

Why Is the Struggle with Sin So Hard? Romans 7:14-25

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We'll be looking this morning at Romans 7:14-25. This is that famous passage where Paul describes his struggle with sin. And everyone who deals with this passage has to grapple with a vital and difficult question. And it's this: *"When the apostle Paul wrote Romans 7:14-25, was he describing his own experience as a Christian, or was he looking back at his life before his conversion and describing the conflict he felt as an unbeliever who was in bondage to sin?"* Is this really Paul the apostle speaking as a Christian, or is he looking back on his old life and describing what the struggle with sin was like for Saul of Tarsus?

That's a vital question, and it has major ramifications for how we understand the doctrine of sanctification. If you imagine that sanctification can be accomplished instantly; or if you think any kind of sinless perfection is attainable in this life; or if you think of sanctification or even the New Birth as a crisis experience that automatically catapults you to a higher spiritual plane where you no longer have to deal with temptation--then you are going to have a hard time explaining how the apostle Paul could have been describing his own spiritual experience as a Christian in this passage.

Notice: The struggle with sin Paul describes here is a fierce battle in which he is frequently frustrated and often fails. He even calls himself a wretched man in verse 24. Let's be honest. This is a difficult passage. How can this possibly be a description of a mature Christian leader's experience? Even more to the point, if this is what Paul experienced as a godly apostle, what hope is there for the rest of us?

Some would say that if this is a description of Paul's Christian life, it is hard to reconcile with Romans 6. After all, Paul has just described the Christian life as a life of glorious freedom from the bondage of sin. Let's

look at that by way of introduction. Starting in verse 5 of Romans 6, Paul writes,

If we have been planted together in the likeness of [Christ's] death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection:

6 Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.

7 For he that is dead is freed from sin.

And in verse 14, he says, "Sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace." That's triumphal language. It describes the Christian life as a life of liberation from sin's bondage and a life of victory over the power of evil.

So how can that be reconciled with Romans 7, just one scant chapter later, where Paul says (vv. 18-19): "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do"?

The history of how this passage has been understood is worth mentioning. During the Reformation, all the great Protestant Reformers were united in saying that this passage in Romans 7 describes the apostle Paul's Christian experience. They had no problem interpreting the passage as a description of the daily battle against sin every Christian must wage. Practically the only commentators who balked at this interpretation were Roman Catholics, because it didn't fit well with their notion of the infallibility of Popes and apostles and saints.

It was not until many years *after* the Reformation, in the wake of perfectionist teachings from people like John Wesley, and later by Charles Finney, that some Protestant commentators began to try to interpret Romans 7 as Paul's description of his pre-Christian state of mind. That began as a novel interpretation, but it has gained popularity over the years along with the rise of deeper-life doctrines and other perfectionist views of sanctification. Recently, it seems, more and more commentators have taken the stance that Romans 7:14-25 could not be descriptive of Paul's experience *after* conversion. In fact, I would guess that the majority of commentaries published in the 20th Century rejected the view that Romans 7:14-25 describes Paul's experience as a mature Christian. And now it is pretty common for commentators to claim that

Romans 7 is Paul's description of his struggle with sin *before* he found Christ. And I'll be honest with you: I think that is a bad trend, and it's both the fruit of bad doctrine and the cause of a lot of unnecessary frustration among Christians struggling to be both holy and authentic. If we understood and embraced the fact that Paul is describing every Christian's struggle with sin, a lot of that frustration could be dealt with.

Now, so that you understand the perspective of people who deny that Romans 7 describes Paul's life as a Christian. here's the gist of their best arguments: They point out that in verses 7-13, Paul makes clear that he is giving a personal testimony about how he came to see his own sin in the light of the law. All the verbs up to verse 14 are in the *past* tense (v. 9): "I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." Therefore, they say, he is giving a testimony about what his life was like before his conversion. One commentary I read even suggested that if verses 14-25 describe the state of a redeemed person, it doesn't really seem to be redemption at all.

