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Sermon Notes

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The Bitter Struggle with Sin, Part 3

Romans 7:13-25

I. Sin's Destructive Power

vs. 13 *“But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.”*

- A. Destructive to People
- B. Destructive to Families
- C. Destructive to Churches
- D. Destructive to Nations
- E. Destructive to Creation

NOW... if sin is so utterly wicked, and if we have died to sin once for all and sin has absolutely no dominion over us any longer, why do we still yield to sin?

That is precisely the question I believe that Romans 7 seeks to answer

II. Context

- A. Last Week: Overview of Romans 7
 - 1. Was Paul speaking as a Christian or non-Christian
 - 2. Extremely difficult to answer
 - 3. One commentator: “It is possible to hold the wrong view of Romans 7 and yet have the right view of the Christian life!!”

Why? Because the passage is difficult!!!

4. Either the passage thinks too lowly of Christians OR too highly of non-Christians

Can a Christian say:

vs. 14 *I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.*

That seems to contradict Romans 6:14

Romans 6:14 For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

BUT can a non-Christian say:

vs. 22 *in my inner being I delight in God's law*

That seems to contradict what we'll learn about non-Christians in Romans 8:

Romans 8:7 the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so

B. The Limitations of the Law vs. the Power of the Spirit

1. Either way... both side can agree that this passage shows the limitation of LAW
 - a. law cannot justify
 - b. law cannot sanctify either
 - c. human effort to keep the law CANNOT advance you one step in your Christian life
2. NOTE: the Holy Spirit is not mentioned in this section

Galatians 5:16 So I say, live [walk] by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Galatians 5:18 If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Galatians 5:25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

C. Already and Not-Yet

1. Power of the New Age has broken in with the coming of the Holy Spirit
2. Holy Spirit leads us in a powerful new life, radically different from our previous existence

3. BUT the experience of the Spirit in our present fleshly existence is only a FORETASTE of our future perfection

Ephesians 1:13 Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession--to the praise of his glory.

"Deposit" = small downpayment on the inheritance... a "monthly stipend" until we get the full amount

When do we get the full amount? When we are glorified in heaven with our perfect resurrection bodies:

Romans 8:23 Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

D. NOW however, we struggle with this body of death

1. "Body of death"

vs. 21-24 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

2. "Body of sin"

Romans 6:6 For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.

3. "Mortal body"

Romans 6:12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.

Consistent teaching from Paul: the fleshly (earthly) part of you is a ready-made tool for sin... an easy entry point for sin to come and entice you and drag you away. The repeated commands to not let that happen show that it can happen if we don't walk by the power of the Spirit

BUT in heaven, we will lose these mortal bodies and receive immortal resurrection bodies with no sinful tendencies whatsoever!!!

Until then, we must struggle with sin

That is the point of Romans 7

III. Cycles of Lamentation: vss. 14-23

Paul gives four laments over his struggle... the first three follow a pattern; the fourth is different

Pattern = "Condition" "Conflict" "Cause"

Condition = mixed, fleshly and spiritual

Conflict = Proof of condition, constant conflict between new nature and sin nature

Cause = Cause of struggle... indwelling sin, residing in the "flesh"

BUT collectively they make clear points: how wretched we are naturally and what a vicious and powerful foe is sin, and how impotent is the law to change us in any way

THEREFORE we should cry out against ourselves and lament our sinfulness most bitterly

A. The First Lament: Unspiritual, Living Force for Evil (vss. 14-17)

1. Condition

vs. 14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin..

2. Conflict

vs. 15-16 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.

- a. sin is essentially a form of insanity
- b. doing what we hate!!! What is that but insanity??
- c. resisting, even defying the God who made the universe? What is that but insanity??
- d. seeking personally to untie the tether that holds us to God? What is that but insanity??

Illus. Spacewalking astronauts had a tether holding them to the spacecraft... worst nightmare is flying off into deep outer space with no one to rescue

God's law holds us safely to God's best for us and protects us from sin which threatens to ruin everything good in our lives... and with our own hands we seek to untie that law that binds us safely to God...

