

“The Real Me!”
Romans 7:14-25
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Dick Exley wrote, “As he stepped into my office I couldn’t help noticing the stylish cut of his suit, his monogrammed shirt and his expensive shoes.

He was a man familiar with success, well respected both by his family and colleagues.

But neither his designer clothes nor his pseudo-confidence could totally mask the misery eating at his soul.

He is a friend of mine, a good man, a respected leader in his church, and a husband and a father.

Yet this is only part of the story - there is another side - a dark side.

The other side started innocently enough with stopping off for coffee at a nearby convenience store.

One morning as he was drinking his coffee he was browsing through the pornographic magazines on the stand.

Over the next several months the insatiable desire for more lured him to “r” and “x” rated videos, adult theaters and more.

With each step he told himself he would go no further but he seemed powerless to stop.

Soon he was living in a self-made hell.

There were moments of lustful pleasure followed by hours of shame and days and weeks of regret.

Yet even in his shame he was irresistibly drawn toward the very thing he hated.”

(Richard Exley in “New Man” magazine Nov/Dec 1996)

The illustration may seem extreme to you but have you ever struggled against sin?

Have you ever fallen to a strong temptation?

Maybe for you it is not lust; maybe it is greed, or hatred, or envy, or selfish ambition.

Maybe for you it is discouragement or even despair.

Have you ever known the feeling of being irresistibly drawn to the very thing you hate?

Have you ever wondered, “how could I do this?”

“How can I go on doing this, or thinking this way, I’m a Christian?!”

Have you ever felt the pain of failing miserably as a Christian?

Have you known the discouragement of doing the very thing you said you’d never do?

Have you ever experienced, not once but again and again, the deep disappointment of not doing the very thing you knew you should do?

If ever there was a man we hold up as a man of God - it is the Apostle Paul.

When we think of how the Christian life ought to be lived - surely he would be an example.

We most often think of Paul as a giant in the faith - a man who loved God and served God more than most.

I want you to watch and listen to a text, that lets us in on Paul’s experience.

I want you to hear this man express in words, with which many of us can identify, the anguish of his own mind - **as he describes one aspect of the Christian life.**

Romans 7:14-25

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me

that does it. ²¹ So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin."

Do you hear that?

Doesn't that sound much like the man with whom I introduced this sermon?

Doesn't that sound like what some of you have experienced – I know I have and still do?

I don't want you to pass over this text too quickly.

I don't want us to miss the point of these verses.

Listen to Paul's heartache: "What a wretched man I am!"

- Is Paul describing some past experience of his?
- Is Paul saying this is the way it used to be until he learned the secret of living the Christian life?

No. Paul is describing his present experience.

Here is this spiritual giant describing the struggle with sin in his own life.

I realize that this interpretation is debated but I believe the context and the grammar push us to this conclusion.

Paul is here describing the struggle as he was experiencing it right then - this was a frequent struggle in his life.

In the first 2 ½ chapters of Romans Paul describes the definite need every person on earth has to become a Christian.

From half-way through the first chapter through the first half of the 3rd chapter Paul demonstrates how everyone on earth is sinful, condemned by God and helpless to do anything about it.

Mid-way through the 3rd chapter Paul begins to describe how we can become Christians - It is only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Because of who Christ is and what he has done on the cross, it is possible for the righteousness of God to be credited to us through faith in Jesus.

In chapter 4 Paul uses the illustration of the Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, to prove that it has always been true that righteousness is credited by faith not earned by being good enough.

Then, at chapter 5 Paul begins to describe the great benefits of being a Christian.

The first result he mentions is that we are no longer enemies of God's but now we have peace with God - we have become part of his family - God's friends.

Those thoughts end with 5:11 "Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Reading through Romans carefully it would seem likely that the subject of chapter 8 would come next.

That subject is how we live this new life in Christ.

Romans 8 begins with 8:1-2 "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."

Paul then goes on to describe life controlled by the Spirit in contrast to life controlled by sin.

But there are 2 ½ chapters between the first part of chapter 5 and chapter 8.

In these chapters Paul digresses with some very important clarifications.

We have already looked at the first two clarifications in the last half of chapter 5 and then in chapter 6.

In the latter part of chapter 5 Paul describes how it is possible for the righteousness of Jesus, to be credited to us.

You might recall that he does it by using the analogy of our relationship with Adam.

Just as we were “in Adam” when he sinned so that his sin is credited to us, so also we who trust in Christ were “in Christ” when he died and rose again so that his righteousness is credited to us.

In chapter 6 Paul deals head on with an erroneous assumption. In chapters 1-5, Paul has so emphasized the fact that we are not saved by what we do, by our good efforts, that it was possible for people to assume that it therefore doesn't matter how we live – after all we are saved by grace not by works.

