

The Battle Begins

The War Within – Part II

Romans 7:14-17

Introduction

I do not remember the last time I encouraged you to take notes, but today I am going to suggest that you do. There are two reasons for that:

1. The first reason is that you are going to get lost if you don't;
2. The second reason is – you are going to get lost if you don't!

You will need to keep track through six or seven different points that I will be making to ultimately, prove one point. So, write on a scrap piece of paper; on the back of your hand; on a page torn out of the hymn book – that way David can buy some new ones!

Today, I want to begin a series of studies entitled, “The War Within”. I am not sure how long it will take. In fact, as I studied and prepared, it became obvious that all I would be able to do is introduce a paragraph in Romans, chapter 7. It is a paragraph that is one of the most desperately needed passages in our generation.

I am not sure how long we will spend on this. And, in light of that, I thought you would find a story from this past week interesting. I picked up my youngest daughter from elementary school to take her to the Christian bookstore to buy a new Bible cover and a Bible to fit in it. She picked out a nice black velvet Bible cover with squiggly velvet lines, and it even had a pouch for her AWANA book. We were driving home and she wanted to put the tab slip that came with the book cover inside her Bible at just the right place. She turned in her Bible to where? To the

book of Romans. I thought, “She’s caught on to the significance of this great book.” But then, she asked with total innocence, “Daddy, what verse are you teaching this year?”

Somebody put her up to that!

The War Within . . . Whom?

How do you battle sin? Does a true believer sin? What do you do with defeat? How do you treat the principle of sin that seems to linger and make the Christian life so difficult? How do you gain victory in your Christian life?

Questions such as these, are why this series refers to, “the war”. The next paragraph in Romans, chapter 7, is nothing less than a revelation of the battle for the mind, the heart, the emotions, and the will of the believer.

In saying that, I have just tipped my hand. I said “the believer,” which indicates my perspective in approaching this passage.

There happens to be quite a controversy over this passage as to just who Paul is referring to. It is not a small argument over interpretation. In fact, it is the most important thing to decide before you begin to study this text. Who Paul is referring to will make all the difference in the world not only in the interpretation of the text, but in the application of the text.

Who is Paul talking about when he says in Romans, chapter 7:

- verse 14,
... *I am . . . sold into bondage to sin.*

- verse 18,

For I know that nothing good dwells in me . . .

- verse 21,

I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.

If Paul is talking about an unbeliever, it will make all the difference in the world as you interpret and apply this text. If Paul is talking about a believer, that will have huge implications as well.

Of whom is Paul speaking?

Six Major Views of Whom Paul is Speaking

There are six major views of whom Paul is speaking in these verses in Romans, chapter 7. There are actually more than six, but these are the primary viewpoints.

Paul is referring to someone other than himself

1. One view is that Paul is referring to someone other than himself.

Surely Paul cannot be talking about himself! Paul is a victorious believer, right? He said that we should imitate him, as he follows the Lord, right? How could Paul ever be so distraught and so weak to say of himself, as he did in verse 19,

For the good that I want, I do not do . . .

The trouble with this view is that, beginning with verse 7, Paul begins to use personal pronouns. He refers to himself over and over again, “I this . . .” and “my that . . .”. In fact, in the earlier part of chapter 7, Paul consistently said, “we” and “us,” but now, Paul talks about himself. And his agony reaches a climax in verse 24, when he cries out,

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free . . .

Paul is referring to an unbeliever

2. A second view that is argued is that Paul is referring to an unbeliever.

There is far too much talk about bondage to sin. The phrase in verse 14, “. . . sold into bondage to sin,” would reference an unbeliever, right? Didn’t Paul say in Romans, chapter 6,

- verse 6,

. . . that we would no longer be slaves to sin

- verse 7,

for he who has died is freed from sin.

- verse 18,

and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

Surely this passage in Romans, chapter 7, is referring to an unbeliever and not to Paul or any other Christian. The person in view here is, according to verse 14,

. . . sold into bondage to sin.

You need to understand that the emphasis in chapter 6 is on the new creation; the new nature; the new identity; the new person in Christ. In Christ and through identification with Him, we have been delivered from the dominion of sin.ⁱ

We are free from the penalty of sin, which is judgment. We are free from the power of sin, which produces despair.ⁱⁱ

We no longer have to sin. That is our position.

This passage in chapter 7 is not dealing with our position in the heavenlies, it is dealing with our experience on earth. We are free from the penalty of sin, but we are *not* free from the presence of sin which spells temptation. We are free from the power of sin, but we are *not* free from the possibility of sin which can spell failure.

May I remind you that in the midst of everything that Paul said about the Christian in chapter 6, he never said we would not battle sin. Verse 12 implies this, when Paul commands,

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts

What is true for the believer positionally (we are free from the penalty and power of sin), may not be true for the believer practically (we may fall to the presence and possibility of sin).

Notice verse 19 of chapter 6,

I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness . . .

He writes that because the possibility exists that we can do one or the other.

I believe Paul is referring back to that thought as he writes in verse 14 of chapter 7,

For we know that the Law is spiritual, . . .