So Paul says:

I do not understand what I do.

3. Cause

vs. 17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me

- a. sin is “**alive**”... lit. “dwelling”, taking up residence in me
- b. like some cancerous tumor inside us all

Illus. Scanning electron microscope photos of the malaria parasite... ugly little worm destroying the red blood cells of 200 million people around the world...

Sin infects our spiritual blood streams in the same way, weakening us and opposing everything God wants to do through us

- c. still there even after we’ve been justified through faith in Christ

B. The Second Lament: The Pull of the Flesh (vss. 18-20)

1. Condition

vs. 18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.

- a. KEY clarification... “me” vs. “my flesh” or “sinful nature”

This adjustment is key to my interpretation of the passage... whenever Paul uses “slavery” language here, he’s speaking about his flesh, his sin nature

- b. “I” am not “my flesh”... but sometimes by flesh gains the upper hand
- c. the “flesh” in this sense = sinful nature

NOTE: sometimes “flesh” simply means physical bodies of muscles, blood, tendons, nerves... cells

Sometimes “flesh” has to do with physical descent or ancestry... or is simply a synonym for people or mankind “The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh will see it”

HERE “flesh” means that part of human personality dominated and controlled by sinful desires and pursuits

PAUL SAYS THIS PART OF HUMANITY IS UNREDEEMABLE!! It must simply be crucified

vs. 18 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.

2. Conflict

vs. 18-19 *For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing.*

a. mere desire alone not sufficient for sanctification

- Paul's desires conflict with his actual behavior
- He grieves over the gap between what he wants to do and what he actually does

Illus. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions"... Have you ever made plans to change your life in some key way to be a permanent blessing to God and God's people... and it never really comes about

Vision of Christian life far outstrips actual performance

Illus. Mediocre artist trying to draw spectacular scenery... nothing wrong with the scenery; something wrong with the artist

Christian life is like a mediocre artist who grows tired of the lousy attempts he makes to draw the magnificent scenery and puts his hand in the Spirit's hands and says "Draw this scene through me!!" Yet even so, the sin nature impairs even that portrait

b. without power of Christ's Spirit no good thing can occur

John 15:5 *"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*

c. evil we "keep on doing"... lit. "practice" (vs. 19)

- habit patterns of sin... built up over years
- "where water has flowed before, it'll flow again"
- DEVILISHLY HARD TO BREAK BAD HABITS

NOTE: the body has been trained to sin for decades... snappish, prideful responses; idle wandering thoughts; covetous yearnings; lazy half-jobs... breaking the sin cycle is the hardest thing a Christian can ever do

3. Cause

vs. 20 *Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

- a. it is sin... not I
- b. YET Paul does not deny his personal responsibility for it
- c. “No longer” is VITAL... there’s been a change in me... I used to love the sin and own it completely; I used to be my flesh and my flesh was me
- d. NO LONGER I... I am a new creation in Christ

NOTE: a non-Christian cannot say “no longer I who does it” There’s been no change at all, they are still slaves to sin through and through

Christians are forever free from sin’s authority to rule and dominate... but not from sin’s power to tempt and draw us away

- e. AMAZING Christians are free from sin’s bondage and yet they still sin

C. The Third Lament: Clear and Present Evil (vss. 21-23)

1. Condition

vs. 21 *So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.*

- a. calls it a “law”... unbreakable principle of life, as certain as the law of gravity
- b. evil “right there with me” = immediately present

Christians have the sense that Christ is standing at our side during trials

2 Timothy 4:16-17 *At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. ¹⁷ But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength*

Christians also have the sense that sin also stands right at our side during temptation

- c. condition: divided people... not 100% anything

Galatians 5:17 *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.*

You never want 100% to do good; you never want 100% to do evil...

