

WHY DO I STRUGGLE TO BE GOOD?

Romans 7:13-25

In 2008 my right hip was operated on. The morning after surgery the anesthesia had completely worn off and I was in considerable pain. The nurse administered morphine. I couldn't believe it; in about two minutes my pain was completely gone. I was grateful, but at the same time alarmed. Not only was my pain gone, but I could hardly move. My muscles were so relaxed it took great effort to move anything. My mind was telling my arm to lift, but my arm didn't do anything!

It was unnerving to be in a situation where my body wasn't obeying my mind.

In Romans 7:13-25 Paul describes a similar but deeper frustration – a frustration with which *all* Christians can identify - the frustration of wanting to do right, but doing the opposite. We want to serve God in our minds and hearts, but we keep sinning in our bodies.

In these verses Paul uses himself as an example. Paul knows first hand the agonizing struggle between his desire to obey God's law and the continuing influence of sin over his body.

Paul is describing the struggle every believer experiences attempting to keep God's law *by their effort alone*.

KEEPING IT IN CONTEXT

In chapters 1-4 Paul deals with *justification*. Through faith in the blood of Jesus Christ we are delivered from the *penalty* of sin. We are declared righteous by God. That is our new *position* before God.

In chapters 5-8 Paul deals with *sanctification*. *Sanctification* is the second aspect of salvation. It is the lifelong process of being delivered from the *power* of sin. The goal of *sanctification* is that we fulfill the righteous requirements of God's law in our daily living (8:4).

We are righteous in our *position*: we ought to become more and more righteous in our *practice*.

In chapter 7 Paul teaches that God's law cannot sanctify us. 7:7-12 affirms that God's law is not the problem. Sin is the problem. God's law is holy, righteous and good. The problem is that sin is aroused by God's law. Rather than subduing sin, God's law actually stirs it up. Sin sabotages the good purposes of the law.

In 7:13-25 Paul demonstrates through his own life experience that believers cannot fulfill the righteous requirements of God's law by their effort alone.

WE CANNOT BE SPIRITUALLY TRANSFORMED BY OUR EFFORTS ALONE (7:13-25)

Through his own experience Paul demonstrates that believers cannot fulfill the righteous requirements of God's law in their own strength. Sin fights us all the way. We need the help of the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote this section to emphasize our need. Just as we need Jesus in order to be justified so also we need the Holy Spirit in order to be sanctified. The crisis of Romans 7 finds its relief in Romans 8. It is the Holy Spirit Who ministers to us and in us to defeat sin. It is the Holy Spirit Who empowers us to become genuinely good people living for God.

Paul begins this section with a question.

Romans 7:13 (ESV)

13 Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?

Is God's law the cause of our spiritual separation from God?

Romans 7:13 (ESV)

13 Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

God's law did not kill us; sin killed us. God's law spotlights sin and exposes it for the evil it is. God's law is the MRI that reveals the cancer of sin. But spotlights and MRIs cannot defeat sin.

Our sin nature is so powerful it sabotages our sincere desire to do what is right.

There is a tug-a-war in every believer's life. As Paul describes, every truly born-again believer wants to be good, wants to do what is right, wants to obey God's law. But the inclination to serve ourselves, to worship ourselves, is so strong it "overrides" our good intentions.

This state of affairs is agonizing to the Apostle Paul. Even he does not fully understand it. He describes our inability to overcome the flesh in our own strength in three cycles; each cycle ends declaring that it is sin dwelling in our flesh that sabotages our efforts to do what is right.

Notice in this first cycle, Paul admits he does not understand his own actions.

Romans 7:14–17 (ESV)

14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. **15** For 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.

Cathy says something and without thinking I respond in a condescending tone of voice. I feel terrible because I've hurt her in the past using that tone of voice. I don't want to speak to her in that way. I agree with God's law that speaking thus is corrupt talk and not good for building up (Eph. 4:29). I agree with God's law that speaking to my wife in that tone of voice is not loving her as Christ loved the Church (Eph. 5:25). I agree with God's law and I want to do God's law, but there it is; I've spoken down to my Beloved. I hate this.

If we try to keep God's law in our own strength, this cycle will continue to be our experience.

In the second cycle, Paul localizes sin in our flesh.

Romans 7:18–20 (ESV)

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.

I think the tendency of most Bible teachers is to define "flesh" as our sin nature and not take seriously the idea that our physical bodies are the primary location of sin. Paul is not saying our physical bodies are evil. He is saying that our physical bodies host sin. This may be in the form of muscle memory and neuroplasticity. Our self centeredness carves deep habits of thought and action that become ingrained in our muscles and neuro pathways.

I'm not suggesting this is the total explanation of what Paul is saying. Sin isn't limited to our bodies. We sin in thought and attitude as well. Hatred, bitterness, covetousness all start in the mind and heart. I do think we need to take more seriously the relationship between sin and our physical bodies.

In the third cycle, Paul emphasizes the conflict between his mind and body.

Romans 7:21–23 (ESV)

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.

It should be the burning desire of every justified believer to do right; to be a genuinely good person. Paul wanted to do right and was distressed by the opposition he experienced from his own body.

In verse 24 Paul expresses his anguish.

Romans 7:24 (ESV)

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

And in verse 25 Paul expresses relief that God has made a way through Jesus.

Romans 7:25 (ESV)

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.*

The way out of this crazy cycle is the subject of Romans 8 – living by the Spirit and putting to death the deeds of the body (8:13).

APPLICATION

We have a traitor within. Our sin nature is not eradicated as a result of justification. There remains in us this powerful bent to serve ourselves and to throw off God's authority. We must be concerned and vigilant. Our sin nature makes us vulnerable to the enticements of Satan and the world. Satan and the world hate God's law. They always misrepresent God's law as bondage and oppression. God's law is holy, righteous and good. Living by God's law leads to the abundant life. Because of the traitor within, we need to always remember how vulnerable we are to being deceived by Satan and the world and our own flesh.

Do you want to be a good person?

Do you really want to do what is right?

Do you really want to be like Jesus?

The Apostle Paul really wanted to be a good person. He wanted to do what was right. He wanted to be like Jesus. This is what caused his anguish.

If we don't really want to be a good person, a person who does what is right, a person who is like Jesus, then sin is of little significance to us. If this is the condition of our heart then it's likely we do not see God's law as holy, righteous and good, but a burden.

If we don't really want to be a good person then Romans 8 is of little interest.

If you don't really want to be a good person I challenge you to examine yourself as to whether you are really born again. Such an attitude does not reflect a heart that has been forgiven and made alive to God. The other possibility is that you are born-again, but you have given yourself over to sin and have hardened your heart against the Spirit. If that's the case, you need to repent and to do the works of repentance to break that habit of sin and replace it with a habit of obedience and righteousness. Seek a brother or sister out whom you trust to pray for you and encourage you in renewing your relationship with Jesus.

Finally, for those of us who truly want to be good people, who want to become more like Jesus, God has made a way. Through the Holy Spirit sin can be defeated. Through the Holy Spirit we can become genuinely good people like Jesus. After the anguish of Romans 7, this is the welcome message of Romans 8.