

The Long Road to Freedom – Part 2

Romans 7:14-25

There are no “quick fixes” when it comes to making you holy.

The road to freedom from sin is a long one that will not end until we reach our eternal rest.

This is the second half of a message that I gave two weeks ago on Romans 7. Today we will be focusing on vv. 14-25. In this passage, Paul let’s inside his heart to see the struggle that is often his as he strives to defeat sin. But before we look at Romans 7, I want to take a few moments to get you thinking.

Are you a hypocrite? Sometimes I sure feel like a hypocrite. A hypocrite is someone who pretends to be what he is not. And when it comes to godliness, it is someone who gives the appearance of godliness without actually caring about godliness.

Throughout the Bible, hypocrisy is condemned. Jesus is never fooled by a hypocrite. He sees right through the façade. But as true hypocrisy is only concerned with appearances, outward appearances can lead us to conclude that someone is a hypocrite, when in reality they may be a genuine believer. Every week, we join together in reciting the Lord’s Prayer. I hope that the words of this prayer will be etched in your mind. And it will be a guide to your thinking and your praying. As it relates to the Christian’s struggle against sin, the Lord’s prayer is so helpful. Lead me not into temptation, but deliver me from evil. The prayer is so simple. It is easy to pass it by without grasping its meaning. Look at your affirmation of faith in the order of worship:

The Westminster Larger Catechism – Question and Answer – 195 explains well what is going on. I have adapted the language just a bit.

Q 195. What are we acknowledging when we pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil”?

A. We are acknowledging, that God, for various holy and just purposes, may so order things, that we may be assaulted, foiled, and for a time led captive by temptations.

That in itself is almost shocking! The same God who gives us a new heart that hungers and thirsts for righteousness, the same God who, as the 3rd Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, indwells us and gives us access to true power to conquer sin... this God “for various and just purposes” orders our lives in such a way that temptations assault us, foil us (that means deceive us), and (for a time) lead us captive.

The Catechism continues...

Q. Is there more that we are acknowledging?

A. We are also acknowledging that Satan, the world, and the flesh, are ready powerfully to draw us aside, and ensnare us; and that we, even after the pardon of our sins, by reason of our corruption, weakness, and lack of watchfulness, are not only subject to be tempted, and careless to expose ourselves unto temptations, but also of ourselves unable and unwilling to resist them, to recover out of them, and to defeat them.

The writers of the Catechism were careful to not say that there is no hope for the Christian – that all that awaits the Christian is defeat. But, at the same time, they readily admit that true Christians are often careless to expose themselves to temptation, and then once in the temptation do not find the ready strength to resist the temptation, or once ensnared find themselves unable to get themselves again free of the sin to defeat it.

We will get to the second portion of the prayer, “but deliver us from evil” in a little while. But for now, I want you to see how “judging by appearances” it would be easy to judge a true believer as a hypocrite.

To proclaim the standard of holiness, to agree with the goodness of the commandment, and then to willingly choose to commit the sin that you agree is evil... That sounds very close to the definition of a hypocrite. How can you call yourself a Christian when you do the very thing that you agree is evil? How can you truly have a hunger and thirst for righteousness, and still continue to commit sin? This is the dilemma. And nowhere in Scripture is this dilemma more explicitly dealt with than in Romans 7.

The Christian is absolutely on the road to freedom. But it is a long road. And it is often not very smooth. The certainty of full and complete freedom flows out of the reality of our being tethered to Jesus Christ. His one act of obedience has freed, is freeing, and will free all those who are in Him by faith alone.

Read Romans 7:14-25.

In verse 14, Paul makes a stark contrast between himself and the law.

For we know that the law is spiritual,
but
I am of the flesh,
sold under sin.

Understanding what Paul means by “law” can be very tricky. Does Paul refer to the Law of Moses? Does he refer to the law written on the hearts of Adam and Eve at creation? Does he refer to the command in the Garden? Rather than pinning down one or the other, I believe it is best to see Paul’s meaning more generally as the “commandment of God flowing from the character of God”. God’s righteousness put into words for man to submit.

