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The Law and the Believer's Sin
(Part 2)
Romans 7:18-25

Introduction:

The wonderful missionary **David Brainerd** wrote in his diary on **May 13, 1742**, "Saw so much of the wickedness of my heart, that I longed to get away from myself. I never before thought there was so much **spiritual pride** in my soul. I felt almost pressed to death with my own **vileness**. Oh what a body of death is there in me! Lord, deliver my soul."

George Whitefield, who was probably the most famous preacher in **America** and **Britain** in the eighteenth century and a vital part of the **Great Awakening**, said a similar thing about himself, "When I see myself I seem to be half devil and half beast." He went on to say that as he passed through great crowds on his way to preach, "I wondered why the people did not stone so **vile** a wretch as myself."

It is this same **super-sensitive conscience to sin** of these **mature believers** that Paul is talking about in **Romans 7:14-25**, which is one of the **most strategic** passages in the New Testament for understanding our **sanctification**. As we saw last time, Paul's **major intent** in this passage is to **defend** the inherent **goodness** of the **Mosaic Law**, but in doing so he also shows how the Law **in itself** is **powerless** to address the **sin** in his life. Remember that as a **mature believer**, Paul is both talking about himself **autobiographically** in his own agonizing struggle with sin and **representatively** for all of us as Christians. His **personal experience**

that he honestly reveals was not **abnormal** or **unique** to him, but is to be regarded as “the **normal** Christian life.”

In Romans 7:14-25 we see three personal confessions of Paul whereby he laments his spiritual condition and struggles. In each of these **three confessions** (vv. 14-17, 18-20, 21-25) he follows a similar **three-fold pattern**, but in the **third** he also draws a **final conclusion, thanks God** for the eventual **deliverance** that comes through the Lord Jesus Christ, and **summarizes** his on-going battle with sin (vv. 24-25).

Now thus far, we have seen Paul’s **first confession** in **vv. 14-17: His inability to overcome evil by the Law.** This morning we will see his other **two confessions.** The **second personal confession** of Paul is this:

II. His Inability to accomplish Good by the Law

- A. The **first element** of Paul’s **pattern** is: **He describes his spiritual condition.** Look at **v. 18:** For I know that **nothing good** dwells in **me**, that is, in **my flesh...** (Stop there)
1. This is very similar to **v. 14**, but whereas in **v. 14** Paul said “**we know**” and “**I am of flesh**” or **fleshly**, now he says “**I know**” and “**in my flesh.**”
 2. Having just described the **origin** of his struggles as **indwelling sin** in **v. 17**, he now begins **v. 18** with the word “**For**” (*gar*) to **confirm** and **amplify** what he has said. Therefore, in **vv. 18-20** Paul does not merely **repeat vv. 14-17** but **builds** on them.
 3. Now what Paul has come to “**know**” (*oida*) about himself is “...that **nothing good** dwells **in me.**” What he means by

“**good**” (agathon) is that which is of **moral** and **spiritual excellence**.

4. But he quickly **clarifies** what he is talking about in saying, “...that is, **in my flesh**.” As we have already seen in **vv. 5 and 14**, when the word “**flesh**” (sarx) is used in a **negative ethical way** and associated with **sin**, as it is here, it does not refer to the **physical body**, but to man’s **self-reliant independence** and **autonomy** from God and His resources.
 5. The flesh is **everything** related to “**self**”— selfishness, self-obsession, self-centeredness, self-everything.
 6. **C.E.B. Cranfield** calls it “...our fallen, **ego-centric** (or self-centered) **human nature** and all that belongs to it.” (pg. 372)
 7. And **John Peter Lange** says it this way, “Flesh is...the **whole nature** of man, **turned away** from God, in the **supreme interest of self**, **devoted** to the **creature**...The **ruling principle** of the **flesh** is undoubtedly **selfishness**.” (Zemek pg. 26)
 8. I believe that our **selfishness** is most **clearly seen** in how we **relate** to one another. Notice that Paul calls this “**my flesh**,” and that even as a believer he says that it still **resides** “**in me**.”
 9. Therefore, as Paul **accesses himself** in light of the **perfect standard** of God’s Law, he sees **nothing** of **moral** and **spiritual excellence** in himself.
- B. Paul goes on to **explain further** what he means by this in the **second element** of Paul’s **pattern**: **He proves his deplorable condition**. Look at **vv. 18b-19**: ...**for** the **willing** is **present** in

me, but the **doing** of the good is not. **For** the good that I **want**, I do not do, but I **practice** the very **evil** that I do not **want**.

