

THANK GOD! THE ANSWER IS IN JESUS

Romans 7:14-25

Key Verses: 7:24,25a

“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

In the first part of Romans 7, we learned that we have been released from the law. When Jesus came and paid the price of our sins with his own life, our relationship with the law was fundamentally changed. The law has no jurisdiction over us, as far as our salvation (justification) is concerned. We are saved only by the grace of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. But the law is not the problem to begin with. Sin is the problem. The law is holy and good. The law of God still helps us to live a life that is worthy of Jesus’ sacrifice, if we obey the law in the new way of the Spirit by loving God with all our hearts and loving one another in Christ.

In today’s passage, St. Paul shares his personal experience from his struggle with sin. Being a Christian does not mean we are immune to sin. We know that we struggle with sin. I pray that God may help us to learn from this passage how to struggle and overcome sin.

I. I DO NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT I DO (14-20)

Look at verses 14-17. *We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. 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. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.* St. Paul again makes comments about the law, saying “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” (14; NLT). He honestly admits the fact that he was unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin, while the law itself was spiritual. As a proof of this, he says this: “What I want to do, I do not do; but what I hate, I do” (15). He describes his personal, frustrating experience to overcome his sinful nature. Then he declares, “As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.”

Now a question that comes to our minds quickly is this: Was Paul describing his struggle with sin before he became a Christian or after his salvation through the blood of Jesus? We find some conflicting statements of his on this. When he said he was “a slave to sin” (14), it seems to suggest that he was telling us his past life before he met Christ. Also, his description sounds more than just struggle with sin, but daily defeat by his sinful nature. In that sense, he might have been telling us about his life as an unbeliever. On the other hand, Paul uses the present tense throughout this passage to describe his struggle with sin. And some things he said about his life seem to indicate that he was a Christian, like the fact he hated sin. We know that we, as believers, also have to struggle with our sinful nature even after we commit our lives to Christ. We are forgiven sinners. It is true that as we continue to grow in the image of Christ, we sin less and less over

time. But we can never say we are sinless. Based on this, Bible scholars believe that Paul is describing the Christian sanctification process in Romans 6-8 which today's passage is just part of it, using his personal experience as an example. This is the view of many prominent scholars (e.g., St. Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, James Boice). Still some other scholars consider this passage as Paul's experience as a believer, but as an immature one, before he really came to rely on the power of the Holy Spirit. To me, what is important here is not about whether this was experience before or after conversion *per se*. It is rather to acknowledge humbly the fact we must struggle with our sinful nature, both before and after we are justified by the grace of God. We don't become saints over night when we become Christians. When we are born again by the baptism of the Spirit, we begin our Christian life as spiritual infants. We need to grow in Christ. And we surely have some growing pains in the process. What is most important is that we recognize we are not alone in this process. We have Jesus with us. We have the Holy Spirit with us, which Paul teaches us in detail in Romans 8.

Look at verses 18-20. *For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 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.*

Verses 18-20 is a repetition of what is in verses 14-17. Paul again states, "I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature." Then he provides a proof for that by saying, "I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. I do not do that good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." Then he concludes, "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." This is exactly what he had declared in verse 17.

Paul's frustration was real. We can almost hear it in his tone of voice. So we ask: "How could such a great servant of God go through this kind of intense struggling with sin? Was Paul a worse sinner than we are?" It is such a ridiculous question. In Romans 6, Paul confidently declared that he and we have been set free from sin and law. In fact, he declared that he and we have died to sin, and he and we have a new life in Christ Jesus. In Romans 8, he would declare that he and we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to overcome our sinful nature. So how come, in Romans 7, he shared his personal, intense struggle with sin and even said that he kept on doing the evil he did not want to do?

Again, why did Paul have to struggle so much with his sin, seemingly much more intensely than we do in our daily life as Christians? Actually Paul struggled a lot with sin, not because he was a terrible sinner, but because he was such a spiritual man. He was so intent on living a life of faith that glorifies God that even a hint of sin arising in his heart troubled him so much. So it wasn't the gravity of his sin, but his hypersensitivity toward even a small sin in his heart that frustrated him so much. In other words, Paul struggled so much because he lived a spiritual life, not because he lived a sinful life. We learn something important here. Many of us do not struggle intensely with sin, not because we are very spiritual, but because we have become

insensitive to our sin and sinful desires. If you spill a little bit of ketchup on your clean, white blouse, it is very noticeable. But even if you mess up your dirty multi-color jacket with ketchup and kimchi sauce, you hardly notice it.

