradicate the sin nature. Sin continues to dwell within us. 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 in me.” He made the same statement in the last of v.20. Then he said in v.21, “I find then a law,¹ that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.” He found or experienced something within that caused him

¹ 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, & then the other contrast in v.23 of “another” [*heteros*] law seeking to control 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.” 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 carnal....” The word translated “carnal” (*sarkikos*) is based on the Greek word for flesh. As “spiritual” expresses the nature of the law, so “carnal” must express the sin nature, and not the physical flesh. One evidence of this is the fact that 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. (Gal. 5:19-20). When he says, “I am carnal,” he means “I am under the power of the fallen and corrupt nature of man.”² Then he said in v.18, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells....” The flesh is wholly sinful. He also mentions the flesh in v.25.

Indwelling sin is a reality of the human condition. Many want to blame bad behavior on our environment, or lack of education. 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?

It is also clear from these verses that Paul recognized that in this life believers will constantly have to battle sin on account of the sin nature that remains within us. Every time you sin, you lose the battle.

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

A. Indwelling Sin Is Always Seeking to Enslave Us – 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. The sin nature is so strong & 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 he was brought “into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” In the context he is speaking of warfare in one’s soul, and in those days, those who lost the war were often sold as slaves. When sin wins the victory in the spiritual struggle, the believer becomes a slave to the sin that, at least temporarily, masters him. Then he said in the last of v.18, “for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.” 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. Sin is a tyrant whose dictates he hates and loathes, but against whose power he struggles in vain. This does not mean that sin always triumphs in act, but simply that it is a power from which the soul cannot free itself. 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.

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 try to enslave you. It is not your friend. Keep listening, & I will show you the pathway of freedom.

Now let me warn you of another problem:

² 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.

B. Indwelling Sin Uses the Members of our Bodies – Paul says in v.23, “But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” He had already said in v.5, “For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death.” Of course, he is talking about the members of our bodies. You cannot see the sin nature within us, but you can see the effect of the sin nature as it uses the members of our bodies to commit sin.

Sin really likes to use the tongue. Indwelling sin uses the tongue to commit the sins of profanity, lying, slander, gossip, & so forth. Sin tries to take control of the hands to commit the sins of stealing, fighting, & so forth.

Are the members of your body under the control of sin, or under the control of Christ?

C. Indwelling Sin Creates Inner Conflict – We have already noted the presence of indwelling sin. But we also have within our mind a conscience that tells us we ought to do right. We also have a new, regenerate nature. This sets the stage for a great, ongoing struggle. In this text of Scripture Paul laments about this inner conflict 3 different times. This struggle is described in the last of v.15, “For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.” Every Christian can adopt the language of this verse. Pride, coldness, slothfulness, and other feelings which he disapproves and hates, are, day by day, reasserting their power over him. Likewise, he said in v.19, “For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.” Then he says in vv.22-23, “For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” Paul speaks of his sin nature “warring” against the law of his mind & “the inward man,” 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, “with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.”

This struggle is especially potentially true of the Christian. We have a heightened sensitivity to sin. We not only have a conscience more fully trained by the Word of God, but we also have a new 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 & the Spirit is described in Gal. 5:17, “For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish.” So there is more within us that wants to resist the old sin nature. On the other hand, a non-Christian typically has less interest in overcoming 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.

At times it sounds as though Paul is not taking personal responsibility for his sin. He is blaming his sin nature for his failure to obey God. Some even conclude that there’s no use trying to win the battle against the sin nature. But as this text moves into chapter 8, we see that we can overcome any specific battle with sin if we avail ourselves of the right solution. So what is the solution? How can we be victorious in the struggle against our sin nature? Well let’s see next of all:

II. THE PROPOSED SOLUTION: OBEY GOD’S LAW

Keep in mind that the Law of God is one of the main topics of chapter 7. 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. He 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? Consider what Paul says here:

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. He says in v.16 that the Law is good. After all, it reveals God’s will, 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. So there is nothing wrong with the Law. Since it is spiritual & good, you would think it would be a big help in living the Christian life.

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. Even the non-Christian may want to obey God’s law at times, so they won’t have problems with a guilty conscience. Paul said in the middle of v.25, “So then, with the mind I myself serve (*douleuo*) the law of God....”

However, we see in the last part of that verse that will-power is not enough. Though he knows his obligation to obey the will of God, he also says, “but with the 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.³ 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.”⁴

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

C. The Law Does Not Provide the Power to Obey – Back when Paul was living under the Law, notice what his experience was in the last of v.18, “for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.” 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! Then look down at 8:3, “For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh....” The inability to overcome sin persists only so long as “I myself”—that is, I in my own strength—fight the battle. If sin remains and exerts its power, in spite of all our efforts, it is clear that we must look for deliverance to something out of ourselves. Furthermore, Paul finally came to the conclusion that the Law was ineffective in overcoming the power of the sin nature.

What, then, is the solution? Well let’s consider last of all:

³ Quoted in *Reader's Digest*, January 2003, p. 17.

⁴ *Readers Digest*.

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, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” This is not a cry of despair but of earnest longing for deliverance. This deliverance that is longed for is deliverance from the captivity of the preceding verse. In fact, the word translated “wretched” refers to one who is under heavy affliction, one whose life is miserably oppressed like that of a slave. He cries out in the distress and the frustration of his spiritual conflict that so often ends in failure. Then he gets even more vivid when he describes his situation as being heavily afflicted by the “body of this death.”⁵ Paul could be simply referring to the fact that the body is mortal & subject to death. On the other hand, “this death” could point back to the wretched state of the living death of slavery to sin that he has been describing. The sin nature uses the body as its slave, and that is why he mentions “the body.”

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 in desperation he cries for help. He wants someone to rescue (*rhuomai*) him, like a slave wanted to be rescued from his living death. Unable to cope with his problem within himself, he looks for help elsewhere. He wants deliverance from the tyranny of sin which uses the body and its members as instruments of sin. “Who will deliver me from the burden of this 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? Let’s look to v.25 for the answer as we consider:

B. The One Who Can Deliver Us – Paul answers his own question in v.25, “I thank 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! Victory is possible. His 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 from the slavery of sin. He is the One who can deliver us from the condemnation of sin. Victory over indwelling sin does not come by the Law, nor by will-power, but through the work of Jesus Christ. We will 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. You are going to have to come back next week to hear a more full explanation of our deliverance in Jesus Christ.

Of course, the final & 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, or when Jesus comes again.

Conclusion: We all have a problem within. Even after becoming Christians, we still have a sin nature. It will seek to control you. The way to be free from its enslavement is not through

⁵ 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.

willpower to keep the law. True freedom & victory is through Jesus Christ our Lord. He is stronger than your sin nature. Look to Him. Trust in Him.

Sources: 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); John MacArthur, Jr., *Freedom from Sin: Study Notes on Romans 6-7* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1987); 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 [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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