

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

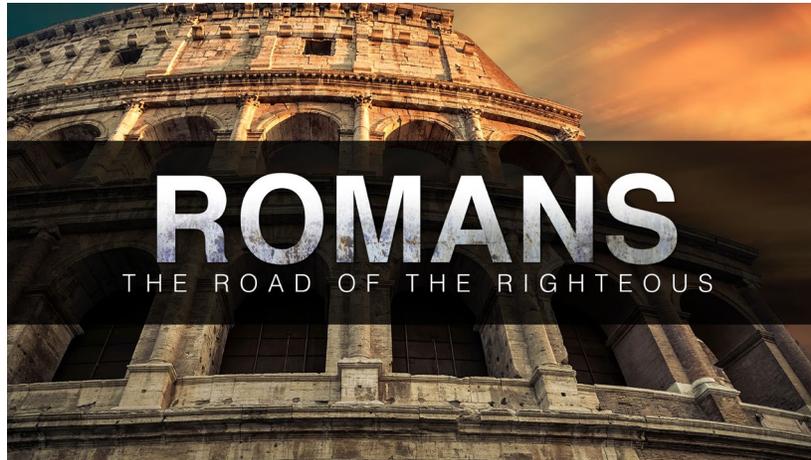
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 7:14

Written By

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Since the Mosaic law (hereafter called the law) is, in fact, holy, righteous and good (Rom. 7:12), and serves God's purpose by identifying what is holy, righteous and good behavior, but man's quest to live in this fashion is overpowered by the presence of indwelling sin, this leads to a logical question:

How Can A Person Gain Victory Over The Powerful Presence Of Inherited Sin (Rom. 7:14-25)?

I'm sure Paul's question is your question. How could it not be? If my best efforts to abide by God's law fall woefully short because of my sinful imperfections, coupled with the resident power of sin, can victory over the sin which easily trips me up ever be realized (*Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us*, Heb. 12.1)? Can spiritual maturation ever become a reality, and, if so, by what means?

Paul, who was a man like you and I, identified with our struggles and worked through tough, trying questions like these. He answers them in a highly personal fashion in what is one of the most practical yet theologically complex passages in his letter to the Roman church. That pericope is Romans 7:14-25. It would be most helpful to begin our study by first reading the inspired text:

¹⁴ For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to 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. 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. ¹⁷ So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. 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. 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. 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.

Victory Starts With Understanding The Positions Of The Passage (Rom. 7:14-25)

Hermeneutically, one of the most important questions which must be answered in order to guide an interpreter to a proper understanding and application of the content of this passage is concerned with ascertaining when Paul made these theological observations. One, do these words reflect his pre-Christian life or his Christian life, was he unsaved her or saved? This, of course, leads to two diametrically opposed views, and, believe me, there is ample evidence for both and I can argue for both positions contextually, lexically, grammatically, and theologically. But is one view more tenable than the other? I believe so, but we shall first begin by presenting the views.

View one describes Paul as a non-Christian Pharisee who zealously attempted to fulfill the Law. True, in Philippians 3:6, Paul waxed eloquent about how he was a Jew of Jews because of his stone-cold allegiance to the demands and dictates of the law. However, in Romans 7:14-25 he looks back at his former unsaved and misdirected life and confesses just how much he struggled internally with his total inability to fulfill the Law as God demanded because of the presence of sin in his life. For instance, he zealously willed to be obedient to the Law, but sin's alien influence trumped his best efforts, turning things like his desire to worship God to actually rejecting the Messiah/God and militantly opposing any Jew who would dare leave the law for a faith relationship with Jesus. This struggle between his interior will to live according to the law and his utter failure to do so because of his sin nature led him to see his ultimate need for salvation at the feet of the One who defeated the power of sin. His name? Jesus.

View two simply and honestly describes the normal Christian life, one which knows the daily and moment by moment struggle between the sinful flesh and the presence of the Spirit of God in the life of the saint (Gal. 5:16-17). Seen from this perspective, the saint knows the importance of following God's law(s), he is quite aware of the wrestling match between his saintly side and his sinful side, and he knows that victory comes in problematic life areas only as he intentionally leans on the power and presence of Jesus . . . not on his power or ability.

Of these views, I believe the second one is more viable for the following reasons.

First, the present tense verbs show a saint, and not a non-Christian, is in view. His entire battle with his desire to do good by obeying God, which is tripped up with his penchant for throwing obedience to the wind because of his sinful demeanor is all described in the present tense as if it was a current issue in his life as he wrote the letter to Rome (Rom. 7:14-21).

Second, his frustrating battle with sin is, *ipso facto*, something a non-Christian could care less about.