GOOD:

- Sitting at church you yearn to hear God's word, but you struggle with boredom or thoughts of what you're planning to do this afternoon
- Kneeling in prayer, you hunger for God's presence and to pray for missionaries, but your mind wanders and you chafe under the discipline of prayer
- Witnessing: part of you has genuine compassion for the lost and is bold enough to open your mouth to share the gospel; part of you cares more about your reputation than your neighbor's eternal destiny
- Giving: part of you wants to be generous, part of you wants to be selfish

EVIL

- Watching something on TV you shouldn't; part of you wants to, but part of you is disgusted
- Slandering your neighbor: part of you really enjoys it, part of you recoils in horror
- Sinful habits... overeating, impure thoughts, drinking etc.

If you are a Christian, you will NEVER wholeheartedly sin again! Among the most miserable people on earth are sinning Christians

2. Conflict

vs. 22-23 For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind

- a. "another law" = an authority, a power which makes demands
- b. wages war... a form of subversive terrorism

Illus. The war on terrorism... so difficult because so much is hidden below the surface... uncertain as to who friends/foes are, uncertain how to attack even the foes we're sure about; Sin carries on a subversive form of terrorism against the law of our minds and hearts

- c. the battle for the **mind**... thinking with the mind of Christ is essential

Right doctrine is the Holy Spirit's greatest weapon in the battle with sin

Transformed minds lead to transformed lives... "repentance" lit. means "change of mind"

Romans 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.

d. "the flesh" has a mind of it's own... REBELLION against God

Romans 8:5-6 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. ⁶ The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace

3. Cause

vs. 23 and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

SIN is the cause of everything!! Sin the personified monster, the enemy of everything God wants to do in this world

SIN is a vile howling rebellious monster, and it lives within your own heart... and mine too!

D. The Final Lament: vss. 24-25

vs. 24-25 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! 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.

IV. The Final Lament: A Careful Look (vs. 24-25)

A. Condition

vs. 24-25 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! 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.

1. The problem is NOT with the law... it's with ME
2. "Wretched" = "utterly miserable", "tormented," "devastated"
3. No confidence in himself to save himself

This is exactly what must happen to us in order to be saved... we must see ourselves as utterly lost without Christ; if the flesh had its way, we would go to hell; Paul puts no confidence whatsoever in himself... he's not "basically a good person"... he calls himself a "wretched man"

This is the state of becoming a spiritual beggar, with no hope whatsoever for salvation apart from Christ

We are therefore spiritual beggars for JUSTIFICATION... and we must be spiritual beggars for SANCTIFICATION as well; we can't make one positive step in the Christian life without Christ

B. Cry for Deliverance

Who will rescue me from this body of death?

1. Cry for salvation... full salvation; not only justification but sanctification as well
2. This is the cry of a spiritual beggar!!! The body of death is too strong for me and it will drag me down under sinful wickedness
3. HELP ME JESUS!!!

This is perhaps the best example of the sinner's prayer... but it's meant for all of us all the time!

C. Confession of Faith in Christ

Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ

1. God is the savior... not only Christ
2. God the Father decreed your salvation... He is the one who hears your cry

Exodus 2:23-25 The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. ²⁴ God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. ²⁵ So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.

3. God sent you a deliverer... Jesus Christ; He sent you also a FULL SALVATION FROM SIN... not merely from the **penalty** of sin but also from the **practice** of sin and ultimately from the very **presence** of sin
4. Celebrate God's incredible goodness to us in Christ
 - Thanks be to God that Christ died in our place!!
 - Thanks be to God that all our sins have been forgiven by Christ's blood!!
 - Thanks be to God that Christ has given us His Spirit!!
 - Thanks be to God that Christ will raise us out of the tomb with resurrection bodies!!

- Thanks be to God for His incredible goodness to us in Christ!!

God has heard your cry for deliverance from your body of death!! He is working out His salvation plan in your life and NOTHING can stop it!! While you must labor for a time under the burden of your bodily existence, in the end you will triumph completely!

D. Cause of Ongoing Struggle

vs. 25 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.

