

## The Believer and Indwelling Sin, Part 1

### Introduction

Romans 7:14-25 says, *"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I understand not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If, then, I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now, then, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man; 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. Oh, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death? 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."*

That passage is a poignant description of someone in conflict with himself--someone who loves God's moral law and wants to obey it, but is pulled away from doing so by the sin that is in him. It is the personal experience of a soul in conflict. This intense warfare within the heart is summed up in the desperate cry of verse 24, *"Oh, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me?"*

### A. The Controversy over the Passage

There has always been debate whether Paul was describing a Christian or a non-Christian in this passage. Some people say there is too much bondage to sin in view in for this passage to refer to a Christian. Others say there is too much desire to do good for a non-Christian. You can't be a Christian and be bound to sin, and you can't be a non-Christian and desire to keep the law of God. Therein is the conflict of interpreting the passage.

#### 1. The non-Christian view

##### a. Supporting its position

##### 1) The power of the Spirit

Those who believe Romans 7:14-25 is speaking of a non-Christian say verse 14 is the key: *"I am carnal, sold under sin."* Then they point to verse 18, which says, *"I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not."* They conclude that has to be a non-Christian because a Christian knows how to do what's good. There seems to be an obvious lack of Holy Spirit's power here.

##### 2) The peace of God

The despair of verse 24--*"Oh, wretched man that I am!"*-- seems far removed from the promise of Romans 5:1-2: *"Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have access by faith into this*

*grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*" The question is asked, How can a man justified by faith be so wretched?

3) The freedom of believers

Romans 6 has many examples of the believer's freedom from sin's power. Verse 2 says, *"How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer in it?"* Verses 6-7 say, *"Our old man is crucified with [Christ], that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin."* Verses 11-12 say, *"Reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin .... Let not sin, therefore, reign in your mortal body."* Verse 17-18 say, *"God be thanked, that whereas you were the servants of sin, ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you. Being, then, made free from sin, ye became servants of righteousness."* With all the evidence of chapter 6, the proponents of the non-Christian view ask how one who says, "I am carnal, sold under sin" (7:14), can be a Christian.

b. Stating its problems

The emphasis in chapter 6 is on the new creation, the new nature, the new identity, the new person in Christ, and the holiness of the believer. In his new redeemed self, the believer has broken sin's dominion. However the emphasis of chapter 7 is different. Paul now gives the other side.

Every Christian knows that even though he is a new creature in Christ, sin is still a problem. In fact, that conflict is pointed out even in chapter 6: "Let not sin, therefore, reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in its lusts" (v. 12). In spite of all that Paul said in chapter 6 about the Christian's new nature, he never said the Christian wouldn't battle with sin. Verse 12 implies that we will. That implication is carried into verse 13: *"Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin."* Because it is still possible for Christians to yield to sin, they are commanded not to.

In Romans 6:19 Paul says, *"I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh; for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity, unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness, unto holiness."* The implication again is that a Christian could yield to sin.

So arguing that chapter 7 cannot refer to a Christian because of statements in chapter 6 is to misunderstand the intention of chapter 6.

2. The Christian view

a. The accurate description of a Christian

1) Pursuing God

Paul says, *"I delight in the law of God after the inward man"* (Rom. 7:22). That certainly isn't something a non-Christian could accurately claim. Romans 8:7 says that the unregenerate person is not subject to the law of God.

In verse 25 Paul says, *"I thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. So, then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God."* That sounds like a Christian to me--thanking God through Jesus Christ our Lord and serving the law of God with the mind are the deepest longings of a Christian.

2) Hating sin

Verse 15 describes Paul's thwarted desire to do what is right: *"That which I do, I understand not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I."* Does an unsaved person long to do what is right but inexplicably prevented from doing it? Not according to Jeremiah, who said *"the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked"* (Jer. 7:9).

Paul continues to explain the internal battle in verses 18-19 and 21: *"I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing; for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do.... I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me."* Something deep inside this person wants to do what is right. Nevertheless an evil principle keeps that from being easily accomplished.

