

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13–25

Dr. George O. Wood

Romans 7:13–25 (NIV)

“Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! 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. 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. I know that nothing good lives 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 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. 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. So I find this law at work: When 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 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. 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.”

As we look at that Scripture today, it’s important once more to set it in context since anytime we single out a special section in Romans, we cannot divorce it from what has preceded it and what is indeed to follow. All of chapter 6 and 7 are really a development of what Paul said in Romans 5:20: “Law came in to increase the trespass. But where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” He spoke in that verse about the wonderful thing that has happened to us because in Jesus

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

Christ we've been declared righteous in God's eyes. He indicates in that verse there are two issues yet to deal with now that we have been justified.

One is the role of sin. "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." Chapter 6 dealt with the statement of where sin increased from the standpoint of the person who wants to say, "If grace is all that fabulous, let us prove how great it is by sinning even more." Then in chapter 7 Paul develops the theme about how the Law relates to the Christian and his life. If one is not saved by the Law, what special position does the Law—the commandments and even the moral law—have? Every one of us—whether we recognize the validity of the commandments that were given to Moses—would recognize that within the life of every person, inevitably, the question sometimes arises. It doesn't seem fair when someone else's actions don't satisfy the moral conscience that you feel. The very fact that, as a moral being, we cry out for justice, or we say it isn't fair, indicates that there is a law—not always a written law, but an unwritten law in the heart.

What is the relationship of this Law to the believer's life? There are two options, which Paul rejects in Romans 6 and 7 in relationship to sin and the Law. One option for the Christian has been called anti-law. It's the kind of a person who says, "Do what you will. It doesn't matter. You're covered by God's grace." So licentiousness is the result. The opposite extreme of that is legalism, which comes in on the Christian life and imposes the law with a whole set of "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not" and says, "You may have been saved by grace, but if you're going to keep saved then you better walk the straight line. If you step over that line, you become unsaved and you need, therefore, if you're going to get back on the right side of the line, to come back and get saved all over again." Between these extremes, this letter to the Romans is walking. We recognize as we approach chapter 7 that there are essentially three basic themes that the apostle is picking up in this chapter.

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

I. The first basic theme that he is tracing we looked at last week in verses 1–6—that is, the believer’s relationship to the Law.

This was important for the first generation of believers, who were coming from a system of Law, and it’s important to us in understanding. We recognize that the Law no longer has demands upon us because we have been won to Jesus Christ. We have died to the Law so we are not judging our relationship to God any more by the demands of the Law. We indicated, as we closed last week, that the Law keeps telling us, “You failed. You can’t make it.” Even in the Christian life, the Law has this purpose. When you feel like you’re not saved—and you know perfectly well that you once had given your life to Christ—something comes along and you have done wrong, and you say, “I could never be worthy enough in God’s eyes.” Especially when you come to a time of communion, you may feel totally unworthy to take communion. “Even though I’ve given my life to Christ, I don’t feel like I’m going to make it. When I look at my life, I see that it’s not totally where I want it to be. I am unworthy.” That’s the purpose of the Law, to tell you that. If you’re living by the Law, you’ll just never feel secure in your walk with the Lord. The Law keeps reminding you, “You can’t make it. You’re undone. God’s just requirements haven’t been satisfied in you.” But grace comes in, the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus, crying “Abba” in our spirit, witnessing to us that we are indeed children of God. So we have died to the Law in order that we might be raised to newness of life in Christ Jesus.

II. The second question then that is dealt with in this chapter, Romans 7, is from verses 7–12. It is the question, “What is the Law anyway?”

Paul, you’re saying that the Law stimulates sins? Verse 5: “While we were living in the flesh our sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.” If the Law stimulates sin, maybe something’s wrong with the Law itself. And should the Christian just simply throw aside the Law and says it’s bad? Paul, in these verses, vindicates the Law and says,

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

“No, the Law is not bad at all. It is the Law, which is raising in us continually the consciousness of sin.”