- According to Romans 1:18, the unbeliever does not pursue divine truth, but he suppresses it willfully and, at times, knowingly.
- According to Romans 1:19-31, the unbeliever readily and naturally chooses to worship anything and anyone other than the living God. He is not interested in God's law, but his law, which is really lawlessness (Rom. 1:24-27). Therefore, Paul's statement in Romans 7:22 is most implausible for an unbeliever, even a zealous, passionate, law-minded Jew, viz., "For in my inner being I delight in God's law."
- According to Romans 1:28, God has given this truth rejecter a depraved mind which automatically disobeys the law by doing lawless things. Hence, at the close of chapter one, we are not given a picture of a person, regardless of whether he is a Jew or a Gentile, who zealously struggles with abiding by the law of God. He may have the outer trappings of being a lover of the law like a Pharisee; however, in his heart of hearts there is no love for God, but only love for himself and his ability to appear holy by his observance of law and ritual.
- According to Romans 1:32, the unbeliever does not struggle with sin, but approves of those who swaddle sin. Hence, if he is zealous for the Law, like a Pharisee, he challenges others to mimic his zeal so they, too, can be saved by their strict adherence to the law.
- According to Romans 2:17-24, Paul castigates Jews for thinking they were spiritually superior to Gentiles because they were Jews, God's chosen people, and they knew the law. Paul puts them in their spiritual place by detailing how they, in fact, did not adhere consistently to the essence of the law, but played games with it. Again, there is no hint in this passage of a zealous Jew struggling with his inner desire to follow God's law set against his perpetually inability to do this because of resident evil in his heart.
- According to Romans 3:1-20, Paul makes it painfully clear that all mankind, Jew or Gentile, is godless to his core and does not pursue, nor is he interested or concerned about the things of God. As Paul taught, "There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless, there is no one who does good, not even one" (Rom. 3:11b-12). So much for a battle between wanting to do good, spiritually and morally speaking, and not doing it because of the alien power of sin (Rom. 7:14-20).
- According to the structural flow between Romans 7:14-25 and chapter 8, which depicts the believer's victory over sin through the power of the Spirit of God, a believer, not an unbeliever, appears to be in view. Romans 7:14-25 describes the believer's struggle with sin, which is a concept Paul has contextually addressed in chapter 6. Even though the believer is freed from slavery to sin by means of their faith relationship and new standing with Jesus (Rom. 6:7), the present tense command of Romans 6:12 ("Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.") unequivocally demonstrates the potential reality for believers to actually permit various sins to plague them.

Third, why in the world would a non-Christian ever make the emotional plea Paul utters in Romans 6:24, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” The non-Christian does not typically struggle with his spiritual wretchedness before a holy God, but on the contrary he attempts to rationalize his sinful behavior with clever arguments so as to appear quite morally content and pleased with himself. And if the sinner is a law-lover, the gospels readily demonstrate the prideful, peacock strutting ways he showcases his outer holiness, which is wedded to external allegiance to religious laws and rituals. Jesus told a parabolic story about an individual like this when he spoke about a Pharisee and a tax collector going to the temple to pray: ¹¹ *The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² ‘I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get’*” (Luke 18). Note the spiritual smugness wedded to his religious actions. Here was a man guilty of spiritual snobbery of the first order, and who struggled, not with his failure to obey the law, but with the inability of others to be obedient. One can well imagine he’d never breathe Paul’s admission, “What a wretched man I am!” He, like all self-consumed religious legalists and blind zealots, was too busy thinking everyone else around him was utterly wretched.

Based on these observations I am convinced a believer, Jew or Gentile, is in view in Romans 7. This conclusion is all-important for if we think a non-believer is in view, then our focus must be entirely different. We must speak about how a person who seeks to approach God through the law will never find peace because of the sin of Adam which permeates his being. The thrust of the passage, therefore, would be salvific and redemptive, calling for the person in question to leave their hopeless struggle by coming to Christ. Indeed, this is a viable theological motif, I just am not convinced it is the thrust of this passage for the reasons stated.

Conversely, if a believer is in view, the passage demonstrates the daily battle he will have as he attempts to live as a freeman in Christ. Further, it will acquaint the believer with the very real presence and power of sin in his life, which is something he should always be cognizant of. Just because Christ justifies you by faith in His courtroom, just because He has fulfilled the law for you, just because He has freed you from slavery to sin, does not mean your life will be easy. On the contrary, the life you will live will be, as I have said, a constant battle between the flesh and the Spirit, between doing good and giving into sin and evil. Spiritual maturity comes to those who wrestle well and depend on God’s help . . . as we shall see. Hence, identifying the person of the passage is the key to understanding and applying the passage. Victory starts when you realize this truth is true for your life.

Second,

Victory Starts With Understanding The Problem Of The Passage (Rom. 7:14-20)

What is the problem of the passage? Simply put it is this: Paul says he knows God’s law, as any Christian would, be it innate (Rom. 2:15) or Mosaic (Rom. 7:12), and he really desires to obey the law; however, he frequently fails and quickly and shockingly chooses sinful behavior. Can you relate?

