

“OUR INTERNAL, ONGOING BATTLE WITH SIN.”

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Scripture Texts: Romans 7:13-25

Introduction.

These verses give the reason I am not a golfer. All golfers know that what you want to do, you do not do, and what you do not want to do, that is the very thing you do.

If you asked 100 biblical scholars to list the ten hardest to understand or most controversial chapters in the Bible, it is almost certain Romans 7 would be on most of their lists, and there would be much disagreement. I asked ChatGPT that question and sure enough Romans 7 made the list.

Peter said there are some things in Paul’s writings “that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction” (II Peter 3:16).

The debate is over whether this is Paul talking about his pre-Christian life or his post-Christian life, earthly Paul or heavenly Paul, sinner Paul or saint Paul.

I believe this passage bears all the marks of being post-Christian Paul. It is written in first person singular, present tense. He hates his sin, he is humble about it, he says he delights in the law in his inner being (vs. 22) and desires to please God, to do what God wants, all of these are marks of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s description of his struggle with sin in Romans 7:14-25 is nowhere found in his pre-conversion testimony. Philippians 3:4-6 does not indicate Paul wrestled with or agonized over his sin like he does in Romans 7:14-25, nor do the personal narratives he offered in Acts 24:1-27 and Acts 26:1-32 indicate Paul was deeply troubled over his sin prior to his conversion to Christ (Derek J. Brown).

Those who say this is pre-Christian Paul do so because he describes himself as sold under sin (vs. 14) when in the previous chapter he said Christians are not slaves to sin, but slaves to Christ. And he says there is no good in him, that sin lives in him and evil is right there with him.

What does Paul mean when he says he is sold under sin?

Romans 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

The best interpreter of Paul is Paul, so let's let Paul help us understand what he means.

These are not the same words he uses to describe a soul sold in slavery and bondage to sin. These are not the words of a Romans 1 man who has "became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened, claiming to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:21-22).

By birth and by nature we are sinners, we are addicted to sin, we sin freely, of our own will. We cannot do otherwise, the power of sin holds sway and mastery over us. We who are slaves to sin obey sin.

When Paul speaks of being sold under sin, he is speaking of his flesh, not of his whole being. The law lives in his spirit, but not in his flesh.

Paul says the same thing in Galatians:

Galatians 5:17 The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

Regenerate Christians are of two natures, one that delights in God and His Word, and one that wages war against God and His Word.

Before the Spirit comes in there is no struggle, no battle, just temptation and surrender, just doing whatever we want. When the Spirit comes in, the battle is engaged, the Spirit gives new desires, new courage and new strength. The struggle is the sign of new life, of spiritual life, a sign of the grace of God.

Paul is saying "I am redeemed, I am saved, I am born again, I love Jesus and am a slave to Christ, but I have this body that is indwelt by sin. Becoming a Christian doesn't make me perfect, just a redeemed sinner in a lifelong battle with sin all the way to the end."

When Paul says he is of the flesh, sold under sin, he is describing what the law does to him. The law gives us knowledge of the sin that still remains in us. When we look at our lives through the window of the law we always find we have done less than the good that we wanted to do. We see there is still sin in us and that sin is still taking us captive to its own desires.

What so deeply troubles Paul and makes him so miserable is the knowledge he cannot hope to get rid of all his indwelling sin as long as he remains in this body of flesh.

The final reason for understanding this as Christian Paul is because this is every Christian's testimony.

These are the words of a soul in a pitched battle for righteousness and sanctification who is hating his indwelling sin that continues to hound him. These are the words of a soul who knows the law that has enlightened him to the weight and depth of his sins, like the sin of covetousness. This is a soul full of the Holy Spirit who is sanctifying him by exposing the sin of his flesh that still clings so tightly. These are the words of a man who knows he has not arrived, but is pressing on in the struggle to gain the upward calling of Christ.

These are the words of a mature Christian who is honestly confessing what the Christian battle with sin is like. This is the agony of a born-again, spiritually minded saint sold under sin, who is divided between his spirit which belongs to God and his flesh which still serves sin.

These are the words of a man who knows grace, because it is only by grace that we know the law is good, only by grace that we have a sound mind and a clear conscience and hate sin.

These are the words of a regenerate man, a man who is not under bondage to sin, but is under the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit, who is striving for righteousness while fighting against the remnants of sin that still indwells his soul.

These are the words of a man after God's own heart like King David who pleads in earnest prayer, "my sin is ever before me, my soul is greatly troubled, forgive all by sins, my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden, they are too heavy for me, my wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, turn to me and be gracious to me" (various Psalms).

These are the words of the prophet Isaiah who is lifted up to see a vision of the supreme holy God of all creation and cries out "woe is me, I am undone, an unclean man, mindful now more than ever of my sin and sinfulness" (Isaiah 6:5-6).

The true follower of God feels the pain, agony and misery of sin in his own heart and feels he is the worst.

Until you know the depth of your own sin, until you know your temptations and defeats, until you know there is no good in you apart from God, until you know how often you don't do what you want to do and do what you don't want to, until you can say "what I hate, that I do," Romans 7 won't make much sense to you.