Romans 3 tells us that the unsaved person has no such longing to do the will of God: *"There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God... There is none that doeth good, no, not one.... There is no fear of God before their eyes"* (vv. 11-12, 18). Paul says that an unbeliever does not pursue God's purposes or His holy law.

The conflict described in Romans 7 can be true of a redeemed person only. I don't think an unsaved person experiences much of a battle at all. From God's perspective, people are not good by nature, but evil.

b. The acute debate over carnality

Another question comes up at this point that has sparked an equally furious debate: What kind of Christian is Romans 7 talking about?

1) The Christian of Romans 7 is spiritual immature

Some believe he's a carnal Christian--one with a low level of spirituality who is trying in his own strength to keep the law. One writer says Romans 7 describes the *"abject misery and failure of a Christian who attempts to please God under the Mosaic system"* (Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Contrast Between the Spiritual Conflict in Romans 7 and Galatians 5," Bibliotheca Sacra 123 [Oct.-Dec., 1966]: 312). Bibliotheca Sacra, 123 (66) 312).

2) The Christian of Romans 7 is spiritually mature

Romans 7:14-25 describes the most mature Christian there could ever be, because he who sees so clearly the inability of his flesh to uphold the divine standard. The more spiritual a believer is, the greater his sensitivity of his shortcomings will be. An immature Christian doesn't have such an honest self-perception. The legalist is under the illusion that he is very spiritual. I

believe Paul is describing himself in this chapter, which would seem obvious from the extensive use of the personal pronoun "I" in this portion of Scripture.

a) Paul's the confessions throughout Scripture

Some people say Romans 7:14-25 describes Paul's struggle before he was saved or when he just got saved and was still spiritually immature, but I disagree. I think it describes him at the very heights of his Christian perception, where he recognizes that he does not live up to the God's holy standards, though he desires to do so with all his heart. He finds himself debilitated by the ugly reality that sin is still hanging on.

(1) 1 Corinthians 15:9-10--Paul here said the same thing in other terms: *"I am the least of the apostles, that am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am."* Paul didn't feel fit to be an apostle because he had once persecuted the church.

(2) Ephesians 3:8--Paul considered himself as *"less than the least of all saints."* That 1 Corinthians was written before Ephesians shows he became more humble as time went on. Although in our judgment Paul is the supreme man relative to other men, he saw himself as having fallen from the position of the least of the apostles to less than the least of all believers.

(3) 1 Timothy 1:12-16--Paul said, *"I thank Christ Jesus, our Lord, who hath enabled me, in that he counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious; but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. Nevertheless, for this cause I obtained mercy."* Paul wrote this after he wrote Ephesians. Having experienced more of God's mighty power, wisdom, and knowledge he became increasingly sensitive to the presence of sin in his life.

b) Paul's emphasis through Romans 7

(1) The terms he uses

The terms Paul uses in Romans 7 are so precise that we can't miss his struggle with sin. He states that he hates committing sin (v. 15), that he loves righteousness (vv. 19, 21), that he delights in the law of God from the bottom of his heart (v. 22), and that he thanks God for the deliverance that is his in Christ (v. 25). Those are the responses of a mature Christian.

(2) The transitions he makes

The change in verb tenses is a clue that this passage applies to a Christian. The verbs in Romans 7:7-13 are in the past tense. They

refer to Paul's life before his conversion and the process of conviction he experienced when he stood face-to-face with the law of God. However, in verses 14-25 where we see the battle with sin taking place, they are in the present tense. That tells us Paul has moved out of the past before he was redeemed, into the present.

Accompanying that change is a different relationship to sin. In Romans 7:11 Paul says, "*Sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.*" Sin killed Paul's hope and security in his self-righteousness. But in verses 15-25, we see Paul alive and fighting with sin.

So, I believe Romans 7:14-25 is Paul's own testimony of how it is to live as a Spirit-controlled, mature believer. He loves the holy law of God with his whole heart, but finds himself wrapped in human flesh and unable to fulfill it the way his heart wants him to.