- Ever walked away from a Bible studying convicted by the Spirit of a certain behavior and knowing exactly what you needed to do and before the day ended you committed the same ingrained sin again?
- Ever said, “I’ll be the godly husband I’m supposed to be, and in an instant you jettisoned the idea?” Ever thought, “I must come clean of this sexual sin I’ve hidden from so many for so many years, and the next thing you know, you are

- engaged in it in a weak moment?”
- Ever said, “I really need to stop hanging around a particular person because she gets me to do things I know I shouldn’t be doing, and before you know it you’re with them and doing what they do?”
 - Ever said, “I shouldn’t be in the bar with everyone on a business trip because I know what will happen, and on your next trip you’re sitting there having way too many drinks?”
 - Ever said, “I know I must tell so and so I am sorry for what I said and did to destroy our relationship, but when you saw this last you just clamed up?”

What is going on here? Paul tells us in verses 14 through 20.

First, he tells us that saints are fleshly and driven by fleshly, sinful desires even though they are saved (Rom. 7:14). As we’ve said before, the problem is not with God’s law but with man’s desire to fulfill and obey this law. And man’s issue is directly related to his flesh, as Paul states so clearly:

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

The law of God is spiritual as we would expect since it originates with God who is Spirit (John 4:24). Once more, the law is not a problem. Man’s flesh, with its propensity to live contrary to God, to be deceived by sinful desires, and to be tempted by things which benefit the flesh, is what causes the believer angst. This fleshly status, which none of us can escape while we walk the earth, is that which creates a spiritual issue for saints. I’m sure none of us will argue this point.

Second, Paul remarks that saints are not only fleshly but that they can, and do, act fleshly (Rom. 7:15-20). His words couldn’t be more candid and personal:

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

Sound familiar? Do you know the drill?

Have you seen the movie *Venom*? In the movie, journalist Eddie Brock is attempting to take down the evil Carlton Drake, a wealthy genius who created *Life Foundation*, a dangerous company bent on merging alien and human life for new life on planet earth. Unfortunately, after Eddie breaks into the *Life Foundation* headquarters in San Francisco, he winds up in a glass vault with an alien life form called *Venom*. In seconds, the alien attacks Eddie and quickly merges with his body. Eddie is no longer Eddie. He now has superhuman strength and power, and is fueled by a twisted, bloodthirsty rage, which is cannot control no matter how hard he tries. He tries to be the old Eddie, but the resident power of *Venom* causes him to do things he does not want to do. Sound familiar? You can’t watch the video and not walk away seeing a correlation between the believer’s spiritual man which struggles against the powerful desires of his sinful flesh. Like Eddie, your body, as a believer, sometimes causes you to do things you hate, but it is not because you do not have the power to say no. You just choose to give in to the pull and power of the flesh.

What Christian doesn't know this terrible tension?

- I said when I switched churches I'd stop gossiping about people, but I'm back at it again.
- I told my wife I'd stop flirting with other women, but there is just one woman in the office I am just attracted to.
- I committed to never getting involved in porno again, especially after it cost me so much, but I suddenly found an easy way around some of the safeguards my family and friends put in place for me.
- I hate the way I always inflate the truth to make myself look better, and I did good for a while, but lately I've been back at it again.
- I told my girlfriend I didn't want to go that far anymore, but then we got alone one night and, well, I headed back down the same well-worn rocky road.

You know what I'm talking about and you have your own wrestling stories to tell.

Is Paul taking the easy way out and just blaming sin for his inability to live more consistently in his Christian walk? No, he is just being real and honest. He desires to follow and obey God, but at times his flesh gets the best of him. The same thing happens to me and to you, and the fact that it occurs and we are upset and bothered by it shows we are saved. It also shows we need help to defeat the power of the sinful flesh. The lusts of the flesh are many, as Paul articulates in Galatians:

¹⁹ Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, ²¹envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5).

What lusts are you fighting against? What's the powerful pull of your flesh? Each of us face different temptations and struggle against different sinful powers, but we all face the same main issue: the flesh. It is the problem.

Paul makes sure we understand the problem in verses 21-23:

²¹ I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.

Verse 21 reminds us that as long as we reside in this old fleshly body, then evil dwells in us. True, positionally, we are righteous and holy before God (1 Cor. 1:30); however, we have yet to reach a state of ultimate glorification when the sin nature will be neutralized. Until then, we battle the presence of sin within us. Ostensibly, this means that every thought, every word, every action, everything we do and why we do it has the potential to be polluted by sin. Now wonder Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians to pray without ceasing. No wonder he tells us in Ephesians 6 we struggle not against flesh and blood. Our foes are external and internal, therefore, we must always be mindful to keep our minds set on Christ (² *Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.* ³ *For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* ⁴ *When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory,* Col. 3; ² *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God,* Heb. 12).

