

THE BELIEVER AND SIN (PT. 1)
ROMANS 7:14-25

For years, the bumper sticker and slogan, “Visualize World Peace” has been both affirmed and mocked. And while people *want* peace, war is a reality of the world in which we live. I think I mentioned a few weeks ago that historians have compiled lists of all known wars and since the year 3600 B.C. have documented only 292 years of peace, worldwide. During these 5600 years, there have been over 14,300 wars, with 3-2/3 billion people killed. Additionally, since 650 B.C., there have been 1,650 arms races, and all but 16 of those have ended in wars. We want peace, but war is a reality.

And when a sinner comes to trust in Jesus Christ, he similarly often yearns for peace from sin and finds that in many ways his battle with sin actually increases. The fight is harder and longer and deeper than he ever anticipated it could be. We want to assert the motto, “visualize spiritual peace” — visualize a life free of temptation and sin. But it doesn’t exist.

While a believer has been set free from sin and the believer no longer *has* to sin, that does not mean the believer will not sin. And that doesn’t mean that the believer will not have a struggle with sin. The life of a believer is not a life free from all temptation and all struggle with sin. Consider two examples:

- ✓ Our Savior, Jesus Christ, while on this earth faced the same kinds of temptations we did, yet without sin. So Hebrews 4:15 says, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.” That last phrase is important — it means that Satan unleashed all of his guile and animosity and power at Christ in an attempt to get Christ to sin and He did not sin. We might ask, “How much of his power must Satan use to get entice us to sin before we fall?” Might it sometimes take 1% or 2%? Or 5%? Perhaps. But I think most often it is a fraction of a percent. But Christ faced 100% of Satan’s tempting power and did not fail. Here’s the point: if Christ, our Master, faced the fullness of Satan’s onslaught and He faced temptation throughout His life, why do we assume that as His followers we will not also face temptation and the battle with sin throughout our lives?
- ✓ The Bible is full of exhortations and commands that we do not sin, which implies that we are always susceptible to temptation and sin and that the flesh remains with us. Even in the previous chapter Paul said this: “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace” (6:12-14). That he warns his readers to not let sin reign means there is a possibility that sin might reign in their lives.

So the struggle against sin is real. And that is the focus of the passage before us this morning. In one of the most well-known (and most debated) passages in the NT (Romans 7:14-25) Paul says,

As we come to this familiar passage, I want to help us identify whom Paul is talking about when he says, "I" and then I want to identify one lament in the life of the believer. And then next week talk about another lament and the believer's hope and the believer's reality.

Context: Is Paul Talking About an Unbeliever or a Believer?

- ✓ Why Paul might be talking about an unbeliever
- ✓ Why Paul might be talking about a believer
- ✓ Paul is talking about an inability of the Law

1. The Believer's Lament: I DO What I HATE (vv. 14-17)

- ✓ The believer's condition (v. 14)
- ✓ The proof of the believer's condition (vv. 15-16)
- ✓ The source of the believer's condition (v. 17)

2. The Believer's Lament: I DON'T Do What I LOVE (vv. 18-20)

- ✓ The believer's condition (v. 18a)
- ✓ The proof of the believer's condition (vv. 18b-19)
- ✓ The source of the believer's condition (v. 20)

3. The Believer's Hope: JESUS Sets Us FREE (vv. 21-25a)

4. The Believer's Reality: Loving GOD and Battling SIN (v. 25b)

Context: Is Paul Talking About an Unbeliever or a Believer?