Most who take that view will point out that the language of Romans 7 contrasts starkly with the victorious language of Romans 8 (not to mention the verses I already quoted from Romans 6). In fact, most of them argue that if Paul is describing the Christian life in Romans 7, then he contradicts himself. Because in verse 14 of chapter 7, he says, "I am . . . sold under sin"--as if he is describing a state of bondage to sin. But in verses 6-7 of chapter 6 (the passage we just read), he says "that our old man is crucified with [Christ] that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin." How can both passages portray what it means to be a Christian, when they are so different?

Now, again, I am convinced Paul is describing his experience as a Christian in Romans 7. And you'll find that the *best* commentaries on the book of Romans agree. They take the same position all the Reformers took. The experience Paul describes here is the common experience of *all* Christians, and it explains why we cannot do the things we want to do.

Paul *wrote* this passage as a mature apostle. He is describing his experience as a Christian and as an apostle. By the time you get to verse

14, he has switched back to present-tense verbs. Everything in the context suggests he was describing a present-tense struggle. And that is an important fact to realize. If it were possible to attain a state of perpetual spiritual victory where you no longer have to struggle with sin, then surely *Paul*, of all people, would have already attained that higher level, and he would have told us about how to achieve it. But instead, when he came to the point of describing his own struggle with sin, he described it as a frustrating and never-ending warfare.

The truth is that no spiritual experience will ever catapult us to a such a high spiritual plane that we will never be tempted again. Let me give you two bits of advice that arise out of this chapter:

First, if you think you have attained a degree of perfection where you are living above sin, then you ave a deficient view of sin, a lack of appreciation for your own fallenness and fleshly infirmities, and too high an opinion of yourself--and you need to be broken and humbled. If you're a *true believer* with that kind of lax attitude toward sin and low view of perfection, I'm warning you: God will humble you. "let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Second, *if you are looking for a powerful experience that will launch you into a state of perfect sanctification where you will no longer be tempted by your favorite sins, then you are looking for something Scripture does not promise.* The Christian life is a constant war against sin, and each battle must be fought with diligence and persistence. Victory almost never comes easily. In fact, those who are looking for a life of ease will fail in the struggle against sin.

Here is why you cannot live your life on a plane that keeps you perpetually free from sin and temptation, no matter how much will-power or determination you think you have.

Look at the passage. This is how Paul described his own struggle with sin. As I read, listen carefully, and ask yourself if it doesn't describe your own present struggle with sin. Nothing Paul describes here is foreign to the Christian experience we all share. I wish it were not so. *Paul* wished it were not so. But he described his own struggle with stark honesty, and these are words every true and honest Christian could use to describe the daily struggle we all face against sin.

I'm going to read verses 14-25, and as I read, ask yourself if this is not a perfect description of your own daily battle against sin:

14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.

15 For that which I do I allow not [I do not understand]: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.

16 If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good.

17 Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.

18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.

19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.

20 Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.

21 I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.

22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:

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.

24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

25 I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

There are several reasons I think the context makes it perfectly clear that Paul is writing as a Christian, describing the struggle he faced even as a mature apostle. Again, notice that throughout the section I just read, he uses present-tense verbs. It's true that in the section leading up to this passage, he used past-tense verbs, because he was describing how he came to grips with the fact that the law could not save him. The law exposed his sin, and even provoked him to more sin--and it made sin appear exceedingly sinful. But the law itself offered no *remedy* for sin. The remedy for sin, Paul found in Christ. Through Christ, he found forgiveness, and freedom from sin's condemnation, *but not a full and immediate victory over the fact of sin--and certainly not an easy victory over the power of sin in his life.* Therefore, beginning in verse 14, he

switches to the present tense, and everything here indicates that he is giving a testimony of what he was going through at the stage of life when he was writing these words. In other words, he didn't speak of his struggle with sin as something in the past; he described it as a present reality--something he grappled with daily until the day he died.

Here's another reason I am convinced he was speaking of his Christian experience: He says in verse 22, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man." And in verse 25, he says, "with the mind I myself serve the law of God." He could not have said that as an unredeemed man. Even Saul of Tarsus, whose whole life consisted in a slavish devotion to the ceremonies and outward elements of the rabbinical traditions, could not have honestly said that he delighted in the law of God in his inward man. Because like most of the Pharisees, he had "made the commandment of God of none effect by . . . [human] tradition"--as Jesus said in Matthew 15:6. He was following a system of ceremonies and requirements that made an outward show of righteousness, but which actually reflected a degree of contempt for the moral meaning of the law. In other words, Saul of Tarsus was a hypocrite, a whitewashed sepulchre, whose obedience to the law was primarily an external matter, done for show, to receive the respect and honor of men--not really to please God.

