

***The War Within***  
***Romans 7:14-25***

Romans 7:14–25 is one of the most famous passages in the New Testament. It is also one of the most hotly debated passages in the New Testament. The main issue is whether or not Paul is describing his present experience as a believer. Some think that Paul is using a literary technique in which he uses the first person singular (“I”) to depict the experience of Israel under the Law. They would see Paul agonizing over the Jews’ inability to keep the Law without the indwelling Holy Spirit (given in the new covenant). Some of the commentaries I’ve used throughout this series in Romans land on this interpretation. I’m sympathetic to that view, but I believe that Paul is writing as a mature follower of Christ who walked by the Spirit and yet still agonized over his own struggle with sin and with his flesh. My message will reflect that understanding this morning.

But I want to acknowledge that good, honest scholars and other believers hold the view that Paul is depicting the experience of Israel under the Law. I don’t think that those who hold that view are horribly misguided or uninformed or any such thing. As with many passages, there are honest disagreements on the interpretation of Romans 7. Having acknowledged that, I should also point out that most of those who hold other interpretations of this passage would agree with the basic point that I’ll be making this morning, namely that as believers we have a “divided self.” Even though they wouldn’t see this passage as making that point, they would agree that believers face “a war within” because of indwelling sin and the flesh.

This morning we’ll move our way rather quickly through Romans 7:14-25. This passage raises many complex issues that we won’t have time to address. We’ll mainly point out Paul’s internal struggle between his desire to do the will of God and the sin that dwelt within him. After we examine Paul’s experience, we’ll draw out some implications for our experience.

Last week Brian taught from verses 7-13 in which Paul established that the Law is “holy and righteous and good.” The problem wasn’t the Law but sin; sin took advantage of the Law and deceived Paul (and everybody). In verse 14 Paul moves from past tense to present tense. This is a core reason why I view Paul as describing his present experience as a believer.

14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

Here we have a contrast that Paul will continue into chapter 8, a contrast between the Spirit and the flesh. The Law is spiritual in the sense of being given by the Spirit; ultimately the Law was given by God. By contrast, Paul writes, “but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.” On the surface of it, this statement seems to contradict what Paul wrote of the believer in chapter 6 when he said that we have “died to sin” - that through the death and resurrection of Jesus we have been set free from bondage to sin. In which sense could Paul as a Christian write that he is “of flesh, sold into bondage to sin”?

I think Paul is describing his experience as someone whose flesh was still very much alive. As believers we have been united with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection. We are now just as alive to God as Jesus Himself. But in this life we still live in mortal bodies that have lusts. In other words, in these bodies part of us still craves sin; that part of us is called “the flesh.” Chapter 8 will explain that one day the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead will give life to our mortal bodies (8:11). But in this life we have bodies that have intense sinful cravings. That’s why Paul wrote in 6:12, “Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lust.” When we’re raised immortal, the flesh will be gone and our bodies won’t have sinful cravings. But in this life they do. I think that Paul is acknowledging that reality here in 7:14. As a man living in a mortal body, he is “of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.”

He explains himself further in the following verses. He describes an internal struggle in which he finds himself doing things that he didn’t want to do. The culprit is not the Law but indwelling sin.

15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

Statements like this challenge our assumptions about Paul. Theologically we would probably all say that Paul wasn’t sinless (nobody is sinless in this life, right?), but we tend to think that he was pretty close. Even though Paul wrote half of the New Testament and even though Paul was passionate about knowing Christ and making Him known, Paul still struggled with his flesh. Here he says that he didn’t fully understand why he did things that he didn’t want to do and why he did things that he “hated.” Even though Paul was a spiritual giant, parts of his behavior were a mystery to him. The culprit was sin. If we think, “Yeah, but his sins were probably small and insignificant,” we probably have a skewed view of sin; we might be ranking sins in a way that God doesn’t.

