

**Sermon for Sunday, March 14, 2010**  
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**THE INNER STRUGGLE**  
**Romans 7:14-25**

We all fall short of our own standards at times. This winter, when it was so cold so gray for weeks, many of us felt we weren't quite ourselves. "I don't know what's wrong with me, I have no energy; the world looks dark."

I once had a hair cutter who liked to start in deep conversations. When we got going my haircut stretched from fifteen to thirty-five minutes as she kept talking and trimming. My hair ended up short but perfect. I doubt that she wanted such variety.

Or we let silly things upset us. We say, "I don't know why I let that bother me." Still minor. At the other end of the spectrum we have the major problems that appear in courtrooms – fraud, assault, theft. These may be episodes or habits or part of a criminal life. And then there are life-controlling problems – alcoholism, pornography, drug abuse.

Some problems are small; some are life-governing sins. Each has something in common: We act one way, and wish we acted another. We do things that we do not want to do and we don't do things that we do want to do. Paul says, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out." (7:18). This is the theme of Romans 7:14-20. It is, to some degree, a universal phenomenon, but it has a particular place in Paul's thought.

Everyone faces this internal conflict, but it has a special form in the believer. And there is, for the believer, a remedy from the Lord.

**1. The believer faces internal conflict\***

Before we go far, I need to tell you that there is a debate about this passage. Most people believe the person Paul describes is a believer but some think it is an unbeliever and a few think there may yet be another option.

The speaker in Romans 7 seems to be Paul. He says, "I" and speaks in the present tense: "I do, I want." But some say, "This is a voice; it can't be the apostle. The struggle he endures is too intense. He sounds defeated. A Christian can't say: "I am of the flesh, sold under sin... Nothing good dwells within me... I have the desire to do what is right, but I cannot do it." (7:14, 18).

Can a believer say these things? The believer can't be so much at war within that he says, "The evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing" (7:19). Does your theology have room for this cry that is near despair? Earlier, Paul himself said that we've been "set free from sin" (Romans 6:17-22). He sang of his peace, joy, freedom and hope (Romans 5:1-5). Where did they go?

But believers do feel defeated at times. All of us have said at some point, "I cannot do the good that I want to do" or "My pattern of sin is holding me captive." Or "When I want to do good, but evil is right there with me" (7:21). That isn't a believer at his or her best, but almost all of us have felt weak and frustrated. Even the strongest disciples think "Things are out of control; defeat is at hand."

Give us three long, rainy, exhausting days, filled with problems, criticisms and complaints, add a sub-par performance on an important occasion and most of us will at least visit the City of Despair. We know the feeling of defeat, but there is a better reason to think Romans 7 is the voice of the Christian: At several points he says things that none but a believer can say:

First, "I delight in the law of God in my inner being." The unbeliever does not delight in God's law. He may obey it, but reluctantly. Or he may scoff, disregard or rebel. Paul says, "The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law nor can it do so" (Romans 8:7). Believers say, "I love the law."

Second, his very struggle with sin is a sign of faith. His sin aggravates him, makes him miserable, makes him lament his weakness. But one mark of the unbeliever is moral complacency and self-satisfaction.

When Paul was a Pharisee, he judged himself "faultless" concerning "legal righteousness" (Philippians 3:4-6). The common self-perception of the irreligious person is "I'm a pretty good fellow – a good neighbor, better than the next guy. If I do something unkind, I had a reason; they deserved it". Complacency is the norm. But the disciple knows God's standards, so when we fail to meet them, it troubles us.

Third, the speaker in Romans 7 longs for and expects Jesus to deliver him. He groans, but expects to be rescued. His cry is filled with desire, not despair. He asks, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Then he thanks God that Jesus will deliver him. This is exactly what the believer says later "[We] groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (Romans 8:23).

And Paul says all of this in the first person, present tense. He says, "I do not understand my actions." Not "I don't understand what I did", but "I don't understand what I *do*". (This is especially meaningful since Paul used the past tense in the first part of Romans 7).

Some people have tried to explain the conflict that Paul describes by creating a term and category. They say this person is a Carnal Christian. This person who knows Jesus as Savior, but not as Lord, and so lives a defeated life. But the category is false. No one can know Jesus as Savior, but not as Lord. Jesus is Savior and Lord; to know him as one is to know him as the other. (Besides this implies two stages to the Christian life – saved and committed - which is false).