## **B. The Context of the Passage**

Romans 7:14-25 continues Paul's discussion of the law. He previously had been affirming that although there's nothing wrong with the law, it can't save or sanctify on account of human weakness. Its chief value is in convicting us of sin. That's true both before and after we're saved, which is what Romans 7:14-25 illustrates. Sin does not obviate the law before we are saved, and it doesn't obviate it after we're saved either. In fact, when you become a Christian, you should be more concerned about your sin than you were before you were saved. When the psalmist said "*Thy word have I hidden in mine heart, that I might not sin*" (Psalm 119:11), he was saying that the Word of God in the heart leads to conviction. It isn't just information--it has power!

## **Lesson**

Romans 7:14-25 is a picture of indwelling sin in the life of a believer. This passage is unique in that it contains a series of laments-- desperate, repetitious cries of a distressed soul in great conflict. Each lament follows the same pattern. Paul first describes his condition, then gives proof of it, and then explains the source of the problem.

### **I. THE STRUGGLE RECORDED (vv. 14-23)**

#### **A. The First Lament (vv. 14-17)**

##### **1. The condition of carnality (v. 14)**

*"For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin."*

##### **a. The affirmation of spirituality**

The word "for" tells us Paul is not introducing a new subject. He's continuing the same subject from the prior passage about the law revealing our sin. Paul continues to answer the hypothetical accusation that his preaching of salvation by grace through faith apart from the law implies that the law is evil. He states to the contrary that "the law is spiritual," meaning that it comes from the Spirit of God, reflecting His holy, just, and good nature (cf. v. 12).

##### **b. The admission of sinfulness**

## 1) The barrier to obedience

Although Paul delights in God's law, he confesses there's a barrier that prevents him from obeying it: his carnal or fleshly nature. He doesn't say he was in the flesh or controlled by the flesh. Romans 7:5 makes it clear that Christians cannot be considered as being in the flesh: *"When we were in the flesh, the sinful impulses, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death."* Romans 8:8-9 says to its Christian audience, *"They that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh."* The phrase "in the flesh" refers to an unregenerate condition.

Although Christians are not in the flesh, the flesh is still in us. We're no longer held captive to it, but we can still act fleshly or carnal. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul says, *"I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ.... For ye are yet carnal; for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?"* (vv. 1, 3). He reproved the Corinthian Christians for acting in a fleshly way.

In Romans 7 Paul says, *"I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing.... With the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh, the law of sin"* (vv. 18, 25). He admits that the flesh is still present. Flesh is simply a term for our humanness.

When Paul said, *"Let not sin, therefore, reign in your mortal body"* (Rom. 6:12), he implied that it doesn't reign in the believer's renewed mind, although it still affects it. When he dies, he immediately goes to heaven because the flesh is the only thing that keeps the believer from being fit for heaven.

Any Christian could make the statement in verse 14. Saying your carnal is the same as saying you're a sinner. For example, when I am angry, insensitive, or don't pursue God as diligently as I desire, I see my humanness getting in the way of accomplishing all I ought to do.

## 2) The bondage to sin

### a) The explanation

Paul states in verse 14 that he is *"sold under sin."* Verse 23 gives us a similar statement: *"I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin."* But how can that be since we as Christians have been delivered from sin? The phrase *"sold under sin"* is literally "having been sold under the sin" in the Greek text. That puts emphasis on the sin principle, the product of the fall of man, which continues to reside in the believer's body, not the individual deeds committed.

Being "sold under sin" doesn't mean Paul actively committed himself to sinning, as is said about Ahab in 1 Kings 21:20, 25 and of the idolatrous Israelites in 2 Kings 17:17; it means he recognized that in this life we as believers will constantly have to battle sin on account of our human flesh.

Every time you sin, you lose the battle, and become in a sense captive to sin.

Our incorruptible nature isn't in view in verse 14; the physical, human nature is. The law or principle of sin resides in our bodily "members" (v. 23), which include the physical, emotional, intellectual, and volitional parts of man.

