

CLASS 7: THE ONGOING STRUGGLE WITH SIN (Romans 7:7-25)

4. The struggle with sin, 7:7-25

Paul does not discount the power of sin in the life of people, both before and after salvation. He recognizes that justifying faith comes from an awareness of one's sin, and still does not totally eliminate sin. He uses himself as an example; in verses 1-6, Paul talks about "we," but in verse 7 he changes the subject to "I."

In verses 7-13 he uses "I" plus the past tense. Then in verses 14-25 he switches to "I" plus the present tense. This change of verb tenses from past to present between verses 13 and 14 shows his own experience in two stages: before he was saved, and after he was saved.

What is most surprising in this section is the role that the law plays in Paul's (and our) experience. Because of our own sinful nature, the law actually aggravates sin in us, causing us to sin more! Even though it is good in itself, it cannot help us, but rather hurts us. Only the Spirit of God can write the law on our hearts and enable us to obey it. The Holy Spirit's ministry will be the theme of Romans 8.

a. Paul before his conversion, 7:7-13

Sin was powerful in his life, but he was not aware of its power until confronted by the law. The law not only exposed his sin to his eyes, it also produced an amazing reaction: it caused him to sin even more! Knowing that it was a sin against God just made him want to do it again. (Augustine points out this root of sinfulness in his own *Confessions*. As a boy he stole pears, not because he was hungry, but because it was forbidden.) The particular sin Paul mentions was covetousness, forbidden in the tenth commandment. Many have seen in this section a parallel with the account of Adam and Eve's fall in Gen 3.

^{7:7} What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."⁸ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead.⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.¹⁰ The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.¹² So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

The law is good – vv. 7, 12

Note that the moral law is in view (v. 7, the Tenth Commandment)

Paul says this to counteract possible misunderstanding of “anti-law” statements (5:20-21; 6:14; 7:4-6, 8-11; 8:2-3; Gal 2:19; 3:2, 12, 25; 5:1, 4, 18)

The law’s subjective consequences

Our sinful nature is exposed – vv. 7, 13

Our sinful nature is awakened – vv. 8-11

Paul, a Pharisee, knew from experience the greed of the Pharisees, their (and his) breaking of the Tenth Commandment (Luke 16:14)

The law, a “bridgehead” of sin (Greek *aphorme*, “occasion, place of opportunity”)

Term used here and in v. 11; also in 2 Cor 5:12; 11:12; Gal 5:13; and 1 Tim 5:14

Example of Eve in Garden—Gen 3:5-6; cf. 1 John 2:16

Example of young Augustine and the pears (in *Confessions* 2:4)

The law inadequate to bring life

By itself the law brings disappointment (v. 10), degeneration (v. 8), and death (vv. 9, 11)

b. Paul after his conversion, 7:14-25

Paul sees a difference now: he has the law of God in his heart and genuinely desires to keep it (vv. 15, 16, 18, 19, 22, 25); an unregenerate person can never have this heart desire (cf. 8:5-7). On the other hand, he finds his old nature, his “members,” “body,” etc., warring against his heart. His old sinful habits and attitudes die hard, and Paul despairs that in this life he will ever be able to extinguish his sin. Only in the resurrection will he find relief from this battle (vv. 24-25).

Sanctification is a process. This passage is a strong antidote to those who claim “Christian perfection.” It is encouraging to us all that even Paul had to struggle against his old nature.

¹³ *Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.* ¹⁴ *For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.* ¹⁵ *I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* ¹⁶ *Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.* ¹⁷ *So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.* ¹⁸ *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not*

the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ 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. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

The problem:

- Christians have victory over sin (6:6, 14, 17-18, 22; 8:2)
- But yet we still struggle with sin (vv. 14-15, 18-19)

This is the normal Christian life

First person “I” plus the present tense

“Paul is depicting in his own person the character and extent of the weakness of believers.” (Calvin)

This is not someone in the unsaved state

Mind serves Christ (vv. 16, 18, 22, 25 [Greek *douleuo*])

This is not true for the unbeliever (6:17-18, 20 [Greek *douleuo*]; 8:7)

This warfare is found only in the Christian (Gal 5:17)

This is not a Christian in a temporary “carnal state”

Synonyms:

- *Sarkinos* – “fleshy, composed of flesh,” weak through body (Rom. 7:14; also in 1 Cor 3:1 [cf. v. 4, “are you not human?”])
- *Sarkikos* – “fleshly, determined by the flesh,” weak through sinful corruption (1 Cor 3:3 [twice])

Struggle goes on, even after victory assured (v. 25)

“We are convinced that it is possible to do justice to the text of Paul . . . only if we resolutely hold chapters 7 and 8 together, in spite of the obvious tension between them, and see in them not two successive stages but two different aspects, two contemporaneous realities, of the Christian life, both of which continue so long as the Christian is in the flesh.” (C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans* 1:356)

Two warring factions:

The “law of my mind” (vv. 22-23, 25)

The “law of my members” (vv. 21, 23; cf. 17, 20)

Seems stronger at times (vv. 15, 19)

Can come from evil habits or lifestyle (Eph 4:28), fleshly gratification (1 Cor 9:25-27, outside temptation (Heb 4:15), etc.

Struggle not hopeless

- Victory in this life (Rom 8)
- Confidence in God’s working (Phil 1:6)
- Ultimate total victory (Rom 7:25a)