

Romans 7:14-25
7/19/2020 Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
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Romans 7:14-25 (NKJV)

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| 14 For we know that the law is spiritual,
but I am carnal, sold under sin. | 20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is
no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells
in me. |
| 15 For what I am doing, I do not
understand. For what I will to do, that I
do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. | 21 I find then a law, that evil is present
with me, the one who wills to do good. |
| 16 If, then, I do what I will not to do, I
agree with the law that it is good. | 22 For I delight in the law of God
according to the inward man. |
| 17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but
sin that dwells in me. | 23 But I see another law in my members,
warring against the law of my mind, and
bringing me into captivity to the law of
sin which is in my members. |
| 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my
flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is
present with me, but how to perform
what is good I do not find. | 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will
deliver me from this body of death? |
| 19 For the good that I will to do, I do not
do; but the evil I will not to do, that I
practice. | 25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ
our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself
serve the law of God, but with the flesh
the law of sin. |

I'm just gonna get this disclaimer out of the way now. This is one of my favorite passages of all time. When I saw that this text was one of the pericope texts for this Sunday, I was so excited to dig back into it. The reason this is one of my favorite texts is that it shone the brightness of the Gospel to me when I was in a despaired and terrified state, and ever since, it has continued to comfort my soul greatly. During my first year in seminary, we were reading C. F. W. Walther's famous work *Law and Gospel*. It is an excellent book that I highly recommend. However, there was one section that just caused me an immense amount of terror. In it, Walther said that those who willfully sinned were casting the Holy Spirit out of them, and thus forfeiting salvation. Upon reading that, I thought, "Well, isn't all sin willful? Does that mean I've thrown

my faith away? Am I even saved anymore?” I wrestled with those thoughts for a handful of days before finally, by God’s grace, a classmate explained that section to me and pointed me to this text. As I read, it was like a weight was lifted off my shoulders. To know that even the apostle Paul, one of the mightiest men God used to spread the Gospel, struggled with sin just like I did? Wow, talk about mind blowing, and comforting. This passage reminded me of the richness of the Gospel, and gave me a new perspective on what the daily experience of Christian life really is. I found that the Christian life is not one of continual stopping sinning to the point where we’d get to something resembling perfection.

Rather, the Christian life is one of struggle with sin, repentance, and faith. I came to that conclusion after wrestling with the text and having three cogs fall into place, if you will. First, on this side of heaven, Christians will always continue to struggle with sin. Second, this does not diminish what Christ has done for us. It is this act that allows us to engage in the struggle in the first place. And finally, we live in repentance and faith as we struggle with our sin day after day.

The first piece of this I didn’t really have to wrestle so much with because I was experiencing it and it was right there in the text. And that piece is that on this side of heaven, Christians will always continue to struggle with sin.

That is, unfortunately, the bad news of this text. Despite our best efforts, we will always be battling our sin on this side of heaven. And that is because we, like Paul says in verse 14 are “carnal,” or “of the flesh,” sold under sin. We, like Paul and the rest of humanity, have our original sin nature tied so intimately to these bodies, that we cannot be rid of it until we are dead and buried in the ground.

Because of this, even after we’re saved, we echo Paul here and say that the things we don’t want to do, sinning, we do, despite wanting to do good and follow God’s law.

That cry of Paul is one of the first things that hit me when I first dug into this text way back then. I felt that exact same struggle, and in a weird way, it comforted me. It comforted me to know that even Paul, the man who wrote almost half the New Testament, the man who led countless people to Christ, still struggled with sin. It took the weight off my shoulders to know that being a Christian didn’t mean, upon being saved, doing all these good works to maintain your salvation. It meant, as I later discovered, continuing to live in repentance and faith, which we’ll touch on later.

That weight that I was feeling is why now, I can tend to react really strongly (sometimes too strongly) to Christians influenced by the holiness movement. Willingly or not, they are continuing to press the Law upon people, pushing them to be perfect by their own striving and working. And while it is certainly good to spur believers on to good works, as the author of Hebrews tells us, we must be careful in our application of both Law and Gospel when doing so. As Paul explains right before this text, the Law’s main function is to show us our sin and drive us to repentance. The Law is not there to whip us into doing good works.

Hence, getting back to the text a bit, we have this “I desire to do what is good, but can’t do it. I don’t want to do evil, but I can’t help but do it.” Upon coming to faith, we agree, by faith,

that God's Law is good. But we have our sin nature tied to this body so intimately, that it can't help but act out its desires.

But where does that leave us in relation to salvation? Has not Christ set us free from sin? That was the next piece to fall into place as I wrestled with this text.

The struggle against sin does not diminish what Christ has done. In fact, that act allows us to engage in the struggle in the first place

So, does the fact that we're constantly going to have our sin with us then mean we should just give up the fight? To quote Paul, by no means!

Yes we still have our sin with us, but that does not negate what Christ has done for us. Christ has still set us free from the bondage of sin. We are freed from following our sinful passions and desires now that we are saved!

And that is what awakens us to the struggle that Paul talks about in verses 15-23, the majority of this text. If it were not for Christ awakening us to faith, we wouldn't even be struggling with sin. We'd be carried along by it and all its desires.

