

# HARD SAYINGS

## SESSION #11: The Inner Struggle (Rom. 7:13-25)

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### Text

1. What does it actually say?
2. Is it descriptive or prescriptive? Genre?
3. What is hard about this passage?
4. What are we looking to understand about this passage as we begin to examine it?

### Literary Context

#### Literary Context: Romans

**THEME:** The Gospel of the Righteousness of God (Romans 1:16-17)

#### **OUTLINE (from ESV Study Bible)**

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|--|---|
| I. The Gospel as the Revelation of the Righteousness of God (1:1-17) | D. The triumph of grace over the power of the law (7:1-6)                           |
| II. God's Righteousness in His Wrath against Sinners (1:18-3:20)     | <b>E. The law and sin (7:7-25)</b>  |
| III. The Saving Righteousness of God (3:21-4:25)                     | F. Life in the Spirit (8:1-17)  |
| IV. <b>Hope as a Result of Righteousness by Faith (5:1-8:39)</b>     | G. Assurance of hope (8:18-39)  |
| A. Assurance of hope (5:1-11)  | V. God's Righteousness to Israel and to the Gentiles (9:1-11:36)                    |
| B. Hope in Christ's triumph over Adam's sin (5:12-21)                | VI. God's Righteousness in Everyday Life (12:1-15:13)                               |
| C. The triumph of grace over the power of sin (6:1-23)               | VII. The Extension of God's Righteousness through the Pauline Mission (15:14-16:23) |
|  | VIII. Final Summary of the Gospel of the Righteousness of God (16:25-27)            |

#### "Flesh" In Paul's Letters (non-exhaustive list)

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|-------------------|----------------------|
| • Romans 8:1-11   | • Ephesians 2:1-4    |
| • Galatians 5 & 6 | • Colossians 2:11-13 |

# Historical Context (*from Hard Sayings by R.C. Sproul*)

Paul underlines the contrast and the conflict by saying: "...Who will deliver me from this body of death?".... It is argued that in the ancient world, one of the punishments for murder in certain cultures was to have the corpse of one's victim tied to his back until that victim was so putrefied and decayed that nothing but the skeleton was left. At that point, the murderer was released from it. Can you imagine anything more horrible than to have to walk around for days with a dead body strapped to your back? A body of death would reduce a person to wretchedness.

Paul is using the phrase in a metaphorical or illustrative sense, saying that this is what the Christian life is like. We are a new person, but we still have to carry this old nature around with us. Our dreadful sin nature is like a "a putrefying body of death that hasn't yet completely fallen off our backs but continues to torment us and cause us to be in this ongoing conflict. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" was the Apostle's final cry (v. 25).

## Trusted Interpreters

Westminster Confession of Faith (16<sup>th</sup> c. AD):

13.2 This sanctification works in the whole person, but not completely or perfectly in this life. The old sinful nature retains some of its control in body, mind, and spirit. And so a continual and irreconcilable war goes on in every believer. The old nature tries to get its way in opposition to the Spirit, and the Spirit fights to assert its authority over the flesh.

13.3 Although the old nature temporarily wins battles in this warfare, the continual strengthening of the sanctifying Spirit of Christ enables the regenerate nature in each believer to overcome. And so the saints grow in grace, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.

Westminster Larger Catechism (16<sup>th</sup> c. AD):

Q78: Why are believers not completely sanctified?

A. Believers are not completely or perfectly sanctified because they retain some remnants of sin throughout their whole being and are continually plagued with desires of their old sinful nature that are contrary to the spirit. Consequently believers are frequently defeated by temptation, commit many sins, and are hindered from performing their spiritual obligations, so that their best works in God's eyes are imperfect and defiled.

## From Sound Interpretation to Useful Application

1. What do we learn about God?
2. How does this passage shape our hearts to glorify God?
3. What do we learn about people?
4. How does this passage change how we live as citizens of God's Kingdom? How can we live in its light today?

# Resources

## Selections from Westminster Standards

### WCF Chapter 9 : Of Christ the Mediator

9.4 When God converts a sinner and brings him into a state of grace, he frees him from his natural enslavement to sin. By God's grace alone, freely given, sinful man is enabled to will and to do what is spiritually good.<sup>1</sup> However, since the old sinful nature also remains, the believer cannot consistently or perfectly will to do what is good but also wills evil.<sup>2</sup>

9.5 The will of man is perfectly free and permanently inclined to good alone only in the state of glory.<sup>3</sup>

### WCF Chapter 13 : Of Sanctification

13.1 Those who are effectually called and regenerated have a new heart and a new spirit created in them. They are additionally sanctified, actually and personally, by the power of Christ's death and resurrection and by his word and Spirit dwelling in them.<sup>4</sup> The power of sin ruling over the whole body is destroyed,<sup>5</sup> and the desires of the old self are more and more weakened and killed.<sup>6</sup> At the same time the ability to practice true holiness, without which no one will see the Lord,<sup>7</sup> is brought to life and strengthened by all the saving graces.<sup>8</sup>