I ran across a fascinating statement this last week to describe what some of the great evangelists have done, like, for example, George Whitefield and John Wesley and Charles Finney. They—in their ministry, had in the early part of the week in a campaign in the city—they had a device, which they used to describe the kind of preaching they were doing before there was a real break and many people were turning to Christ. It was what was called Law work. Those first days when they’d come into a region and begin to preach, the emphasis would be upon the Law of God and how we have broken that Law and how if true salvation was to result, we must first come to understand that our own righteousness is totally unacceptable in God’s eyes. We may have a righteousness as far as other people are concerned, but in God’s eyes it will not cut it. If the Law was to be adequately presented, then we would see the tremendous need we have in our lives for Christ our Lord.

The Law, in this respect, works somewhat like an accelerator on a car. If I’m driving along and stop at a stop sign, the motor inside is running and I may be unaware that it’s running. But if I get it out on the freeway and push my foot down on the accelerator, all of a sudden I become aware of the tremendous drive that is within that car.

Paul is, in a sense, saying Law works much like this. That when we are just kind of living without a consciousness of God, sin is sort of running in idle. But the minute we get serious about wanting a relationship with God and we become aware of God’s demands on our life, the “thou shalt nots,” the Ten Commandments, especially the summary of all commandments, which says, “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself,” when you become aware of this totality, the accelerator steps down and it, in effect, makes us

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

more conscious of sin, and it increases sin. It “stimulates” sin—the precise word that is used here.

Paul indicates this happened in his own life. He’d gone along as a Pharisee, blasé in regard to his righteousness. Philippians 3 presents it very clearly. He thought he was ok. He was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee of the Pharisees, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. Then he began to realize he did not have a righteousness which was acceptable to God. This probably happened to him sometime prior to his experience on the road to Damascus, or maybe in the three days following that experience where he fasted and was blind. But he became very aware of the Law in a new way. He had simply thought that the Law was a matter of actions and he had walked in accordance with the Law, not transgressed the Law of God in terms of his activities. But as he ponders this awakened consciousness raised in him through the Law, he recognizes the tenth commandment, which is the only commandment related to one’s inner life in terms of how he relates to his fellow man. The other commandments—Don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t lie—those are all activities. But he came to that tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet—your neighbor’s house, your neighbor’s wife, your neighbor’s employee, your neighbor’s property—these things you shall not covet, you shall not desire in your heart.” Paul says when that commandment came to him, it awakened sin in his life. “It wrought in me all kinds of evil imaginations running rampant in my life, all kinds of covetousness.” He indicates that the Law stimulated this in his life. He was unaware of his failures until this Law came.

David Reed, an American preacher, tells the story of frontier days about a small western lumbering community, where they built a church and called a minister. The new pastor was well received and the church began to prosper. But one day, as the pastor was down by the riverside, he happened to see some members of his church pulling into the banks some logs that were floating down the river from another village. They were marked with the owner’s stamp. To the

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

pastor's great distress, he saw that his parishioners were pulling in the logs and sawing off the little piece at the end where the stamp appeared. Then they were branding them with their own brand and floating them on down the river. The next Sunday, the pastor preached a mighty sermon. His text was, "Thou shalt not steal." It was delivered with great power. At the close of the service, the congregation lined up, and to the pastor's absolute shock and surprise, congratulated him with enthusiasm. "Wonderful sermon!" they said. This troubled him quite a bit, so he went home and worked on a sermon for the following Sunday. And this time, he announced his text, "Thou shalt not cut off the end of thy neighbor's log." When he got through, they ran him out of town!

Paul, in coming at this theme of the Law, vindicates the Law. He says there's nothing wrong with the Law. The Law is holy, blameless, just, and good. But it provokes in us that tremendous consciousness that we're not right with God. It served its purpose.

III. Then he comes to the third theme of Romans 7, which demonstrates how it is that the Law works—how the Law continues even to work in the believer's life.

This passage in Romans 7:13–25 is one of the more complex ones within the Scripture. It is one over which fair-minded Christians have expressed disagreements as to whether it relates to a life before one became a believer or whether it describes the believer's life.

