

The Dynamics of Spiritual Conflict

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.
(Romans 7:14-21)

As Paul develops the futility of pleasing God by legalism, by perfectly keeping God's law (The law will accept nothing less!), a logical question surfaces. Is God's law then something to be rejected and avoided? Having come from God, the law cannot be so characterized. The problem that Paul surfaces and explains is not an inherent problem with God or with His law, but with a misrepresentation of that law.

For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. Simply stated, the problem is with us, not with God's law. Here "I" not only refers to Paul, but to all regenerate elect who struggle with the fierce internal conflict between their carnal nature and the law of God written within.

For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. What is Paul's point? He surfaces an intense conflict within. His conscience and his conduct do not always agree. At times he does things that his conscience does not approve—does not "allow." Further at times he desires to do righteously, but fails to perform the good thing that he intended. In fact, at the heart of the matter, according to Paul, there are times when he did the very things that he hated.

This conflict between carnal and spiritual appetites is experienced by every regenerate elect. Sinless perfection is not the true experience of any regenerate elect person, although some folks claim to have developed such a pure state of mind and conduct. A careful examination of their conduct will reveal that they have redefined sin in relationship to their behavior so as to define their personal sins away. Many years ago I visited with a man who boastfully claimed that he had not sinned in around fifteen years. Without thinking too much, I started to probe his conduct, mentioning along the way

John's comments about self-deception if we claim that we do not sin (1 John 1:8). As I nudged him in light of this passage, the man began a "slow burn" or increasing anger at my questions. Factually his anger clearly displayed that he just broke an alleged fifteen year record! More factually, he had sinned many times during that fifteen years, but he had carefully redefined sin so as to exempt himself from John's truth.

Often sincere believers who stop distinctly short of any pretense of sinless perfection will so characterize this passage and others that deal with this question so as to minimize any significant conflict in the "true believer." In their minds the spiritual elements of grace have so taken over the life of the believer as to leave only the barest minimum of one's old or sinful nature. First of all, such a claim stands in rather stark contrast with Paul's depiction of spiritual conflict in this chapter. Further the inference of those who hold to this idea implies—often openly charges—that anyone who claims to experience such fierce conflict is either an inferior Christian or is not even a regenerate person at all. Their false claim in this point charges Paul with their low esteem, for it was his own experience that Paul described in this chapter. Notice the frequency of both the personal pronouns and present tense verbs that appear throughout this chapter.

Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. Paul does not here intend to distance himself from a sense of responsibility for his conduct, nor does he intend to shift the blame for his sins onto God.

Advocates of extreme views of predestination will occasionally represent themselves and their conduct in a form that effectively demonstrates the mirror opposite of this view. Let's examine three views of predestination to see the dynamic of this point.

1. The most radical view of predestination holds that God actively and causatively predestinated everything that occurs, sin included. Factually there are only a few people who hold to this view. Thank God! This view impugns the righteous character of God by actually charging sin to God and not to man.
2. The second view holds that God orchestrates all events, but only causatively predestinated the good that we do. This view holds that our faith and good works are irresistibly predestinated, or decreed, by God. While this view stops barely short of charging sin to God, it takes predestination distinctly beyond the teaching of Scripture. If God predestinated our faith and good deeds, we would expect to see absolute sinless and pure faith and good works, something that we in fact do not see. Every act of faith and obedience is to some extent mixed, not pure. Does God then predestinate and irresistibly cause imperfect obedience? For example, when Jesus reminded the pleading father that his belief was

placed in the balance for his daughter's healing, he responded, "Lord I believe; help thou mine unbelief." (Mark 9:24) At the moment of his strongest belief, this noble and honest man acknowledged the presence to some extent of unbelief within. Surely if God predestinated his belief, it would be whole and full belief, not belief mixed with unbelief? Did God also predestinate the man's partial belief? His unbelief? Scripture repeatedly lays a certain responsibility for one's personal willing or voluntary response to God's holy leading in all acts of faith and obedience. Denial of any sense of responsible compliance with God's direction in faith and obedience contradicts the clear teaching of Scripture. Advocates of this idea occasionally claim that only by attributing the whole of their faith and obedience to God, even to the extent of denying any form of personal response to God's leading, is the only way they can "give God all the glory" for their obedience. Given this view of obedience, I look at the passage before us and wonder. Since Paul specifically stated, "...it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me," are we also to deny any element of personal responsibility for the sins that we commit? God forbid such an abominable idea.