Can Paul's lament of being sold under sin come from a true believer? In Psalm 51:5 David says, *"Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me"* (NIV). That sounds like a man whose never been redeemed, doesn't it? But David was simply looking at one reality about himself. His lament is similar to that of Isaiah, who upon seeing a vision of God said, *"Woe is me! For I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips"* (Isa. 6:5). All the prophet could see against the glorious holiness of God was his own sin.

b) The evidence

Paul's lament is evidence of the apostle's maturity. He knew that the law is spiritual, holy, just, and good, but that he remained fleshly. He reiterated that perception in 1 Timothy 1:15 when he admitted to being the chief of sinners. That is a legitimate and desirable perception for a Christian to have. Not only can a Christian say that he is in bondage to sin, though redeemed, but the more spiritual he is, the more likely he is to say this. It is a perception of any mature Christian; not of one who has a poor self-image.

Paul put all our experiences with sin into words in Romans 7:14-25. We all know there's sin in our lives even though it shouldn't be there. Although sin is not the product of our new self, we're still bound to some degree by the body we dwell in. Verse 14 could be paraphrased, "The law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, experiencing a bondage to sin at times."

Commentator C.E.B. Cranfield wrote, "The more seriously a Christian strives to live from grace and to submit to the discipline of the gospel, the more sensitive he becomes to ... the fact that even his very best acts and activities are disfigured by the egotism which is still powerful within him--and no less evil because it is often more subtly disguised than formerly" (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol.1 [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975], p. 358). He's right. That sinful presence of the flesh is still there. Sin is so wretched that even when a person has been redeemed, it still hangs on to some degree.

2. The proof of the problem (v. 15)

*"That which I do I understand [or, know] not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I."*

A self-righteous person deceives himself into thinking he is moral, but a Christian led by the Spirit will not. He sees the proof in him of indwelling sin. The word translated "understand" or "know" implies an intimate love (e.g. Gen. 4:1). To make his point, not only does Paul say that he does not love what he ends up doing, but also that he hates doing it. His failure to do what he desired and his practice of doing what he hated reflects a profound inner turmoil. His will was frustrated by his sinful flesh. It's not that evil won all the time; but that he was frustrated in his attempt to perfectly obey God's entire law.

If you're a Christian, you can identify with that frustration. For instance, no sooner are you complimented for having done something right then you become proud--and now you've just done something wrong. The road to spirituality is paved with a sense of your own wretchedness, not your own self-glory. The spiritual man has a broken and contrite heart, realizing he can't be all that God wants him to be. Sad to say many Christians have yet to reach this point. That's because they're so holy; it's because their comprehension of God's holy law is so shallow.

3. The source of the struggle (vv. 16-17)

*"If, then, I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now, then, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."*

Do you know what makes a Christian want to carry out God's law? His new nature within, which according to 1 John 3:9 does not sin. When he goes against his new nature, it isn't the law that is responsible, but the sin that still resides in his frail human body. A Christian will naturally pursue the moral excellence of God's law. The more mature a Christian is--the more he love the Lord, submits to the Spirit's direction in his life, and grows in his understanding of God's holiness--the greater will be his longing to fulfill the law.

\* **Was Paul Shirking His Responsibility?**

Verse 17 sounds like Paul refuses to take the blame for his sin. It's as if he's blaming an inanimate object instead of himself. However in verse 14 Paul acknowledges that he is sinful. We can all identify with his desire to live for God as well as his failure to be as holy as He wants us to be. Accepting responsibility for our failure challenges the philosophical dualism teaching that God doesn't hold us responsible for our sin because sin is tied to our old nature. That view concludes we should go ahead and sin because we can't do anything about our tendency to sin. But we must reject that kind of thinking. Although a Christian will sin less and less as he matures, he at the same time will be more aware of the sin in his life because of his increased understanding of God's law.

Verse 17 goes beyond Paul's admitting that he is responsible for sin. He specifies what part of him is responsible by making a more technical distinction: the sin that dwells in his flesh. Verse 17 says, *"Now, then, it is no more I ... but sin."* The Greek phrase δε ουκετι ("now ... no more"; a negative adverb of time) means from this point on something has changed. An unbeliever could never claim a new beginning that marks a permanent change from the past. Whatever he was, he still is. But

when Christ comes into a believer's life and gives him a new spiritual nature, the believer can accurately claim that he is no longer the same.

