

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part sixteen

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PAUL'S HONEST FIGHT WITH PRETEND SPIRITUALITY

Romans 7:14-25 - "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. [15] I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. [16] Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. [17] So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. [18] For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. [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."

I called this teaching "**Paul's honest fight with pretend spirituality**" because he says things about spiritual experience that wouldn't make for a good television broadcast. You get a balanced, honest picture of the Christian experience of new life when you study the whole letter of Romans the way we are.

For example, if you just hand picked isolated verses from these chapters you could create many different descriptions of the Christian's spiritual life in this world. You could just isolate **Romans 6:14** - "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." Or, conversely, you could pick **Romans 7:19** - "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." This verse, taken all by itself, would give you a very different set of expectations than **6:14**.

Or, you could pick **Romans 8:1-2** - "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death." Or, you could move ahead in the same chapter and pick **Romans 8:22-23** - "For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. [23] And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies."

My point is, depending on which verses you choose, there is both *fantastic* news and *realistic* news. So much has been *accomplished* for us in Christ Jesus, but not everything is fully *realized* just yet. There is *victory* and there is *waiting*. There is *rejoicing* and there is *groaning* - "We ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait...." (8:23).

The important point to note here is the *groaning* and the *waiting* don't in any way diminish the *victory* and the *certainty* and the *hopeful rejoicing*. Explaining this strange mixture is the purpose of Paul's teaching in Romans chapter seven.

1) WHY I BELIEVE PAUL IS DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCE OF A CHRISTIAN IN THIS ENTIRE PASSAGE

This is the point of much dispute. Many feel this *can't* be the experience of a Christian because of the graphic way Paul describes him being "*sold under sin*" (14b), and "*captive to the law of sin*" (23). Therefore, they conclude this must be a person in a *pre-conversion* state.

Admittedly, this is a difficult passage where dogmatic statements are probably out of place. But here's why I

doubt very much that Paul is picturing himself or anyone else in a pre-conversion condition. Primarily, I have come to the position that this just doesn't line up with other passages where we are positive Paul *is* describing his pre-conversion condition:

Philippians 3:4-6 - "...though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless."

This is not the picture of a man tortured by his own weakness and inability to keep the law. This is a man totally blind to the *kind* of righteousness God requires. Paul was full of self-confidence and pride. This is totally different from the person described in **Romans 7:18-19** - "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."

Also, Romans seven doesn't seem to fit with the description Paul gives of the *pagan mind* in **Romans 1:18,21-22,28** - "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth....21-22....For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools....1:28....And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind...."

This is how the pagan mind responds to divine truth. It sees everything God says and "*suppresses*" it (18) with a "*debased mind*" (28). This doesn't seem to be the case in **Romans 7:18,21,22** - "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out....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....*"

This is not someone who is *suppressing* the truth. This is someone who *savors the truth*. This is someone who agonizes over his resident inability to *live* it. This is a person *grieving* over inward failure and corruption. This is not someone who *hates* the law of God. This is someone who "*delights in the law of God in his inner being.*" In short, this is not the struggle of someone trying to *abort* the law of God. This is the struggle of someone who *loves* it and struggles with all his or her might to *honor* it and *obey* it.

2) **I BELIEVE THE PURPOSE OF THIS PASSAGE IS TO ENCOURAGE CHRISTIANS TO FIGHT AGAINST INDWELLING SIN**

Romans 7:16-23 - "Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. [17] So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. [18] For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. [20] Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. [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 and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."

Whatever else may be hard to explain in these verses, one thing is obvious. If these are the words of a Christian then *sin isn't going to disappear all by itself*. The watch word seems to come from the end of **verse 21** - "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, *evil lies close at hand.*"

Don't be confused here. Our writer isn't talking about the **guilt** of sin. That has been removed completely and instantly by redemption through the cross. Our writer is talking about the **presence** of sin. Guilt is removed by **grace**. **Presence** is removed through **warfare**.

