

# The Struggle Against Sin

Romans 7:13-25

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The game of golf has to be one of the most frustrating sports known to man. The golf swing has lots of moving parts, and the tiniest wrong movement can have disastrous consequences. I haven't played much in recent years, but I can't tell you how many times I've intended to hit the ball straight, only to see it curve in the wrong direction, or tried to hit a gentle shot, only to see it rocket across the green. You might be tempted to chalk this up to me just being a bad golfer (which is probably fair), but if you've ever tried to play, you know just how frustrating it can be. You practice, you do drills, and you know exactly what you want to do—and then when you take your swing, the opposite happens.

My experience with golf sounds a lot like the experience Paul describes with the battle against sin. Paul talks about knowing what he wants to do but continuing to do the opposite. I suspect we can all resonate with this in our spiritual lives.

This morning, we're going to unpack the second half of Romans 7, and we will find a kindred spirit with Paul, as he describes the frustration of his battle against sin. As we look at these words, it might be tempting to think that Paul was despairing, but he wasn't. This passage shouldn't be depressing; it should bring us encouragement and direction. It should drive us to find the strength to continue battling sin in our lives, even when we fail. That's my hope for you (and me!) as we dig into our passage today.

## The Law and Us

Paul picks up his argument from last week regarding the law and our relationship to it.

<sup>13</sup> But how can that be? Did the law, which is good, cause my death? Of course not! Sin used what was good to bring about my condemnation to death. So we can see how terrible sin really is. It uses God's good commands for its own evil purposes. <sup>14</sup> So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. (Romans 7:13-14, NLT)

Paul has been talking about how the law's purpose is to show us our sin. The law shows us what we are doing wrong and points us to our need for a Savior. Paul anticipates the question that some people might be asking. "If the purpose of the law is to show us we are sinful, then doesn't the law cause our spiritual death?"

Paul's answer is a resounding no! The law is good—it reveals to us the character of God and shows us how God has designed us to live. The law is not the problem—we are! And that's what Paul's point is. The law is good, the problem is sinful people.

At the end of verse 14, however, notice that Paul shifts his tone a little bit. Before, Paul seemed to be speaking about Christians in general, but now he focuses specifically on himself, saying that the trouble with the law is that "I am all too human, a slave to sin."

What follows (which we'll get to in a moment), is Paul's discussion of the struggle he faces against sin and temptation. The question is who is Paul describing in these verses? There are basically three views.

**First, is that Paul was describing his experience before Christ.** Proponents of this view believe Paul was talking about his life as a Pharisee, for he loved the law, but invariably found himself falling short of it. One of the biggest issues with this view is that Paul has been speaking in the past tense up to this point, but now he abruptly switches to present tense. It would seem strange that he would use the present tense to speak about something that used to be true of himself but isn't now. Plus, Paul the Pharisee viewed himself as faultless (cf. Phil. 3:6). He didn't see his sin prior to Christ.

**Second, is that Paul was describing the experience of immature Christians.** The idea here is that Paul is describing people who have not yet fully submitted to Christ. They are Christians but have not experienced true freedom through Jesus. The problem with this view is again that Paul speaks about himself in the present tense, which doesn't make sense. Additionally, the rest of scripture does not bear out the notion that mature Christians no longer struggle with sin, and neither does our experience! None of us ever arrives at a place where we no longer face these struggles.

**The third view is that Paul was describing his present experience.** This view makes the most sense to me. It is consistent with Paul's sudden switch to using the present tense, and what he describes in these verses is a conversation I have had with myself many times before. From talking with other mature believers, I know they have as well.

I believe Paul is speaking about the struggle all genuine believers in Christ face. Those who are not living for the Lord do not struggle with sin, because they do not see their sin. But for the person who desires to live for the Lord, the person who submits their life to Him, sees their sin and desires to do something about it. Paul is describing the experience that every believer faces when they own up to their sin and seek to do something about it.

But there is still another unanswered question in these opening verses. Paul describes himself as a slave to sin...but hasn't he just spent the last chapter and a half telling us how we are no longer slaves to sin? Is he contradicting himself? Was he having a stroke? How are we supposed to understand what he is saying here?

Paul has indeed said that we are no longer slaves to sin because through Jesus, we are no longer the same sinful creatures we were before Jesus. The old us has died and we now have the ability to go in a different direction. So, what did Paul mean when he said he's a slave to sin here?