Paul's reasoning in verse 17 is reminiscent of Galatians 2:20: "*I [the old nature] am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*" After salvation, sin no longer resides in man's innermost self, which is recreated to be like Christ. Yet it finds its residual dwelling in our flesh. That's why Paul said nothing good dwelt in his flesh (v. 18).

## Conclusion

### A. The Failure of the Flesh

There's a big difference between surviving sin and reigning sin: sin no longer reigns in us, but it does survive in us. We are like an artistically unskilled person who has a beautiful picture in clear view, but has no ability to actually paint it. He's debilitated by his physical incapacity. The fault is not with the scene, but with his inability. That's where the Christian finds his frustration. The problem is not the law; it is our inability to keep the law because of our sinful flesh. That is why we must ask the Master Artist to put his hand on ours to help us paint the strokes we could have never painted independently of Him. We can experience victory over sin only when we yield ourselves to the One who can overcome the flesh.

### B. The Solution of the Spirit

Galatians 5:17 says, "*The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other, so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.*" Romans 7 echoes that battle. Galatians 5:16 tells us how to win: "*This I say then, walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.*" The Holy Spirit gives us victory. But let me warn you that the more victory you experience as you mature in Christ, the more you will recognize sin in your life. The Spirit of God is the resource for those whose deepest longing is to fulfill the law of God but are distressed because they fail to obey it perfectly. Praise God that we will one day leave our sinful flesh behind to enter glory and perfectly fulfill His law.

## Focusing on the Facts

1. Identify the conflict raging within Paul in Romans 7:14-25.
2. What has been the major debate regarding that passage?
3. Why do some conclude that Paul was referring to himself before he came to Christ?
4. When is sin's dominion over a person come to an end? What implications in Romans 6 support your answer?
5. What desire of Paul shows that he is speaking from a Christian perspective?
6. What does Romans 3:11-12, 18 tell us about an unbeliever's regard for God?
7. Explain the debate about the maturity of the Christian in view in Romans 7:14-25.
8. The more \_\_\_\_\_ a believer is, the greater his \_\_\_\_\_ to his shortcomings will be.
9. Chart Paul's evaluation of himself in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, Ephesians 3:8, and 1 Timothy 1:12-16.

10. Describe the tension that a Christian lives in.
11. What transitions take place in Romans 7, leading us to conclude that verses 14-25 are the testimony of a mature believer?
12. Although Paul wanted to obey God's law, what barrier prevented him from obeying it fully?
13. Where does sin reign, according to Romans 6:12?
14. What did Paul mean when he said he was "sold under sin" (Rom. 7:14)?
15. Is it a sign of maturity to admit one's bondage to sin? Explain.
16. Describe the profound inner turmoil Paul experienced (Rom. 7:15)?
17. The road to spirituality is paved with a sense of your own \_\_\_\_\_, not your own \_\_\_\_\_.
18. Why do many Christians not have broken and contrite hearts over their sin?
19. What part of a Christian makes him want to carry out God's law? Explain the relationship between his longing to fulfill that law and spiritual maturity.
20. Why could an unbeliever never claim a new beginning marking a permanent change from the past?
21. What is the only way believers can experience victory over sin? Explain.

## Pondering the Principles

1. If you're a Christian, the conflict of delighting in God's will but failing to carry it out perfectly should be present in your life if you are a Christian. However knowing that it is normal for Christians to sin once in awhile, don't succumb to the temptation of rationalizing your sin. Sin brings nothing nothing but guilt, misery, and despair to the person who refuses to deal with it as it appears in his life. Follow the lead of the psalmist who said, "*Thy word have I hidden in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee*" (Ps. 119:11).
2. Memorize Galatians 5:16: "*Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.*" We can win the battle over the sinful desires of our flesh when we walk by the Spirit, a step-by-step process of depending on the guidance of the Spirit to avoid and resist temptation. Are you communing daily with God in prayer? When you encounter temptations, is your first reaction to seek the Spirit's wisdom on how to have victory in that area? Take time now to praise God for the resource we have in the Spirit and the promise we have in one day being totally free from sin.