1. In essence, Paul **restates** the **substance** of **v. 15**. The word “**willing**” (thelein) here is also translated “**want**” or “**desire**.”
2. Paul had the **desire** to do what was “**good**” (agathon) or **beneficial** according to God’s Law “**present**” within himself, which revealed he was a **true believer**. However, the “**doing**” or **accomplishment** of the **good** he was not.
3. On the contrary, he states, “...but I **practice** the very **evil** that I do not want.” What a **vivid description** of the **internal conflict** and **frustration** within a believer who **wants** to please God by **obeying** His Law, but cannot do so in his own resources.
4. Paul recognizes his **inability** to accomplish good by the Law. Although God’s Law **informed** his **willing**, it could not **enable** his **doing**.
5. **C.E.B. Cranfield** describes it this way, “...even his **best** actions, in which he comes **nearest** to accomplishing the good he wills, are always **stained** and **spoiled** by his **egotism**.” (pg. 361)
6. Now as we saw in **v. 15**, we must not **assume** that Paul is talking here about the **whole** of his experience. He was not **ever** and **always** doing **bad things**, for we often see him in his other **letters** as **victorious**, **fruitful**, and **always rejoicing** even in the midst of difficult circumstances.
7. Paul is simply referring to **episodes** of **wrong doing** in his life. As he looks at his life, what he **knows** from God’s Law and **desires** to do isn’t being live out in his **daily practice** as it should.

8. Isn't this often **true** of us as well? We truly **desire** to do what **pleases** God, but many times we **don't**.
 9. **Remember** that the spiritual realities revealed in **Romans 6** (positional freedom from sin), **7** (constant struggle with sin), and **8** (victory over sin) are **contemporaneous**, in that, they **exist at the same time** throughout our entire Christian lives. But Paul's **focus** here in **Romans 7** is on his **sin**.
 10. Just because he doesn't say anything about the "**fruit of the Spirit**" in his life in this passage doesn't mean it's not there. He will address how this comes about in **chapter 8**.
- C. We now come to the **third element** of Paul's **pattern** where: **He reveals his struggle's origin**. Look at v. **20**: But **if** (first class condition—"if and it's true" or "**since**") I am **doing** the very thing I do not **want**, I am no longer the one doing it, but **sin** which **dwells** in me.
1. As we saw in v. **17**, Paul again **seems** to be **denying personal responsibility** for his sin and **appears** to see himself as a **helpless victim** of the **alien power** of **sin**. But he is not!
 2. Yes, it is "**indwelling sin**" that is the **culprit**, but it is nonetheless **his sin**. Paul was **100% morally responsible** for his sinful actions, just as we are for ours.
 3. I cannot **separate** myself from my **sin**, by saying "I didn't do it, **sin** made me do it." When **I sin**, it is **me** who sins!
 4. We now come to the **third personal confession** of Paul, which is this:

