

October 11, 2026

STRUGGLE: ROMANS 7:4-6,14-25

Introductory Activity

Ask the group if anyone has ever known a perfectionist.

Explain: The online Cambridge Dictionary defines a perfectionist as “a person who wants everything to be perfect and demands the highest standards possible.” A perfectionist can be hard on others and on themselves. One historical example is the great artist, Leonardo da Vinci. You might know him from his great masterpieces such as the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper. As a scientist, inventor, philosopher, and artist, da Vinci was very methodical. He would spend years researching and working on a project. Many of his projects continued for years before completion. Contemporaries reported that while painting *The Last Supper* da Vinci would sometimes stand on the scaffolding for an entire day staring at the painting only to make a single brushstroke. Isabella Feinstine writes that “Leonardo started painting the *Mona Lisa* in 1503 and worked on it until 1517...Over the course of 14 years, he would add layer after layer of translucent paint to summon movement, emotion and intricate detail in the panel.”¹ Da Vinci’s perfectionism resulted in a small artistic output: only 20 completed paintings.² On a more personal level, his perfectionist spirit caused him feelings of inadequacy and regret. In his book *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, written in the mid 1500’s Giorgio Vasari reports that da Vinci was demoralized as he lay dying. Reportedly, he repented for his lack of achievement, saying, “I have offended God and mankind because my work did not reach the quality it should have.”³

Summarize and Transition: Da Vinci was a great talent, but he could never do enough good to satisfy his demanding requirements. Today we are going to talk about the demanding requirements of moral perfection—living a godly life. Last week we talked about the sanctification process—the process of moving toward Christlikeness and freedom from the power of sin. Today, we will continue in that vein and discuss the challenges of attempting to live a righteous life. We are going to see that Paul aimed for perfection, but we will also see that while perfection is “a proper goal to aspire to... it is never the reality.” (ETBC, 60) Moreover, we are going to see that Paul’s life was not marked by perfection but with struggle. (see ETBC, 60) This struggle, while not the aim of Paul’s life, is a driving force in the sanctification process.

Notes:

This Lesson was created using:

- *Explore the Bible Leader Guide* (ETB LG)
- *Explore the Bible Personal Study Guide* (ETB PSG)
- *Explore the Bible Commentary* (ETBC)
- *New American Commentary: Romans*, Mounce (NAC)
- *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*, Moo (NICNT)
- *Exalting Jesus in Romans*, Merida (Exalting)
- *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Romans*, Bruce (TNTC)
- *Be Right*, Wiersbe (Be)

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/kenburns/leonardo-da-vinci/the-mona-lisa> accessed October 2, 2026

² <https://www.britannica.com/question/How-many-Leonardo-da-Vinci-paintings-are-there> accessed October 2, 2026

³ <https://www.mentalfloss.com/history/leonardo-da-vinci-last-words> accessed October 2, 2026

1. FREED (ROM. 7:4-6)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 7:4-6.

Explain: Paul begins chapter 7 with an analogy from marriage. He says that a husband and wife are obligated to one another for as long as one of them lives. However, if one dies, the other is free from that obligation and can pursue another romantic relationship. In verse 4, Paul reveals that a believer has **Died to the Law for a Purpose**. The purpose he gives for the death is “so that you may belong to another.” We have died to the law (and sin) *so that* we can unite with Christ. We are freed from the obligations of the law and the demands of sin and freed to unite with Christ through faith by grace. That is not the end of things, though. The believer did not just die for a purpose, but he or she was **Raised for a Purpose**. At the end of verse 4, Paul says that we were “raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.” J. B. Phillips says we were raised so “that you may be productive for God.”

Discuss: What do you think it means to bear fruit for God or be productive for God?

Explain: to help us understand this lets first examine what Paul says about the **Fruit of our Former Lives**.

Reread verse 5 (See Notes Box.)

Explain: Let’s consider what Paul writes here. First, he says that before salvation we were living in the flesh. Two points can be made here: **the flesh is a mindset and a way of being**. The fleshly mindset is a carnal or worldly mindset that is hostile to a righteous God. A life in the flesh is a life in sin. Moreover, the flesh is a way of being in which a person attempts to be righteous. In Romans 8:7, Paul says a person living in the mindset of the flesh cannot live in a way that pleases God. This is because of their sin. It is also because they are unable to do the good that is necessary to please God. The prophet Isaiah had pointed this out centuries earlier when he wrote, “all our righteousnesses *are* as filthy rags.” (Isaiah 56KJV) In other words, all of our attempts at righteousness are as bad as our sin when living in the flesh prior to salvation.