It is not one who is a slave to sin who speaks as Paul does. It is the one who *was* a slave to sin and *now is* a slave to Christ, the one who knows the freedom and yet still feels the old bondage, that is the one who cries out, “O, wretched man that I am, how will deliver me?”

This is no young unconverted Jewish Pharisee before his Damascus Road as many commentators like to suggest, this is the aging Paul, the maturing Christian Paul, the Paul who has journeyed in his own self-reflection and self-examination to say

I am least of the apostles.

I am least of the saints, least of the Christians.

I am chief/foremost of sinners.

Paul wants us to see this as a normal part of the Christian life, and not to be surprised by it or discouraged by it. He is saying what every honest, mature, growing Christian says. I do what I don't want to do and I don't do what I want to do. Indwelling sin is the ongoing battle in the life of a Christian.

Why doesn't God take away our love of sin and our habit of sinning at our conversion? Why doesn't God give us the grace to totally defeat sin and win every battle with sin and Satan? Why must we endure this ongoing, internal battle with temptation and sin for our entire lifetime, all the way to the very end?

You know the answer has to have something to do with the wisdom of God and the glory of God, otherwise it wouldn't be this way. But how does this path exalt God's wisdom and magnify His glory and greatness?

God knows a lifetime of daily dealing with our indwelling sin gives us a deeper, truer measure of the awful sinfulness of our sin which leads us to a truer measure of the abounding nature of God's grace.

Every day we prefer Christ over our sin, every day we hate sin and Satan and desire Christ, every day we resist and flee and defeat sin and every day we bear any godly fruit by the Spirit, is a day when Satan loses and Christ wins, when the beauty, worth and value of Jesus is exalted and glorified.

Every sin that looks like another victory for Satan becomes another defeat when I repent and turn to Jesus. Every sin that leads me to Jesus glorifies the Gospel.

Every day of repentance is a bad day for Satan and a good day for Jesus. Every prayer of repentance is a thorn in Satan's side. That we have thousands of those days glorifies God and magnifies our Savior. The greatest sinners have the greatest Savior.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Finally, notice Paul's double response to this great spiritual struggle with sin.

Romans 7:24-25 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?
25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Paul does not let despair or discouragement, discontent or defeat or impatience have the last word. While we are discouraged by our sin and our slow progress in the Gospel, let us never forget the Gospel and how much forgiveness and grace we have already received and continue to receive.

Let us never forget how much protection God gives us, what we have been delivered from, that we already have the first-fruits of the Spirit and God has promised to bring to completion the good work He has begun, making certain the hope of our eternal inheritance.

Romans 8:23 We ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the spiritually bankrupt, blessed are the wretched, blessed are the broken and contrite in heart, blessed are those who trust not in their own righteousness.

Implications and application.

This is a great Father's Day text. This is a great call to all fathers, to all men, to bury their macho pride and set an example like Paul in owning up to our sin, confessing our failures, doubling down in our struggle against our sin.

I need to say a word about this expression "struggle with sin." For too many men, "to struggle" means to fall into a particular sin over and over again without gaining victory. When we talk about struggling with sin it needs to mean we are actively fighting against the temptation to sin so as not to sin in that particular area. Victory follows warfare, there needs to be real fighting. It needs to be life and death, there needs to be blood, there needs to be anguish, "wretched man that I am, who will deliver me?"

If you are honest about yourself, you know the things in your heart, you know there are thoughts, feelings, wishes, likes and dislikes, desires, secret things you try to hide, and some things you cannot hide as hard as you try, you know all the ways you self-sabotage, do that thing you regret over and over, all these things should take you to your knees before the cross of Jesus every day.

The greatest saints, the holiest of men, are the most broken, contrite, humbled, sensitive to sin and the exceeding sinfulness of sin.

The more they hate their sin the more they love God and His grace.

If you could ask Paul, “What are some examples of the types of sins you were thinking about when you wrote about this “struggle”? and then he told you, you might find yourself a bit flummoxed by his answer. You might respond, “Does that even count as sin?” This is because Paul had a much lower tolerance for sin in his life than most of us do; and he had such sensitivity to the Holy Spirit that he quickly dealt with anything that might not please the Lord he loved so much. (Ken Berding).

I love Romans 7. It is a chapter that understands me and gives me hope. It is a lifeline, a way to pray and seek God more earnestly.

Paul wrote this for me. Paul wrote this for those who need the greatest comfort and consolation to not give up the lifelong fight against our worst sins. This is written that through endurance and the comfort of the Scriptures we might have hope (Romans 15:4).

Glory to God that one of the hardest passages in Scripture is in fact the most comforting, helpful, hope filled passages in Scripture for us who walk daily in our flesh on earth.

As long as I am sold under sin, as long as my flesh serves the law of sin while with my mind, I serve the law of God enabled by the Spirit of God, I will read this chapter over and over.

When I look at my sinfulness, my salvation becomes the greatest miracle I have ever seen, greater than the Red Sea, greater than Jonah being swallowed by a whale, greater than the sun standing still.

Thanks be to God that a broken and contrite heart He will not despise.

Thanks be to God that Jesus Christ has secured the victory for us.

Thanks be to God that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Prayer: We are humbled by the war with sin we cannot win.

We are grieved by desires we cannot conquer.

We are confronted by actions we cannot excuse.