John MacArthur tells about a young man who came to a preacher to make a statement in mocking fashion, “You say that unsaved people carry a great weight of sin. Frankly, I feel nothing. How heavy is sin? Ten pounds? Fifty pounds? Eighty pounds? A hundred pounds?” The preacher thought for a moment, then replied, “If you laid a 400 pound weight on a corpse, would it feel the load?” The young man was quick to say, “Of course not; it’s dead.” Driving home his point, the preacher said, “The person who doesn’t know Christ is equally dead. And though the load is great, he feels none of it.”

Of course, we believers are not dead but alive in Christ. The point, however, is that if we become dull or numb about our sinful nature because of our prideful and callous hearts, we stop struggling with our sins. What kind of sins must we all struggle with on a daily basis? We are not murders, adulterers or bank robbers. But we are not immune to many other kinds of sins, including lustful desire, prideful attitude, and ingratitude. Paul said he had to struggle with one particular kind of sin that is in the tenth commandment--“Do not covet.” The more he tried not to covet, the more covetous desire arose in his heart (7:7-11). Likewise, we also have to battle with our envy and jealousy problems. We must struggle with sin as Paul did. We cannot grow mature spiritually if we ignore our sin problem. We must learn to be sensitive to our sinful tendency, as Paul did.

II. THANK GOD FOR JESUS WHO DELIVERS ME (21-25)

Look at verses 21-23. *So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.*

For the third time, St. Paul makes the same statement—that he wanted to do what was good, but he kept on doing what was evil. He said, “I love God’s law with all my heart. 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” (22-23; NLT). Sin took advantage of the weakness of his flesh and enticed him to sin. There was a war going on inside him. He had no peace because of the war. I once had a Bible student who complained to me, saying, “I began studying the Bible, hoping to have peace in my mind, but my mind is more troubled now than before.” What he meant was that some things he had been doing did not bother him before, but now, because he knew what God’s word said about them, he was troubled in his heart. This is true. Before God saved me, I did not consider selfishness a sin. After all, in economics, we learn that self-interest is at the center of capitalism. Adam Smith’s invisible hand depends on it. Through it, the market system achieves efficient allocation of scarce resources in the society. So what’s wrong with a little bit of selfishness? But then I learned from the word of God that he did not create us in his own image to be selfish. God created each of us to be a source of blessing to others. So I am now troubled in my heart when I see selfish behavior in me.

Finally, Paul declared in his frustration, in verse 24: *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?* This was his crying out to God that he could not overcome sin on his own. He struggled to control his sinful desires so that he could glorify the name of God in his daily life. But he was utterly frustrated because he failed again and again. So he cried out: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me?”

So where did Paul’s intense struggle take him? What was the outcome of his struggle with sin? Let us read verse 25a. *Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!* After much struggle, Paul found the answer to his sin problem. His struggle with sin did not solve the problem, but it led him to Christ. God did not leave him alone to be defeated by sin and death. God delivered him from sin and death through Jesus Christ the Lord. Let me read verses 24-25 in NLT: “Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? 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.”

Our problem is not that we sin. Of course, we should try not to sin before God, because sin never glorifies God. But the reality is that we do sin. Our problem is not that we despair over our sin, either. On the contrary, it is lack of despair over our sin, that is, our insensitivity or indifference toward sin. St. John says that if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves (1Jn 1:8). If we don’t think we have a sin problem, we will not struggle with sin, as Paul did. We will be like the Pharisees who considered themselves righteous. They didn’t think they needed to repent. They didn’t think they needed Jesus. So they remained in sin. If you have a health problem like diabetes or melanoma, you should acknowledge the problem and go to doctor for treatment. It is not wise to ignore it, hoping it will go away. Likewise, we should acknowledge our sickness problem called sin. We should come to our doctor who can heal us. Jesus said in Mark 2:17: “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”

St. Paul recognized his sin problem. He struggled with it. As he did, God came to help him. God gave him victory over sin. God delivered him from sin through Jesus Christ our Lord! In conclusion, we learn this: we cannot overcome sin on our own. We cannot control our sinful desire on our own. We need Jesus! God comes to our rescue when we humbly acknowledge our sin problem and struggle with it. Let us read our key verses (24,25a): *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*