- You shall...
- You shall not...

In verse 14, Paul calls this law spiritual. Many things Paul may be saying here, but without a doubt he is certainly saying that the Law is GOOD. And it is good precisely because it is in agreement with God's goodness, God's nature.

Paul then contrasts the goodness of the command with the sinfulness of his own nature. He says, "I am of the flesh." You could translate it, "I am fleshy." Paul does not mean by this that he is "material". By "flesh", Paul means: That which is bad/evil/sinful. All that is connected with Adam's slavery to sin and death.

Paul is not simply condemning the physical body. The soul of Paul is also corrupt, and is part of what is "fleshy". Paul is placing the blame for his sin upon himself and not on the law.

I am the one who is a sinner. I do not merely commit sins occasionally. My very nature is corrupt and is evil. I am fleshy.

Law is good. I am bad. How does Paul come to this conclusion about himself? By an honest evaluation of his own decisions.

15 I do not understand my own actions.

For I do not do what I want,
but

I do the very thing I hate.

16 Now

if I do what I do not want,
I agree with the law,
that it is good.

Notice Paul's last statement at the end of verse 16. I agree with the law, that it is good. Being "spiritual" and being "good" are synonymous. The idea of the law being spiritual may say more, but at a minimum, Paul is arguing that the Law is fully and completely good.

Those who do not know Jesus Christ, and do not have a new heart that He has created within them, will try to blame God's law for their own corruption, or they will try to change God's law to be more in line with their own behavior and desires.

This is why it is a terrible thing when the Church begins to agree with the world, adopting the world's standard of sin, rather than upholding the authoritative standard of Scripture.

Those who do know Jesus Christ will admit that God's law is good and pure and right, even if that law exposes them as bad and evil.

One clear mark of being saved is that you admit to the goodness of God's law, even while you admit that your own heart often leads you to disobey that law. And, you are not flippant about your falling short of God's glory. You are, like Paul, confused and frustrated with yourself.

Being exposed as evil does not feel good. And when you feel bad, your natural tendency is to do whatever it takes to feel better. Unfortunately, the quick fix is often to change the standard. Or, at least, to try to.

Paul wants nothing of this sort of solution. The Law is spiritual. The Law is good. I am the one who is evil. Admitting the evil of your own heart is one of the first signs of being born again. Even experiencing disgust with yourself. I clearly remember praying to God, "You would be absolutely right in condemning me to an eternal hell."

But "evil" is not ALL that Paul is. There is something else that is going on deep inside of Paul. And because of this, Paul struggles to understand himself. Paul has some things that he loves. And he has some things that he hates. It is reasonable to assume that Paul, like the rest of us, would choose to do the things that he loves and not do the things that he hates.

Jesus taught a very similar thing when he taught that our choices reveal what is in our heart. Bad trees produce bad fruit and good trees produce good fruit. Our choices reflect our desires. That is why we are held accountable for them. If you did the opposite of what your desires intended to do all the time we would think you crazy.

I love apple pies. If I have choice between an apple pie or custard pie. I am going to choose the apple pie. All things being equal, to regularly choose the custard pie, would be strange indeed.

But contrary to normal reasoning, Paul is confused about himself. He finds himself choosing to do the very thing that he hates. This is truly perplexing to Paul. It is frustrating to him. When Paul contemplates his actions, he admits that they do not always line up with his desires, at least, with his good desires.

What about you? Do you want your decisions to be holy and righteous, in accordance with God's perfect standard? Are you frustrated that you do not fully and consistently choose to love God and love others above yourself? Do you want to be full of thankfulness, but find yourself continuing to be discontent? Do you want to forgive, but find yourself holding grudges? Do you want to not be driven by the opinions of others, but find yourself repeatedly caring more about those opinions than you do God's perfect opinion? Do you want to think about heavenly things, but find your mind constantly dwelling upon the things of this world?

I hope we all can relate to Paul's honest reflection of his struggle. But even if we can relate to Paul's experience, it is how he interprets his experience in light of his new connection to Jesus Christ that is most helpful.