III. His Inability to experience Freedom by the Law

- A. The **first element** of Paul's **pattern** is: **He describes his spiritual condition**. Since unsuccessfully struggling in himself to accomplish the **good** demanded by the Mosaic Law, Paul now **concludes** in **v. 21**: **I find** then the **principle** that **evil** is **present in me**, the **one** who **wants** to do **good**.
1. **William Newell** accurately states that Paul "...now states as a settled **conclusion**, what he has experimentally **discovered**." (pg. 276)
 2. Now the Greek literally reads, "I find then the **law** (nomon)..." Whereas some scholars see this "**law**" as the **Mosaic Law**, in this **context** it is **best** to take it as a "**principle**," which refers to a **rule** or **norm**.
 3. The stated **principle** is this: "...**evil** is **present** (present tense) in **me**. The continuing presence of "**evil**" (kakon) or **sin** in a believer's life is so **universal** that Paul here refers to it as a continually operating spiritual **principle**.
 4. As we saw in **vv. 14** and **18**, Paul is again **describing** his spiritual condition as a **saved sinner**. The tyranny of indwelling sin is **constantly "present"** in him, "...the **one** who **wants** to do **good**."
 5. Now in the Greek there is another "**in me**" in this second part of the verse, which the **NASB** and **KJV** have left out. We might paraphrase it like this: "I **find** then the **principle** that **evil** is present **in me**; **in me** who **wants** to do good."
 6. **The point** is that both "**in me's**" show the **unity** of Paul. He is **both** the **willing "me"** and the **failing "me."**

7. He is the **same Paul** who **desires** to do good, but also **sins**.
And the same is **true** of me and you!

B. Paul **explains** more fully this internal struggle with sin in the **second element** of his **pattern** where: **He proves his deplorable condition**. Look at **vv. 22-23**: For I **joyfully concur** with the **law of God** in the **inner man**, but I see a **different law** in the members of my body, **waging war** against the **law of my mind...** (Stop there)

1. The one Greek word translated “**joyfully concur** (sunedomai) means to **rejoice** or **delight** in. Since Paul was a **true believer**, his redeemed heart **delighted** in the “**law of God**,” which refers to the **Mosaic Law**.
2. In the **Psalms** the various **psalmist’s** repeatedly talk about **rejoicing** and **delighting** in God’s Law (Ps. 1:2; 19:8; 119:14, 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92).
3. Notice that Paul’s **rejoicing** in the Mosaic Law is “...in the **inner man**.” Although some identify this with the “**new self**” (Eph. 4:24), in this **context** it is **best** to simply see it as describing the **immaterial** hidden person of the **heart** (1 Pet. 3:4) in **contrast** to the **material** or **physical body** of a person that other people see.
4. We see this **same comparison** in **2 Corinthians 4:16**, “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our **outer man** is decaying, yet our **inner man** is being renewed day by day.” (Eph. 3:16)

5. No one could **see** Paul's **inner man** where he sincerely **delighted** in God's Law and said **AMEN** to it. It wasn't visible to the human eye.
6. But as Paul **honestly** and **humbly** looked into himself, he goes on to say in **v. 23**, "...but I **see** a **different law** in the **members** of my body." This is the area where other people could see.
7. The word "**different**" (heteron) here means another of a different kind, which distinguishes a **totally separate law** from the **law of God**. This "**different law**" is **equivalent** to the "**principle**" in **v. 21** and the "**law of sin**" at the end of the verse.
8. Paul declares that this "**different law**" of **sin** is "...in the **members** of my **body**." As we have seen before in **chapter 6**, it is important to understand that our **physical body** is not **sinful** in itself, it is not the **source** of sin; it is merely a **neutral instrument** that can be used for **good** or **bad**, for **God** or for **sin**.
9. And in this case, the **law of sin** in Paul's soul is being **expressed** "in the **members** of (his) body," such as his **tongue, eyes, ears, hands, feet**, etc. It is here where other people could observe him periodically as not living consistently with God's Law that deep inside he **delighted** in and **desired** to do.
10. Notice that Paul says this "**different law**" of **sin** is also constantly "...**waging war** (present tense) against the **law** of **my mind**." It is the very nature of sin to constantly mount **military campaigns** against the "**law of the mind**" to gain victory and control over us.

