

“Sold as a Slave to Sin”

Sermons on Romans # 17

Texts: Romans 7:14-25; Psalm 51:1-19

Romans 7:14-25 is one of the most important, but disputed passages in the New Testament. This is because in this passage Paul describes a struggle with sin so intense that he can characterize it as follows: “when I want to do good, evil is right there with me.” When the apostle seeks to avoid doing evil, he ends up doing it anyway. In fact, throughout these verses, Paul speaks of sin almost as a power or force which takes hold of him, taking him prisoner (“sold as a slave to sin,” as he puts it), even though in his heart, he delights in the law of God. In a lament of despair the apostle cries out in verse 24, “what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

The news of the gravity and intensity of this struggle with sin either comes as a welcome relief to Paul’s reader—who may have a similar struggle—or as a word of warning that if this is their experience also, they need to move on to the victory over sin the apostle will describe in Romans 8. The dispute over this text centers around a very simple but important question. Is Paul talking about his present experience as a Christian, even that of an apostle? Or is Paul talking about that period of his life before he came to faith in Jesus Christ. Perhaps, Paul is not even talking about himself at all. Perhaps Paul is describing someone who has been convicted of their sin by the Law of God, but who has not yet come to faith in Jesus Christ. But make no mistake about it—however we interpret Romans 7, it will dramatically impact our understanding of the Christian life.

This is one of those passages in the Bible where we hit a genuine fork in the interpretive road. As baseball player-philosopher Yogi Berra once put it, “if you come to a fork in the road, take it.” We do not have the option of remaining undecided about this text, because how we interpret it will affect virtually every aspect of the Christian life. From the doctrine of justification, to the doctrine of sanctification, to our expectations about the Christian life and how we choose to live it, to the kind of teaching and preaching we hear in the church, to the way in which we deal with our troubled consciences, to the way we pray, how we interpret these few verses has such dramatic consequences for our daily lives as Christians that we have no choice but to make a choice!

If Paul is talking about his present struggle with sin, even the struggle with sin as experienced by an apostle, then Romans 7:14-25 should be interpreted as speaking of the normal Christian life. This means that Paul’s struggle to do what is right and avoid doing evil, coupled with his failure to do so as depicted throughout, is the same struggle with sin that every Christian faces on a daily basis. If we interpret Paul in this way, the struggle with sin described by Paul is the inevitable consequence of being transferred from the domination of sin, the law and death (what we were in Adam—to use the categories Paul sets out in Romans 5:12-21) to the dominion of Christ. As we saw in chapters 6 and 7 of Romans, although we have been set free from sin, death and the condemnation of the law because we were buried with Christ in baptism and have risen with him to newness of life, nevertheless, we still think and act like what we were in Adam, while we were under the dominion of this present evil age. This is why the imperative (command) which Paul gives to his reader back in Romans 6:11, focuses upon the need to reckon ourselves dead to sin, but alive unto God. It takes a fair bit of time for someone who has known only slavery, to learn to live as a freedman.

But, if Paul is talking about his struggle with sin before his conversion, or even the struggle with sin of a

typical Jew coming under the conviction of sin through the law, then Romans 7:14-25 is a description of that struggle with sin which is characteristic of an unbeliever or an immature (or carnal) Christian. In other words, the struggle described here is that of someone who has not yet been set free from sin, death and the condemnation of the law, through faith in Jesus Christ. If true, this means that anyone who experiences the struggle depicted here, is either not yet a Christian and still in the process of coming to faith, or is someone who is not yet living in the victory promised in Romans 8 but who needs to do so. Those who interpret Paul to be describing a hypothetical Jew struggling with sin before conversion, or even his own experience as a Jew before his conversion, usually go on to argue that what follows in Romans 8 (the struggle between the flesh and the Spirit) is a call for the person struggling with sin in Romans 7, to move on to the victory described in Romans 8, just as the apostle has supposedly done.

Therefore, Romans 7:14-25 is either a description of the normal Christian life, and something we all must go through as part of our sanctification, or else this passage is a description of an abnormal or defective condition which must be remedied immediately. If the struggle with sin is typical of the Christian life, then our understanding of the Christian life must make room for the struggle. The struggle with sin is not a sign that we are not yet converted—the fear of many Christians. Rather, it is the proof that we have been converted! But if this struggle is not normal, then the struggle with sin Paul describes should occupy no such place in the Christian life. We must advance beyond the struggle depicted here—just as Paul did. This is a stark interpretive choice from which we cannot shrink. We must decide. It effects everything.