What is the worst sin a person can commit? Paul may or may not have committed that sin as a believer. But do you know what sin Paul was tempted to commit? Apparently Paul had a problem with pride. I say that because in 2 Corinthians 12 Paul explained that God gave him a “thorn in the flesh” to keep him from exalting himself. Since “God is opposed to the proud,” exalting himself was a serious sin. Pride is one of the great temptations for people like Paul who are spiritually mature and used greatly by God. Paul apparently had a problem with pride.

But it’s instructive to note that Paul hated sin. He loved the will of God and hated sin. This is a sign of spiritual maturity. We’ll talk about this more when we discuss application of this passage. But notice throughout this passage that Paul’s deepest commitment was to the will of God. It grieved him when his thinking and/or behavior didn’t line up with God’s will.

16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.

Paul didn't resist the conviction of sin that he experienced. He didn't accuse God of giving unreasonable commands that nobody could obey; he didn't try to justify his behavior in any way. As we saw last week in verse 12, Paul believed that "the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

This is an explanation, not an excuse. He's not saying that he doesn't have any responsibility or guilt. He's saying that indwelling sin still has a certain amount of power in his life. The part of him that is so susceptible to sin is his flesh:

18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. 19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. 20 But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

In verse 20 he repeats what he said in verse 17, namely that the real culprit was indwelling sin. This didn't mean that he wasn't responsible for his actions; and it certainly didn't mean that he ALWAYS practiced the evil he didn't want to do. He is simply being honest about the power of indwelling sin as long as he lives in a mortal body.

If Romans 7 were the only passage in the NT that spoke about Paul's spirituality, we'd probably conclude that he was a very immature, worldly person. But we know from other passages that Paul was a very godly, Christ-centered person. We should read this passage in that context.

21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.

Here Paul depicts a war that raged within himself. In that war, his mind and the members of his body were (sometimes) on different sides. Paul isn't describing two persons living within the same body; rather he's describing two natures within one person.

His mind wanted to please God, but the members of his body wanted something else. Paul wasn't exempt from the dynamics that he warned against in the second half of Romans 6. He himself needed to practice what he preached in terms of not "presenting the members of his body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness" (6:13). In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 Paul described how mindful he was that his body had the potential of disqualifying him in the race he was running. He said, "I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified."

Other Scriptures that speak of this fierce war. In Galatians 5:16-17 Paul acknowledged that the flesh and the Spirit have two opposing desires.

16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. 17 For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.

In James 4:1 James said something very similar.

1 What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?

In 1 Peter 2:11 Peter pleaded with the people he loved in this way:

11 Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.

Paul wasn't exempt from this internal war. In verse 24 Paul cries out for deliverance.

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

It might be hard for us to imagine Paul crying out, "Wretched man that I am!" If this were the only statement we had from Paul about himself, we might charge him with being overly harsh and pessimistic about himself. But this is Paul's anguish over his divided self. I agree with those who say that Paul's anguish was so intense **because** he was so very passionate about pleasing God. In his sermon on this passage, Tim Keller makes reference to CS Lewis' statement, "Ask Hitler if he was a bad man and he'd say no; ask Lincoln if he was a bad man and would say to a great degree." The closer you are to God, the more sensitive you are to your own sin.

Paul asks the question, "Who will set me free from the body of this death?" Paul answers with an exclamation of praise, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" This will be the topic of chapter 8: how God delivers us from sin and death through Jesus Christ our Lord. This deliverance of Jesus will come from the indwelling Spirit. Just as sin dwells within us, the very Spirit of God dwells within the believer. **In this life** as we "walk by the Spirit" we are empowered to obey God; we don't obey God perfectly, but by the Spirit we can live lives of obedience in which we carry out the true intent of the Law (love God and love our neighbor as ourselves).

And **after this life** the Spirit will "give life to our mortal bodies" (8:11 - something we'll talk about on Easter morning). Through the Spirit who dwells within us, we will be raised immortal. We will have physical bodies, but the flesh will be gone. We will be completely and permanently "set free from the body of this death."