17 So now
 it is no longer I who do it,
 but
 sin that dwells within me.

18 For I know that
 nothing good dwells in me,
 that is,
 in my flesh.

 For
 I have the desire to do what is right,
 but
 not the ability to carry it out.

19 For
 I do not do the good I want,
 but
 the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

20 Now
 if I do what I do not want,
 it is no longer I who do it,
 but
 sin that dwells within me.

Twice in four verses Paul says that when he sins, “it is no longer I who do it”. Paul is not schizophrenic. He has not been taken over by some microscopic alien living inside of him. His will is not being forced by some external force. And he is not denying what he has just said, “I am fleshy.”

Paul is responsible for his actions. And these actions continue to reflect desires that are rightly called, “Paul’s desires.” So, what does he then mean? “It is no longer I who do it.”

He answers his own question: It is sin dwelling in me. And he joins the “sin dwelling in me” with “that which is in my flesh.”

Paul is working out and applying to himself the reality of the new birth. Christianity is not merely accepting a new philosophy. At its core, Christianity is the power of God working to create a new heart within the soul of sinful man.

Visually illustrate the Egg principle!

[Pull out your insert and use it as I explain briefly the egg principle.]

Once you understand the reality of the New Heart – the New Creation of the Inner Being – the fact that we have within us two warring “selves” makes perfect sense.

But, what is still baffling is that although the new self does indeed have a true desire for righteousness – to obey the good law of God – this new self does not, of itself, have the ability to carry it out. When God creates within the sinner a new heart, this new heart is NOT as powerful as the old heart.

This is purposeful in the wisdom of God. It is not an accident. God could have made the new heart equal to, or greater, in strength than the old heart. Sanctification would then be a piece of cake: God implants the new heart, and we immediately quit sinning entirely.

And sometimes, God does empower the new Christian to overcome terrible sins very quickly. We love to hear the testimony of the person who does the complete 180. But even in cases where there is rapid change, sooner or later, difficulties settle in. There are those stubborn sinful desires that are very good at resisting any and all efforts of being defeated.

At some point, every true Christian comes to the reality that conquering sin is not so easy. They have a genuinely true desire to defeat sin, and yet, they find that that power to overcome sin is not within them.

When God creates the new heart within you, I believe that he purposely designed it weaker than the old sinful heart. Why would he do this?

It is actually quite ingenious. He designed the new heart with some truly amazing features.

The New Heart is eternal. It will never die. The New Heart is an unquenchable flame. And because it is eternal, it is also absolutely relentless. The New Heart hungers and thirsts for righteousness and when it does not accomplish its goal, it never gives up. So, the New Heart is pretty awesome.

But internal power is not a quality of the New Heart. When it goes head to head with the old heart, the flesh, it loses. Why would God design the New Heart this way? One reason: God desires that sanctification only come through reliance upon Himself. God wants us to be righteous. But he also is drawing us into relationship with himself. Only as the Christian continues to cling to Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, can he overcome the strength of indwelling sin.

God has designed the new heart such that you would feel your helplessness. This helplessness to, of yourself, defeat sin is so fixed that Paul refers to it as a law.

21 So I find it to be a law
 that when I want to do right,
 evil lies close at hand.

22 For I delight in the law of God,
 in my inner being,

23

but
 I see in my members another law
 waging war against the law of my mind
 and
 making me captive to the law of sin
 that dwells in my members.

“making me captive in the law of sin.”

This is so counter-intuitive. How can a Christian, who has the new heart, and who is united to Christ, and who has the Holy Spirit living within him, still be captive to sin? I believe that any captivity that the Christian experiences is temporary. How temporary is not said! And the longer that the captivity occurs, the more desperate that the Christian becomes. Victory is all of grace. And victory is according to the sovereign wisdom of God. But the new heart is never satisfied with defeat.

Of course, as Christians, we must learn to not continue beating ourselves up with the condemnation of the law – Romans 8:1 makes this clear and we will talk about this in our next time together.

