

The Believer and Indwelling Sin, Part 2

Introduction

A. Our Sensitivity to Sin

It is said that a flippant young man said to a preacher in mocking fashion, "You say that unsaved people carry a great weight sin. Frankly, I feel nothing. How heavy is sin? Ten pounds? Fifty pounds? Eighty pounds? A hundred pounds?"

The preacher thought for a moment and gently replied, "If you laid a four-hundred-pound weight on a corpse, would it feel the load?"

The young man was quick to say, "Of course not: it's dead." Driving home his point the preacher replied, "The person who doesn't know Christ is equally dead. And though the load is great, he feels none of it."

The believer is not indifferent to the weight of sin like the unbeliever is. He is actually hypersensitive to it. Having come to Jesus Christ, his senses are awakened to the reality of sin. His sensitivity to sin intensifies as he matures spiritually. Such sensitivity prompted a saint as great as Chrysostom, the fourth century church father, to say he feared nothing but sin (*Second Homily on Eutropius*).

It is said that an unbeliever, when confronted of the message of salvation by grace, retorted, "If I believed your doctrine that salvation is only a matter of faith, and was sure I could be so easily converted, I would believe and then take my fill of sin." Clearly he did not understand that a true Christian could never tolerate the kind of sinful indulgence he had in mind.

Coming to faith in Christ brings an overwhelming sense of sin to the heart and mind. A Christian feels the true weight of sin while an unbeliever does not. Ephesians 2:1 tells us they are "*dead in trespasses and sins.*" But a Christian under grace hates the evil that is in him. He does not seek not to fill up his life with sin, but to empty it.

B. The Consequences of Sin

As Christians, we should be aware of the serious consequences of sin.

1. The Holy Spirit is grieved (Eph. 4:30). We certainly don't want to make God sad.
2. Our prayers go unanswered (1 Pet. 3:7). None of us would choose for our prayers not to be answered.
3. Our life becomes powerless (1 Cor. 9:27). Paul feared the power of sin to disqualify himself from the ministry.
4. Our praise is unacceptable (Ps. 33:1). The psalmist said, "*Praise is fitting to the upright.*" Conversely, praise is not fitting for those who are not.
5. God's blessing is withheld (Jer. 5:25). Jeremiah rebuked the nation of Israel, saying, "*Your sins have withheld good things from you.*"
6. Our joy is forfeited (Ps. 51:12). When confronted with his sin, David asked God to restore the joy of His salvation to him.
7. God's chastening is administered (Heb. 12:5-11).

8. Our spiritual growth is hindered (1 Cor. 3:1-3). The apostle Paul couldn't offer the Corinthians the spiritual nourishment he wanted them to experience because they were so fleshly.
9. Our service is limited (2 Tim. 2:21). Paul says we must have pure lives to be vessels fit for the Master's use.
10. Our fellowship is polluted (1 Cor. 10:21). Paul instructs us to cleanse our hearts before God before we come to the Lord's Table (11:28-29).
11. Our lives are endangered (1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16). If we are involved in unrepentant sin, we are in danger of losing our lives.
12. God is dishonored (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Because our bodies are the temple of the Lord, we dishonor him when we bring them into contact with sin.

None of us wants to do any of those things. On the contrary, we can more readily identify with the psalmist who said, "*As the hart [deer] panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God*" (Ps. 42:1).

When an individual comes to faith in Jesus Christ, God plants a new nature within him that longs for the things of God and despises sin. That is the testimony of the apostle Paul in Romans 7:14-25--a man in conflict who hated sin and yearned to obey the law of God. Such conflict is not experienced by unredeemed men, who according to John 3:19-20 love darkness and hate righteousness. The psalmist, reflecting on the Word of God, said, "*Through thy precepts I get understanding; therefore, I hate every false way*" (Ps. 119:104).

Puritan Thomas Watson said that a sign of sanctification is a hatred for sin. A hypocrite may leave sin, yet love it--as a snake sheds its skin but keeps its venom--but a sanctified person not only leaves sin, he loathes it. God has changed our nature: He has put on us the breastplate of holiness, which, though it may be shot at, can never be shot through (*The Body of Divinity*, [London: Banner of Truth, 1970], pp. 246, 250).