Since this is such an important theological issue, as well as having so many ramifications for how we understand the essence of the Christian life, we'll spend several sermons covering this section of Romans. In this sermon, we'll discuss the biblical evidence for the historic Protestant and Reformed interpretation of this most disputed passage—which is that Paul is describing his present life as a Christian, making the struggle depicted here as that of the normal, indeed healthy Christian life—while next time, Lord willing, we'll go through the passage in some detail before we talk about some of the practical ramifications of this very intense struggle with sin, a struggle which we all face and with which we all must deal.

In order to make sense of these verses, it is vital that we keep this discussion in the context of Paul's broader discussion about a Christian's relationship to the law in Romans 7, now that they are in Christ and no longer in Adam (review the handout).

The critical interpretive question is this. Who is the wretched man of Romans 7:14-25? Is it Paul the apostle? Is it Paul the Jew before his conversion? Or is it someone else? One of the most helpful discussions of this passage is found in the appendix of J. I. Packer's book, Keep in Step with the Spirit (pp. 263-270). Much of what follows is taken from Packer's discussion, which I heartily encourage you to read it if you have any questions about this passage. Since, this text has troubled Christians from the time of Augustine down to the present, and since it is so disputed, and since it is so important to living a healthy Christian life, it is vital that we be familiar with the ways in which the passage is interpreted.

Recall that in Romans 7:7, Paul has just asked the rhetorical question, "*Is the law sin?*" Earlier in Romans, Paul has already linked together the condition of being "under law" (Romans 6:14) and being "under sin" (Romans 7:5). And since Paul has spoken of the rule of sin as being exercised and made effective through the law (Romans 5:20; 7:5, cf. I Cor. 15:56), Paul fears that his readers may arrive at the erroneous conclusion that he views the law itself as evil. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Thus, Paul asks the question in verse 7—"is the law sin"—and then immediately answers it with the emphatic negative—[μὴ γένοιτο], "*certainly not!*" Next, he proceeds to describe the relationship

between the law of God—which is holy, righteous and good—and human sinfulness, which is actually excited by the law to even greater levels than would otherwise be the case. This is the theme of the seventh chapter of Romans. According to Packer, Paul makes three main points in this chapter.¹

1. The effect of the law is to give men knowledge of sin—not merely of the abstract notion of sin, but of sin as a concrete, dynamic reality within themselves, a spirit of rebellion against God, and of disobedience to His commandments (vss. 7, 13, cf. 3:20).
2. The way in which the law gives this knowledge is by declaring God’s prohibitions and commands; for these first goad sin into active rebellion and then make men aware of the specific transgressions and shortcomings of motive and deed into which sin has led them (vss. 8, 19, 23).
3. The law gives no ability to anyone to perform the good which it prescribes, nor can it deliver from the power of sin (vss. 9-11, 22-24).

The key to understand Paul correctly when he describes this struggle with sin is to notice the fact that throughout this entire discussion of the law (beginning in verse 7), “Paul speaks throughout in the first person singular, and his teaching takes the form of personal reminiscence and self-analysis.”² In fact, this first person singular falls into two historical sections: verses 7-13, where Paul speaks in the past tense (“I was”), and verses 14-25, which are written in the present tense (“I am”).

As we saw previously, in verses 7-13 of Romans 7, Paul is speaking as a typical Jew, a representative of Israel, *before* his conversion. It was at this point in his life he can declare, “*I would not have known what sin was except through the law.*” Before Jesus Christ confronted him on the Damascus Road, the law stirred up all kinds of sin in Paul. When the law told him not to covet, he found himself coveting like never before. This seems to be indicative of someone still enslaved to sin, under the curse and the condemnation of the law. While the same thing happens to him as a Christian, the cross and Christ’s imputed righteousness provide relief from sin’s guilt, while the indwelling Holy Spirit and his union with Christ give him the desire and the power to obey God’s commandments—not perfectly, but tangibly.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* summarizes this in **Q 86**. “We have been delivered from our misery by God’s grace alone through Christ and not because we have earned it: why then must we still do good? **A.** To be sure, Christ has redeemed us by his blood. But we do good because Christ by his Spirit is also renewing us to be like himself, so that in all our living we may show that we are thankful to God for all he has done for us, and so that he may be praised through us. And we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.”

