

Romans 7:7-25 is foundational to our view of the Christian life and our Sanctification. Teacher Bob Deffinbaugh highlights these principles and implications from this section of scripture while challenging us to come to grips with our own struggle with sin. It may help to reread the scripture text and glance back over the teaching notes as you begin. Remember – Pray for insight and understanding!

**(1) *There is an intense struggle going on within the Christian.*** Conversion to Christ does not instantly solve all our problems. It even results in some problems we had never experienced as unbelievers. Before our salvation, we were never in opposition with sin. We were unknowingly the slaves of sin, all along thinking we were serving our own interests. Before our conversion, we were enemies of God. Our struggle was the result of our opposition to Him and His present judgment in our lives. As a result of faith in Christ, our animosity toward God ended and a new animosity—toward sin—began. The struggle which Paul is describing in Romans 7:7-25 is the result of his conversion.

**(2) *An overwhelming sense of despair over our struggle with sin and our defeat by it is an essential step in the solution to this problem.*** Paul’s despair was legitimate and even necessary. Until we hate sin, we will not turn from it. Until we reach the end of ourselves, we will not look to God. Just as unsaved men and women must come to the end of themselves in order to receive God’s gracious provision of righteousness, by faith in Christ, Christians too must come to the end of themselves to find the solution, once again, at the cross of Calvary.

**(3) *The problem with many Christians is not their despair, like that of Paul, but their lack of it.*** If coming to the end of ourselves is essential to turning to God for our deliverance, then many Christians will never turn to God for victory over sin because they do not recognize their true condition or take it seriously enough. It was the self-righteous scribes and Pharisees who did not come to Jesus for forgiveness simply because they did not think they needed it. It is the “smooth-sailing saints” who do not come to the cross for deliverance from the power of sin in their lives because they do not agonize over their condition as Paul did. My concern is that I lack the kind of agony that Paul has. I lack the kind of intensity that Paul has.

Why is it I do not feel the struggle as much as he does? How can Christians fail to identify with Paul here in Romans 7? Let me suggest several reasons.

- a. ***We fail to agonize over sin because we have redefined our old sins, giving them new Christian labels.*** Aggressive, self-assertiveness, once condemned as sin, now becomes “zeal for the Lord.” These are the same vices, the same sins, but we now sanctify them by putting Christian labels on them.
- b. ***We live superficial, hypocritical lives, which deny the reality of our sin, and our failure to live as God requires.***
- c. ***We ignore and reject God’s Law, as though it were “of flesh,” while we are the ones who are spiritual (the exact opposite of what Paul says in verse 14).*** See endnote for more information *i*
- d. ***We teach Christians to “cope” with their sin.*** Paul never teaches Christians to cope. In effect, we say to Christians that they need to learn to live with the agony. Paul says, “No, you don’t. You need to have that agony so intense that you *can’t* live with it, and you can only turn to God.”
- e. ***We seek to convert our socially unacceptable sins to those sins which are socially acceptable.*** We know that robbery and murder are unacceptable to society, and so we redirect our sinful energies in areas which serve our own self-interest, but in ways which bring us the commendation of others, rather than their condemnation.

- f. *We appeal to unholy motives in order to produce conduct which appears righteous.* We use pride, ambition, greed, and guilt within the church, making these illicit motives the reasons for acceptable conduct.
- g. *We cannot stand to see people “putting themselves down” and thinking of themselves as wretched creatures, and so we attempt to build their self-esteem.* We would not turn Paul to the cross for the solution to his problem; we would rebuke him for his poor self-esteem, and put him in a class or program which made him feel good about himself.

Those of us who are Christians and can identify with Paul are blessed. Those of us who cannot identify with Paul are to be pitied. It is not that we are plagued because we think too little of ourselves, but because we do not take sin seriously enough. The agony of Romans 7 is a prerequisite for the ecstasy of Romans chapter 8.

**(4) Sin is complicated, but its solution is simple.** Paul has already said it—sin is beyond our comprehension. We do not understand it. We cannot understand it. But we do not have to understand it in order to solve the dilemma it poses.