Paul continues in verse 5 that the unbeliever’s “sinful passions aroused through the law” led to rotten fruit. Reading that, we understand the “sinful passions” part. That makes sense to us. The second part about those passions being aroused through the law is more confusing. The Explore the Bible Commentary explains, “Paul’s comments bring to mind a child told not to do something who then becomes fascinated by the very thing he or she was warned to avoid. The law can have the same effect (7:7-8).” (ETBC, 63) As we are going to see in the next passage, the fault here does not lie in the law itself. Instead, it lies with the person having sinful desires. Their sinful desires misuse the law. Instead of using it as a guide to righteousness, they use it as a guide to sinfulness, rebel against it, and defy God’s intention for it.

Romans 7:5

⁵ For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions aroused through the law were working in us to bear fruit for death.

Romans 8:7

⁷ The mindset of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit to God’s law. Indeed, it is unable to do so.

Lastly, Paul says that living in the flesh produces that fruit for death. Again, Phillips writes, “that we became productive—for death!”

Discuss: How would you define, describe, or identify the “fruit for death” or being productive for death as expressed in the life of the unbeliever?

Explain: The famous passage in Galatians 5:22-23 lists the Fruit of the Spirit. Those might well be included as part of the “fruit for God” mentioned in Romans 7:4. Before Paul lists the Fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5, he provides a list of the works of the flesh that correspond with the “fruit of death” mentioned in Romans 7. In order to help us wrap our minds around that list, we might read it from the Message paraphrase because it modernizes and makes personal the list given by Paul.

Optional Activity: Provide your group with the attached handout. Ask them to compare the CSB translation of the passage with *The Message* paraphrase and mark on either that activities that they might *particularly* equate with the “fruit of death” or being productive *for* death (which ones stick out).

Read Galatians 5:19-21 from *The Message* (See Notes Box.)

Explain: What culture calls fun and normal Scripture identifies as the fruit of death, or more importantly, fruit that is productive for death. Paul says that believers are free from sin and the law and the rotten fruit it produces. Instead, believers are united with Christ, and, according to verse 6, believers can “serve in the newness of the Spirit.” This is the flip side of producing fruit for God or being productive for God. We not only produce fruit in our righteous behavior; we produce fruit in service through the Spirit. Righteous fruit is not just “acting right”; it is “doing right” in relationship with others—those we know and those we do not know.

Summarize Transition: As we discussed last week, sanctification has two concerns. First, it is concerned with how we live between **justification** (getting saved and experiencing freedom from the penalty of sin) and **glorification** (experiencing the glory we hope for and freedom from the presence of sin). Second, it is concerned with **learning to live Christlike** lives in the in-between time. In this passage, Paul reminds us that in our union with Christ we are freed from the obligation to sin so that we might be righteous and live righteously in relationship, thus bearing fruit for God.

In the next passage, Paul is going to remind us of the struggle we experience in this in-between time as we strive to live in a Christlike manner.

2. CONFLICTED (ROM. 7:14-23)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 7:14-23

Explain: In this passage, Paul presents three realities. The first is the **Conflicting Reality (vv. 14-15)**. More accurately, we might call this the reality of conflict. On the face of it, verses 14 and 15 seem to be in conflict with much of Paul argument in the preceding chapters. In those chapters, Paul has repeatedly told us that believers are free from sin. Yet here the “saintly”

Notes:

Galatians 5:19-21 (MSG)

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom

apostle appears to be struggling with the sin of which he says the believer is free. This has led some (very smart people) to theorize that Paul is speaking of the unsaved person here. They make a very good case, but today we will stick with the traditional view of this passage that asserts Paul is speaking of the saved person and his/her struggle to live in this mortal body. In verses 19-23, we will see why this struggle exists, but first we need to admit that **saved folks struggle**. This struggle against sin exists for all believers: those young in the faith and those who have followed Jesus for many years. It exists for all believers, but it changes over time.

Discuss: How does the struggle with sin change over time as we grow in Christ?