Then in **Q 114**, the *Catechism* asks, “But can those converted to God obey these commandments perfectly? **A.** No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God’s commandments.” In **Q 115**, the *Catechism* goes on to make the point, “No one in this life can

¹ J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984), pp. 263-264. Also see the discussion of what the law can and cannot do in: John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), pp. 184-185.

² Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, p. 264.

obey the ten commandments perfectly: why then does God want them preached so pointedly? A. First, so that the longer we live the more we may come to know our sinfulness and the more eagerly look to Christ for forgiveness of sins and righteousness. Second, so that, while praying to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, we may never stop striving to be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach our goal: perfection." This, it seems to me, very effectively summarizes Paul's thinking about how a Christian relates to the law.

There is marked shift from the past tense in verses 7:7-13 to verses 14-25 where Paul now uses the present tense. As Packer, among others, points out, "the natural way to read [these verses] would be as a transcript of Paul's self-knowledge at the time of writing."³ This fact alone would normally decide our interpretation of these verses as a description of Paul's present Christian experience. However, it is what Paul says about his present experience as a Christian that causes commentators to shrink back from taking this as a description of Paul's present life as a Christian. Here is a man—indeed an apostle—who describes the Christian life as that of someone who has been set free from death, sin and the law, because of his union with Christ, but who now constantly fails to do the good he wants to do, and who repeatedly does those very things he seeks to avoid. How can someone who has been buried with Christ in baptism and raised with him to newness of life, cry out, as Paul does, in verse 14, "*I am unspiritual (carnal), sold as a slave to sin*"? How can a Christian cry out, as Paul does, in verse 24—"*What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*" This is especially problematic since Paul goes on to state in Romans 8:2, "*because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.*"

At first glance, this appears to be a contradiction. How can Paul be set free by Christ from the domination of what he was in Adam, and yet still speak of himself as presently a slave to sin? This tension (some call it a contradiction) is why a number of commentators explain away the use of the present tense and argue that Paul is speaking (as he did in verses 7-13) of the time before he was a Christian, although he uses the present tense in verses 14-25 to make this struggle with sin more vivid. Still others, contend that Paul is not even speaking of his own struggle. Rather, Paul is speaking of a hypothetical Jew, struggling with conviction of sin brought about by the law. Paul uses the first person to show the depths of the struggle that a Jew faced since the law brought them condemnation, not life.

There are two questions, then, which we will seek to answer. First, is this discussion autobiographical at all? Is Paul even speaking of his own struggle with sin? Or, is he speaking of a hypothetical Jew, struggling with the demands of the law? Second, if Paul is speaking autobiographically, and describing his own experience, is this Paul the Christian? Or is this Paul, the unconverted Jew describing his experience of sin *before* his conversion?

Let's consider these questions in order. Is Paul the "wretched man" of Romans 7:24, or is he speaking of someone else—a hypothetical Jew, under the law? It seems to me that the use of the first person singular is absolutely determinative in answering this question, and that Paul is indeed speaking about his own experience. Are we really to understand Paul to be speaking of someone else's experience in these

³ Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit, p. 264. Cf. Leon Morris' comments: "this verse marks the change from the past tense so common in the previous section to the present [tense], which is equally characteristic of the verses to which we now come. As we have already noticed, the most natural way of understanding this is to see it as pointing to Paul's present experience" (The Epistle to the Romans, p. 290).

verses? Although it is relatively clear in the NIV, in the Greek text, the “I” is emphatic (“*ego*,” vss. 14, 17, 24; “*autos ego*,” v. 25).⁴ So, are we to understand Paul’s emphatic “I” to be describing the experience of someone else? Is the cry, “what a wretched man I am,” really the cry of someone other than Paul? This is completely unconvincing to me, even if those who hold this view argue that Paul is speaking of hypothetical people who had a similar experience to his own. Therefore, it seems beyond all reasonable doubt that these remarks are autobiographical and describe Paul’s own personal experience (which may indeed be the same as others) either before or after his conversion.