In two different ways Paul demonstrates how that kind of thinking is absolutely false.

Now in chapter 7 Paul will clarify a couple of other issues, one of which we will look at today.

In 7:1-7 Paul describes in part the believer's changed relationship to the law now that we are “in Christ.”

And in 7:8-13 Paul discusses the unbeliever's relationship to the law using himself, before conversion, as an example.

In both paragraphs Paul is defending the law of God as good even though sin makes bad use of it.

Look at 7:7 “What shall we say then? Is the law sin?”

And in the next few verses Paul say, “Certainly not.” Verse 12 “The law is holy, and righteous and good.” But the purpose of the law was not to save us but to show us how much we need to be saved. -

The law shows us how sinful we are and our need for salvation by grace.

In verses 7-13 Paul has been writing in the first person but in the past tense. He said this used to be my relationship to the law.

Before I became a Christian - the law's purpose was to show me my need for Jesus.

At verse 14 Paul switches verb tenses; from verse 14 on Paul is writing in the present tense - he is describing his relationship to the law even as he writes.

He is describing his relationship to the law as a Christian.

The law still does for Paul as a Christian what it did for him before he became a Christian.

It shows him his sinfulness and his need daily for the intervention of the Spirit of God.

If we don't realize how powerful, how pervasive and how pernicious sin truly is in our lives then we will live vulnerable to its every destructive influence.

Many of us keep failing in our Christian experience because we don't take sin seriously and because we don't take sin seriously we don't take seriously our need for the daily, even moment by moment, salvation of the Lord Jesus.

This message will be successful today if you and I leave here with one overwhelming conviction: "I need Jesus TODAY!- I need him as much today as I did before I became a Christian.

In fact if I don't have his intervention in my life TODAY I am hopeless.!!

I will not give more time to the first 13 verses of chapter 7 today because I have addressed the issue of the Christian's relationship to the law as recently as 2005 in our study of Exodus.

That sermon was titled, "The Law of God in the Life of the Christian from *Exodus* 19-20 and is available at (www.soundliving.org).

I am also placing other notes on the website that deal with the first 13 verses of this chapter.

Look with me again, please, at how Paul describes one aspect of his present experience as a Christian.

Romans 7:14 "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin."

Let Paul describe what he means by that.

He does it twice in almost parallel fashion: Verse 15-17 and again in verses 18-20.

Look at v15 beginning at the second sentence:

“What I want to do, I don’t do, and what I hate, I do.”

Compare that to the last part of V 18: “I have the desire to do what is good but I cannot carry it out.”

Look at v17: “it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.”

Compare v 20 “Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is not longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”

Verses 18-20 say, in slightly different language, the same thing that Verses 15-17 say.

There is a struggle within Paul.

As God’s child, I want to do what is right but it is like there is something in me that fights against that.

In Verses 21-23 Paul defines that struggle.

There are two powerful principles at work within Paul and within every Christian.

The first is in verse 22 “In my inner being I delight in God’s law” - I want to do what is right.

God has placed in Paul, as he places in every Christian, a new heart, a new desire to love and serve God.

God said through Jeremiah, “This is the covenant I will make with my people after that time, I will put my law in their minds and will write it on their hearts.”

“BUT” Paul writes in verse 23 “I see another law or powerful principle at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind.”

This second powerful principle or influence is sin.

In the last part of verse 25 Paul summarizes these two principles that are both at work in him at the same time:

“In my mind I am a slave to God’s law” - he desires to love and serve God BUT “in the sinful nature I am a slave to the law of sin” - he still finds that he does the very things he ought not to do.

What is this?

Is Paul so weak that he can't get on with the Christian life - living it the way he is supposed to?

Why doesn't he just get hold of himself and start living the way he ought to?

What is Paul saying in these verses?

- That he can't help himself?
- The Devil makes him do it?

Come on Paul, where's your backbone?!

If someone else said the things Paul said here, some of us might be tempted to look on them with a certain amount of contempt.

If someone else was struggling with sin in their life and came saying they couldn't help it - we might be tempted to say - "Come on! That's no excuse - straighten up and fly right!!"

But to say that or even think that is to demonstrate a real lack of understanding of the power and pervasiveness of sin.

We ought not to be fooled.

Just because we become Christians doesn't mean that sin is any less powerful in our lives.

If anything, when you become a Christ-follower, the battle with sin intensifies.

Remember Paul's description of his struggle with sin is a present-tense struggle - it is what he was experiencing as a mature Apostle of Christ Jesus. The battle is real.

How powerful is sin in the life of the believer?