Realizing the presence of evil as a power in his life moves Paul to make this logical conclusion:

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.

In verse 22 Paul says what you, as a believer probably feel: you love God's law, His teachings and commands. You know you and have every intention of building your life around them because you know this is the right thing to do and it brings maturation and blessing. You, like David, hunger and thirst to know God and follow hard after him.

However, an honest appraisal of your life reminds you that where there is a will to obey God, there is also a counter will, a principle as it were, which works to thwart this holy desire. The resident power of sin, which is associated with your old sinful man, is, as I have said, like the alien creature called Venom. Its express desire is to get you to do what it wants you to do, which runs completely counter to what you desire. Like Venom, it wages a ruthless military campaign against your desire to please God all the time by attacking your mind.

Again, I ask, Can you relate? If you haven't a clue as to what I'm speaking about, then there is a good chance you do not yet know the living God by means of a faith relationship with Jesus, the Christ. If you do understand, then you know God. The question is, Will you at least look honestly into your life right now and ask for the Spirit to show you where you are a prisoner to the power of sin? Realization precedes transformation . . . but more on that later.

For now, it is enough to understand that victory over inbred sin comes in waves:

- First, Victory Starts With Understanding The Positions Of The Passage (Rom. 7:14)
- Second, Victory Starts With Understanding The Problem Of The Passage (Rom. 7:15-20). The problem is clear: your sinful flesh wars against your spiritual man, and sometimes you are victorious and sometimes you are a defeated foe. Are you worn out from the battlefield struggle? Is our patience wearing thin? Are you wondering how you'll ever get a handle on the sin which easily trips you up? Are you at your spiritual wits end? If so, listen and learn from Paul's final point.

Victory Starts With Understanding The Power Of The Passage (Rom. 7:24-25)

When Paul reached the bottom of the spiritual bucket, when the battle started to get to him, when the struggle with sin simple took its toll on his desire to follow hard after Jesus Christ, when he reached a point when he realized just how hard it is to consistently obey God, he lets out a guttural cry:

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

I ask again, How could a non-Christian make this statement? How could they be so overcome by their inability to live for God that they break out in a cry of this nature? That, my friend, would never happen. Conversely, this is the cry of a saint who is weary of the battle, but who has not

lost hope. I know he hasn't lost hope because he asks, "Who will set me free from this body of this death?" The answer to the rhetorical question is undoubtedly, Jesus.

Let's go back to the movie *Venom*. What is *Venom's* kryptonite? High frequency sound. It drives him nuts. It forces him to leave the body in question like a defeated foe. I know every analogy breaks down, but please go with it. Jesus' introduction into your issue is the game changer, He's the high frequency which disarms *Venom's* power at key places in your life. Does not Paul say this much in closing?

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.

He admits there is a royal battle going on, but he offers two salient points. One, Jesus will one day set all believers free from this ongoing battle between their desire to follow God and their desire to follow the pull and power of their sinful flesh. This is the believer's ultimate eschatological hope, something which Paul develops well in Romans 8, especially in verse 10. Two, when you are doing that which you hate, when you are not doing that which you, as a Christian, know you should, is when you call for backup as it were. Who is backup? His name is Jesus. When you yield to Him and His leadership is when a victim becomes a victor.

I remember wrestling a heavy-weight when I was a freshman in High School. At the end of a hard two hour practice, the coach had us wrestle someone several weight divisions above us. I'll never forget the moment the whistle blew and the Samoan-like guy slammed into me like a freight train. I hit the mat instantly. I tried all the moves I knew to break free but couldn't. He was just too heavy, and I was just too tired.

At that point the coach came over and said, "Baker, bridge out of that?" "I can't coach; I don't have any more strength." The coach said, "Baker, I'm going to start kicking your head with my wrestling shoe until you bridge out of his hold." I thought to myself, "You can kick my head all you want to try and get me angry so I'll have a rush of adrenaline, but there is just nothing left in my body." After a few kicks, the coach walked away and the guy pinned me.

If I had only had the ability to call for a buddy, a strong back-up, I'd have wasted no time calling his name.

Spiritually, I'm sure you get the point. You might be down for the count right now as a saint as a heavyweight of sin presses down upon you. It's time to call for your buddy, your backup to come and help you up. His name is Jesus and he's champing at the bit for an opportunity to give you some much needed relief.

Who's ready so say, "God, I need my buddy?"

And if you do not know God today, then one thing is quite sure. Sin owns you. It dominates you, totally. You are its prisoner and you do its bidding. If this is your condition, then you need to come to Christ in faith today because He's the only one capable of empowering you to live a life of true spiritual vitality and victory.