Explain: The young Christian, in both age and spiritual maturity, might struggle with outward-facing sins. If we use Peterson's list from Galatians 5 in *The Message*, those might include cheap sex; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; cutthroat competition; a brutal temper; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions. As we age in Christ, the struggle can change. I doubt Paul was struggling with many of those sins (though he might have; we don't know). Instead, he was probably struggling with the inward-facing sins like pride, jealousy, laziness, limited love toward others, etc. At age 80, Gordon MacDonald, pastor and author of books like *Ordering Your Private World*, was asked about the sins of "old people." He gave three: fear, bitterness, anger. Fear of death. Bitterness directed toward family. Anger directed toward the church that seems to have forgotten them.⁴ These sins are usually not even on the radar for those younger in the faith. You see, as we age in Christ, we become more aware of God's holiness and our lack of holiness, and these inward sins become our focus.

What Paul is expressing in these verses is what it means to live between justification and glorification. You see the Kingdom of God has broken in, but the world is still broken. We are saved from the penalty of sin but not yet free from the presence of sin. Therefore, we struggle against the power of sin. The first reality that Paul presents is the **Conflicting Reality**—the reality of conflict.

In verse 16, Paul briefly reminds us of the **Concrete Reality** of God's goodness. He reveals that the struggle with sin reveals that God's ways are good. Here Paul is speaking about the moral imperatives of the law, not the ceremonial parts. His logic is thus: I am saved and want to do good. I don't do good all the time. When I do bad, I feel bad because I want to do good. Therefore, what God wants me to do—the moral/ethical aspects of the

Notes:

In this passage Paul writes as if "the 'age to come' has already arrived, although the old age has not yet passed away, and he is caught up in the tension between the two." (TNTC, 143)

"He is like a person living simultaneously on two planes, eagerly longing to lead a life in keeping with the high plane, but sadly aware of the strength of indwelling sin that keeps on pulling him down to the lower plan." (TNTC, 143)

"Here is a picture of life under the law, without the aid of the Spirit, portrayed from the perspective of one who has not experienced the liberating power of life in the Spirit." (TNCT, 143)

Someone who "had not appreciated or appropriated the fullness of gospel freedom." (TNTC, 143)

⁴ Carey Nieuwhof, "Required Listening: Gordon MacDonald on the View from 80 and 15 Lessons on Why We Struggle," July 21, 2026 in *The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*, The Art of Leadership Network, 1 hr 47 min, <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/required-listening-gordon-macdonald-on-the-view-from/id912753163?i=1000777695114>

law—is good. The practical application of this point is that we should not stop struggling. Keep fighting against the power of sin because God’s ways are best.

Verses 17-23 present a third reality. Here we see the two **Co-present Realities** that reside in the believer. First, we see the reality of **Inhabiting Sin**. Paul says that it is not he but the sin living in him that causes him to do, think, and feel unrighteous things. We should note that Paul is not trying to duck responsibility here. Instead, he is acknowledging the truth that in Christ he is a new person. However, that person lives in a spiritually broken, mortal body that still has the propensity to sin. As a justified person headed for glory, Paul is a new person, but his mortal body “wages war against” his renewed mind. This leads Paul to highlight the second, co-present reality of the **Indwelling Spirit**. While sin inhabits the mortal body, the Holy Spirit has moved in/taken up residence/indwelt the believer. Imagine with me the Christian college student who moves into a dorm room with an unsaved freshman who wants to party-it-up. These two are not going to get along. The inhabiting sin and the indwelling Spirit in the believer are not going to get along. In verse 22, Paul says his “inner self” or his “spiritual self” or his “Spirit-led self” delights in God’s law. Nevertheless, he feels that his sinful nature has taken him prisoner to the desire of the flesh (v. 23)

These three realities—the reality of conflict, which reveals the real goodness of God’s ways, lived out in the battle between our sinful nature and the leading of the Spirit—bring us to the crux of sanctification. If we are going to grow in Christlikeness and experience freedom from the power of sin, we must yield ourselves to the Spirit and resist the temptation of sin.

Discuss: How do we practically yield ourselves to the Spirit and resist temptation?

Explain: We do this by first reminding ourselves daily of the truth that Paul points to here: I am a new creation in Christ. As 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!” Second, we struggle. Back in chapter 5, Paul wrote about afflictions (5:3-4). Those afflictions are the day-by-day afflictions of being human in a broken world. They are also the persecutions faced by those who live godly lives in an ungodly world. In that passage, Paul tells us to practice godly endurance in the face of such affliction because godly endurance will produce godly character as we wait in hope for the glory of God. The struggle against sin can be another form of affliction. We do not endure sinfulness in ourselves, but we do endure the struggle against sin. As we endure the deprivation of worldly/sinful enjoyment by resisting sin, our godly character will be developed. This is what it means to grow as a disciple of Christ.