Review

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

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

1. The condition of carnality (v. 14)
Paul found himself still being victimized by sin, even though he was redeemed.
2. The proof of the problem (v. 15)
Paul was experiencing conflict between desiring to obey God's law and being frustrated in not being able to live up to that standard all the time. It's a sign of immaturity to think you've arrived at a point of spiritual perfection. The apostle Paul admitted he hadn't obtained that goal, nevertheless he continued to press toward it (Phil. 3:12-14). That's the humility that comes from right spiritual perception. If we understand God's law, we're going to see ourselves as falling far short.
3. The source of the struggle (vv. 16-17)
The source of Paul's problem was the sin that continued to dwell in his human nature. It conflicted with his new nature in Christ received at salvation. Even though

we're redeemed, sin hangs on in our flesh and prevents us from consistently fulfilling our desire to obey God's law.

I believe every child of God who is walking in obedience to God laments the reality of his sin. In 1 John 1:8-10 we see we're to acknowledge and confess our sin, and in Psalm 97:10 we see we're to love the Lord while hating evil.

Lesson

B. The Second Lament (vv. 18-20)

1. The condition of carnality (v. 18a)
"I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing"

Paul here gives a more technical identification of the part of him that is actually sinning than he has previously. He wants to emphasize that it's not his new incorruptible nature that's failing to obey God's law; it's the sin that dwells in his flesh. Paul admits there is nothing good in his unredeemed humanity. The flesh, however, isn't necessarily evil in and of itself, but it's where sin finds its base of operation.

2. The proof of the problem (vv. 18b-19)
"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."

Paul is not saying he can't figure out how to do anything right. He's saying he can't do it to the extent his heart longs to do it. If you look at your spiritual growth as a Christian, you should be able to recognize a greater hatred for your sin now than you did before you understood how serious sin is and how holy God is. Although spiritual growth results in a decreasing frequency of sin, it inversely involves a heightened sensitivity to it.

You probably will not find any writer in the Old Testament who was more sensitive to his sin than David, the king through whom the Messiah came (Matt. 21:9, 15) and a man after God's own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). In his psalms David cried out to God for mercy in the midst of his sinfulness (e.g. Ps. 32; 51). David's close relationship with the Lord caused him to have a broken heart when he sinned (Ps. 51:17). That kind of struggle with sin is characteristic of a regenerate man.

3. The source of the struggle (v. 20)
"If I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me."

That is exactly what Paul said in verse 17. Although he had a new nature, he still fought against sin and often lost. Those losses seemed overwhelming to him against the perfection of God's holy law. Nevertheless, his sensitivity to sin was a normal result of justification by faith.

At this point you might figure Paul would give up, having adequately made his point. But he starts a third lament to emphasize his frustration and sorrow over sin.

C. The Third Lament (vv. 21-23)

1. The condition of carnality (v. 21)

"I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me."

Paul again laments the condition of indwelling sin. He used the Greek word translated "law" as a literary device to refer to a principle. In contrast to the law of God, he saw another law or standard that was making demands on him: the principle of evil. The Greek text literally says that evil lies close at hand. Evil battles every good thought, word, and deed. Rather than our sin nature being eradicated in this life, as some theologians have concluded, Paul tells us that evil is present within us, creating conflict between our two natures.

2. The proof of the problem (vv. 22-23a)

a. The inward delight (v. 22)

"For I delight in the law of God after the inward man"

In his new spiritual nature, Paul delighted in God's law. Psalm 119 is an Old Testament parallel to Romans 7. In verse 77 the psalmist writes, *"Let thy tender mercies come unto me, that I may live; for thy law is my delight."* Paul might well have had that psalm in mind when he wrote Romans 7. Psalm 119:111 says, *"Thy testimonies have I taken as an heritage forever; for they are the rejoicing of my heart."* Verse 20 says, *"My soul breaketh for the longing that it has unto thine ordinances at all times."*

Likewise, the mark of the truly spiritual man in Psalm 1:2 is that *"his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night."* The regenerate man is marked by a love for the Word of God.

The phrase "after the inward man" could be translated, "from the bottom of my heart." Paul deep down had a great love for the law of God. That redeemed inward part of man *"is renewed day by day"* (2 Cor. 4:16), and is *"strengthened with might by [God's] Spirit"* (Eph. 3:16). The truest expression of our redeemed personhood is to delight in God's law.

b. The outward discord (v. 23a)

"But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind"

The channels through which this sin principle is expressed are the "members," the parts of the body, which are subject to our unredeemed humanness. This law isn't in Paul's inner man; it's in his outer man.