Or: This person under conviction regarding sin, but has not yet rested in Christ. They experience "conviction but not conversion." <sup>1</sup> But why does Paul say "I" if it's another type of person? Besides, this person knows Jesus as Deliverer. Or: this person is the believer who is still relying on the law rather than the Spirit. <sup>2</sup>

No, this person belongs to Christ. He loves the law, he hates his sin, and he knows Jesus is the deliverer. Yet we agree with our friends something is not right. This is a believer, but not a normal believer. He is not living as a believer wants *or* expects to live.

The struggle presented in Romans 7 is common but isn't normal, conforming to the norm for believers. It's part of our life in this world, because we are loaded with unwanted desires, bad habits, bad examples. The flesh which resists God and the way of love, remains in us or a part of us, so we are sometimes at war with ourselves. Some temptations hardly register, but others bore into our soul. This is not the whole of our experience or the norm, but it is part of our experience.

We live in two worlds. By virtue over our union with Christ, we have peace with God, joy in suffering, mature character, love in our hearts and victory over sin (Romans 5:1-5). But not always. For the flesh still torments and subverts believers.

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<sup>1</sup> Lloyd Jones, *Romans*, pages 229 ff, 255 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Stott, *Romans*, pages 208-11

## 2. The flesh still torments and subverts believers (7:14-20)

There are two ways to tell the truth. We can tell it straight, or tell it slant. Emily Dickinson said, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant... The Truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind." "Pure truth", she said, is "too bright for our infirm delight." "Tell All the Truth but Tell it Slant." One way to tell it slant is to tell it by contrast, even by apparent contradiction. So here, dialectically:

The believer "has died to sin once for all" Romans 6:2-10, especially 6:10).

But not so fast. Paul also says, "I do not do what I want, but what I hate, this I do" (7:15). Both can be true, even for Christians, because we don't always appropriate the privileges and identity that are ours.

In Romans 7:14-25, Paul says everything three times, in three blocks: 7:14-17, 18-20 and 21-24. So we hear it, it sinks in.

First, innate sinfulness remains in us. Paul says, "I am unspiritual, sold under sin" and "Nothing good dwells in me, that is in my flesh." Paul says "We know" this and "I know" this (7:14, 18). Earlier, Paul said that a believer is "free from sin" (Romans 6:2-10). Now he says, "Not entirely." So he tells it slant.

The Bible often uses exaggeration to make a point; Jesus did it often. Paul, too. Nothing good in me? He exaggerates. He means he agonizes over the inability to turn desire into action. He knows that all he does is tainted. So then we love God and His law, yet we're almost enslaved by our inability to turn good intention into good action. Examples: bedtimes, language, food, internet

Second, as a result, believers live in conflict: We love and long for God's way, but cannot do it by ourselves.

- "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." (7:15).
- "I can will what is right, but I can't do it; the evil I do not want is what I do" (7:18-19).
- "I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self." But Paul sees internal warfare raging in his mind and his body (7:22-23).

Third, he says this raging sin is not his true self. "Indwelling sin is responsible for the failures and defeats"<sup>3</sup> He says this twice, in almost identical words: "Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me" (7:20, cf.7:16-17). If the law is good, and I truly want to obey it, but do not, it must be some alternate or counterfeit self who defeats me.

## 3. So then we delight in God's law and grace, yet we face struggles, some common, some extraordinary.

We live in two worlds, two cities - the city of man and the city of God. We are citizen of both, for we belong to God but live in this world, with all its evils and pleasures. We live between two ages – this age and the age to come (Matthew 12:32), the kingdom of God and the petty fiefdoms of this world.

The nature of our sin varies. We commit isolated sins, habitual sins and compulsive sins. Some sins are isolated. Suppose you are short on sleep because you got up early for a vital project. You're making progress, but then the interruptions begin. When the sixth person calls, you answer, "What!? What do you want from me?" That is a probably a one-time event. If you feel terrible about it, repent and ask forgiveness, you're unlikely to repeat it.