In other passages Paul made very similar statements, expressing his longing for his salvation to extend even to his body. He didn't look forward to a body-less existence, but one in which his body was transformed and redeemed. In Romans 8:23 Paul speaks about believers having the "firstfruits of the Spirit" and "groan[ing] within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body." In 2 Corinthians 5:2-5 Paul talks about while in this "tent" (i.e., body) "we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven," looking forward to the day when "what is mortal will be swallowed up by life." Even though Paul agonized over indwelling sin, he was full of hope and confidence about the future.

What are the implications of Paul's experience for us?

***Paul's experience (as narrated in Romans 7) suggests that we acknowledge our internal war with sin.***

Instead of denying it or ignoring it, we name our internal war as a battle of our flesh. And we face it directly, as Paul did.

Sometimes we have a tendency, I think, is to deny that there's really a fierce, internal battle going on. Perhaps we think that if we ignore our internal struggle it will go away: "Maybe eventually my struggle with anger/lust/jealousy/greed will just fade away. . ." Both Scripture and experience (mine and many others) would tell you that ignoring a sin doesn't make it go away; if anything it gives it a safe place to grow and flourish.

Or perhaps we fear, "If I admit that I have an internal war with sin, I'll be paralyzed with shame." I think that Paul experienced a degree of guilt over his sin; but he didn't experience paralyzing shame. He wasn't full of self-loathing and self-condemnation. As we'll see next week, Paul writes in Romans 8:1 that "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." He had a very honest understanding of indwelling sin without self-condemnation. He understood that the condemnation he deserved fell upon Christ on the cross.

Instead of denying or ignoring our battle with the flesh, we do what Paul did: We acknowledge our internal war with the flesh.

***Paul's experience suggests that we cultivate a hatred for (our own) sin and a love for the will of God.***

It's relatively easy to identify and hate other people's sins. Actually it's too easy. But I'm struck by Paul's statement that he hated his own sins (7:15 "I am doing the very thing I hate."). And I'm also struck by his statement that he loved the will of God (7:22 "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man."). If we understand that these are the statements of a mature believer, it seems to me that we need to cultivate this same mind toward both sin and the will of God.

Are there sins that, quite honestly, you love? Augustine said that if you really want to know someone, don't ask "What do you believe?" Rather, ask, "What do you love?" And

so I would ask you whether or not there are sins that you love. When I've found myself loving some sin, I've found great benefit in simply admitting as much to God. Since everything is laid bare before God's eyes, there's no reason to hide or pretend in His presence. Admit if there is some sin that you need to begin hating and some aspect of His will that you need to begin loving.

You don't have to fear that if you hate your own sin that you'll become a sour, mean, judgmental person. If you're fixated on others' sins, that will be probably be the case. But if you hate *your own* sin, it will humble you to the core. And humility puts you in the place where the Holy Spirit can do a deep work in your life. In the new covenant, when we welcome His work, the Spirit takes the truth of Scripture and writes it on our hearts. We begin to love the will of God. The Spirit continues to show us the things in our lives that are incompatible with God's will.

And the result will be that we will also cry out for deliverance as Paul did. If Paul didn't hate his own sin and love the will of God, he never would have cried out for deliverance. But since he hated his sin and loved the will of God, he cried out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" He understood that his freedom would come through Christ. This leads to the third implication:

***Paul's experience suggests that we understand that our deliverance will come only through Jesus Christ.***

Paul was a realist when it came to his internal battle with sin. But he also had hope. He believed that his deliverance would come through Jesus Christ. We'll talk about this more next week when we wade out into Romans 8. But this morning I'd point out the obvious and say that our deliverance will not come through willpower (although our wills are involved). Our deliverance will not come through us figuring everything and everyone out (although knowledge is important). Our deliverance will come through Jesus Christ.

I want to close now by inviting God to do this work in our lives and in our midst. Would you pray along with me and admit that we face an intense internal battle with the flesh? And would you invite God to give you the grace you need to hate your own sin and to love the will of God?