There are three views altogether of these particular verses of how the law works. Some say it describes the person before he became a Christian. Others say it describes the person after he became a Christian; it's sort of normative experience. We've all felt this, even as Christians.

"What I would, I do not. What I would not, I do." There are some who say what this describes is the person who has gotten saved but has not yet gotten sanctified. So he needs another experience beyond him. When he gets into Romans 8, he'll get sanctified and he'll never return to Romans 7 again. Let me indicate the arguments for each side.

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

There is a fair-minded way of looking at this, which makes an awful lot of sense. One of the problems people have with Romans 7:13–25 is they try to take it and teach from it, and they have not followed all the book as it's been moving through systematically in development of a theme. So they manage to really take something out of context—those who say that this experience is describing one before conversion. Here there is no mention of the Holy Spirit in these verses, whereas in Romans 8 there are 18 references to the Holy Spirit. So this certainly is the unregenerate life without the Spirit. They say it can never be said of a Christian that he would describe himself as being “sold to sin.” Paul does here. And further, can it really be described of the Christian life that a person is wretched—“O, wretched man that I am”? (Romans 7:24). Is this a good testimony, for a Christian person to stand up in a testimony meeting and say, “O wretched person that I am”? What does this say about the Christian life?

Those who say that this is referring to the believer's experience indicate that one sees in verses 13–25 that present tense employed by Paul, where in verses 7 through 12 he used the past tense. If he'd have wanted to describe his experience before he became a Christian, he'd just have continued right on using the past tense. But he's very clearly moving in the present, describing something which is actively going on in his life. Further, they indicate in verse 22, for example, that Paul is saying that he delights in the Law in his inmost self. Something, it is argued, that an unbeliever could not truly say—that he delights in the Law in his inmost self. The Law is staying home with conviction. How in the world could he delight in it?

In the Early Church, for the first three centuries, interpreters believed that it spoke of the unregenerate life, and the first major one to speak of it referring to the Christian life was Saint Augustine—and he changed his mind to come to that position. I would think that one of the qualities of growth in the Christian life is the capacity to change one's mind. Reflecting on early notes on Romans 7 that I have preached on, I also would now like to submit that I have changed

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

my mind. One of the testimonies that we have is that the Church can err and leaders from time to time can err. That's why it's important for all of us to study the Word together so we can check one another. But I really believe that I have had—through prayer and through study—a way of approaching Romans 7 which is going to be an immense help to all of us. Trying to back off all these interpretations and simply look at the text as it is and see the context that surrounds it, we have to come to some conclusions in regard to the person's life who is making the statements in Romans 7:13–25. What is describing him in his spiritual life? What's he saying to us about himself psychologically and spiritually? This person, the Apostle Paul, is telling us that in going through the experiences of struggle with the Law, he is a bound person. He is sold under sin. He is brought into captivity. He does not have true freedom.

He is telling us, secondly, that he is terribly perplexed. He says in verse 15: "I do not understand my own actions." Perplexed. One again, in looking at these terms, has to say this is descriptive of normative Christian thinking and behavior. Perplexity. He indicates also that he is disgusted, verse 15. "I do not do what I want. I do the very thing I hate." He indicates, further, that he is impotent. He cannot do the good which he wants to do. He is powerless at righteousness. And he winds up by giving a fifth characteristic of himself, a characteristic of being "wretched." The word here is derived from the concept of being exhausted as a result of hard labor. And in trying to satisfy the demands of the Law, he has come to the point where he is exhausted from his hard labor and he is wretched.

