

Message #26

Romans 7:18-25

Many years ago I had to write a paper in a secular college psychology course on the subject of “Cognitive Dissonance.” I got the idea from my brother Tim. Now Cognitive Dissonance is simply this - when you believe one way and behave another way contrary to what you believe, you create a dissonance gap in your personality. In other words, you have trouble living with yourself. Now there are only two ways to resolve the dissonance gap: 1) Change your belief; 2) Change your behavior. If you change your belief so that it conforms to your behavior or if you change your behavior to conform to your belief, you may temporarily relieve the problem.

Now the paper I wrote was a paper that I titled, “The danger of Cognitive Dissonance in Altar Calls at Church.” I don’t know what your personal flesh struggle is, but let’s list some:
Perhaps your flesh struggle is with idolatry in that you love and hoard money.
Perhaps your flesh struggle is jealousy; you cannot stand anyone who has something you don’t have or is something you aren’t.
Perhaps your flesh struggle is drinking, you get up and can’t wait until it is the cocktail hour.
Perhaps your flesh struggle is looking at immoral things, it is like an addiction.
Perhaps your flesh struggle is gossip, you just can’t wait to spread the latest rumors.

Now you come to church and you listen to that list I just gave and it starts you squirming because you realize that you do believe it is wrong to do that, but your behavior does not match your belief.

So now we reach the end of the service and I say if you really want victory and if you really want to be right with God, slip out of your seat and come forward or where you are sitting raise your hand. Many would do it. Many do this very thing. They go forward and they weep and pray and for the moment they have just resolved the gap between belief and behavior.

But here is the problem. Walking forward in church and raising your hand at the end of the service will not solve the problem. Why? The problem is our flesh and when you leave the church you take your flesh with you.

You could leave this service and promise God you’ll never do it again and you will probably end up just like Peter, doing it three times before the rooster crows tomorrow morning. You can end up doing what you hate to do.

It does not matter how long you have been a believer or how mature a believer you have become. The fact is, spirituality is a struggle and war and there are times that even the best of believers fail and lose.

The problem is not what we want to do or what we want to be, the problem is doing it. Our problem is ourselves. We do not have the power to live victoriously over sin within ourselves and the moment we think we do, we will fail.

Our strength lies in seeing ourselves honestly. We are sinners. We are weak. We are not strong. Our strength lies in our position and relationship with Jesus Christ. He is our power, we aren't. When Isaiah saw himself honestly before God as a prophet, he said, "woe is me" (Is. 6:5).

When Job saw himself honestly before God as the most righteous on earth, he humbled himself "in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6).

When John the Apostle saw himself honestly before God, he fell down at His feet as a dead man (Rev. 1:17).

When Paul the Apostle saw himself honestly before God, he saw himself as a "wretched man" (Romans 7:24).

In Romans 6:14 we read "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace." Those are wonderful words. Those are uplifting words. In Christ, we have been set free from law and sin.

The problem is there are times when that does not seem to be reality. There are times when we do what we don't want to do and we don't do what we do want to do. Paul knew that struggle. He went through it.

Paul was a spiritual believer. He was as spiritual as has ever lived. **The main difference between a spiritual believer and a carnal believer is that a spiritual believer hates his sin (Rom. 7:15) and a carnal believer likes his sin, excuses his sin and arrogantly even boasts about it (I Cor. 5:2).**

What Paul wants every justified believer to know is this:

THERE IS A WRETCHED FLESH SIN PRINCIPLE THAT LIVES WITHIN EVERY BELIEVER AND WANTS THE BELIEVER TO DO JUST THE OPPOSITE OF WHAT GOD WANTS, AND THE KEY TO VICTORY IS NOT IN US BUT IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST.

In these verses there are seven key observations we want to make:

OBSERVATION #1 – There is a nothing good flesh that indwells every justified believer. **7:18**

This is important to see. You and I have a sin will and nature living inside us that is capable of doing all kinds of wicked things, including the darkest and most depraved kinds of things. There is within us a depraved heart and pride, a depraved love of the perverse and the potential to pursue the most sinful kinds of things to the point that no warning of God's chastisement or judgment even fazes us.

The verb "dwells" is present tense which means this sinful side to us is there continually and it lives in us. When that Holy Spirit took up residency in Paul, he saw the truth about himself, which is why he uses the pronouns "me" and "my." Paul did not see himself as basically good. He saw himself as a depraved sinner.

In fact, Albert Barnes said, there is not a stronger statement of total depravity than this statement right here, man in and of himself is incapable of doing the good things of God's good law (*Barnes Notes on the New Testament*, p. 600).

This was Paul's own assessment of himself and if that is his assessment of himself, how much more should this be the assessment of us.

OBSERVATION #2 – There are times when justified people do just the opposite of the good they want to do. **7:19**

I really hope you personally know about the frustration here. Any honest justified believer will be quick to admit, this is the story of my life and struggle.