But here Paul says he "delight[ed] in the law of God after the inward man." He had come to see the true meaning of the law and his heart embraced its moral teachings. He "consent[ed] unto the law that it is good" (v. 16). He loved God's law, in the true sense David spoke about in the Psalms. This can only be true of a redeemed person, and Paul himself says so in Romans 8:7: "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be."

So Paul now had a *mind* that was subject to the law of God. The problem was in his will and his flesh and his behavior. And as he describes his struggle with sin, he tells us why all of us, even as Christians, still find it difficult to do what we want to do. And he gives us three reasons why we so often do the very things we hate. I'll give them to you as we go, if you want to take them down. Here is why you find the struggle with sin so difficult:

1. YOUR DESIRES ARE CONFLICTED

There is a conflict within each Christian, and this conflict will continue until we are finally glorified. It is part of the curse of sin. It is a curse to which all creation has been subjected. A chapter later, in Romans 8:20, Paul says that all creation "was made subject to vanity"--cursed with futility. In 8:21, he refers to our predicament under the curse as "the bondage of corruption." And we won't be fully released from that state of corruption until our bodies are finally redeemed and we are fully glorified. Therefore he says all creation groans, and in 8:23 he says that even believers, we who "have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body."

For now, while we live on this sin-cursed earth, there is a remnant of sinful corruption--a *principle* of sin--that still indwells us. Our redemption, though certain, is not yet fully complete.

Now, there is a difference of opinion among theologians and Bible teachers about what this means. Some claim it means each believer has two natures. We know that *Christ* has two natures. He is both fully human and fully divine. And some see a kind of parallel with Christians in their unglorified state. They say we also have two natures--one a sin-nature, and the other a pure, sinless, new nature. They see the Christian as a kind of spiritual schizophrenic, whose old nature fights against his new nature. And they believe that is what Paul is describing here. That is the view that is taught in the notes of the Scofield Reference Bible. That is also how the great Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon interpreted this passage. He believed each Christian has two fully active natures, one good, one evil--the old man and the new man.

I don't often disagree with Spurgeon, but I think he was wrong on this point. Scripture doesn't speak of two natures in the Christian. When the apostle Paul speaks of the old man and the new man, nowhere does he suggest that we have a new person added to our old person. He says we *are* new men and women--new creations. Second Corinthians 5:17: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." And look at Romans 6:6 again: "our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed." The old nature is crucified, nailed to the cross. Its doom is sealed, so "that henceforth we

should not serve sin." You don't *have* a new creature inhabiting you; you *are* a new creature. If you are redeemed, you *are* a new person, with godly desires and a whole new godly nature that replaces the old one. The old nature is as good as dead, nailed to the cross. Its dominance is broken; its utter destruction is guaranteed. That is no longer your true nature. In no way does sin define who you really are any more.

That's what Paul means in verse 17, when he says, "Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me." He is not shirking responsibility for his sin, and he is not saying that the sin doesn't matter. He simply means that sin doesn't reflect the real Paul. Sin no longer defines who he is. Sin is now an interloper, a trespasser in his life. The real Paul is reflected in the heart that loves the law of God. The old man is crucified, that the body of sin might be destroyed.

And yet, it does often seem as if our old, sinful self, even in its death throes, is trying to get down from the cross and regain mastery over our lives. Our sinful habits; our old desires; our old ways of thinking--all of these still fight to regain power over us. It *does* sometimes feel as if we had a split personality, a schizophrenic psyche, vying for control of our hearts. It *does* sometimes feel as if we were still in bondage to sin and helpless against sin's power.

But the apostle Paul explicitly commands us not to think that way. He says we are to reckon ourselves "to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:11). We are not to let sin "reign in [our] mortal bod[ies], that [we] should obey it in the lusts thereof" (v. 12). We are not supposed to yield our "members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God" (v. 13). And he promises in Romans 6:14, "sin shall not have dominion over you."