Summarize and Transition: Paul presents three compounding realities in this passage. He reminds us that following the Lord as redeemed humans living in a broken world can be difficult. Nevertheless, the filling of the Spirit can help us endure the challenges of pursuing godliness. We should note two things before we move along. One, a successful struggle against sin can only be done in the power of the Spirit. The saved person can be no more successful in living righteously than the unsaved person without the power of the Spirit. Second, we must yield ourselves to the Spirit in order to experience His power. We can attempt to be the master of our lives if we want to follow the true Master.

In the last passage for this lesson, Paul is going to once again express his misery and his hope in Christ.

3. HOPE (ROM. 7:24-25)

Read (or have someone read) Romans 7:24-25.

Discuss: Verse 24 Paul declares that he is a “wretched man.” What do you think led to such a declaration?

Explain: John Stott declares that the wretched man is saved “‘but not liberated, under the law and not yet in or under the Spirit.’ He rejects it as a ‘pattern of normal Christian experience’ but recognizes that ‘some

churchgoers today might be termed ‘Old Testament Christians’” (Stott, *Romans*, 210 in NAC, 167, fn. 94). Wiersbe explains that the word wretched refers to “a person who is exhausted after a battle.” (Be, 82) Paul declares his wretched state not simply because he is failing to live the righteous life he desires. No, he declares himself wretched in failing in his struggle *because* he is struggling in his own power. He is tired and defeated, but he is tired and defeated because he is fighting a battle alone. We don’t like to think about this type of living in relation to someone like Paul. But it appears that the sins with which he struggled (whatever they may be) could only be defeated through the power of the Spirit. This is true for outward-facing sins we face in young life and the inward-facing sins we face in old age. Whether it is sexual promiscuity or bitterness, we will be wretched if we try to defeat them in our own power.

Paul does not ruminate too long on his defeated frame of mind. His “question [in verse 24] leads to a proclamation of the only solution to the problem of sin [found in verse 25].” (ETBC, 69) The only solution is the grace of God. Read as a whole, verse 25 might be restated as: Thanks be to God who, while I am struggling to follow Him with my spiritual mind but failing in my mortal body, forgives me through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Summarize and Transition: We can read this account of Paul’s struggle in a couple of ways. One inappropriate way to read it is as an excuse for sinfulness. We are not allowed to say things like, “Well, I am just human.” You are human, but you are a new kind of human who is indwelt by the Spirit, who has the power to free you from sin if you yield to Him. One appropriate way to read this passage is as a guide to thanksgiving. Yes, you are human who struggles, but thanks be to God for Christ’s redemption, the Father’s grace, and the Spirit’s power.

CONCLUDE

We began our lesson discussing the dangers of perfectionism. Yes, we should strive for moral perfection, but we should also understand that it is an impossibility in this mortal body living in the time between justification and glorification. However, that should not deter us from yielding ourselves to the Spirit and striving for Christlikeness. This is the goal of sanctification. As we struggle with sin in the Spirit’s power, God will lessen sin’s power in our lives as He builds Christlike character in us.

How do we respond?

1. Don’t get down on yourself. The struggle is real, and we will not always resist the temptations of our mortal body.
2. Don’t give up. Keep fighting the fight, but do so by *not fighting* the Spirit. Yield to His guidance.
3. Fill your life with practices and people that promote godliness.

One last quote from Gordon MacDonald that reminds us of our part in the struggle toward Christlikeness: “If people are going to come to church 1.7 times a month, then they better accept the fact that their faith will not go very far.”⁵ That is not meant to be a massive rebuke, though it might be a massive challenge to some. Instead, it is meant to remind us that we can all do more to partner with the Spirit in our sanctification. Maybe it *is* coming to church more consistently. It might also be setting aside time to study or pray or fast or practice solitude. Ask the Lord to reveal to you your next step in partnering with the Spirit this week.

⁵ Ibid.

THE WORKS OF THE FLESH—FRUIT OF DEATH

Galatians 5:19-21

¹⁹ Now the works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, moral impurity, promiscuity, ²⁰ idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions, ²¹ envy, drunkenness, carousing, and anything similar. I am warning you about these things—as I warned you before—that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:19-21 (Message)

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

This isn't the first time I have warned you, you know. If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.