13.2 This sanctification works in the whole person,<sup>9</sup> but not completely or perfectly in this life. The old sinful nature retains some of its control in body, mind, and spirit. And so a continual and irreconcilable war goes on in every believer. The old nature tries to get its way in opposition to the Spirit, and the Spirit fights to assert its authority over the flesh.<sup>10</sup>

13.3 Although the old nature temporarily wins battles in this warfare,<sup>11</sup> the continual strengthening of the sanctifying Spirit of Christ enables the regenerate nature in each believer to overcome.<sup>12</sup> And so the saints grow in grace,<sup>13</sup> perfecting holiness in the fear of God.<sup>14</sup>

### WLC Q78: Why are believers not completely sanctified?

A. Believers are not completely or perfectly sanctified because they retain some remnants of sin throughout their whole being and are continually plagued with desires of their old sinful nature that are contrary to the spirit. Consequently believers are frequently defeated by temptation, commit many sins,<sup>15</sup> and are hindered from performing their spiritual obligations,<sup>16</sup> so that their best works in God's eyes are imperfect and defiled.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Col 1.13, Jn 8.34,36, Phil 2.13, Rom 6.18,22

<sup>2</sup> Gal 5.17, Rom 7.15,18-19,21-23, 1 Jn 1.8,10

<sup>3</sup> Eph 4.13, Heb 12.23, 1 Jn 3.2, Jude 24, Rv 22.3-4, 2 Chr 6.36, 1 Jn 1.8-10, 2.1-6, Ps 17.15

<sup>4</sup> 1 Cor 6.11, Acts 20.32, Phil 3.10, Rom 6.5-6, Jn 17.17,19, Eph 5.26, 2 Thes 2.13, 1 Cor 1.30

<sup>5</sup> Rom 6.6,14

<sup>6</sup> Gal 5.24, Rom 8.13, Col 3.5

<sup>7</sup> 2 Cor 7.1, Heb 12.14, Col 1.28, 4.12

<sup>8</sup> Col 1.10-11, Eph 3.16-19, 2 Pt 3.13-14

<sup>9</sup> 1 Thes 5.23

<sup>10</sup> 1 Jn 1.10, Rom 7.18,23, Phil 3.12, Gal 5.17, 1 Pt 2.11

<sup>11</sup> Rom 7.23

<sup>12</sup> Rom 6.14, 1 Jn 5.4, Eph 4.15-16

<sup>13</sup> 2 Pt 3.18, 2 Cor 3.18

<sup>14</sup> 2 Cor 7.1

<sup>15</sup> Rom 7.18,23, Mk 14.66-72, Gal 2.11-12

<sup>16</sup> Heb 12.1, Gal 5.17

<sup>17</sup> Is 64.6, Ex 28.38, Rom 7.18, 23

## Preaching the Word Commentary (R. Kent Hughes)

### The Third Pillar: The Conflict of the Law and Self (vv. 14–24)

This section of Romans 7 has known centuries of controversy: who is their subject? There are basically three views. The first is that this passage describes a non-Christian Pharisee under the Law (this was the view [Rom, p. 142] of the Greek Fathers). The second view is that it describes a normal Christian (the view of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin). The third position is that it describes a carnal Christian. I believe the second view is correct, mainly because Paul continues to write in the first-person singular but in the present tense. It seems most natural to understand this section as Paul talking about what he was then experiencing.

We should note right at the start that chapters 7 and 8 are simultaneous. Chapter 8 (the chapter of victory) is not subsequent to chapter 7 in Paul's experience, for he experienced both alternately and continued to do so in the years that followed.

In this self-portrait Paul describes himself not as a so-called carnal Christian, but as one who loves the Law of God and longs to please God, but is trying to do so in his own strength. A so-called carnal Christian does not have such a goal. Here Paul speaks with a candor to be praised. He does not put on any prissy piety.

This is Paul's autobiography, but it is also the experience of every Christian. Anyone who has seriously followed Christ has known something of this. This is reality!

...

Twice Paul says, "it is no longer I myself who do it." He is not actually saying he does not do it, but that it is not what his deep inner self, renewed in Christ, wants to do. He is dominated by sin.

...

The principle Paul recognizes is that he is a man with two natures. One delights in the Law of God. The other wages war against God's Law. The Christian is subject to two forces simultaneously and thus lives in a state of tension.

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. (Galatians 5:17)

The seventh chapter of Romans is a passionate piece of writing. Paul wants us to feel the emotion he experiences in trying to live up to God's standards in his own strength. And here we have the third pillar of wisdom defined: A believer who tries to please God in his or her own strength will always come to disheartening, aching frustration—always! Moreover, this will happen to "good Christians"—even super-Christians. Paul was perhaps the greatest Christian ever, and this was his experience. He had more theology and passion in his little finger than [Rom, p. 144] most of us have in our entire life. Despite this, he sometimes tried to live up to God's standards on his own. It would be naive to say that after Paul came to an understanding of how sin defeats us through the Law, he never came under bondage again. I personally believe that with time he came less and less under bondage, but he never came to perfection.