So what makes us susceptible to sin, then? Here in Romans 7, Paul says there is a principle of sin still at work in us. A remnant of our sinfulness still remains with us. It's as if the rotting corpse of our old man were still strapped to our backs, spreading its corruption and decay, hindering us from enjoying the new life of the new creation--constantly spoiling the freshness of the new life with the decay and the stench of the old life.

And here is how Paul describes our task as believers in Ephesians 4:22-24: "That ye put off . . . the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness."

The new man--the real you that has been redeemed and remade in the image of Christ--is a *spiritual* person. The old man--that crucified, doomed, corrupt, being that you used to be--is just a *fleshly* corpse. And we need to be putting off the old and putting on the new.

Scripture often makes this contrast between that which is fleshly and that which is spiritual. We saw it when we studied Galatians 5:17-25. In fact, Galatians 5:17 is an exact parallel to Romans 7. Here's another reason we know Romans 7 describes Paul's struggle as a believer. This is precisely what he told the Galatian believers their spiritual warfare would be like. Galatians 5:17: "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would." That is the very message of Romans 7: "[We] cannot do the things that [we] would [like to do]." And Paul goes on in Galatians 5 to contrast the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. So there's this dichotomy between flesh and spirit--and it is a theme that runs all through the New Testament.

Now instantly some of you will be tempted to think of this as a dualism between spirit and matter, as if that which is physical and tangible is evil, and that which is spiritual and intangible is good. That is what the Gnostic heretics taught--that matter is evil and spirit is good. But that is not what Paul is teaching. It's not a contrast between *matter* and *spirit*. When he speaks of "the flesh," he has in mind something far more comprehensive than just the physical body. "The flesh" is not a reference to your physical body.

In fact, in Galatians 5, when he lists the works of the flesh, he includes things like hatred, wrath, and envy. These are sins that take place in the mind, not the body. They are immaterial and invisible, but they are not *spiritual*, in the sense Paul is speaking of spiritual things. So the flesh, if you want a short definition of it, is everything about you that pertains to your fallen humanity--including evil lusts, wicked thoughts and imaginations, and sinful desires. Those are all things that pertain to the flesh, and the flesh, therefore, is something more than just your physical body.

Furthermore, the spiritual new creation will eventually have a body that is tangible, corporeal, and visible, just like Christ's resurrection body. Philippians 3:21 says Christ "shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his

glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself."

So don't get the notion that evil is everything tangible and material, or that good is everything intangible and invisible. That is what the gnostics taught, but Scripture says that is heresy.

The expression "the flesh" is Paul's shorthand to represent everything fallen humanity became when Adam sinned: corruptible, perverted, evil, sin-stained, and subject to decay and defilement.

Rather than thinking of the flesh as your physical body, you ought to think of it as a principle, a law that works in you like a spiritual law of gravity--something that pulls you down; something that keeps making you fall; something that holds you to this world when you wish you could soar into heaven.

That is exactly how Paul describes it here in Romans 7. Look at verse 21: "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me." And in verse 23, he describes it as a "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."

God's law, he says in verse 14, "is spiritual"--in other words, to borrow the parallelism from verse 12, "the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good." That is exactly what he means when he says the law is spiritual. Again, he is not setting up any kind of dualism between matter and spirit. "The law is spiritual" (it is "holy, and just, and good.") "but I am carnal, sold under sin." I was born in sin, and though I am redeemed from the penalty and the *absolute* power of sin, I still retain remnants of my fallenness. My body is not yet redeemed. All my sinful habits are not yet broken. And sin still fights for my affections and appeals to my desires. That's what Paul means when he speaks of "the flesh."

But notice, Paul is not suggesting that life for the Christian is the same as it is for the unbeliever. He's describing an ongoing conflict, a struggle. And this is a struggle that does not take place in the mind and heart of the unbeliever. Paul says he *hates* sin (v. 15). In his heart of hearts, he loves God's law and desires to obey it. This is a warfare he constantly wages. There is no suggestion here that he is prepared to give up the struggle. If someone reads this passage and imagines that it means we might as well give up the struggle because we can never be

sinless anyway, then you don't understand the message. If someone thinks Paul is saying it's OK to surrender to sin and accept a life of defeat or to tolerate a measure of sin in our lives because, after all we are not glorified yet--then you are missing Paul's point.