"I don't do what I ought to do and I do what I ought not to do."

Paul said it felt like he was a prisoner, a slave to sin.

Sin is anything we think, do or say or do **not** think do, or say that is not in perfect conformity with God's Word and will.

The slightest departure from exactly what God wills is sin.

That means it is not only possible to sin by doing the wrong thing but it is possible to sin by not doing the right thing.

Furthermore, it is possible to sin greatly against God without even knowing it - the Bible makes it clear that ignorance of the will of God doesn't mean we are guiltless in not doing it.

When I realize that sin is any departure from the perfect will of God, I will stop excusing my ignorance and will stop excusing my sin as a little thing - an inconsequential thing.

Sin is still sin - even as a Christian.

And when I see my sin for the evil that it is - then I will cry out with Paul, "What a wretched man I am - who will rescue me from this body of death - from this body that keeps on sinning against a holy God."

In that 25th verse Paul is looking forward to his resurrection when he will have a body that is finally freed from the sin nature described in Romans 5.

And he knows that it is Jesus who will do that at his second coming. Paul will talk more about that in Romans 8.

But for now Paul is disgusted with himself.

His sin is not just a matter of what he does but it is part of his very nature.

I have commiserated with other men who, like me, have been Christians for decades.

By God's grace we have grown a measure in discipline and fruitfulness.

And yet, without warning, sin will attack in areas we long ago assumed were conquered.

And we realize afresh that the sinful nature we inherited from Adam is still very powerful - that we are still capable of great sin.

And so, it is not that I'm good at root and just do a few wrong things.

It is not that a child is born basically good and then learns some bad things from bad companions or bad teachers.

Yes, it is tempting to look at our little babies and say, "Such sweet angels!" "What little innocents"

J. C. Ryle wrote, “Alas, as that baby lies smiling and cooing in its cradle, that little creature carries in its heart the seeds of every kind of wickedness.” (Ryle, *Holiness*, 4)

The following statement is not true: “Under it all my son has a good heart”.

The Bible says, “We are by nature, children of wrath”

We are born sinful and it is only a matter of time, not much time, before we begin to live out that sinfulness in our actions.

No one has to teach a child to deceive, to be self-willed, selfish, and greedy.

The root is there from conception - it is only time before the fruit appears.

Not only does the fruit of our natural sinfulness appear early in life but it soon becomes apparent that sinfulness has infected every part of our being.

It is not only that our conduct is evil at times but also when we search our own hearts we discover that even our best intentions are scarred by the marks of sin.

Our motives at best are mixed.

It seems that even the best things we do are often turned in such a way as to serve our own interests.

I do a particularly good deed secretly but then can't let it go unnoticed.

Even when we become Christians this propensity to sin is still powerful - as witnessed by Paul's words here in Romans 7 and by our own experience.

Dr J.I. Packer has written, “The (person) in Christ serves the law of God with his mind, in the sense that he wants and wills to keep it perfectly, but with the flesh he serves the law of sin, as appears from the fact that he never is able to keep the (will) of God as perfectly as he wishes to do. The emphatic, “I, even I,” expresses Paul's sense of how painfully paradoxical it is that a Christian, like himself, who desires so heartily to keep God's law and do only good, should find himself under the constant necessity of breaking the law and doing

what in effect is evil. But such is the state of the Christian till his body is redeemed.” (J.I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 269)

There is one other thing about sin that may be its most pernicious characteristic - that is its deceitfulness.

We are deceived into believing that sin, as least OUR sin, is a little thing.

We want to call our actions anything but sin:

We call them errors, mistakes, thoughtlessness, We didn't mean anything by it.

“No one got hurt by it” we say.

We're only doing what most others do.

We buy the lie that somehow our actions or thoughts are not so bad after all.

We want to believe they are less sinful than they are and less dangerous than they are.

And as long as we aren't murdering or doing the things that really bad people do then we assume we can handle it.

And we assume now that we are a Christian sin can't really get us - we can indulge in the little stuff and just stay away from the really bad stuff.

And the most deceitful of all is the sin of self-righteousness that says “I don't have a problem with sin!”

What does Paul say?

On our own, we are just as helpless as Christians as we were as non-Christians.

Someone may say, “Wait a minute, I thought that when we became Christians we won that battle.

I thought that if we did it right we would live victorious lives?

Aren't we supposed to be happy, positive, spiritually successful, and godly Christ-followers?

If Paul's a Christian in these verses, he sounds like a failure.

Is that it, or has Paul learned something that we must learn?

When I read Romans 7:14-25 I see in Paul a man who has learned well what Jesus meant when he said, “blessed are the poor in spirit”.

The poor in spirit sees himself as incapable without Christ.