Paul here is equating the law of God with the law of his mind in that the deepest desire of his inner man is to obey the law of God. If he were an unbeliever, the law of his mind would be just as rotten as the law of his members, for "the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7).

3. The source of the struggle (v. 23b)

"Bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members."

Paul identifies the source of his problems as the sin that resides in his human nature. Sometimes the battle goes in favor of the law of his members, and brings him into captivity. That implies Paul is speaking as a redeemed person because unredeemed people can't be brought into captivity--they're already there. When sin wins the victory in the spiritual struggle, the believer becomes a slave to the sin that at least temporarily masters him.

* **The Irony of Victory and Defeat**

The author of Psalm 119 experienced the same conflict Paul did. His psalm reflects his deep longing for the things of God.

1. Verses 81-83--*"My soul fainteth for thy salvation, but I hope in thy word. Mine eyes fail for thy word, saying, When wilt thou comfort me? For I am become like a wineskin in the smoke; yet do I not forget thy statutes."*
2. Verse 92--*"Unless thy law had been my delight, I should then have perished in mine affliction."*
3. Verse 97--*"Oh, how I love thy law! It is my meditation all the day."*
4. Verse 113--*"I hate vain thoughts, but thy law do I love."*
5. Verse 131--*"I opened my mouth, and panted; for I longed for thy commandments."*
6. Verse 143--*"Trouble and anguish have taken hold of me; yet thy commandments are my delight."*
7. Verse 163--*"I hate and abhor lying, but thy law do I love."*
8. Verse 165--*"Great peace have they who love thy law, and nothing shall offend them."*
9. Verse 174--*"I have longed for thy salvation, O Lord, and thy law is my delight."*

The measure of spirituality that the psalmist expresses is somewhat intimidating. That is why the last verse in Psalm 119 is so surprising: *"I have gone astray like a lost sheep. Seek thy servant; for I do not forget thy commandments"* (v. 176). You might think that a person with such an intense love for God's law would not experience the failure of going astray spiritually. But that is the conflict all believers experience.

Why do we sin? Because God didn't do a good enough job when He saved us? Because He gave us a new nature that isn't complete yet? Because we're not prepared for heaven yet and we still need to earn our way in? No, it's because sin is still present in our humanness, which includes the mind, emotions, and body.

In 2 Corinthians 10:3 Paul says, *"Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh (for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to*

the pulling down of strongholds)." Although we are still have physical bodies, we are engaged in spiritual warfare using spiritual resources.

Paul's three laments reveal a condition of conflict in the life of every believer. They give evidence of that conflict by admitting the inability of a believer to do God's will to the extent he ought to. They identify the source of the conflict--indwelling sin. From that conflict the believer cries out for deliverance.

II. THE SOLUTION REVEALED (vv. 24-25)

A. The Self-Evaluation of a Sinner (v. 24a)

"Oh, wretched man that I am"

1. Explained

As if three laments aren't enough, Paul lets out a wail in verse 24 that exceeds them in intensity. He cries out in the distress and the frustration of his spiritual conflict. Can this be the despair of a Christian, let alone that of the apostle Paul? Commentator Robert Haldane has correctly said that men perceive themselves to be sinners in proportion to what they perceive about the holiness of God and His law.

2. Exemplified

- a. Psalm 6--David cried out, *"O Lord, rebuke me not in thine anger, neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. Have mercy upon me, O Lord; for I am weak. O Lord, heal me; for my bones are vexed. My soul is also very vexed [terrified]; but thou, O Lord, how long? Return, O Lord, deliver my soul: oh, save me for thy mercies' sake. For in death there is no remembrance of thee; in sheol who shall give thee thanks? I am weary with my groaning; all the night make I my bed to swim; I water my couch with my tears"* (vv. 1-6). David was saying, "I'm so sick and tired of not being everything I ought to be!"
- b. Psalm 38--Similarly, David said, *"O Lord, rebuke me not in thy wrath; neither chasten me in thy hot displeasure. For thine arrows stick fast in me, and thy hand presseth me greatly. There is no soundness in my flesh because of thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones because of my sin. For mine iniquities are gone over mine head; like an heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds are repulsive and corrupt because of my foolishness. I am troubled; I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long. For my loins are filled with a loathsome disease, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and very broken; I have roared by reason of the disquietness of my heart. Lord, all my desire is before thee"* (vv. 1-9). If David's desire was before the Lord, how could he get in such a mess? That's the battle that the believer faces. Like Paul, David wanted to be more than he was and found himself debilitated by his humanness.
- c. Psalm 130--The psalmist wrote, *"Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice; let thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications. If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?"*

But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared. I wait for the Lord, my soul doth wait, and in his word do I hope" (vv. 1-5). There again we see the despair of a godly person over sin.