For now, it is important to understand that the true believer is never satisfied being “captive” to the flesh. And so, in sheer desperation, the New Heart cries out to God!

24 Wretched man that I am!
 Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Even though Paul has already said that when he chooses evil, it is not really him who is making the choice. It is sin living in him. Paul does not conclude that he should simply be at peace with his sin. He doesn’t say to himself, “If God wants to free me then He will free me.”

No, he absolutely hates being conquered by sin. He feels the shame of giving into sin. He does not blame the Law. He blames himself. The evil lies with him.

He is wretched.

talai,pwroj, on as feeling inwardly or outwardly tormented *miserable, wretched, distressed* ([RO 7.24](#)); substantivally **o` t.** *the miserable one* ([RV 3.17](#))

talai,pwroj, on: pertaining to being in a wretched state, either mentally or physically - 'wretched, pathetic.' talai,pwroj evgw. a;nqrwpoj 'wretched person that I am' [Ro 7.24](#).

There is within the experience of a Christian both progress and continued frustration.

And in the frustration, there is joy and thanksgiving in being united to Jesus Christ. There is true hope knowing that the one who has died to justify you is also working to sanctify you.

²⁵ Thanks be to God
through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Victory is found in Jesus Christ. Victory is found only through abiding in Jesus Christ. Jesus does not want us to have victory trusting in our own strength. He wants us to find dependent victory or no victory at all.

And you might think that once you learn this that it would be smooth sailing from then on out. But not so. Jesus can withdraw his presence. Or at least the awareness of his presence. We can fall flat on our faces. We can feel alone. We go through times of giving into sin. Learning to live in dependence upon God is not a quick fix. It is a life-long, ongoing lesson...

So then,
I myself serve the law of God with my mind,
but
with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Applications:

1. The New Heart hungers and thirsts for righteousness.
2. If you lack a desire for righteousness, only God can give you this desire. Look to Jesus Christ. You must be born from above, by the Spirit.
3. But a sincere desire for righteousness does not immediately mean victory over sin.
4. Victory is promised and even guaranteed in Christ, but it is not a quick fix.
5. Victory is completed in eternity, but progress can and does happen now. But progress can include seasons of failure.
 - a. Heidelberg Catechism 114: Can those converted to God obey these commandments perfectly? No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience. Nevertheless, with all seriousness of purpose, they do begin to live according to all, not only some, of God's commandments.
6. Failures will result in genuine repentance.
 - a. WLC 76 What is repentance unto life? A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace,(1) wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit(2) and word of God, (3) whereby out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger,(4) but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins,(5) and upon the apprehension of God's mercy in Christ to such as are penitent,(6) he so grieves for(7)

and hates his sins,⁽⁸⁾ as that he turns from them all to God,⁽⁹⁾ purposing and endeavouring constantly to walk with him in all the ways of new obedience.⁽¹⁰⁾

7. Not all remaining sin is hypocrisy. We should be less shocked when Christians sin, and more helpful.
 - a. **Galatians 6:1-2** Brothers,¹ if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.
8. As true believers we must make use of the God-given means of grace.
 - a. The Word of God – This is a means of grace more than a sign of devotion.
 - b. Prayer – Use the Lord's Prayer as your guide.
 - c. Sacraments – They forever point you to Christ.
 - i. Baptism – complete cleansing: from guilt, but also from the power of sin.
 - ii. Communion – fellowship with Jesus in his death and resurrection (Nourishment)

Q. Since we acknowledge all these things, what is it that we are praying for in this prayer?

A. Understanding that we deserve to be left under the power of temptations, we, in faith, regularly pray that God would overrule the world, subdue the flesh, and restrain Satan. We humbly ask him to order all things, to bestow and bless all means of grace, and to quicken us to watchfulness, that we may by his providence be kept from being tempted to sin; or, if tempted, that by his Spirit we may be powerfully supported and enabled to stand in the hour of temptation: or when fallen, raised again and recovered out of sin, that our sanctification and salvation may be perfected, Satan trodden under our feet, and we fully freed from sin, temptation, and all evil, forever.