1. Till we are poor in spirit we are not capable of receiving grace. Hands full of rocks can't receive gold.
2. Till we are poor in spirit, Christ is never precious.

Only when a man sees himself as near dead does he see how much he needs a doctor.

Only when his debt is too great to count does he welcome someone to pay the debt.

Only when he is hungry to starving does the bread someone offers become most precious.

Only when we come to recognize that we will fail miserably without the direct intervention of Jesus - do we see ourselves are we really are.

CEB Cranfield wrote, “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.” Cranfield, *Romans A Shorter Commentary*, 169

Peter started out with self-confidence and ended up poor in spirit:

Do you remember when he said "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death (Lk 22:33) and Peter believed he could follow through on that promise?

His love was great and his confidence was in himself.

Jesus knew how weak Peter truly was and how dependent Peter was.

When temptation came, Peter failed miserably.

If Peter could speak again (knowing what he came to know later) what might he say as a mature Christian?

"As much as I want to follow you and even fight for you Jesus, I know I am totally incapable apart from your power enabling me.

I need your prayer Lord Jesus, I need your power.
I want to do what is right but I will fail most every
time without your immediate intervention.”

This is a matter of coming to the end of myself, even as a Christian, and falling down at the feet of Jesus, asking him and him alone to pick me up and set to walking right - asking him to hold me in that upright position and putting my feet one foot in front of the other.

This doesn't mean I'm passively unresponsive or lazy but utterly dependent.

The Puritans hundreds of years ago knew these truths:

“O Lord, no day of my life has passed that has not proved me guilty in your sight. Prayers have been uttered from a prayerless heart; Praise has been often praiseless sound; My best services are filthy rags... Though my sins rise to the heaven, your merit soars above them; though my unrighteousness weighs me down to hell, your righteousness exalts me to the your throne... I am guilty but pardoned, lost, but saved, wandering, but found, sinning, but cleansed. Give me perpetual broken-heartedness, Keep me always cling to your cross, Flood me every moment with descending grace...” *Valley of Vision, 83*

Paul wants us to understand very clearly and personally that we will never live the way God has called us to live until we recognize two things:

- **One, we are sinful through and through and as long as we live we are in a battle - a battle against our own sinfulness.**
- **And two, we are utterly and always fully dependent of Jesus.**

Christianity is not a matter of believing the right things and then getting a sticker that says you pass hell and go to heaven.

It doesn't work that way.

Christianity is coming to a person - Jesus- and belonging to him.

It is living each day in relationship with him.

It is recognizing that I not only need him to save me from the eternal consequences of my sin (eternal damnation)
BUT THAT I NEED HIM TO SAVE ME TODAY FROM

that sinful nature that so powerfully works in me - I need him in my struggle today.

We don't want to live in struggle.

We want to have victory and have it now.

That's a little like physical illness: we don't like to be sick.

We expect to go to the doctor and get something to make us feel like we are supposed to feel.

We expect to always feel good and if we don't, we assume that something is terribly wrong that must be fixed - it is our right to feel good.

Similarly, we begin to believe that in the Christian life we deserve to be successful, victorious, living on a level of peace, effectiveness, free of moral struggle,

Examples are set before us of "spiritually successful people" - our desire to emulate them - to have what they have - to learn their secret of success.

We have come to believe that if we are struggling then there is something wrong.

But God's word says that our victory is not in the absence of a struggle - our victory is in our relationship with Jesus in the midst of the struggle.

I believe we will battle with sin our entire life.

And that battle should drive us into a conscious awareness of our desperate need for the Jesus.

Some of you are struggling even now – struggling desperately with sin.

One of my concerns for you is that you not lose heart in the struggle.

Please don't assume that because you seem to fail so often, you are not a Christian.

Look how Paul describes himself (and you?)

- I hate sin (v15).
- I don't want to do what is wrong (v20).
- I want to do good (v21).

- I delight in God's law (v22).

No, the struggle doesn't mean you are not a Christian, if anything, it is indication that you belong to God and he is a work in you – painful as that may be.

But at the same time I have concern for others of you.

I don't want you to give up and call yourself just a "carnal Christian."

Chapter 6 should have dispelled that kind of thinking.

I don't want you to think that since sin is so powerful, the best you can hope for us a fruitless life marked by a series of spiritual defeats.

Chapter 8 will dispel that kind of thinking.

Do you see it?

You and I need Jesus - we need him today - we need to be in relationship with him today - we need to come to him, always coming to him, always dependent on him.

Over a hundred years ago the songwriter Annie Hawks wrote:

"Oh I need Thee,
every hour I need thee.
Teach me blessed Savior
to come to thee".

November 11, 2007