(that is, it is good and holy and righteous),

. . . but I am of flesh, . . .

(or “sarkinos” in the Greek, which means, “made of flesh”),

. . . sold into bondage to sin.

In other words, you have on one hand the holiness of God’s standard and on the other hand, the weakness of the flesh that has this internal dynamic of sin, battling the internal dynamic of the Spirit.

We may be slaves of a new master, but we still live in enemy territory; we live behind enemy lines.

Do you know how I know Paul is not referring to an unbeliever? Because an unbeliever would never confess, as in verse 16, that God’s standard of holiness is good. He would never say, as in verse 22, that he with great joy agrees with the standard of God’s law. An unbeliever wants nothing to do with the law of God.

An unbeliever would never say, as in verse 18,

. . . nothing good dwells within me . . .

No, an unbeliever says, “You can’t believe how good I am . . . if you really knew me, you’d never say I might go to hell one day . . . in fact, God knows me so well, He knows I’m a pretty good guy!”

An unbeliever would never concur with God’s law which says, according to Romans, chapter 3, verse 10,

There is none righteous, not even one

God’s law says, according to Romans, chapter 3, verse 23,

for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

An unbeliever would never say, “I hate sin.” Paul says, at the end of verse 15 of chapter 7,

. . . I am doing the very thing I hate.

An unbeliever does not hate sin, he looks for it; he plans it; he sets it up; he saves up his money and buys it; he encourages it; he applauds it. What he hates about sin are the consequences – he hates getting caught; he hates the brokenness and turmoil of relational sin; he hates the diseases of sexual sin; he hates the penalties and punishments of civil sin – but he does not hate sin.

Only a Christian hates sin. Only a Christian hates to offend God and bring dishonor to His name. Only a believer sees the wretchedness of his sin. Only a believer, though failing to practically meet the holy standard of God’s law, would still say, with David, in Psalm, chapter 119, verse 97a,

O how I love Your law! . . .

Of whom is Paul writing then? Not an unbeliever.

Paul is referring to an immature or carnal Christian

3. A third view is that Paul is referring to an immature or carnal Christian.

Frankly, this view is the most dangerous of all thus far. If Paul is writing about an immature Christian, then we are all “off the hook”. That would mean that if we sin, then hey, one day we will grow up and we will not do that sin anymore.

Those who hold that view use this text to defend their perspective of sinning with permission. They talk like this, “I’ve only been a Christian for a few years,” or “I’ve been a Christian, but I’ve never really had to deal with that particular sin before, so don’t hold it against me,” or “I haven’t matured enough to deal with that sin,” or “I’ve got a hall pass for this sin, so I can be out here right now . . . the teacher says it’s okay because I haven’t grown up yet,” . . . “You’ve got to leave me alone.”

I do not know how many Christians are running around saying, “You can’t blame me, I’m the weaker brother.”

So, when are you going to grow up? When are you going start being the stronger brother?

This view of carnal or weak Christians hides sin behind the excuse of immaturity. And, if this passage is referring to that kind of Christian, then everyone gets a free pass to sin by simply claiming, “I’m a weak Christian.”

Yes, Paul says you are weak, but he does not excuse weakness.

You might say, “But surely this text is referring to a carnal Christian. Doesn’t verse 14 say,

‘ . . . I am of flesh [carnal, “sarkinos”], sold into bondage to sin’?”

The Greek language includes the definite article so that you could translate this, “sold under *the* sin,” meaning, “sold under the principle of sin”. Paul is saying, “Where the law is made of spiritual truth, I

am made of Adam's flesh, or flesh which still houses the principle of sin."

Paul is not saying that he is still bound to sins (plural), as in individual sins. He is saying that he is still bound to the singular principle or nature of sin, because he remains in the flesh of Adam's fallen race. So, even though Paul and every believer has been granted a new nature in Christ, we still struggle with the flesh which cooperates with the lure of sin.

Is Paul is writing about an immature believer or is he writing about every believer, including himself? If you look closely at this passage, you will not find the vocabulary of a backslidden Christian. An immature Christian does not feel the depth of agony over sin that is expressed in these verses. A backslidden Christian does not have such deep joy for the law of God referenced in verse 22. That is a mark of maturity . . . not immaturity.

A sin-excusing Christian would not be rejoicing in the good and holy and righteous law that finds him so far short of God's good and holy and righteous character. That is the activity of maturity!

Paul is referring to himself before he was saved

4. A fourth view holds that Paul is referring to himself before he was saved.

The tense of Paul's verbs change from aorist and imperfect (which speak of the past), to present tense. In the first part of this chapter Paul wrote, "We were . . . you were". Now in this section, the tense shifts to the present tense, "I am doing . . . I joyfully concur . . . I find then . . . wretched man that I am . . .". He is no longer using "was," but "am"! In other words, Paul is not writing about his past experience, he is writing about his present experience.

John Walvoord wrote, "Paul was describing his present conflict as a Christian with indwelling sin and its continuing efforts to control his daily life."ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul is referring to himself before he matured in his walk with Christ

5. A fifth view is that Paul is referring to himself, but he is referring to his experience before he matured in his walk with Christ.