We echo with Paul in verse 24 "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Thanks to his work, as well as the gift of the Holy Spirit given to us by faith, we can engage in this struggle with sin.

Because we, like Paul, agree that God's Law is good. It is the standard for a good and perfect society. And we want to do it. We want to live by it. We want to serve God. We want to love and serve our neighbor. And we still do! However, it is done imperfectly, and we are hampered by our sin. Like Paul says, we have the desire to want to serve God and live according to His Law, but our members act contrary to that. I want to go out and preach the Gospel to people, but my fear and insecurity hamper me sometimes. I want to love my neighbor, but my laziness gets in the way. And even when I want to do those things, I do them with selfish desires more than I do them for selfless ones.

It gets to the point where it's almost like it's both us and not us committing the sin. It's still our bodies, our members, committing the sin, but it's almost like it's a different person doing it. Have you ever felt that way? You don't realize what you're doing right away, and then you come to your senses after you've sinned? It's certainly happened to me, and Paul it seems.

This is because we have two desires, two people almost, waging war against each other, as Paul says in verses 22 and 23. His inner man, the man saved and regenerated by faith, wants to live according to the Law, but his old man, the sinful man still residing with him, wants to act out its desires as well

And thus, we come to the struggle, the reality of having two desires or natures in us. Martin Luther called this phenomenon "simul justus et peccator," which is Latin for "at the same time saint and sinner." At all times, we are both believing saints, completely forgiven by grace through faith in the work of Christ, and wretched sinners. Sometimes we can manage to restrain our flesh enough to not act out in sin and live according to the law, but other times we don't. Other times we sin without even realizing it, and then come to our senses later and repent.

So we struggle daily. Each day we wake up, we have to fight our sin all over again. Some days we'll win, and other days we'll lose. Some days, by the power of the Spirit, we'll manage to restrain our flesh from sinning and hurting our neighbor, some days we won't. Some days we'll be eager to go to church, read the Bible, serve our neighbor, whatever, and other days we just won't. But what does this struggle look like in daily life, I asked and you're probably asking? It looks like repentance and faith.

We live in repentance and faith as we struggle with our sin day after day. This life of repentance and faith in the struggle against sin is what Paul is getting at in verse 25 when he says that he serves the law of God with his mind, but with his flesh he serves the Law of sin.

I've come to understand that verse, and the Christian life as a whole, as a cycle. The Law comes and convicts me, convicts us, of sin. I/We then hear the Gospel and receive forgiveness of sins. This encourages us in faith, and helps us to continue in the fight against our sin. We then return to the Law, using it as a guide in how to love our neighbor (theologians call this guiding function the third function of the Law). And then, at the end of the day, when we look back on it, we find that we did not perfectly fulfill the Law, and we are convicted once again, and the cycle repeats itself again and again.

Now, that sounds kinda boring, doesn't it? There isn't any grand victory over sin in this. It's long, it's hard, and not glamorous in the least. There's suffering involved.

Well, you're right. Now, I'm not saying that God can't miraculously free you from some sin you're struggling with. That possibility is there, and we've all heard testimonies speaking to that. However, if you base how well you're doing in your Christian walk on how freed you are from sin, you're just burdening yourself with the Law again.

Carl Rosenius, author of the famous (at least I think it's famous. Bible Schoolers I think will recognize this book) *A Faithful Guide to Peace with God*, has an excellent devotional commentary on Romans. In commenting on this section, he says this: "Spiritual victory consists in the steadfast walk with Christ." Let me say that again. "Spiritual victory consists in the steadfast walk with Christ."

Spiritual victory is not necessarily found in not being tempted by some sin anymore (but thanks be to God when that happens!). Rather, it is more commonly found in the constant struggle with sin and the constant return to the cross in repentance.

So when you're discouraged that you can't kick some sin, or that you're constantly tempted by this sin or that sin, or when you perhaps have a salvation crisis like I did, and cry out with Paul "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?", you can also echo Paul and say "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord." He has forgiven you! Repent, then, and run straight to the cross where you are forgiven in Christ. His blood still covers you, and he is currently at the right hand of the Father, advocating for you.

And then be encouraged by the fact that one day, your cry will be answered, and the struggling and suffering will be over. Christ will return, and you'll have a new body. A body that

has been fully redeemed and without sin. The struggle will be over. Your new body, like the new creation that will be ushered in, will be free of sin and disease, and it will be unable to die.

Conclusion

So, to conclude, on this side of heaven, we unfortunately are going to struggle with sin for the rest of our lives. However, this does not negate what Christ has done for us. In fact, his work is what empowers us and allows us to struggle in the first place. So in light of that, we live in repentance and faith, repeating the same cycle and struggle day after day, with some good days and some bad days. The Christian life is one of struggle with sin, repentance, and faith.

I'll leave you with some lyrics from the band Tenth Avenue North. I was obsessed with them when I was in high school and in my early college years. They have a song called "The Struggle," and the chorus goes like this: Hallelujah, we are free to struggle, but we're not struggling to be free. Thanks be to God, as Paul says, for Jesus Christ, who has delivered us from our sin, both now and in the future, and for His grace that covers us in our daily struggle with sin. Amen. And now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord, Amen.