Another thing. It's important to know what these words **do** say and what they **don't** say. Paul doesn't mean he **never** does the right thing. If the message of Romans seven is taken along side of Romans six and Romans eight Paul isn't saying life needs to be lived in a constant state of **failure** and **condemnation**. But it is also not going to be an **endless, unbroken chain of victories**. No one lives consistently above this struggle.

O, how we need this voice of realism in the fluffy modern version of North American, media driven Christianity! Simply put, there is a wonderful, Biblical place for **struggling with sin**. Yes, struggling with sin is hard. Yes, there may be times when you lose and fail. But get up and start struggling again! Struggling is much better than **not** struggling. Never give up and never give in.

Romans chapter seven is Paul's banishment of **phoney, plastic, image conscious church life**. We will minister to one another with more openness and more humility and more earnestness when we are honest about this ongoing struggle with sin. Romans seven is Paul's way of saying there is a place for mourning and weeping with others before the Lord. There's a place for wiping silly grins off our faces. There's a time to pummel heaven with loud cries and intercession for struggling saints. There's a place for knowing how weak we are just as surely as we know how great Christ is.

James 5:16 - "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working."

Again, this doesn't mean there's nothing but doom and gloom. I'm going to show in just a minute that there is always **hope** and high **expectation** in **all** our times of spiritual struggle. But there will never come **victory** in times of struggle with sin until there is a **humble honesty** of the reality of the battle that rages.

3) THE STRUGGLE WITH SIN IS SOMEHOW TIED TO THE FACT THAT WE LIVE IN THESE EARTHBOUND, PHYSICAL BODIES

Paul mentions this in several key phrases:

Romans 7:18,23-24 - "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, **in my flesh**. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out....23-24....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?**"

The important point Paul is making is this ongoing struggle with sin isn't the sign of a counterfeit or sub-standard conversion. It's meshed up with living in these fallen physical bodies. He doesn't mean if you cut these bodies open you will find something called "sin" near your liver or appendix. Rather, these bodies are where sin takes advantage of us. With their desires, their weaknesses, their appetites, and their habits, our **members** aren't easily trained in righteousness.

Paul has already spoken of this ongoing process of training in righteousness in **Romans 6:19** - "I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification."

The key word in this verse is "**leading**" - "**leading to more lawlessness,**" or "**leading to sanctification.**" But it's all about **leading**. Not **arriving**.

Still, we struggle in *hope* and without *condemnation* because we know where all this is heading - **1 John 3:2-3** - **“Beloved, we are God’s children *now*, and what we will be has *not yet appeared*; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. [3] And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”**

Notice the *time words* - **“now”** and **“not yet.”** We know we will not finish defeated. These bodies will not always trip us up. Our deliverance, begun now through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, will one day reshape and redirect these bodies of ours. The sight of glory fully manifested in Christ, but only dimly displayed here and now, will one day defang the power of sin by making its tempting power look puny and ridiculous.

4) **IS THERE A PURPOSE IN THIS DELAY OF FULL REDEMPTION?**

Why doesn’t God perfect us all spiritually right now? Wouldn’t the world be a much better place?

I think we are left to struggle with sin both to ***deepen our dependency on Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit*** and to ***make us more compassionate rather than condemning of others who need our prayerful help and support.***

It is our struggle with sin that keeps us compassionate with others who trip up. This doesn’t mean we ***ignore*** their sin, or call it by some other name. Rather, we call it what it is and bring them along with us to Christ for pardon and cleansing.

So keep struggling. Or as Paul would say in **1 Timothy 6:12** - **“Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.”**

Never stop the fight. It’s the best evidence of the life of the Spirit within. Never make ***peace*** with inward sin. That kind of peace is the peace of death. The real test is found in the way you answer these questions: **“Do you love the law?”** and, **“Do you hate inward sin and compromise?”** and finally, **“Does your struggle make you look to the finished work of Christ?”**

There is grace there. There is pardon there. There is help and strength there. And, one day, there will come total, final deliverance from sin.