1. Strong indication that Paul meant to declare this struggle an ongoing issue for himself as a Christian
2. Outburst of praise for God's salvation through Christ FOLLOWED BY clear-minded summary of struggles of Romans 7:13-23
3. YET some struggle with the "slavery" language... they shouldn't, because Paul uses the same imagery in Romans 6

Romans 6:19 Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness.

Romans 6:22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.

4. "Sinful nature" will continue to fight you every step of the way

V. Application: Knowing Self and Knowing God

A. Know yourself

1. As a sinner
2. As forgiven
3. As progressively sanctified

1. As a sinner

- a. Sin affects absolutely everything you do and are
- b. No pure motives, no pure actions, no 100% undivided moments
- c. You run the Christian race laden with weights that impede your every stride

Of course, Hebrews 12 tells you to lay aside every weight... but perfectly free running will never happen in this life

Every time you indulge the sin nature, every time you give in to temptation, you just added some weight that will hinder you running your race

Sin is a deadly enemy, the hater of your soul... and your past sins have set up habits and tendencies from which only God can free you

- d. You will always imagine a better Christian life than you actually will do
 - You can imagine yourself praying for two hours a day
 - You can imagine yourself witnessing to every stranger you meet
 - You can imagine yourself given totally to God in complete consecration
 - You can imagine yourself worshipping God perfectly in spirit and truth
 - You can imagine never procrastinating again, never wasting even a moment of God's precious time
 - You can imagine never arguing again with a loved one, never speaking an unkind word to anyone
 - You can imagine yourself using developing and using every spiritual gift God gave you
 - You can imagine yourself with a totally pure thought life... no pride, no lust, no coveting, no selfishness

You can imagine perfection in all these areas... but your sin nature seeks to ensure that your imagination will always exceed your actual performance

You imagine more than you live... your vision exceeds your performance

And every time that's true, it's because of sin... we were NOT slaves to sin, therefore we could have lived more powerfully for Christ

- e. THEREFORE... be a spiritual beggar, and be willing to grieve over sin... it is not a light or small matter
- our sins are damaging everything we do... our family, our church, our employment, our nation, everything
- THEREFORE we must confess and renounce them, and realize that they are poison

2. Know yourself: As forgiven

- Every sin you commit is covered totally by the blood of Christ
- You are justified by His blood shed on the cross

Romans 8:1 There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus

- All your stumblings and sins are covered totally

3. Know yourself: As progressively sanctified by the Spirit

- Positionally you are NOT A SLAVE TO SIN
- At any moment you can grasp a vision of a holy act and accomplish it by the Spirit
- No plan is too great, no action too bold, no vision too lofty to accomplish by the power of the Spirit
- Step by step you can and will see growth and progress in Christlike maturity
- Sins you struggle with today by God's grace you can defeat forever
- BUT only by the Spirit, not by your own fleshly efforts

Galatians 5:16 So I say, live [walk] by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.

Galatians 5:18 If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law.

Galatians 5:25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

Romans 7 and Galatians 5 make it clear that struggle with sin is NO proof that you're not a Christian... not at all... Christians at their BEST wrestle deeply with sin

- Be encouraged!! If you weren't a Christian, your sin would trouble you at all, but you would yield without a fight

- It's Christians that know the bitterest battles with sin, and whose hatred of sin is the strongest because they have tasted the bitterest defeats

KNOW YOURSELF: don't think too highly of your state but understand how powerful is indwelling sin in your life

BUT don't think too lowly of your state but realize that the battle over sin is actually a good proof that you are a Christian

B. Know God

1. God is perfectly holy... every sin grieves Him deeply

- Christ will not allow His bride to be filthy
- The Holy Spirit will not allow you to sink into a sinful life of bondage
- Therefore He will discipline us if we persist in willful sin

2. God has provided a perfect salvation for sin... complete and total

- Saved from sin's penalty... JUSTIFICATION through Christ's blood
- Saved from sin's power... REGENERATION by the Spirit (you are a new creation)
- Saved from sin's practice... SANCTIFICATION by the Spirit
- Saved from sin's presence... GLORIFICATION in heaven

God's salvation plan will be accomplished in your life, and nothing can stop it!!!