Paul was not saying that he was constantly defeated, and he was not teaching that the struggle against sin is hopeless. He was merely acknowledging that his struggle against sin had not yet ended. He had not attained a plateau where he was free from temptation. He had not reached a state of perfection where he could claim to be sin-free. But he was not about to give up the fight. In Philippians 3:12, he writes, "[It is] not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

That is the heart of the true Christian. If you think the reality of indwelling sin means you can accept sin in your life--if you have given up the warfare against your old desires and habits--then you need to examine yourself to see whether you really are in the faith.

Because the defining mark of the true Christian is what Paul says in Romans 7:22: "I delight in the law of God after the inward man." The true Christian may *struggle* with sin, but he *hates* his sin and continues the warfare against it, no matter how discouraging and disheartening the warfare becomes. Sin may trip him up or knock him down. It will *never* give up seeking mastery over him in this life. But he knows that sin is a defeated enemy. He hates it. And he will not surrender to sin's dominion. That is precisely what Paul means in Romans 6:14 when he says, "sin shall not have dominion over you."

And that brings us to a second lesson we can glean from this chapter. Here is a second reason you find it difficult to overcome sin:

2. YOUR WILL IS DYSFUNCTIONAL

No Christian ever ought to put an ounce of faith in human will-power. Scripture makes it abundantly clear in the first place that salvation from sin is not a matter of human will-power or human free will. According to John 1:13, those who receive Christ and are born again "were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

There is no power in the human will. Even the *redeemed* will is crippled by the taint of indwelling sin. And Paul is describing that very situation in verse 18, when he writes, "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not." He is saying that he cannot, by sheer force of his will, make himself do right. There is a conflict in his will. As a believer, he loves the law of God and wants to obey it. But he cannot obey it consistently, because his flesh is driven by contrary desires, selfish cravings, and ungodly lusts. "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would."

One thing almost all false religions have in common is that they try to glorify the human will. Most religions virtually make the human will an object of worship. The only power they really put their trust in is sheer will-power. And that is why manmade religions are so prone to asceticism, self-discipline, self-improvement, and legalistic rules. In fact, in Colossians 2, the apostle Paul describes that form of religion as "will worship." In Colossians 2:20-23, he says such people are "subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a show of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; [but are of no real value in restraining the indulgence] of the flesh." If you're reading from a modern translation, most of them translate that expression as "self-imposed religion," and that is certainly part of the idea Paul means to convey. But the Greek term he uses is *ethelothreskeia* (eth el o THRES kaya), and it literally means "will-worship." It speaks of religion that magnifies man's will rather than God's will--first by substituting self-imposed rules for God's commands, but also by teaching people that righteousness is the result of human willpower. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Unfortunately, even among some Christians, there is a tendency to give too much credit to the human will, and to place too much emphasis on human will-power when it comes to the battle we wage against sin. Arminian theology has at its heart a motive to magnify the importance of the human will, and as a result, Arminianism exaggerates the value of

human will-power. That is one of my chief complaints against the theology of Charles Finney and those who have followed in his steps.

There's a Web site that perfectly epitomizes this error. The address, if you want to see it for yourself, is www.stopsinners.net. The message of the Web site is perfectly summed up in the domain name: Stop sinning. If you want to be holy, according to the fellow who maintains this Web site, all you have to do is *stop sinning*. He claims that this is perfectly obvious. Let me quote you a section from one of his pages. He says, "No limit can be put on the degree of perfection attainable in this life. . . . Clearly the only limitation as to how holy you can be is that which you impose by your own free will. . . . It has pleased God to give us free will, and also to provide for us a way of escape in every temptation. But it doesn't please Him when you misuse your freedom." So his answer to the problem of sin for the Christian is sheer willpower. That is precisely what this man's spiritual mentor, Charles Finney, taught.

But it is *not* what the apostle Paul taught. Paul testified that even late in his Christian experience, long after he had distinguished himself as one of the chief apostles, his will was dysfunctional. He could not do what he wished. Even when the will to do good was present with him, *how* to perform that which is good was elusive. The principle of sin was still at work in him, and his own free will, with all the will-power he could muster, was not potent enough to overcome it.