I think the key is found in the verses that immediately precede this declaration. In the NLT it says, "for I am all too human", but I feel like that misses something of what Paul is driving at. Here is how the ESV renders verse 14,

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.  
(Romans 7:14, ESV)

Paul says that he is of the flesh, which is still a slave to sin. What does this mean? It means that though we have been delivered from the penalty of sin (that is, spiritual death), and we are no longer bound to it, we continue to live in bodies that bear the curse of sin. When Adam and Eve sinned, it not only affected their spirits (though it did that); all of creation became tainted by the curse of sin. That is true even of the physical bodies in which we currently reside.

So while we have been redeemed and set free from the power of sin spiritually, we are not only spiritual creatures, we are also physical ones, and our physical nature continues to bear this curse of sin. This means that though we have the power to live differently, we still will face the temptation to return to the old pattern of living. One commentator had a good way of stating our current condition,

We may be slaves of a new master, but we still live in enemy territory.<sup>1</sup>

This is what Paul is describing. While we have been set free from sin through Jesus, that does not mean the battle is over—though ultimate victory is assured. We must continue to do battle throughout our lives.

## The Battle

Paul goes on to describe what this battle looks like as he continues,

<sup>15</sup> I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. <sup>16</sup> But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. <sup>17</sup> So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

<sup>18</sup> And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. <sup>19</sup> I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. <sup>20</sup> But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

<sup>21</sup> I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. <sup>22</sup> I love God's law with all my heart. <sup>23</sup> But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. <sup>24</sup> Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? (Romans 7:15-24, NLT)

You can hear a growing sense of frustration as you read these verses. This is a man who is disgusted by the fact that he knows what is right, and he even wants to do what is right—but so often he finds himself doing the opposite.

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<sup>1</sup> Barton, Bruce B., David Veerman, and Neil S. Wilson. *Romans*. Life Application Bible Commentary. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992.

In vv. 17-20, Paul talks about the fact that his sinful nature is the source of this failure. It would be tempting to conclude that Paul was passing the buck, basically saying he's not at fault, but that isn't the case at all. He is simply describing the difficult reality he (and every believer) faces.

Christians live an "already, but not yet" existence. We have already been delivered from the spiritual consequences of our sin. Christ has paid the penalty once and for all. We no longer need to fear condemnation from God because of what we have done. This is an important point for us to understand. Sometimes Christians, when they are faced with their continual failure, begin to think that God must have surely tired of them. They reason that if they were real believers, they would no longer have these struggles or desires, and they begin to despair and doubt their standing before God.

Remember that the standing we enjoy before God is not because of our performance, it is because of faith in Jesus Christ. Romans 8 begins with the wonderful phrase,  
So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:1, NLT)

That is the "already" side of our existence. If we are followers of Christ, we do not need to fear condemnation, because Christ has already paid the price for our sin. But there is also a "not yet" side as well. As long as we remain on this earth, which is tainted by sin, in these bodies, which are tainted by sin, we will have a battle on our hands. The Holy Spirit works in us to bring change in our lives and make us holy. That process is called sanctification. But that process will never be finished in this life because we still live in enemy territory. It is only once we have been delivered from our sinful bodies and Christ makes all things new that we will be made completely holy. At that point the battle will be finished...but we're not there yet.

So, what does Paul say? It almost seems as though he throws his hands up in despair, declaring himself to be a wretched man who cannot save himself. But rather than being a declaration of despair, this declaration is the key to victory. Paul has come to the end of himself, recognizing this is not a battle he can win in his own strength, but rather recognizing his need for someone to save him from himself. So he asks the important question, "who can free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?"

## **Our Hope and Strength**

Verse 25 records Paul's victorious conclusion,

<sup>25</sup> Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God's law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin. (Romans 7:25, NLT)

Paul points to Jesus as our only hope for salvation and for victory over sin. A wise person recognizes their weaknesses and surrounds themselves with people who are strong in the areas where they are weak. Those people help us to shore up our areas of weakness. Our greatest weakness is that we continue to live in enemy territory, and in

some sense, we remain slaves to sin. But through Christ, we find a strength greater than our own.