11. Concerning the “**law of the mind**,” **John Murray** rightly states, “...the **law of the mind** is not the law that **proceeds from** and is **propounded by** the mind. It is rather the **law of God** as the law that **regulates** the **mind** and which the **mind serves**.” (pg. 267)
 12. Therefore, the “**law of sin**” is continually fighting against the “**law of God**” in our **approval** and **obedience** of it in our mind. Notice how the “**mind**” is the **center** of our spiritual battle.
 13. **Proverbs 23:7** says, “For as (a man) **thinks** in his heart, so is he” (NKJV). **Romans 12:2** states that the believer is “...**transformed** by the **renewing** of your **mind**.”
 14. And in **2 Corinthians 10:3-5** we are told, “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not **war** according to the flesh, for the **weapons** of our **warfare** are not of the flesh, but **divinely powerful** for the destruction of fortresses. We are **destroying speculations** and every **lofty thing** raised up against the **knowledge of God**, and we are taking **every thought captive** to the **obedience** of Christ.”
 15. The **battle** is for our **mind**. The **law of sin** not only fights against God’s Law that the mind **approves**, but it also works to make us a **POW**.
 16. **Charles Hodge** said it well, “The principle of evil is not only **active**, but it is **conquering**. It **takes** the soul **captive**.” (pg. 237)
- C. We see exactly this is the **third element** of Paul’s **pattern** where: **He reveals his struggle’s origin**. Look at the end of **v. 23**: ...

and making me a **prisoner** of the **law of sin** which is in my **members**.

1. The word “**prisoner**” (aichmalotizonta) means to be taken captive, to be brought under control. This is similar to what Paul said in v. 14 about being “...**sold into bondage to sin.**”
 2. Therefore, the **origin** of Paul’s struggles is the “**law of sin**”—the **principle** or **different law**, which is “...the **power, authority,** and **control** exercised over us by **sin.**” (Cranfield pg.)
 3. Even though we as believers are **already** “**dead to sin**” and “**alive to God in Christ Jesus**” (6:11), whenever we **yield** to sin in our lives we once again open ourselves up to be **enslaved** by this **cruel taskmaster** and made its **prisoner**. This is what sinful **compulsions** and **addictions** are all about.
 4. Notice again where Paul says “...the **law of sin** which is in my **members.**” The “**law of sin**” expresses itself in very **concrete ways** in and through the various “**members**” of our physical body.
 5. But remember that **bodily** “**members**” don’t sin, **people** do. We are the **responsible agents** and our members merely express the **ethic** of our personal **agency**.
- D. Paul now draws a **final conclusion** from his agonizing struggle with sin and cries out in v. 24: **Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?**
1. The word “**wretched**” (talaiporos) means “a **miserable** and **distressed** condition.” (Huges pg. 144) Paul **recognizes** that he is utterly **hopeless** and **helpless** in himself to **free** himself from sin by the Law or his own self effort.

2. This is not a **cry of despair** but one of **earnest longing** for **final deliverance** by a power greater than himself. And since he **already knows** Jesus Christ as his personal **Savior** and **Lord**, notice that Paul doesn't ask the question, "**What do I do?**" but rather "**Who will set me free** from the **body** of this **death?**"
3. Now to be "**set...free**" (rhusetai) means to be **rescued**, **delivered**, or **preserved** from danger. In the midst of his struggle with sin Paul **longed** for the day when he would be **rescued** from "the **body** of this **death?**"
4. The "**body of this death**" refers to our mortal physical body through which the **law of sin** carries on its **endless warfare** and often leads to **captivity** and eventually to **death**, which is the **wages** of sin.
5. **C.E.B. Cranfield** says it like this, "That from which the speaker **longs** to be **delivered** is the **condition of life** in the **body** as we know it under the **occupation** of sin which has just been described, a **life** which, because of sin, must succumb to **death.**" (pg. 367)
6. Now the **future tense** of "Who **will set me free**" speaks of the **future deliverance** that all believers will experience when we receive our **resurrected** and **glorified** bodies. At that time "...this **perishable** will have put on the **imperishable**, and this **mortal** will have put on **immortality**" (1 Cor. 15:42; 26, 57; Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 5:2-5; Phil. 3:20-21).
7. But it's not just our future deliverance that Paul is talking about here. He also **anticipates** our **present deliverance** as we live

in **dependence** on the **Holy Spirit**, who is the **key** to living a victorious Christian life. We will see this in **chapter 8**.