There are moments when God's Spirit who has given us a new nature prompts us to do one thing and we do just the opposite.

There are moments when our new nature prompts us to do one thing and our old nature is nudging us to do just the opposite.

The word "I do" (prassw) at the end of the verse is a word that really has to do with the mind. It is a mind that is set on achieving and accomplishing something (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 376). It has to do with the mental and thought process in setting your mind on something and then achieving it. There is nothing like setting your mind on something and then achieving it.

There is nothing like setting your mind on a career or grades or a house or a sport or even a hunt and then accomplishing it.

The implication of this verse is that one continually sets his mind on something but never accomplishes it. Paul says when I set my mind on wanting to do what is good, what I discover is that in myself I do just the opposite.

Let's illustrate the point. There was no king as honored as King David. He was a man after God's own heart. When you read those Psalms, it is obvious that man loved God and that man loved God's word. When God's Son came into this world, He came through the Davidic Line. How was it that this great man of God fell?

Did he wake up one day and say I think I will turn my back on God and His word today? I think I will try to break every one of the Ten Commandments at one time. How did that happen? David had a sin nature that wanted to do just the opposite of what God wanted him to do.

OBSERVATION #3 – The sin nature that lives in a justified believer does the opposite of what the justified person wants to do. **7:20**

I don't remember who said this, it may have been C.S. Lewis, but someone said, "You will never understand how hard it is to stop sinning until you try it."

Now the context of this whole chapter is being delivered from the law of God. The believer who tries to put himself back under the O.T. law will keep discovering his sin nature keeps winning.

Put yourself back under the O.T. law and you are destined for one failure after another because God will not bless or give victory to one who does this. Paul says exactly that in Romans 7:16 and 17. You cannot win by putting yourself back under the O.T. law.

When we focus on the O.T. law, it will not stimulate our spirituality, it will stimulate our sinfulness. The problem is not with the law, it is with us.

OBSERVATION #4 – The evil sin nature is always present when the justified person wants to do good. **7:21**

The old sin nature never goes away. That evil principle will be with you all of the time. So far Paul has developed three key ideas about this old sin nature of ours:

- 1) The old nature does not do what the new nature wants to do.
- 2) The old nature does just the opposite of what the new nature wants to do.
- 3) The old nature continues to defeat the new nature.

Now here he adds another thing to the list:

4) The old nature is always present and never goes away.

This is why this flesh body cannot go to heaven. It is a body that has a sin nature that has sinned and there is no sin or sin nature permitted in heaven.

Now if you focus your life on the O.T. law and not N.T. grace, you will not succeed. You have no chance of succeeding. Your old nature is relentless. That old nature does not quit and it will not go away.

OBSERVATION #5 – The evil sin nature wages war with the justified person's mind with the goal of making one a slave to sin. **7:22-23**

C.I. Scofield observed there are six different laws in Romans and to that we add one more:

- 1) The O.T. law that condemns us shuts our mouth and proves us guilty. 3:19
- 2) The O.T. law that reveals and promotes the righteousness of God. 3:21
- 3) The legal law of faith that truly saves a sinner. 3:27
- 4) The legal laws of society that establish us aren't free until we are dead. 7:1-3
- 5) The flesh law of sin that lives in our flesh and makes us prisoner. **7:23**
- 6) The flesh law of the mind that can't keep the O.T. law. **7:25**
- 7) The law of the Spirit that sets us free. 8:2

Our old sin nature has a goal and that goal is to make you a prisoner to some flesh sin for the rest of your life.

Now Paul says you need to realize that the new nature will not win in the war with the old nature. Put yourself under the O.T. law and that old nature will never win.

Dr. Warren Wiersbe said, “No wonder the believer under the law becomes tired and discouraged and eventually gives up, he is a captive.”

You stay focused on the law and you will see you are a captive and prisoner to sin.

OBSERVATION #6 – The justified man realizes he has a wretched side to him that needs to be set free from being a prisoner to sin. **7:24**

Paul was so depressed by this that he cried out o wretched man I am. By the way, grammatically Paul says, “**wretched man I am**” not “**wretched man I was**.”

This is the kind of desperation that is needed to have victory. This kind of agony and recognition of our own inability is critical to victory.

OBSERVATION #7 – The man who is justified may thank God that even though this struggle exists we are still victorious because of Jesus Christ our Lord. **7:25**

All victory for everything is not found in the O.T. law or in our flesh. It is found totally and completely and only in Jesus Christ.

Don't miss this. Victory is only found in our personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

It is not found in the O.T. law. It is not found in the flesh. It is not found in your promises. It is not found in your raising hand or going forward. It is not found in medication. It is not found in counseling. It is not found in seminars. It is not found in group therapy. **It is found in your relationship with Jesus Christ.**

It is found in your relationship with Jesus Christ. Develop a close relationship with Jesus Christ and victory will be yours.

That is what Paul discovered and that is what he taught right here in Romans.