How great is your struggle? How great is mine? I think if our struggle is as great as Paul’s we will in desperation give up all self-help efforts, and we will turn to the cross. God has provided a righteousness we cannot produce by ourselves. That righteousness Jesus Christ offers to us through the power of the Spirit. **“Who will deliver me from this body of death?”** The answer is to come in Romans 8. The very Spirit that raised the dead body of Jesus Christ from the grave is the Spirit that dwells in you and will give life to your mortal bodies. God has the solution. The solution for Christians is the walk of the Spirit. But we will never get to that point until we have come to the desperation of Paul in Romans 7.

Over and over again Jesus kept taking the Law to its innermost part, to its spiritual dimension, which went right over the head of those who were most expert in the Law. In my deepest humanity apart from God I am simply flesh. There is no good thing that dwells within me. The mind set on the flesh, Paul says, is death. It is opposed to God—opposed to His rule and His reign. And therefore I find that in my own nature that I am opposed to that which is true of God and His Word. **“The Law is spiritual; I am of flesh; sold into bondage to sin.”**

My prayer is that you may begin to grasp the immensity of the struggle with sin. May you forsake all efforts to serve God in the strength of your flesh. May God help each of us to acknowledge that our flesh is a “body of death” from which we must be delivered. May God help us to understand; as we proceed in our study; the walk of the Spirit; which is the provision that God has made for us to live in a way which is pleasing to Him and produces our sanctification.

1. Why might an overwhelming sense of desperation be necessary for moving forward in sanctification? What problems might there be if this feeling of despair is never experienced?
2. Are there any stories or parables from the Gospels that come to mind when you think about this sort of despair? Read Luke 7:36-47 and 18:9-14 and discuss these in light of the article.

3. Do you think this sense of desperation is a one-time occurrence, or is continuous throughout the Christian life? How might it continue over time?
  
4. If this sense of desperation is “common for someone” when trying to please God what do you think is going on?
  
5. Read Galatians 2:17-3:5. How does Paul support and expand what he teaches in Romans 7:7-25?
  
6. Does this relate to the “thorn in Paul’s flesh” recorded in 2 Corinthians 12:7-10? How is it similar? How is it different?

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<sup>i</sup> Verses 14-16 make the first statement as Paul says something I think most of us do not believe. The Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.” I think contemporary Christians would say just the opposite if this verse were not staring them in the face. If you asked many would say, “I am spiritual, and the Law is carnal. I am spiritual and the Law is a matter of mere externals.” That is not what Paul says. Paul says the problem is the Law’s basic essence; it is spiritual and my basic essence is that there is no good that dwells within me. We are on two different wave lengths: First, I cannot understand the Law, and second, even if I could understand it I would not do it because I am operating in the flesh, and there is no good that dwells in my flesh. My flesh resists the Law. It hates the Law.

In what sense then do we say the Law is spiritual? First we must say the Law (the Law of Moses), is spiritual because it is God’s Word. It is divine revelation, “**the oracles of God**”—it is God’s revelation to men. Can we not say that the Law is Scripture? When we come to 2 Timothy 3: All Scripture is inspired, God breathed and profitable for teaching, etc., most people tend to say, “Yes, Pauline Epistles, New Testament, maybe the Gospels, but maybe some of the Old Testament.” But in essence much of that Scripture which was in the hands of those who received that statement was Law. The Law is Scripture, the Law is God-breathed, the Law is profitable. The Law speaks to men at the spiritual level. This is where the legalistic Sadducees and Pharisees missed the point. Because they were not spiritual, they could not understand the Law. Jesus kept saying to those who were the experts in the Law, “Have you not read? Have you not understood? You are greatly mistaken.” Why did He keep saying that to those who were the most expert in the Law? Because they did not understand that the Law was spiritual, and they were not. Unspiritual men cannot understand spiritual law. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is saying the Law does far more than address mere externals. The Law addresses man’s spirit.