- E. Now having just asked the question, without hesitation, Paul **answers** it and **thanks God** for the **certainty** of his eventual deliverance in **v. 25: Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!** (Stop there)
1. **Already knowing** who his **Deliverer** is, Paul can't help but **burst out in joyful thanks to God** for his deliverance "...through **Jesus Christ our Lord.**" Notice Paul's use of His **full title: Jesus** (Savior), **Christ** (Anointed One), **Lord** (Sovereign Ruler).
 2. Only the Lord Jesus Christ can **set us free** from **sin** in our daily Christian lives. There is no other **Deliverer!**
- F. Paul then **ends** the chapter by **summarizing** his on-going battle with sin in the last part of v. **25: So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind** am serving the **law of God**, but **on the other, with my flesh** the **law of sin**.
1. The words "**So then**" introduce a **summary** of all Paul has been saying in **vv. 14-24**. **C.E.B. Cranfield** says, "...it **sums up** with **clear-sighted honesty**. . . the **tension**, with all its **real anguish** and also all its **real hopefulness**, in which the Christian **never ceases** to be **involved** so long as he is living this **present life.**" (pg. 369)
 2. Now this on-going **tension** is between the **two conflicting servitudes: First**, Paul says, "...**on the one hand I myself with my mind** am **servicing** the law of God."

3. By this Paul means that he continually **serves** the **law of God**, in so far as, he **approves** its goodness, **delights** in it, and **strives** to wholeheartedly **obey** it in **dependence** on the Spirit.
4. **Second**, he states, “...but **on the other**, with my **flesh** the **law of sin**.” But this Paul means that he continually **serves** the **law of sin**, in so far as, in his **proneness** to **wander** from God in **self-reliant independence**, he will not live in constant fellowship with God and conformity to His will.
5. Although these are **two radically different servitudes**, notice that it is **Paul himself** who is doing **both** of them. We see this in the emphatic pronoun “**I myself**,” which shows that it is the **same Paul** who, as **Douglas Moo** states, “...is **caught** in the conflict between **mental assent** to God’s word and **practical failure** to do it.” (pg. 467)
6. As we have seen all along, there are not **two Paul’s**—his **true self** and his **false self**, his **lower self** and his **higher self**. Paul has only **one self** that is **divided** or **split**.
7. In other words, he is **one person** who is pulled in **two opposing directions**—either **self-reliant independence** or **submissive dependence** on God. And this **same battle** is going on within all of us **every minute** of **every day**!
8. **John Murray** said it best, “The **most significant** aspect of this concluding description is the way in which the apostle emphatically identifies **himself** as the **agent** in **both cases**. He does not say that the **mind** serves the law of God and the **flesh** the law of sin but rather ‘**I myself**’ with the **mind** and with the **flesh**. This is **conclusive** to the effect that the apostle did not

disavow his own **personal responsibility** and **agency** in the **service** of the **law of sin** and **corrects** the impression that we might have derived from **verses 17** and **20.**” (pg. 271)

Conclusion:

In closing, I have quoted much from **C.E.B. Cranfield**, he **summarizes** Paul’s **three personal confessions** the **best** when he says, “The **farther** men advance in the Christian life, and the **more mature** their discipleship, the **clearer** becomes their **perception** of the **heights** to which God calls them, and the more **painfully sharp** their **consciousness** of the **distance** between what they **ought**, and **want**, to be, and what they **are.**” (pg. 366) That is **exactly** what we see in **Romans 7!**

So if the **normal Christian life** this side of heaven is a life of **constant struggle** with **sin**, does this mean that we just **throw up** our hands and say, “What’s the use of **trying**, I’m just human.” **Absolutely not!** We should never just **kick back** and become **complacent** about our sin.

Although we cannot live the Christian life in our **own resources**, we are **encouraged** to keep on **pressing** toward the **goal** of Christlikeness (Phil. 3:14) by the **assurance** that **one day** we will experience **full** and **final deliverance** from sin. And, as we will see in **chapter 8**, we are **promised** that as we **live** moment by moment in **dependence** on the Holy Spirit, He will **enable** us to experience **victory** over sin and to increasingly **become** what we **already are** in Jesus Christ.