But if you don't feel terrible and don't repent, it might become a habit. And some habits can become compulsions or addictions, especially if they offer intense physical or psychological pleasure. Because

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<sup>3</sup> Stott, *Romans*, page 212.

Paul talks about the sense of inability to stop sinning, about inability to change, I want to talk about the major compulsive sins people face – even Christians.

The starting point for sinful compulsions is availability:

- When casinos increase, compulsive gambling increases.
- When food is abundant, compulsive eating appears.
- When it's easy to find access to them, drug abuse rises.
- Easy access to pornography leads to pornography compulsions.

Sadly, the free market is all too happy to feed your compulsions if they can make a profit from your devotion to video games, gambling, or pornography.

Some compulsions would be OK in themselves: exercise, volunteering, eating well, shopping. Others are almost neutral: continually washing hands or cleaning the kitchen, the yard, or the car, arranging closets by the rainbow, the wave-lengths of light from red to violet.

But innocent things are destructive if they become compulsions or addictions if you accept the concept. Some people buy hundreds of pairs of shoes and dresses that they never wear, even cars they never drive. I've known several students who flunked out of college because of video games.

Recently, in another country, "a child starved to death while her parents cared for an imaginary child instead." The couple met online, then met face to face and had a baby. But the baby was born prematurely and the parents didn't want to connect with her and never even named her. Instead they found a child to raise online; a healthy, happy child living in an enhanced graphics universe. That virtual world required the parents to make a real investment in their virtual child. The parents spent their days at an internet café, while they left their real daughter alone at home, feeding her powdered milk once a day. "One day, after a twelve-hour stint online, they visited the physical world and found their baby dead [from] malnutrition and dehydration. They indulged in the online game of raising a virtual character so as to escape from reality of their real, difficult baby." <sup>4</sup>

Troubling as virtual worlds can become, the great scourge of the internet is pornography. Among adults under age thirty, a secular poll found that eighty-five percent of men and thirty percent of women think it's normal or acceptable to view pornography. Even secular therapists are trembling, horrified at the wave of problems they see coming. <sup>5</sup> Pornography strains relationships. People drift apart or find they can't meet unrealistic expectations. Other relationships never even start because men are relating to pictures, not real women. In a recent interview, a famous entertainer said what others think: he prefers pictures over real women.

Forgive me as I simplify. The research into compulsion and addiction, if you accept the concept and not all do, is complex! The strongest form of addiction occurs when both body and mind depend on a substance such as nicotine or heroine.

But the hooks of other pleasures go deep and resemble addiction. The brain re-shapes itself to seek

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<sup>4</sup> William Saletan, *Game Over*, Slate, 3/10/2010

<sup>5</sup> Ralph Earl and Mark Bell, *The Tsunami: Adolescents, Technology and Pornography* - Family Therapy, Jan-Feb, 2010, pages 19-21.

pleasures from cocaine, sex, gambling, video games, even thrilling work or exciting hobbies, like sky-diving or hunting for bargains. Even without physiological dependence, psychological dependence is powerful.

The term compulsion means a person engages in an activity, despite harmful consequences, for the user's physical and mental health, their work and social life. The classic perspective on compulsion names four components:

- Inability to control or stop a behavior. The person tries to stop but cannot. He will break laws, hurt friends, ruin relationships, in order to continue.
- He continues despite negative consequences. He will neglect duties till he loses his job and family, ruins his finances and endures public shame.
- She is preoccupied or obsessed by the activity, thinking about it all the time.
- Tolerance and escalation: It takes more and more of whatever to find the thrill.

Compulsions lead to guilt, shame, fear, hopelessness, and anxiety. It is all but certain that I am describing some of you in your relationship with alcohol, drugs - legal or illegal - gambling or pornography. The last is the most likely.

If I just described you, don't tell yourself if so many people do it, it must be OK. And don't say, "If I find the right counselor, I'll be liberated." We will be liberated on the day the Lord returns and heals every wound, cures every sin. Nor can we prevent such sin if we educate people. Counseling and education are helpful, but they do not save. No living man or woman will ever outgrow the need for God's mercy. We start there, not with the quick fix.

I need to spell out two things. First, a meta-lesson from Proverbs: It takes time to gain wisdom necessary to live well and give up folly. So we rarely see a quick fix for major sin. If you have been spending recklessly, treating someone badly, if you have been complaining or lazy for a long time, it will probably take time to change.