If this is Paul, describing his own experience, is this “Paul the Pharisee, representing unconverted religious mankind, mankind in Adam, knowing the law in some form, but without the gospel, and faith, and the Spirit; or is he Paul the Christian, speaking as a representative man in Christ? It is clear that, on the one hand, vss. 7-13 of Rom. 7 depict Paul before conversion, and, on the other hand, that the whole of Rom. 8 is a transcript of the theological consciousness of Paul as a Christian; but to which of these states do the verses [14-25] belong?”⁵ Is this Paul *before* or *after* his conversion?

That this is Paul *before* his conversion is argued on the following grounds. If, in verses 7-13, Paul was unconverted, then verses 14-25 simply continue Paul’s discussion, although Paul now uses the present tense to make the struggle more vivid as he looks back upon his past, from the vantage point of the present. According to Bultmann, this is “a passage in which Paul depicts the situation of a man under the Torah as it had become clear to a backward look from the standpoint of Christian faith.”⁶ Viewed from the perspective of his faith in Christ, the wretched man is Paul struggling to be righteous apart from Jesus Christ. He is wretched because he has struggled so mightily and had failed so miserably. He knows he has no hope of justification under the law, and so he cries out for help. As one writer describes this, “it is the unconverted man’s cry of self-despair.”⁷ Therefore, it is argued that when Paul gives thanks in the first half of verse 25, “*Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” he is doing so for past deliverance, just as in Romans 8:2, Paul speaks of having been set free from the law of sin and death.

Although this view is now the most widely held today, and while, at first glance, it appears to resolve the apparent contradiction between Paul’s having been set free and his assessment of his situation depicted in Romans 7:14-25 as that of slavery, this understanding of Romans 7:14-25—that it is describing Paul before his conversion—fails for a number of important reasons.

For one thing, if Paul is describing his past experience, why does he switch to the present tense (from the aorist tense of verses 7-13). This change would be very unnatural and cumbersome, especially if Paul is talking about a period of time in his life which is now long past. Furthermore, there is no other place in Paul’s writings where he uses the present tense to emphasize the vividness or intensity of a past experience. It makes much more sense to see the change from past to present tense which begins in verse 14, to be indicative of the change from his past experience (unbelief) to that of his present situation (faith in Jesus Christ and union with him through the indwelling Holy Spirit).

⁴ Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit, p. 265.

⁵ Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit, p. 266.

⁶ Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament, I.247.

⁷ Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit, p. 266.

A second factor which points to the fact that Paul is talking about his present experience, has to do with verse 25, and Paul's declaration of thankfulness for deliverance through the work of Jesus Christ. If the prayer Paul offers—"thanks be to God"—is one of thanksgiving for present deliverance from the struggle with sin described in verses 14-24, then last half of the verse—"So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin"—simply doesn't follow. How can Paul be a slave to the law of sin, when he's just given thanks in the first part of the same verse for being delivered from this very thing? Why does the apostle use the present tense and not the past tense—"I used to be a slave to sin" not "I am a slave to sin," especially when he had just done this in verses 7-13?

A third reason why the argument fails that Paul is talking about his struggle with sin before his conversion is a theological one. Paul speaks of the person struggling with sin as having a delight in the law of God (v. 22). In verse 16 he states, "the law is good," while in verses 15 and 18-21, he speaks of a desire to fulfill (obey) the law. He speaks of serving the law in his mind (v. 25), because, as he already stated in verse 22, he delights in the law. This is exactly what we find in Psalm 51 (our Old Testament lesson). David delights in God's law, but is crushed by the guilt of his sin. No non-Christian can pray Psalm 51. But every Christian prays it! We pray such words from the heart—"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me." Given what Paul says elsewhere about the non-Christian's relationship to the law, such statements would be rather shocking if Paul did indeed delight in the law before his conversion.

In Ephesians 2:3 Paul states regarding those in Adam (including himself through the use of the first person plural—we), "All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath." In Ephesians 4:17-23, Paul is even more specific about the effects of sin upon a person's desire to obey God's commandments. "So I tell you this, and insist on it in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more. You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." For Paul, it is the new self that delights in the law—the consequence of being made new—while the old self lives to satisfy the desires of the flesh.

Furthermore, there is a parallel passage in Galatians 5:17. There Paul writes, "For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want." In Galatians Paul is clearly describing the struggle between the indwelling Holy Spirit and the flesh (the sinful nature, which remains even after

conversion). Paul is probably describing the same struggle here in Romans 7:14-25, only this time from the perspective of a Christian's relationship to the law.