## New American Commentary (Robert Mounce)

In the final analysis the approach to be preferred must be the one that is more reasonable in terms of the larger context. At this point in his discussion of sanctification, would Paul have been more apt to tell his readers about his struggle with sin before he became a Christian or describe his ongoing difficulty in actually living out his deepest spiritual desires? Since elsewhere he said that in his earlier days he was “immaculate by the standard of legal righteousness” (Phil 3:6, Moffatt), it seems quite improbable that he was at that time deeply involved in a personal struggle against sin. I believe that in this section Paul was revealing with considerable candor his difficulty in meeting the radical demands of the Christian faith. At the same time, he was using his own experience to describe the inevitability of spiritual defeat whenever a believer fails to appropriate the Spirit of God for victory.

Romans 7 does not describe the totality of Paul’s spiritual experience. In fact, it is preparatory to what follows. It sets the stage for the triumph of chap. 8. It probably is true that in the lives of most earnest Christians the two conditions Paul described exist in a sort of cyclical advance. Recognition of our inability to live up to our deepest spiritual longings (chap. 7) leads us to cast ourselves upon God’s Spirit for power and victory (chap. 8). Failure to continue in reliance upon the power of the Spirit places us once again in a position inviting defeat. Sanctification is a gradual process that repeatedly takes the believer through this recurring sequence of failure through dependency upon self to triumph through the indwelling Spirit.

In v. 14 Paul reminded his readers of the obvious fact that the law is spiritual. Since it has its origin in God, it must of necessity give expression to the holiness of God’s character. In contrast, Paul acknowledged that he was unspiritual. It takes very little self-examination for the Christian to agree that our life and conduct fall miserably short of the divine expectation. Even though the believer has a new nature acquired by a spiritual rebirth, the old nature continues to exert its maleficent influence. To the church at Corinth, Paul wrote that he could not address them as spiritual but as worldly, that is, unspiritual (1 Cor 3:1). Using a metaphor from slavery he confessed that he had been sold into the captivity of sin as a slave. His times of defeat by the power of the lower nature made him feel like a slave to sin. He did not understand his own actions. On a regular basis he failed to carry out what he meant to do; instead he found himself doing the very things he despised. Acting in this contrary fashion is what it means to be sold under sin.

...

The experiences of life led Paul to conclude that whenever he desired to do that which was good, sin reared its ugly head. His desire to do what was right was inevitably confronted by sin’s insistence that he do the opposite. So regular was this opposition that Paul could designate it as a “law.” It was a controlling principle of life. It is true that in his inner self he joyfully concurred with the law of God (v. 22). As the psalmist put it, he was the man blessed by God whose “delight is in the law of the Lord” (Ps 1:2; cf. 40:8). This confession removes the possibility that Paul was speaking about his life before coming to Christ.

## Hard Sayings (R.C. Sproul)

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Paul frequently makes the distinction in the New Testament between the old man (the unconverted person) and the new man (the new person in Christ who has been quickened and indwelt by the Holy Spirit). When we become new people at conversion, when we are quickened by the Holy Ghost, that conversion, that regeneration, that quickening does not immediately annihilate the old sin nature. Paul makes it clear that sanctification is a lifelong process, one that requires laboring in fear and trembling. It involves work and is a constant struggle against those sinful impulses that remain after conversion.

...

If Paul were speaking of his former condition, would he be describing such warfare? The warfare that he's talking about is not characteristic of the unconverted person. The unconverted person is carnal altogether. That's all that the person is—flesh. That person does not have the Holy Spirit, does not have any impulse to real righteousness, and has no driving desire to please Christ or to please God. All that comes with conversion. In a real sense, our lives don't become complicated until we're converted. That's when the war is declared. That's when we have to enlist, and we enlist for the duration of the battle that goes on until we are ultimately victorious in heaven. Paul says, "I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand" (v. 21). Again, he's speaking in the present tense. The unconverted person has evil present in him but does not will to do good. The Christian has evil present in him, while at the same time, there is this disposition or inclination or will to do good. That's the heart of the conflict. I think the passage settles it once and for all[...]

...

Romans, like the rest of Scripture, teaches that the presence of sin continues in our lives until we enter glory, though we experience freedom from the power and the curse of sin in Christ. Therefore, perfectionism in this life is biblically impossible, and those who hold to perfectionism end up denigrating the biblical teaching on sin and sanctification. They do one of two things, although they often attempt both of them. One of those things is to radically alter the full measure of the demands of God's law. We have to drag the law down to the level of external performance rather than heartfelt obedience. This was the error that the Pharisees made—they set up guardrails that allowed them to feel satisfied in their righteousness while never addressing the law's demands on their hearts. They had a superficial understanding of the full demands of God's commandments. For us to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are perfect, we would have to believe that we have loved the Lord with all our hearts and with all our minds and with all our strength. Who has ever done that for even five minutes?

The second mistake is like the first. In order for us to be persuaded that we have achieved perfection of any kind, we have to have an exaggerated view of our own performance. So we bring God's law down and bring our own performance up so that the two can meet. Either one of those is an extreme danger for Christian growth, and both of them together are basically fatal.