- This is not only one of the most well-known passages in the New Testament and Romans, but it is also one of the most debated passages. And the debate centers around the question “Who does Paul mean when he says, “I?” I own a book that addresses only that single question. And I read only a handful of my commentaries on this passage this week because the discussions were so long on this topic (most averaged 5-10 pages on this single question).
 - ✓ There are three main options: Paul is speaking about himself before he trusted in Christ; he is speaking about himself after he trusted in Christ; or he is not speaking about himself but he is speaking of one who has been judged by the Law (either as a believer or unbeliever).
 - ✓ And most of these have further possibilities:
 - He might be speaking about himself as an unbeliever entirely disinterested in God, or he might be speaking about a moralistic unbeliever who is moving towards God.
 - He might be speaking about himself as a very immature believer, or he might be speaking of himself as a mature believer in Christ — this is the story of “every man in Christ.”
 - ✓ In all honesty, there is no clear-cut, definitive answer. There are good reasons for and good reasons against each of these positions. And good, godly men hold different positions on who is being addressed in this passage (so don’t make this a test of orthodoxy).
 - ✓ For the sake of simplicity, I reduced this down to two primary possibilities:
- **Paul might be talking about an unbeliever**
 - ✓ There are many things that Paul says about his condition in this passage that are contrary to what he has just said a believer is in chapter six:
 - Being “under bondage to sin,” v. 14 denotes a kind of rulership of sin that is antithetical to the one who is in Christ and not in Adam (5:20-21; to be “under sin” in 3:9 is to be unregenerate).
 - When he says “sin which dwells in me” (v. 17), he seems again to be speaking about rulership and authority that were removed when Christ saved him (and us).
 - “Nothing good dwells in me” (v. 18) speaks to the depravity of man and his unsaved condition.
 - He uses several more phrases that suggest a man who is in Adam and a man who is not in Christ and even opposed to Christ:
 - ... “the principle of evil is in me” (v. 21)
 - ... “a prisoner of the law of sin” (v. 23)
 - ... “wretched man that I am” (v. 24)
 - ✓ His declaration of gratitude to Christ (v. 25) seems to be a thanksgiving for salvation — it is unlikely that his declaration would be so overt and explosive if he is thinking particularly of sanctification.

- ✓ Similarly, 8:1 seems to indicate a salvation experience that has freed the unbeliever from the bondage to sin.
- ✓ If this is a passage about the believer's life, then why is the Holy Spirit not mentioned? In ch. 8, the Holy Spirit is mentioned 19x; so it appears that Paul is contrasting two kinds of living — life as an unbeliever without the Holy Spirit (7:14-25) and life as a believer with the Holy Spirit (8:1ff).
- ✓ There are a number of reasons to think Paul is thinking about his life before conversion, particularly phrases like, “under bondage to sin,” which is quite compelling. Or...

- **Paul might be talking about a believer**

- ✓ The persistent use of the present tense indicates that this is not what Paul *was* but what he is even as a believer. While a present tense can be used to refer to past or future events, it is most normal to read it as a present tense and makes the most sense in this passage.
- ✓ Paul also emphasizes the personal pronoun “I” in this section — he uses it 18x. “It’s *me!*”
- ✓ When he says that he hates the sin he does (v. 15) and wants to do good (v. 19), that is indicative of a redeemed man — the unredeemed man does not hate sin or want to do good.
- ✓ Similarly, verses 21-22 make the most sense for a man who is justified — only the man in Christ wants to do good and only the righteous man delights in the Law of God (and only the righteous man has the Law of God in the inner man). The word used for “desire” in this passage (“want” or “willing”) indicates the life of a believer (vv. 16, 18, 19 [2x], 20, 21).
- ✓ He is careful to note that sin “dwells” in him (vv. 17, 20); that is different language than being “in Adam” and “ruled” by sin (5:12, 21).
- ✓ He does give thanks for salvation (v. 25a), but then he immediately adds a comment about the tension about his battle with the flesh (v. 25b); if he was referring to his pre-conversion condition we would expect v. 25 to end with “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord,” and then move immediately to 8:1. The ending of v. 25 affirms he is talking about a believer who is wrestling with the flesh.
- ✓ This is what I believe Paul is speaking about in this passage — his life as a believer, and a life that is a common experience for every believer. I am persuaded primarily because of the use of the word “desire” — the longings he has for obedience and his hatred of his sin is what marks a believer’s life. Generally, believers are grieved by sin and unbelievers are unconcerned with their sin. A believer will say, “My sin makes me wonder if I’m not a believer,” while an unbeliever will say, “My sin isn’t a problem; don’t worry about me. God forgives me and loves me...”
- ✓ This section is speaking about a believer’s godly anxiety.

- **Paul is talking about an inability of the Law**

- ✓ One commentator suggested that figuring out what Paul means by “I” really is unimportant; you can preach this without identifying who “I” is. That’s because this section is still about the Law. It is God’s Law (v. 22) and it is “spiritual” (v. 14) and “good” (v. 16).