Even more telling is what Paul states in the next chapter of Romans. In verses 5-8 of Romans 8, Paul writes, "*Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.*" Since Paul is teaching that non-Christians cannot submit to God's law, it is highly unlikely that in Romans 7:14-25, Paul is teaching that a non-Christian can delight in God's law and truly desire to obey it, only to feel the crushing guilt of failing to do the very thing he (or she) desires. Unless Paul contradicts himself in the next chapter (something which is highly unlikely given what we know about Paul) Paul cannot be speaking in Romans 7:14-25 of a non-Christian, even himself, delighting in the law and feeling himself to be a wretched man because he does not obey that in which he delights. This can only be said of someone who is now in Christ, freed from the dominion of Adam to sin, death and the law. Only someone who has been a slave, struggles with reverting to living like a slave again.

And this leads to a fourth and final point. What does the wretched man desire? The wretched man cries out for deliverance from this body of death (v. 24). Indeed as Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:54, "*When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.'*" The wretched man of Romans 7:14-25 is someone longing for the resurrection at the end of the age. Non-Christian ever longed for such deliverance. In fact, in Romans 8:23 Paul says that those "*who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.*" The Christian who has been transferred from the domination of Adam to the freedom of Christ, is now painfully aware of what sin has done—and indeed what sin continues to do, to themselves and others. The wretched man of Romans 7 gives thanks to Jesus Christ, because despite the present struggle with sin, God will certainly grant future deliverance, something which would make no sense at all if the condition described in verses 14-25 is something in Paul's past, not in his present experience.⁸

Therefore, in this very important passage, Paul writes in the present tense, because he is talking about his present experience and his present struggle with sin—even as an apostle. To be sure, this struggle with sin is not the whole of Paul's experience as a Christian (there are also times of victory over sin), but nevertheless this intense struggle is an essential part of our sanctification.⁹ As the law had brought Paul to his senses before he was a Christian—showing him that even though he thought he was alive, he was really dead—and even as the law had left him desiring to sin all the more while providing no relief nor power to fulfill its righteous requires, so now Paul describes how a Christian (of which he is the

⁸ As J. I. Packer so helpfully points out, "the man in Christ serves the law of God with his mind, in the sense that he wants and wills to keep it perfectly, but with the flesh he serves the law of sin, as appears from the fact that he never is able to keep the law as perfectly and consistently as he wishes to do. The emphatic *autos ego*, 'I, even I', expresses Paul's sense of how painfully paradoxical it is that a Christian man like himself, who desires so heartily to keep God's law and do only good, should find himself under the constant necessity of breaking the law and doing what in effect is evil. But such is the state of the Christian till his body is redeemed" (Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit, p. 269).

⁹ Packer, Keep in Step with the Spirit, p. 269.

representative of each one of us) delights in that same law, but fails to fully obey it as he ought. Because we have been set free from sin, death and the condemnation of the law, the struggle with sin (described in this text) begins in earnest. Set free from sin, delivered from the curse, and no longer under the condemnation of the law, Paul desires to do what is right, but fails. Paul strives to avoid doing what is evil, but fails. The apostle laments that he is still a wretched man and longs for the resurrection, when he finally will stop sinning and when the victory in which he now participates through word and sacrament will be fully realized. He knows his only hope is to be found in that same Savior who has set him free and who will come again to rescue him from this present evil age.

But Paul's struggle with sin is also our own. Although we've been set free from sin, death and the condemnation of the law, because we remain "flesh" until our death or the resurrection (which ever comes first), we feel like we too have been "sold as a slave to sin." We too cry out like Paul, "what a wretched person that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?" And like Paul, we must give thanks to Christ Jesus our Lord who has already delivered us from the guilt and power of sin, and who will see us through our struggle with that sin which remains with us until we die. Because we are in Christ, and not in Adam, in our minds we are all slaves to God's law. But because we remain in the flesh, we still think and act like slaves to sin. And so we struggle our sin. We must struggle with our sin. If we are Christians we cannot stop struggling with our sins. But as Paul will go on to remind us at the end of Romans 8, we are also more than conquerors, through him who loved us and gave himself for our sins. And this beloved, is the normal Christian life. Amen!