Second, when Romans 7 describes the inability to stop doing evil, we think of compulsion and addiction, but I urge you to be careful with models of misdeeds that stress disease or addiction. Those models can imply that the situation is completely outside our control. Some people want to call everything an addiction – the “disease of the month club”. But the reality is more complex.

Take alcohol. The Bible says God gave wine to make our hearts glad (Psalm 104:15). But we can drink a bit too much or drink too often, until we think we need it to relax, even to function. Finally, we're drinking and hiding every day.

I have studied the literature and talked to lots of people. Whether a person is hooked on alcohol, drugs, pornography, or gambling, it's always heartbreaking. It's often horrifying. It's usually complex. But we're still responsible agents.

Whether the issue is drugs, gambling, sex, or something else, there is a moment of temptation. I read a chilling first person account of a man who saw an ad in the paper for a certain entertainment. The man said, "Why not?" He was swept away, but he chose it, too. He said, "I want to experience this."

There is also a moment when the normal use of something that's good in itself can become abnormal. The person often sees what is happening. Even if someone makes the wrong choice, things can go in different directions. For example, cocaine.

- Some people try it and hate the paranoia and anxiety it can cause. No more.

- Others try it and like it, but not much. The dangers worry them and they don't do it again. Others use it on rare occasions.
- No one can predict who it will be, but some people become physically and psychologically dependent on cocaine. Soon it's compulsive, life-dominating.

For whatever reason, some people see what is happening and have the ability to stop. They say, "This is wrong," they resolve to quit, and they do quit. Others want to quit and cannot. One man said:

"It's a thrill [and] I've conned myself into thinking it's OK, but deep down I know it's wrong. It's hurting me and my family. I beat myself up afterward, hate myself, and swear that was the last time. But before I know it, I'm back and I'm scared where it's leading." <sup>6</sup>

Another said: "I can rationalize anything. Later, I try to tame the monster and I can't. It's a gibbering ape, untamed, smirking at me." "No river in the world flows cold and strong enough to strike it down." <sup>7</sup>

If you find yourself with a life-dominating sin, if a friend has a life-dominating sin, these are the basics:

**Acknowledge** the gravity of the sin, the problem.

**Admit** the depth of your need - you cannot beat this by working alone.

**Seek** God's strength – through prayer, Scripture... Seek the aid of the people you love – consider who that might be. Know it: they've probably noticed something is wrong. Your eyes have changed, your shoulders aren't square as they were. They know and want to help. And let us stand by our friends who are trapped by sin – whether they are like us or not, our age or not. If you feel alone, talk to a pastor today. If you need time to think, there will be resources on our web site early this week.

But that isn't nearly enough to stop some sins. We must aim for more. In the end, the literature tells people who are trapped in sin two things: "You should be frightened" and "You need to stop." The books try to scare us with statistics about dangers: This is what you are doing to yourself. True, but people who are trapped often know the dangers well. They don't need another lecture. They need a higher love to drive out lesser loves and tame that gibbering ape [or dragon].

## 5. Our struggles lead us to Christ

That higher love may include friends and family. But for the disciple, it's the love of Jesus. See how Romans 7 ends: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" Who will? "Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:25)

When we're in real trouble, we don't need another teacher, another model, another coach, we need a Savior. We need a substitute who will meet the requirements of God's law for us and exhaust his judgment on sin.

Good as that is – and it's very good – we want more. When we indulge in sin, we are robbing and impoverishing ourselves, robbing ourselves of beauty and virtue. Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." And then, as we see God, we will become like him for we will see him as he is. As Romans says, "those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29).

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<sup>6</sup> Wendy Maltz, *Out of the Shadows*, Psychotherapy Networker, 11/12/ 09, pages 26-35

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous, *The War Within: An Anatomy of Lust, Leadership*, 1982

When we aim for this higher love, does sin finally die? No, the Lord doesn't transfer us to glory and angelic purity. We should expect temptations and battles to continue. But the Lord is making us more like himself and one day he will complete the good work he has begun in us. Then we will stand pure before the Lord because of Jesus' love and work on the cross. Since it is our future, surely it's right to walk toward it.