- ✓ But because he cannot keep and fulfill the Law's demands, he comes to know and desire sin (7:5, 8)
- ✓ And then he found himself a "prisoner" of the law (v. 24). He cannot fulfill the Law it only condemns him. But because Christ has fulfilled the Law, Christ is adequate to save him (v. 25).
- ✓ So this section affirms again the power of the Law only to condemn us. The Law is not a means of salvation or sanctification — it will never release anyone from any kind of bondage.
- ✓ And that's Paul's primary point — if anyone is going to be released from the tyranny of sin, it will not be through any inherent righteousness; it will take an alien righteousness — a righteousness that is outside of him — to save him. (And that is just what God gives!)

(As we look at this passage, I should note that I am largely following John MacArthur's outline.)

1. The Believer's Lament: I DO What I HATE (vv. 14-17)

• The believer's condition (v. 14)

- ✓ As Paul continues to talk about the Law, he says that **it is spiritual**. He means that the Law is caused and given by the Spirit and it is like the Holy Spirit. It is another way to say that the Law originates from God — it is God-given (like 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 1 Pt. 1:21).
- ✓ But Paul is different. He is **of the flesh**. This word is only used three other times in the NT and it means more than just "I have a human, fleshly body." His point is to make a contrast to **spiritual**. He is the opposite of what the Law is. The Law is perfect and spiritual. Paul is imperfect and, in a sense, "unspiritual" (which is how the word is used in 1 Cor. 3:1).
- ✓ Calvin said of this verse, "Paul...is depicting in his own person the character and weakness of believers." This *is us*, isn't it. We are imperfect and demonstrate that imperfection regularly.
- ✓ In fact, Paul advances his idea and adds that he is **sold into bondage to sin**.
 - In fact, the phrase is even stronger than that. It is "sold *under sin*." And as I noted earlier, that same preposition, "under" is used in 3:9 to denote the power of sin over the unbeliever. The unbeliever is controlled by and dominated by sin.
 - But can we say this about a believer? Everything in 5:12-6:23 seems to indicate the opposite — the believer is *not* under sin.
 - It is true that the believer is transferred from the kingdom of sin and death to the kingdom of Christ and life; but there is still a sense in which we are under sin:
 - ... Sin still resides in the believer. That's why Paul says in 6:12 — "do not let sin reign in your mortal body..." He says that because there is a sense in which it still can (also, 1 Jn. 1:8-10).
 - ... And we are still subject to the ultimate effect of sin — death (8:23).
 - ... We are saved and Christ is our righteousness and God sees us in that way, but there is still a completion to our salvation that is still in the future — it's not finished yet.
 - ... "Paul's strong words about his condition do not indicate he was only partially saved at the time but rather emphasize that sin can continue to have dreadful power in a Christ's life and is not to be trifled with. The believer's battle with sin is strenuous and life-long." [MacArthur]

- ✓ I like how S. Lewis Johnson says it: "...he is talking about the partial bondage of an imperfectly sanctified man, not the total bondage of an unsaved man."
- ✓ Some will say, "this can't be a believer — believers don't talk this way." But believers do talk this way. I talk this way. I've heard many of you express these very same kinds of laments — "I hate my sin and I'm sick of my sin and I can't wait to get to Heaven and have sin and the desire for sin removed from me..." And even more importantly, the writers of Scripture talk this way:
 - Consider Job, who was called the most righteous man on earth (Job 1:1; Ezk. 14:14; Js. 5:11). Yet he said, "I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:6).
 - David was a man after God's own heart, but he says of himself, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge." (Ps. 51:3-4).
 - Daniel was a man of remarkable integrity — one of the few men in the Bible whom we do not see sin. But listen to his prayer of confession: "Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments and ordinances....Open shame belongs to us, O LORD, to our kings, our princes and our fathers, because we have sinned against You." (Dan. 9:4, 5, 8).
 - Isaiah was a righteous prophet in an unrighteous time in Israel. But when he saw the vision of God's holiness, he cried, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." (Is. 6:5).
 - Jesus' most beloved disciple, John, saw the exalted Christ on his throne and wrote of that experience, "...In His right hand He held seven stars, and out of His mouth came a sharp two-edged sword; and His face was like the sun shining in its strength. When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man..." (Rev. 1:16-17).
 - The kinds of language that Paul uses here, while strong, is normal for those who are believers. And I suspect that many of you have uttered some very similar kinds of statements.
 - It should be a comfort to us to hear that some of the heroes of our faith struggled with sin and had the same laments and longings that we do.
- ✓ This is the believer's condition. Even when redeemed and justified, sin is still powerful and "hangs on and contaminates his living and frustrates his inner desire to obey the will of God." [MacArthur]