3. The New Testament doctrine of predestination attributes our salvation—our final resurrection and our eternal state with God in heaven to God's causative predestination. Romans 8:29-30 makes this point clearly, along with Ephesians 1:3-5 and 11). Occasionally advocates of one or more of the extreme views of predestination will abandon Scripture and adopt a philosophical view of predestination that reduces it to God's omniscience. These four mentions of the word in Scripture are distinctly and clearly causative, not depictions of God's omniscience. The two other passages where the same Greek work appears in the New Testament have to do with the crucifixion of Jesus and can be understood in a number of ways that do not make God the active and responsible cause of the deeds of the wicked men who tortured and crucified our Lord.

I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. The term "law" can be used in at least two senses. In one sense it is the statement of either proscriptive or prohibitive mandates. In this sense we rightly interpret the Ten Commandments. Some of them specifically proscribe precise positive action, "Thou shalt...." Others specifically prohibit certain sinful conduct, "Thou shalt not...."

The second use of the term "law" explains the way things are, as with scientific laws of chemistry, physics, or mathematics. Newton's "law" does not tell us how we should act. It explains the facts of one particular aspect of the natural world in which we live.

In this statement Paul is using the term "law" in similar fashion to our use

of the word when we refer to scientific laws that explain the way things exist. In other words Paul tells us that the intense moral conflict that he has just described is a universal experience within every cognitively aware regenerate elect.

I believe Scripture affirms that one of the distinguishing traits of humans is the ability to know the difference between right and wrong, a sense of moral awareness. This, among other traits, distinguishes humans from animals. The defining difference between a regenerate elect (one of God's chosen vessels of mercy who has been born of God) and an unregenerate (a depraved person void of spiritual life) appears in their mutual appetites. While an unregenerate person has the ability to know the difference between right and wrong, he/she has no appetite for righteousness; in fact such persons loath righteousness and crave sin ("...whose god is their belly..." Philippians 3:19). A regenerate elect person not only knows the difference between right and wrong; such a person also has a deep conviction and longing for righteousness. In other passages Paul refers to our old nature as our "old man," and he refers to our new nature from God as our "new man." Herein is the dynamic of the conflict that Paul presents in our study lesson.

How should we deal with this conflict? How should we make sense of the intense clash? First of all, be aware that only regenerate elect children of God experience such fierce conflict. Never does Scripture depict an unregenerate person as having such an experience. Secondly, Paul clearly instructs us to follow the leading influence of our new and heavenly nature. Carefully study the passage below. I have added bold type to several specific points that appear here in God's inspired teachings to us.

*If ye then be risen with Christ, **seek those things which are above**, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. **Set your affection on things above**, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory. **Mortify** therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry: For which things' sake the wrath of God cometh on the children of disobedience: In the which ye also walked some time, when ye lived in them. But **now ye also put off all these**; anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy communication out of your mouth. Lie not one to another, **seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds**; **And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him**: Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all. **Put on therefore, as the elect of God**, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness,*

*humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; **Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.** And above all these things **put on charity**, which is the bond of perfectness. And **let the peace of God rule in your hearts**, to the which also ye are called in one body; and **be ye thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly** in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And **whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.** (Colossians 3:1-17)*

These are not the words of a man who believed or taught that his faith and obedience are divinely decreed or predestinated.

Warren Wiersbe in one of his works refers to this passage and coins the concise thought, "Put off your **grave clothes** and put on your **grace clothes.**" Amen.

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