Five characteristics describing his life here, which—if we accept this as being descriptive of normal Christian behavior—we have to come to the conclusion that the normal Christian is bound, perplexed, disgusted, impotent, and wretched. I'm not so sure that the context of where we have been in the Book of Romans has been teaching us that the Christian life is leading us to something else. For example, Romans 5:1: "We have peace with God." Romans 5:2: "We have

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

joy. We rejoice even in suffering.” Romans 5:16 tells us that our state of justification no longer brings us into condemnation. We have been set free from condemnation. Whereas, Paul’s description in Romans 7 is giving some indications of very strong condemnation. In 5:21, we find Paul saying that grace is now reigning through righteousness. Grace is king. In 6:4, he says we are now walking in newness of life. There’s a spring to our step, a dimension to our behavior that is right. In 6:13: “Do not yield your members to sin.” And verse 16: “You are slaves to what you obey.” And 6:14 says we’re not to have sin have dominion over us. Rather, in 6:18 we are slaves to righteousness and we are to yield our members to righteousness. An inherent conflict is set up here. Because, if in Romans 7 we can’t do what we want, why in the world in chapter 6 is he saying “yield your members to righteousness” when, in fact, it’s impossible to do it because we can’t do it anyway—because “What we would, we do not”?

What, then, is this mystery? What is happening in Romans 7, and what is Paul trying to communicate to us? I marvel at Scripture and the way the Holy Spirit chose to communicate with us. He doesn’t spell everything out in simplistic terms. The gospel itself is simple in its basic concept. But the Scripture takes for granted, when we were created in the mind of God, one of the challenges that can come to us is to think God’s thoughts after Him. And to be intrigued, mentally and intellectually, and to struggle with the Scripture—struggle with meaning and interpretation. So we shouldn’t resent the struggle that is forced upon us in looking at Romans 7 because it is designed for our life and for our awakening and quickening in the spirit.

If I were to indicate what seems to me the reasonable view of what’s happening in Romans 7, I would say two things. This, first of all, describes for sure the work of the Law in the life of a person who is not yet a believer, but is on the verge of being a believer. It is a person who has been quickened to an understanding that, indeed, they are not right with God. They do not have

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

the righteousness of God. The Law has really come in, and that person—in trying to be right—does not have the ability to be right or to do right at all.

It is a spiritual condition which is just short of belonging to Jesus Christ. But I think, secondly, as it relates to the believer, it certainly does describe the believer's life—every time the believer slips back to relating to God on the basis of Law rather than grace. Or rather than relating to God on the basis of faith. Having been justified by faith, we do not become sanctified through obedience to the Law. Here is where so much Christian teaching on sanctification, or being made holy, goes astray: “Salvation is a free gift. But now if you're going to grow in the Lord and keep your salvation, then, by all means, work, work, work, work! One slip and you're out.”

I can remember the terrible teaching that used to petrify me in my Christian life, and I risk a lot of misunderstanding in sharing this illustration. When I was a young child growing up in the church and sermons would be preached on the Second Coming of the Lord—the Rapture—it was my understanding, as that teaching commonly came across, that if I am doing something wrong at the time of the Lord's return, I am left on the ground. One of the major wrongs that was preached on was being in a theater. As an adolescent, never would I attend because I was sure that that would be the precise moment. I had such a bad view of God, He was so out to get me, that He would time His coming to coincide with the moment I would be in such a place. And I'd be on the ground. It is still a struggle to accept that my salvation truly is a gift of God. And that He does not yank it from me on the basis—on the occasion—of my disobedience to the law. “But if that is the case, you're encouraging anybody to do anything.” I'm saying what the opponents of Paul did. They said, “If you preach that kind of a doctrine, you are giving license for behavior, because you're saying it doesn't matter what you're doing when the Lord returns. You're going to go up anyway.”

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

“That’s not quite what I said, if you read carefully. But I have indicated that our salvation is not predicated on obedience to the Law. And if we return unto bondage to the Law, we’re going to come back into guilt and condemnation, and we’re going to continue to wrestle with, ‘O, wretched person that I am! I don’t feel safe. I’m not sure I am safe. The Law is telling me I’m not first with God.’”

And over and over again, it’s speaking to us and we find that we do not have power to obey the Law when we come under dimension of the Law. So if we want to really understand Romans 7 and where I think it’s coming in our Christian life, we need to ask really probing questions like this in our inner self, our inner consciousness. Ask yourself the question, “Am I saved?” If you’ve really given your life to Jesus Christ, ask yourself that question. If you say, “I did confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. I have given Him my life. I have followed everything that the Scripture has told me to do. I’ve confessed my sins. I’ve believed Jesus is risen from the dead. I believe that Jesus is the Son of God. I’ve given Him my life, but I am still not sure.”

If you’re still not sure, you’re living in obedience to the Law. It is the Law, still operating in your life, which tells you you can never please God. And it is only the power of grace, the power of Jesus Christ, which can ever bring you out of that. It is the law of the Spirit. Here we have to jump into Romans 8 because it tells us how to get out of the Law. It is the law of the Spirit, which sets aside the law of sin and death. The Spirit within us, which is crying out, “Abba, Father.”

Is it the Spirit that encourages us to licentious behavior? Not at all. The Spirit, instead, encourages us to yield ourselves as instruments unto righteousness and gives us the power to do right and to be right. So the Christian life, when it is lived in grace and the Spirit, is not the life of wretchedness, disgust and perplexity. It is meant to be a life of growth and peace and joy and

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

triumph and victory. But whenever we choose to slip back under the demands of the Law, we come in under this kind of bondage.

Are you saved but miserable? It is because, maybe, without even being aware of it, you are choosing to live by Romans 7—rather than coming under the impact of the law of reigning in life through Christ Jesus, which has set you free from the law of sin and death. “I find a law,” Paul says, “at work in my members.”

There is a law at work in my life—the law of myopia, the law of near-sightedness. Without my glasses, there is not a person in this room that I can see clearly. I make out forms. I could guess the people sitting in the front row. The people on the back are just blurs to me. The law of myopia is telling me, “You cannot see clearly.” What can I do about this? I can say, “I’m going to try to see clearly.” So I try. Let’s say I go to eye exercise courses, corrective vision laboratories, and the like, but it so happens that there is a law of myopia at work in me that my efforts to improve are never going to do any good. The myopia is still going to be there. I am helpless to improve my condition. O, wretched person that I am! What I would see, I do not! But there is another law at work called the law of lens correction—which, when I put it on (eyeglasses), immediately corrects the other law. It gives me freedom and life.

You can struggle with the Law and try to be righteous before God. By keeping it, you will never arrive at that level. There is, however, a law which sets aside the law of sin and death. It is the law of life in Christ Jesus—which, when put on, gives one the correct vision and appropriate response to life.

In saying this I don’t want to set aside the intensity of the struggle that sometimes does occur in our Christian life, which Romans 7 reflects. We need to be conscious from time to time as we come under obedience to God that we do go through great spiritual struggles. That certainly is being reflected in Romans 7. We’re in the midst of a battle, and we’re in the midst of struggle,

THE STRUGGLE WITHIN

Romans 7:13-25

and sometimes we realize that our strongest efforts have failed and fallen short. But it is the purpose of the law of lens correction in the Spirit to tell us over and over again that there is “therefore now no condemnation in Christ Jesus our Lord” (see Romans 8:1). You’re free to grow, free to be. Free to be a triumphant person so that you recognize there is a Savior who has heard the response, “O, wretched man that I am. Who shall deliver me from the body of death?” It is, of course, Christ our Lord who delivers us and brings us into the Spirit and into triumph and victory.

Closing Prayer

We do come to You, our Father, in this moment as we prepare our hearts to receive communion and as we reflect upon the teaching of the Scripture today. We do know that the Law reminds us, again and again, as we approach this table that we are unworthy to partake. None of us have a right to be here. But we also know that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has cried out within us that we are the children of God and heirs with Christ of the age to come. So through Christ, we are worthy to partake. We pray, Lord Jesus, that we would not fall back to live by the Law and attempt to please You by demands of the Law. But that through the Spirit we would find the Law written in our hearts, the Spirit which energizes us and even gives us the power to go beyond the Law, to go beyond its negativity to a positive life of virtue and faith and trust. So today as we come to You, bless us as we gather. In Christ’s Name. Amen.