- The proof of the believer's condition (vv. 15-16)

- ✓ How do we know that the believer still has remaining sin? Verses 15-16 tell us very simply.
- ✓ **What I am doing I do not understand.** The word "understand" is the word "knowledge." So it sounds like Paul says, "I don't know what I'm doing...I don't understand the nature of my sin." But Paul is an intelligent and well-trained man. He's an apostle. He *knows*. The word can also mean "acknowledge" or "condone," and that's what it means here: "I don't approve of what I am doing."

- ✓ And what he doesn't approve of is that ***I am not practicing what I would like to do***. He has a desire that is God-pleasing. He wants to fulfill the Law. The wanting is good and true. But he doesn't do it. He feels the desire and constraint to obey and he doesn't.
 - He doesn't fulfill the Law in all its fullness (only Christ could do that, Mt. 5:17)
 - He cannot keep every aspect of the Law *all the time*; his emphasis here is that he *regularly* (habitually or continually) doesn't do what he wants to do to fulfill the Law.
 - In Philippians he will say that the Law renders him blameless (Phil. 3:6), but whatever he did to obey the Law externally, he could never fulfill the spirit of the Law (7:6).
- ✓ He not only doesn't do what he wants to do, but it's even worse: ***I am doing the very thing I hate***.
 - He is emphatic with what he says here: "*but that very thing I hate, I am doing!*"
 - [Aside: It is good to hate sin. Hating sin is a step in overcoming sin. You will never overcome sin if you do not hate it (if you love it you will do it). But hating it is not the entire answer — Paul hated sin and still found himself doing it. And if you have grown as a believer, then you know what this is like, too, don't you? You can't simply "will" yourself to righteousness.]
 - And then he adds, ***If I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law...*** The Law calls him to a standard, but he cannot attain the standard, so the Law condemns him. And then he tries to attain it again, fails, and gets more condemnation. And on it goes. So we might ask Paul, "Why not simply throw out the Law? Why not call it bad and reject it?" But that is no solution. The Spirit in Paul (and his conscious) compel him to say, ***the Law is good***. The Law is morally excellent. He cannot disobey it. He must affirm it's goodness. And he affirms that obedience to the Law is the only way to righteousness and sanctification (through Christ).
- ✓ This is the state of Paul and every believer. We see the standard of God and we do not do it. We cannot achieve it. We want to do it, but we cannot. And we will not. Inevitably we will fail.
- ✓ What is the proof of the condition of indwelling sin in the believer? It's pretty simple. We sin by doing what we don't want to do and by not doing what we want to do.
- ✓ If you don't believe that, then listen to C. S. Lewis' words: "No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good." If you really try, you will realize that you will only really fail.
- ✓ Where does this sin come from? What is the source of this condition of the believer?

- The source of the believer's condition (v. 17)

- ✓ Paul's conclusion about where this comes from is in v. 17 — ***so now***. What does he conclude?
- ✓ ***No longer am I the one doing it***. That sounds strong, but it's even stronger — "not I!" He's not denying culpability. He's not saying, "I'm not guilty." But he is saying that there is something else going on besides his rebellion against God.
- ✓ He says that his problem is that ***sin dwells in me***. Now notice that he does not say "I am dwelling/ living in sin," or "I am still in Adam..." His problem is not that he is in sin, but that sin is still in him.
- ✓ As Paul is thinking about his life as a home, one commentator says, "This is not the honored guest, nor the paying tenant, but the 'squatter, not legitimately there, but very difficult to eject." [Morris]