Again, this is not the language of an immature Christian. If you ask an immature believer how he is doing in his walk, he will say, "I'm doing so well!"

If you ask a maturing Christian how he is doing in his walk, he will say, "I am so aware that I've got

so far to go. I am so unlike Christ you wouldn't believe it."

Part of the trouble in the church is that the immature Christian grabs the microphone first and tells everyone in the class or Bible study how holy they are. And while they are speaking, the mature Christian sits there with his mouth shut, knowing his own faults and the besetting sins that he battles daily, and knowing that the last thing he wants to do is boast in his personal achievements or spiritual victories.

When Paul wrote this, he wrote, with present tense passion, "This is my battle now!" And Paul had been saved, at the time of the writing of this letter, twenty-five years.

Paul is referring to himself as a committed, growing believer

6. A sixth and final view, which I believe is correct, is that Paul is referring to himself as a committed, growing believer!

You might say, "Now wait a second! Surely this text cannot be the experience of Paul, or any believer who is serving in the Spirit and yielded to God. People like that don't struggle with sin like this paragraph implies."

Have you ever known a great Christian? Have you been surprised that they struggle with the same stuff you do? Have you read a biography of a godly Christian lately? There was the despair of Spurgeon and the temper of Luther.

I have received more comments, emails, and "thank-you's" since I told the story a few weeks ago, about being in Connecticut and getting mad at the taxi cab driver and telling him to "go yank somebody else's chain," than any other time I can remember. I believe that has been the most encouraging thing I have said in the last five years. Why? Because, as many of you told me, one of your spiritual leaders was found to be a fellow struggler and it gave you hope.

I remember spending time with the late Dr. John Walvoord, who often came and spoke at Colonial. One afternoon, while I was taking him back to the airport, I remember him saying to me, "I just want to finish well." I remember the passion in his voice and the determination on his face.

I remember one Sunday evening, taking our speaking guest out to eat after a Sunday evening service. He is a giant of the faith, now in his late

seventies, that I am in awe of. My contemporaries and I used to refer to him as “Moses” – not to his face, mind you. After the service, I was going take him to a really nice restaurant where he could get something really nice to eat. Instead, he wanted to be taken to his hotel room right away, so he could rest. He said, “Just run me by the drive-thru at McDonald’s and I’ll get a Big Mac.”

I thought, “Moses eating a Big Mac?! Godly giants of the faith don’t eat Big Macs, that’s the food of us common people. They don’t eat with their hands and stuff French fries in their mouths, we do that. Surely they eat with more dignity and class.”

The truth is, we really cannot imagine the great apostle Paul, an incredible spiritual leader, struggling with sin! That is why so many people come to this paragraph and suddenly change the rules of interpretation. “I” no longer means “I”. Paul is not speaking literally anymore, he has now jumped into some sort of strange mysterious method of communicating where he says, “I do this,” but he really means an unbeliever, or an immature Christian, or himself before he got saved, or himself before he grew up.

No, my friends. As one author wrote, “Paul is describing a mature Christian, one who clearly sees the inability of his flesh to uphold the divine, spiritual standard. The more spiritual a believer is, the greater his sensitivity to his shortcomings will be.”^{iv}

The more Paul grew up in Christ, the more aware he was of this body of flesh, this body of death he had to battle!

Early in his ministry, Paul described himself in I Corinthians, chapter 15, verse 9a, saying,

For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle . . .

In other words, “Line up the other men and I’ll come in last place.”

“I am the least of the apostles!”

Later in his ministry, Paul wrote to the Ephesian believers, in chapter 3, verse 8a of that book, that he was,

. . . the very least of all saints . . .

In other words, earlier he was the least when compared to a handful of incredibly gifted and faithful men. Now he considers himself to be less than the least faithful of all the Christians who are living and who have already died.

And, Paul was not finished. Shortly before his death, he wrote to Timothy, in I Timothy, chapter 1, verse 15, and said,

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.

Once, Paul was the least of a dozen men. Then, he was the least faithful of all the Christians. In his later years, he was the greatest sinner on planet earth.

Ladies and gentlemen, becoming a Christian does not end the battle with sin, it begins the battle.

Sin is no longer your sovereign, but it is still your adversary!^v

So, what does growing in Christ involve? Is it an awareness of how good you are becoming? Or, is it a growing sense of how sinful you really are – so that you constantly turn to, run to, depend upon Jesus Christ – your Advocate, your Savior, your Redeemer.^{vi}

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/14/2003 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ John MacArthur, Freedom From Sin; Romans 6 & 7 (Word of Grace Communications, 1987).

ⁱⁱ Life Application Bible (Tyndale House, 1992), p. 140.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gib Martin, Romans; God’s Word for the Biblically-Inept (Starburst Publishers, 2000), p. 100.

^{iv} MacArthur, p. 152.

^v Life Application Bible, p. 142.

^{vi} James Montgomery Boice, Romans (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House), vol. 2, p. 762.