And that brings us to a third lesson we can glean from this passage. We have already referred to it. But here is a third reason you cannot be completely rid of sin in this life, and you cannot always do what you resolve to do:

3. YOUR FLESH IS CORRUPTED

Paul writes in verse 18: "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing." In verse 21, he says, "I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me." He speaks of sin as a reality that clings to him, and indwells him, so that he is never free of it as long as he inhabits an unglorified body of flesh. Earlier I compared it to being strapped to a rotting corpse, and that is exactly the imagery Paul seems to have in mind here.

In some ancient cultures, a murderer would be punished by having the body of his victim lashed permanently to his body. It was a slow and agonizing death sentence. As the corpse decayed and putrefied, its corruption would infect the body of the murderer, eventually causing him to die, too.

That is the very picture Paul paints of the flesh. It is decayed and rotting, and its corruption is a constant threat. That is why the only answer, and the only way for a Christian to grow in sanctification, is to put off the old man and to put on the new.

And that is exactly what Paul had in mind when he wrote the famous words of verse 24: "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

Now again, a lot of Christians recoil at this language. How can a true believer and a redeemed man see himself as wretched? How can someone who is set free from sin's absolute dominion, loosed from sin's ultimate condemnation--a new creature in Christ--regard himself as wretched? People even here in GraceLife sometimes ask me similar questions. In the past when I have quoted Jeremiah 17:9 ("The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked") people have asked me how that verse can apply to a Christian. After all, God has removed the stony, hard heart and given us tender hearts of flesh, with new desires and a new love for righteousness. Are we still subject to the deceitfulness of sin?

And the answer is yes. There's a sense in which we are still burdened with the wretchedness of our own sin. Although we are fully justified, and Christ's perfect righteousness has been imputed to us, we are far from perfectly righteous in the practical sense. And that is what Paul is describing here.

It is the same thing Job spoke of--perhaps the most righteous man who ever lived on earth. And yet at the end of his ordeal, when he saw God and understood better his own fallenness, Scripture says in Job 40:3-4, "Then Job answered the LORD, and said, Behold, I am vile." He said in Job 42:6, "I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."

David, a man after God's own heart, testified that he was "shapen in iniquity." Isaiah, the great prophet, said, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because

I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." And here even the apostle Paul described himself as a wretched man.

A. W. Pink wrote, "This moan, 'O wretched man that I am,' expresses the normal experience of the Christian, and any Christian who does not so moan is in an abnormal and unhealthy state spiritually. The man who does not utter this cry daily is either so out of communion with Christ, or so ignorant of the teaching of Scripture, or so deceived about his actual condition, that he knows not the corruptions of his own heart and the abject failure of his own life.

"The one who bows to the solemn and searching teaching of God's Word, the one who there learns the awful wreckage which sin has wrought in the human constitution, the one who sees the exalted standard of holiness which God has set before us, cannot fail to discover what a vile wretch he is. If he is given to behold how far short he falls of attaining to God's standard; if, in the light of the divine sanctuary, he discovers how little he resembles the Christ of God; then will he find this language most suited to express his godly sorrow."

Is there a remedy for all of this? There is, and it drives us back to the realization that the only remedy for any sin is Christ. Paul recognizes this, and that is why immediately after calling himself a wretch, he writes, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." And then he goes on to describe in Romans 8 how through justification Christ has already freed us from the *condemnation* of sin, and how through glorification he will ultimately deliver us from every taint of sin.

Until that day, we groan along with the rest of creation. But thank God it is not a hopeless groaning. The process of sanctification takes place daily in spite of our failures as we confess our sin, learn to hate and forsake it, and God by His grace conforms us to the image of His own dear Son.

That is the goal toward which we keep pressing. That is the prize of our high calling. That is what every genuine Christian pursues daily, and it is the promise that keeps us from giving up in discouragement as we wage war against the flesh and its corruption.

So if you are frustrated by the struggle with sin in your life, don't despair and don't give up the fight. But learn to depend on God's grace and his power rather than on your own will-power and determination.

Will-power and self-determination are, at the end of the day, fleshly and therefore sinful. But we who believe in Christ are His true people, who "worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh."