

Romans: The Good News of God

The War Within

Romans 7:21-25

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June 8, 2008

The War Within

Scripture

The second half of Romans 7 is one of the most difficult sections in the entire Bible to understand. Last week I drew your attention to Romans 7:14-20. In that section I showed you that Paul is talking of himself as a growing, maturing Christian struggling with sin. In our study today, Paul continues with that same theme.

So, let us read Romans 7:21-25:

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. (Romans 7:21-25)

Introduction

Dr. Ligon Duncan, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, MS, and also a professor at Reformed Theological Seminary, tells the story of a famous and godly man who climbed up the steps to the pulpit of a Bible College chapel. He began to preach a sermon in which he promoted to the students the view that Christians ought to live a higher life, a victorious life, in which they got victory over sin, which set them free from conscious sin.

In the course of his sermon, he said to this gathered assembly of students, “I have not sinned in three years.”

In the group of the people attending that particular chapel were two young students. They had just been married for about a year. They had met at the Bible College. They were both commit-

ted to the Lord. They both wanted to go into missions. Both of them had come to that desire before they ever met one another.

But like many Christians, they were struggling with sin—sin from their past, sin that was impacting their relationship and giving them enormous struggles.

As they sat there and heard this man say that he had not sinned in three years, they heard him go on to say this, “And if you’re still struggling with sin, it is because you don’t have enough faith. If you only had enough faith, you would have victory over sin, and you could live the higher life, the blessed life, and experience perfect love.”

They asked some friends who heard the same message, “Have you experienced this higher life? Have you found victory over sin?”

“Oh, yes,” they were assured by their friends around them.

So they began to wonder, “Is there something wrong with us? Are we the only people struggling on this mundane plane with sin? Have we failed to achieve the higher life—just because of a lack of faith?”

That is the impression they got from the preacher and from their classmates.

After Bible College, the couple went to Reformed Theological Seminary under enormous emotional and psychological pressure from the sense that they were somehow failing God, because they were continuing to struggle with sin in their lives.

While at Seminary, however, they were greatly relieved to find that the teaching they had heard was not in accord with the Scriptures, and that the Scriptures’ teaching actually liberated them from their false guilt in order to deal with the real guilt with which they needed to deal.

And so, I hope you can see how an understanding of the ongoing struggle with sin in the Christian’s life is far from an academic question. We are not going off to the Ivory Tower of the theologians today to dabble in theological mumbo jumbo. Today’s teaching is something that hits all of us where we are everyday.

Lesson

To that end, then, I want to suggest five practical implications of what Paul is saying in Romans 7:21-25. Now you will need to keep your Bibles handy, because we're going to rub our noses right back in the text of Scripture so that you will be certain that what I am saying is actually what Paul is saying. But my concern is to drive home these very practical truths.

I. Christians Still Sin (7:21, 23, 24, 25)

The first practical truth is this: Christians still sin.

It is fascinating to note that Paul says or implies that Christians still sin in *every* verse from verse 13 through verse 25, except in verse 22. Let me simply draw your attention to what he says in the section before us.

Paul says in verse 21, **“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.”**

In verse 23 he says, **“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.”**

In verse 24 Paul says, **“Who will deliver me from this body of death?”**

And in verse 25 Paul says, **“So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.”**

Over and over again, Paul, the mature, godly, believing apostle indicates that he still sins.

Now he tells you this not because it is just an interesting biographical highlight or side note in his own experience. He tells you this because this is the experience of *every* Christian.

Paul is not describing for us here someone who is talking about what they were like before they were converted. He's not describing someone who is under conviction of sin and is almost ready to be converted. He's not describing a Christian who has ne-

glected the means of grace for years and is in a deep trough of back-slidness.

He is describing the experience of *every* godly, growing, maturing Christian.

We saw this truth last week. Paul speaks in present-tense verbs. He says things about the law of God that only a Christian could say, and indeed, he indicates that the law of God has a certain role and relationship to his heart that can only be said to be that of a Christian. That's the kind of person who is speaking in Romans 7, and yet in every verse, except verse 22, he stresses that Christians still sin.

That is vitally important for us to hear. And in an ironic way, it's so encouraging. One of the first things that a Christian struggles with—upon reflection on the transforming work of God's grace in him—is this: “How in the world could God have done a work of grace in me, and I still sin? How can I be a new creation in Christ, and yet I find myself sometimes trapped, sometimes feeling as if I will never be able to break out of the patterns and habits of sin? And I wonder whether I'm a Christian, since I'm struggling against this particular sin?”

How many times have pastors had people come into their studies and say, “I'm struggling with sin; I wonder if I'm even a Christian”? And here's the apostle Paul, over and over again, slamming home this truth. Christians still sin.

It is part and parcel of our ongoing Christian experience. Continuing sin is not necessarily a sign that we are not Christians.

Now, of course, there can be moral states that would indeed give us a hint that a person has not experienced God's grace. But Paul here is indicating something very important for us, and that is this: The battle between the Spirit and sin does not cease at conversion; rather, it begins at conversion. The first time a Christian really begins to battle against sin is when the Holy Spirit has united him to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith. And so we should expect this to be an ongoing reality.

J. I. Packer struggled with this as a young man. He grew up

under perfectionist teaching, and he couldn't make it work. He was a concerned young man. And then, because he was an avid reader, he happened to come across the sixth and the seventh volumes of John Owen's works, and a book by J. C. Ryle called *Holiness*. And in that book on holiness, Ryle opens with this sentence: "He that wishes to attain right views about Christian holiness must begin by examining the vast and solemn subject of sin."¹

Now, I doubt that there is an editor today who would let that sentence get by as the first sentence of a book. But that's the first sentence of Ryle's book, and he points you right back to the issue of sin *before* you can advance in holiness.

And that is precisely what Paul is doing in this great passage. The very fact of continuing sin also reminds us that our Christian experience is an ongoing process of repentance. Repentance isn't something that we do once at the beginning of our Christian lives, and then we're done with that, and we move on.

Christian relationships will be characterized frequently by repentance when we realize that we have done something wrong. If we continue to sin, then asking forgiveness of one another is going to be a part of our relationship. It is going to be a part of our ongoing Christian experience, because we are not perfected at conversion. We're starting a journey.

Christian growth in grace is not characterized by perfection, but it is characterized by a steady growth in holiness.

Augustine once said, "The church is not a place where the perfect dwell but, rather, a hospital where sick sinners get well."

And that is precisely what Paul is pointing us to here when he reminds us that Christians still sin. That's the first practical implication in this great passage that I'd like you to see.

II. Christians Hate to Sin (7:24)

Second, Christians hate to sin.

¹ J. C. Ryle, *Holiness: Its nature, hindrances, difficulties, and roots* (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1979), 1.

The fact that Christians still sin is not the whole story. In some quarters, that's the only story you get. Paul makes it clear that though Christians still sin, that is not the whole story. They hate to sin. He makes this clear in verse 24, where he exclaims, **“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”**

We see this truth even more clearly in verse 15, where Paul says, “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, *but I do the very thing I hate.*” Christians still sin. Sure, but they hate it.

Christians can never be complacent in sin. And the very fact that God is doing a work of growth in grace in us makes it impossible for us to be complacent and shrug off sin, and say, “Oh well, that's no big deal, it's a sin.”

Anselm once said, “If you placed sin before me, and hell before me, I would sooner plunge myself into hell rather than to sin against my God.”

That's the Christian's attitude about sin. He never shrugs off sin and says, “Oh, it's no big deal.”

The Christian is serious about sin. He knows that he sins. But he hates it. That's a mark of the change that God has worked in our lives.

III. Christians Long to Obey the Law (7:22)

Third, Christians long to obey the law of God.

Paul says in verse 22: **“For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being.”**

Modern teaching on grace often misses this point. Many times, if you say, “Well, I love the law of God, and I desire to be conformed to it,” you are immediately accused of works righteousness.

“Oh, you've got to get done with the law, and you've got to move on to grace,” these modern preachers say.

“Oh, no, no, no.” Paul says, “I love the law.” That is the

normal attitude of the Christian toward the law of God.

And so teaching which says that the Christian, in order to mature, must not care about the law is not what Paul is saying in Romans 7. Paul is not saying that the Christian is lackadaisical about the law. The Christian, in fact, loves the law and desires to be conformed to it.

Now, it is very important to note that the Christian doesn't look to the law to bring about his transformation. No. He looks to Jesus Christ. He asks for grace. He relies on the work of the Holy Spirit in him. But what does he desire to be conformed to? God in his image. And what does the law reflect? God in his image.

And so the Christian longs to be conformed to the law and to obey it.

IV. The Christian Life Is Characterized by Struggle (7:23)

Fourth, the Christian life is characterized by struggle.

Notice how Paul indicates this in verse 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.”**

Paul indicates that the Christian life is characterized by a struggle. Again, that is so encouraging because pastors have people who show up in their studies and say, “I've got this struggle with sin in my life, and I wonder if that means that I'm not a Christian.”

Now usually the response of the pastor to that is this, “The fact that you are struggling with sin is not a sign of spiritual deadness. It's in fact a sign of spiritual life. If you were spiritually dead, do you think that sin or Satan would be prompting you to be miserable in sin and to war against it? But if you are spiritually alive, don't you think the Holy Spirit would be conducting an aggressive, offensive campaign against that sin? And that sin would be counter-attacking all along the way? The very fact that you're struggling is a sign of grace. The fact that you're struggling is a sign of life. Only a live man can struggle. Dead men just lie there,

there's no struggle. When you have peace in sin, and peace with sin, you've got death. But the Holy Spirit won't let you have peace in sin and with sin. He wars against sin, and, therefore, the normal state of the Christian life is one of struggle."

I read a story about a farmer that illustrates this particular problem in the Christian's experience. He was a hard man. He was hard on his employees. He was abusive of his domestic animals. He had a foul mouth, and used that foul mouth all the time in his conversation.

But, at some point, he was converted to Christ.

After his conversion, there was a dramatic change. His language cleaned up. His behavior cleaned up. He became loving toward his wife and family. He became fair and equitable with his employees. He even treated his animals differently.

One day several months after his conversion, he became angry and frustrated about something while working. He began to fall back into his old patterns. He was cursing, and he was dealing harshly with some of his employees, and was, in fact, even abusing the animals.

However, he caught himself in the midst of this, and he was absolutely crushed, and he ran from the barnyard. He made his way into the farmhouse kitchen, he threw himself onto the kitchen table, and he began to convulse in tears.

His wife was at the kitchen sink and asked, "What's the matter?"

And he responded, "I'm no different than I used to be."

She smiled and said, "Oh my dear, there is all the difference between you now and then. Then, you never would have been sorry for what you had done. Then, you would never have even thought that you had done anything wrong. And you certainly wouldn't be contrite about what you had done. Oh, I see every sign that the Holy Spirit is working in you."

It's not that he was perfect. It's that he couldn't be happy in a state of rebellion against God. He longed to be right with God, and when he wasn't, he was miserable, he was wretched in it. And that

is a sign of grace. And it illustrates the truth that the Christian life is characterized by a struggle.

So, Paul teaches us that Christians still sin. But Christians hate to sin. In fact, they long to obey the law of God. And they find that the Christian life is characterized by a struggle. Is there any hope then for the Christian over his or her sin? This brings us to our final point.

V. Jesus Christ is Our Victory Over Sin (7:25)

Finally, Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is our victory over sin.

In verse 24 he cries out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

And the glorious good news is in verse 25: **“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”**

By his death on the cross, Jesus won our victory over sin. He paid the penalty—in full!—for all of our sin on the cross.

One day, when we see him face to face, we shall finally be delivered from the presence of sin in our lives. Until then, however, sin is still present in our lives. But Jesus Christ, by his death on the cross, has even broken the power of sin in our lives.

Victory is ours. The triumph of grace is assured, regardless of how badly we may think we are doing now or how near despair we may be due to the intensity or duration of the struggle. It is the very knowledge of Christ’s victory over sin that enables us to struggle on.

When the armies of Oliver Cromwell were winning battle after battle in the English Civil War, it was said of them that they could not lose because they knew, even before they started to fight, that God had given them the victory.

I do not know how true that was of Cromwell’s army. There were Christians on both sides of that conflict, and Cromwell’s cause was not entirely free of wrong motives.

But whatever the case with Cromwell’s soldiers in those very human battles, the principle does hold true for us, the soldiers of

Jesus Christ who are engaged in fierce spiritual warfare against sin.

Apart from Jesus, not one of us can prevail for even a moment. But united to Jesus by faith in him, we not only *can* prevail—we *will* prevail. The Bible promises us that “he who began a good work in [us] will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

Conclusion

So, let us remember these five very practical truths.

Christians still sin. But Christians hate it. In fact, Christians long to obey God’s law. So, the Christian life is characterized by a struggle. And finally, Jesus alone is our victory over sin.

“Therefore,” as the author of Hebrews tells us, “since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted” (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Friends, the Christian life is not easy. No responsible person ever said it was. It is a battle all the way. But it is a battle that has been won for us by Jesus Christ our Lord!

John Newton, the former slave trader who wrote “Amazing Grace,” died at the age of 82. Shortly before his death he is quoted as proclaiming, “My memory is nearly gone, but I remember two things: That I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great Savior!”²

And as we look to him, we who have triumphed will cast our crowns at the feet of the Lord Jesus Christ who worked in us to accomplish the victory, and we will praise him for ever and ever. Amen.

² Kenneth W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace: 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1990), 170.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

From Ray Ortlund's, *A Passion for God*:

O Lord, your gospel is true to life. It reads us as much as we read it. How lofty, how grand, how noble are our intentions!

But how ugly, how squalid, how embarrassing are our actions!

We see your law for the holy thing it is.

And we see ourselves, in our imaginations, riding off on our white chargers to do battle against sin. But so often, we are defeated and shamed and seen to be the fools we are.

In this ongoing encounter between your law and our sinfulness, we are learning one simple truth: we really are sinners, and we really hate it, and we really need you to be our Savior.

Draw near to us now, dear Lord. Nurture within us an undying persistent, rugged love for you that will fight on through the warfare of this life, never giving up and never giving in, but striving on for the holiness you have promised to perfect in us in heaven. Keep your bright promises before us, dear Lord, especially when we fall defeated in sin.

And all of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.