B. The Deliverance from Death (vv. 24b-25a)

1. The appeal for help (v. 24b)

"Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"

Paul rhetorically asks who will rescue him from the sin that resides in his body. The Greek word translated "deliver" was used to describe a soldier who ran to his comrade in the midst of a battle to rescue him from the enemy. "The body of this death" literally refers to our physical body which is subject to sin and death.

I remember reading that near Tarsus, where Paul was born, lived a tribe that that inflicted a most gruesome penalty upon a murderer. They fastened the body of the victim to that of the killer, tying shoulder to shoulder, back to back, arm to arm, and then drove the murderer from the community. The bonds were so tight that he could not free himself, and after a few days the decay in the body transferred itself to the living flesh of the murderer. Paul might have had that gruesome punishment in mind in expressing here his desire to be rid of the sin that clung to his flesh.

2. The assurance of hope (v. 25a)

"I thank God through Jesus Christ, our Lord."

- a. Romans 8--Paul gratefully expresses assurance of triumph through Jesus Christ over the conflict with sin. I believe that's what Paul had in mind when he said, *"I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God... the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only they, but ourselves also, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, that is, the redemption of our body"* (Rom. 8:18-19, 22-23). We Christians await for the final phase of salvation. We're still looking to that day when we are redeemed in the body as well as soul. So Paul thanks God in Romans 7:25 that the end of the conflict will come through Christ when we enter into His presence and are glorified.
- b. 1 Corinthians 15--Paul said, *"This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.... Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (vv. 53, 57). That is almost the same phrase he uses in Romans 7:25 in reference to our bodily resurrection and glorification.
- c. 2 Corinthians 5--Paul said, *"We that are in this tabernacle [body] do groan, being burdened [with our humanness]; not that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life"* (v. 4).
- d. Philippians 3:20-21--Paul said, *"We look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our lowly body, that it may be fashioned like his glorious body."* Ours is a triumphant hope!

C. The Continuation of the Conflict (v. 25b)

"So, then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh, the law of sin."

Until the day we are glorified, the battle goes on as long as we remain in the flesh. We cry with Tennyson, who wrote, "Ah for a new man to arise in me, that the man I am may cease to be!" (Maud, X. 5). The battle won't be over until Jesus gives us immortality. Full deliverance awaits glorification. But that's not to say we can't experience victory here and now in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Rather than being indifferent to the weight of sin, the believer is actually _____ to it.
2. List five consequences of sinning.
3. Explain the sign of sanctification mentioned by Thomas Watson.
4. What did the apostle Paul admit he had not yet attained in Philippians 3:12-14?
5. Although spiritual growth results in a _____ frequency of sin, it inversely involves a _____ sensitivity to it.
6. What law in addition to God's law was making demands on Paul?
7. What are the channels through which the sin principle is expressed in believers?
8. How does Paul's being brought into captivity imply that he is a believer?
9. Like Paul, what did the psalmist of Psalm 119 delight in? What is surprising in light of his spiritual maturity (Psalm 119:176)?
10. Men perceive themselves to be _____ in proportion as they have previously discovered the _____ of God and His law.
11. What was Paul's assurance of hope for victory over sin? Support your answer with Scripture.
12. What does full deliverance from sin await?

Pondering the Principles

1. Study the list of consequences of sinning on pages 1-2. Look up the Scripture references list with them and be familiar with them so you will be less apt to fall to the temptation of sin next time.
2. Read Psalm 119. Let the psalmist serve as a model to you to help strengthen your love for God's Word.
3. Give thanks to God that you are a new creation in Christ. Next, confess to Him that although you love His law and long to do what's right, there's something in you that wars against that desire. Finally, ask that He would give you victory until Jesus gives you a body fashioned like His own. Memorize 1 John 3:2-3: *"Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure"* (NASB). Is your hope fixed on your glorification when Christ returns? Is that hope having a purifying effect on your life-style in the meantime?