Here is how Paul describes this battle in another one of his letters,

<sup>12</sup> If you think you are standing strong, be careful not to fall. <sup>13</sup> The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you can endure. (1 Cor. 10:12-13, NLT)

Paul reminds us of two things. **First, when we become confident in our own strength, we set ourselves up for failure.** You've surely had this experience. You've worked hard to eliminate some sinful behavior from your life and have had some success, so you conclude you can relax because you've conquered that sin. And the next thing you know, you're right back where you were before! Or maybe you see others who are tempted by something, but you conclude that you don't have to worry about that because you are stronger than they are. Paul shows us that when we have these attitudes, we are in great danger. In our own strength we will always be weak. So we must look to the Lord for strength.

And that leads to the second truth. **God will help us in our temptation if we turn to Him.** Paul says God will not let our temptation become greater than we can stand. Some have misunderstood this passage to say, "God will never give you more than you can handle." That isn't the message. The message is that God provides a way out of every temptation we face. But we need to remember that He is the One who provides the way out! So when we feel tempted to sin, we need to turn to the Lord, seeking His help, because He promises that in His strength, victory is possible.

That, I believe, is Paul's ultimate conclusion. We will all face a continual battle with sin. The temptation when we fail in this battle is to conclude that we have been defeated once and for all, to throw up our hands in despair and simply give up. Paul shows us a different way. He says victory is found in Christ. He has promised to not only save us from the penalty of our sin, but to help us to do battle with it here and now.

## Conclusion

As we conclude today, I want to give you some practical steps you can take in your battle against sin and temptation. These may seem obvious and straightforward, but I promise that if you (and I) will actually do them, we will see victory in places where all we've previously known is failure.

**First, own up to your failures.** The biggest reason we continue to fall into the same sinful patterns over and over again is because we don't take responsibility for them. We blame others for our anger, or we blame society for our greed. We believe others are the reason we sin. We need to be honest with ourselves. Rather than making excuses, recognize that you ultimately have a choice to make in how to think and act—and you chose poorly. Identify things that aren't how they should be and own up to them. Rather than making excuses, rather than saying, "this is just the way I am", accept

responsibility for your failure—and even more than that, accept responsibility for changing the things that need to be changed. We will never see victory until we admit our failures.

**Second, focus on specific areas.** It is difficult for us to tackle a huge, and wide-ranging problem in our lives, because shows up in so many ways that it seems impossible to root out. The solution is to focus on specific areas. Ask yourself why you are tempted in certain situations. If you struggle anger, for example, you may find that anger is how you respond to feeling afraid or insecure, or maybe because things just aren't going the way you want. It may reveal the real issue is insecurity or a desire for control. Focus not just the behavior, but the attitude that underlies it. Focus on doing battle in that one area to start with, and you'll begin to make real and lasting changes.

**Third, utilize prayer!** Prayer is a powerful weapon we have against sin. Spend time asking God to show you the ways a given sin shows up in your life. You will likely find places you didn't even realize were there. It is only when we are aware of sin that we can do something about it. So ask God to show you where you need to change. But don't stop there. Remember that God will help when you are tempted. When you feel those familiar feelings rise, immediately stop what you are doing and ask for the Lord's help. Remind yourself that He has promised a way out of this temptation and ask Him to show you what that is! Remember that you don't fight alone, so make use of the tools He gives you!

**Finally, choose to see progress.** We are going to continue to fail. It shouldn't surprise or discourage us, but it does. Nobody likes to fail. Inevitably, we will become frustrated by the fact that something we've battled for a long time continues to be a struggle for us. Satan will tell you all sorts of lies to get you to despair. Here's the remedy: look for progress, not perfection. We won't attain perfection until we get to Heaven, so make progress your goal. Celebrate the victories you experience. Victories are places where you would have given into sin before, but now you've chosen a different path. Even small victories are a big deal! Don't believe the lies that they don't matter. Choose to celebrate progress rather than getting frustrated that you don't see perfection.

I believe Paul's purpose in these verses was to offer encouragement to believers. He wants us to see that none of us has it figured out, and we will all continue to struggle. But rather than throwing up our hands in despair, we should look to our Christ as our source of strength, knowing He will lead us in a different direction.

As I said at the beginning, golf is a frustrating game because we fail so often. So why do people keep playing? The answer is simple. Every now and then, the pieces line up and you do it right. That's what keeps you coming back. The golfers who replay their failures end up giving up. Those who replay their victories tend to keep coming back and working to get better. That's the same approach we ought to take in our battle with sin. Celebrate your victories, see that the Lord is helping you make progress, and use that to help you keep moving forward with Him. Let that propel you to keep fighting the good fight—in His strength, rather than your own.

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