- ✓ What is the source of Paul's problem (and yours and mine)? It is the illegal squatter, remaining sin. It's the flesh that still is bent toward sin. It's the unsanctified parts of our lives.
 - ✓ He is not saying, "My problem is a deficient salvation." He's not saying, "I am still in Adam." He's not saying, "I still really do love my sin." No, he's affirming that he has a new desire and a new longing. You can hear his weariness and sadness ("lament" really is a good word). His problem is that while he is in Christ and declared righteous and his new longings, he does not yet have an ability to do all that he desires to do. And it is remaining sin that is keeping him from obedience.
 - ✓ He will say something very similar in **Galatians 5:17** — the problem is not something outside of him, but something inside of him. Something remaining in him is keeping him from obeying.
 - ✓ I have always loved music and particularly the piano. I grew up listening to classical music and still listen to that style of music much of every day while I study. And I particularly love the piano. I really wish I could play the piano. When I was young, my father offered to pay for lessons. We owned a piano for about 15 years. I just never learned to play. If I sat down at the piano, I don't even know enough to play "Chopsticks." Now you could give me a very fine piano. You could pay to tune the piano. You could give me a very fine tuxedo to wear while I play the piano. You could buy me a variety of books and music to play. You could install excellent lighting. And I still wouldn't be able to even play "Chopsticks." Why? Because the problem isn't outside of me. The problem is inside of me. Now if the spirit of Fredrick Chopin or Van Cliburn could live in me, then you could give me Schroeder's toy piano and I could make it dance.
 - ✓ And similarly the only way for me to live the Christian life is not by attempting to keep the Law. I can't. Remaining sin will preclude my obedience. But if I live by the Spirit of God who indwells me, then I will not carry out the desire of the flesh (**Gal. 5:16**).
- Let me ask a few questions in summation:
 - ✓ Do you love the Word of God and the Law of God?
 - ✓ Do you hate your sin or do you love your sin?
 - ✓ Do you grieve and lament over your sin, or are you apathetic to your sin?
 - ✓ Are you living with an awareness of your battle with sin and not letting sin reign (6:12) and not making provision for the flesh and sin (13:14)?
 - ✓ These are marks of the believer. And if that's your life, then you should feel comforted and encouraged and strengthened for your battle with sin. (More on that in chapter 8.)
 - ✓ If these items do not characterize your life, then you have no reason to think you are a believer. And you must repent and turn away from your sin and rebellion and trust in Christ and submit yourself to His lordship and leadership. He will free you from sin and empower you to live for Him. You must trust in Him and when you do, you will still battle with sin, but you will have freedom and joy that you cannot know otherwise.

2. The Believer's Lament: I DON'T Do What I LOVE (vv. 18-20)

- The believer's condition (v. 18a)
- The proof of the believer's condition (vv. 18b-19)
- The source of the believer's condition (v. 20)

3. The Believer's Hope: JESUS Sets Us FREE (vv. 21-25a)

4. The Believer's Reality: Loving GOD and Battling SIN (v. 25b)

CONCLUSION:

The spiritual life is a battle. It's a fight. It's a war against sin. It is an ever-present war against sin. We'd like to have instant sanctification. We'd like to not have to fight sin. We'd like to be fully righteous and perfect. But as long as we live life on this earth, we will always have a battle with sin.

We do well to remember what A. W. Tozer wrote a generation ago:

“...we want to forget that most of God's wonderful people in the early days of the church did not have peace of mind. They did not seek it. They knew that a soldier does not go to the battlefield to relax — he goes to fight. They accepted their position on earth as soldiers in the army of God, fighting along with the Lord Jesus Christ in the terrible war against iniquity and sin. It was not a war against people but against sin and iniquity and the devil!” [*Who Put Jesus on the Cross?*, 18.]

Yes, we are in a war. No, sin has not been fully eradicated. But yes, there is help for the believer, even the struggling believer, through Jesus Christ our Lord!

BENEDICTION: Jude 24-25

First Service — Be sure to take advantage of the hospitality area. Find some physical refreshment and even more look for an opportunity to give spiritual refreshment: get to know someone you don't know; give a word of encouragement to someone who needs help and hope; pray with anyone who has a need.