

Keeping Poodles Out of Portraits

The War Within – Part III

Romans 7:15-24

Introduction

For centuries, the royalty and the wealthy of Great Britain and Europe showed off their wealth in a number of pretentious ways. Castles and coachmen were signs of financial independence. The women of aristocracy spent lavish amounts of money on the breeding of small dogs for pets. It was not uncommon for a woman to have her portrait done with her tiny dog in her lap.

In America, the late 1800's were times of financial prosperity for many people. Men became overnight millionaires through railroads, oil, and real estate. Their wives lacked the culture and connections to British aristocracy, although they were equally as wealthy, if not more so. To compensate, these little lap dogs, which were the sign of European status, became the rage among the wives of American millionaires. Sure, they did not have centuries of culture and royal blood in their veins, but they too could spend huge amounts of money to import and breed their own small dogs. One of the most favorite American version was known as the poodle. These women had their own portraits made with their dogs on their laps, just like their distant cousins in England. They could show off their wealth too!

Cynical observers began to describe this show of wealth with the phrase, "putting on the dog". That phrase exists to this day. When someone is observed as being flashy or pretentious or stuck up, we say, "They're just putting on the dog."¹

The truth is, the average believer runs the risk of "putting on the dog" more often than he would ever want to admit and in more ways than he would ever

want to reveal. Whether it is faking a pious look or attitude, using spiritual vocabulary at just the right time and around just the right people, refusing to ever admit failure, showing up for church, volunteering for certain duties, you name it, we are frankly, more comfortable "putting on the dog" than letting people know who we really are. Transparency is extremely difficult – it is safer to hide behind a poodle.

That is one of the reasons it is so difficult to imagine that Paul the apostle is actually revealing his own spiritual battle. We cannot imagine that the great apostle could be referring to himself in Romans, chapter 7, with such honest words. We cannot fathom that it is this difficult for him to live a pure and holy life. We would rather think Paul had a handle on holiness; that handling temptation for a mature saint of God like him, was easy by now.

The truth is, we are uncomfortable with this passage because if Paul admits to sinful thoughts and actions, then we have to come clean too. We are going to need bigger dogs to hide behind. If Paul did not have holy living "down pat," none of us can say we have it mastered either.

In addition to that, we are just not used to someone speaking so honestly about the battle within, as Paul speaks in the latter part of chapter 7.

The War Within . . . Paul

Let us read several verses in Romans, chapter 7, and try to climb into Paul's skin and feel his agony and hear his passion and sense his heart cry as we read them. Look at verses 15 through 24.

For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.

So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.

But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

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

For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,

but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

Wow! No wonder people have argued that this passage is referring to an unbeliever or an immature believer. Surely Paul was victorious, but this is the language of struggle and defeat and agony and temptation.

The truth remains: *becoming a Christian does not end the battle with sin – it begins the battle!*

Three truths about a believer

Paul speaks in first person and in present tense in these verses. His openness is not only shocking, it is revealing. Paul says three things that reveal truths about himself and sin that can only be true of the believer.

A true believer has an aversion to sin

1. First, a true believer has an aversion to sin. In verse 15, Paul said,
... I am doing the very thing I hate.

When Paul gave in to temptation, he did that which he truly hated. An unbeliever does not agonize over sin, he agonizes over the consequences of sin.

John MacArthur told the story of a man who was mocking a preacher after the sermon was delivered. He said to the pastor, “You say that unsaved people carry a great weight of sin. Frankly, I feel nothing. How heavy is sin? Ten pounds? Fifty pounds? Eighty pounds? A hundred pounds?”

The pastor thought for a moment and then, gently replied, “If you laid a four hundred pound weight on a corpse, would he feel the load?”

The man replied, “Of course not, he’s dead.”

The preacher replied, “The person who doesn’t know Christ is spiritually dead . . . and though the load of sin is great, he doesn’t feel it.”ⁱⁱ

The truth is, a person who comes to faith in Christ suddenly becomes sensitive to sin – even the smallest of sins weigh on them like a hundred pounds. And, your sensitivity to sin will intensify as you grow in Christ. Isn’t that great news?!

Thomas á Kempis wrote centuries ago, of his battle, saying,

*I desire to cleave to heavenly things, but fleshly things and passions depress me. So I, unhappy man, often grieve . . . O what I suffer within while I think on heavenly things in my mind; the flesh comes against me even when I pray.*ⁱⁱⁱ

A true believer has an aversion to; a loathing of sin.

A true believer has an abiding love for God’s law

2. Secondly, a true believer has an abiding love for God’s law.

Paul writes in verse 22,

For I joyfully concur with the law of God . . .

A true believer has a longing for God’s pleasure that is found in holy living

3. Thirdly, a true believer has a longing for God’s pleasure that is found in holy living.

In verse 15, Paul says,

... for I am not practicing what I would like to do . . .

Obviously then, the believer is pulled in two opposite directions. With his flesh, he is pulled toward sin; with his spirit, he is pulled toward holiness.

Using himself as the example, Paul has taught us that while he was an unbeliever, sin owned him (that is in Romans, chapter 6). Now that he is a believer, sin cannot own him, but it can still master him (that is in chapter 7).

David wrote, in Psalm, chapter 19, verses 12 through 13a,

Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults. Also keep back Your servant from presumptuous sins; let them not rule over me . . .

Paul, like David, says in effect, “Before I was under the grace of God, sin owned me. But when I came by faith to Christ, I died to sin, but am still tempted to own it.”^{iv}

Is this the testimony of an unbeliever or a passive immature believer? No! This is the testimony of a believer engaged in the battle for purity, holiness, devotion, and godliness.

Outline of Romans 7:14-24

Now, you can easily outline Romans, chapter 7, verses 14 through 24, since Paul repeats himself three times. He says virtually the same thing about himself in three different ways. The outline consists of:

- The first section – verses 14-17.
- The second section – verses 18-20.
- The third and final section – verses 21-24.

Each section begins with an exposure of the battle within, followed by an example of the battle within and then, each section closes with an explanation. So we have in each section:

- exposure;
- example;
- explanation.

Section 1 - Romans 7:14-17

For instance, Paul exposes his heart the first time, when he writes in verse 14b,

. . . I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

This literally means, “sold into bondage to *the* sin.” He is not talking about individual sins, but the internal principle of sin. Though delivered from the

penalty and power of sin; Paul, and every believer, is still bound to the principle of sin, which is the flesh. Being bound to the principle of sin makes the presence of sin the possibility to sin.

Paul gives his first example in verse 15a,

For what I am doing, I do not understand . . .

The word “understand” or “know” implies “an intimate love of”. It is the same word used in the *Septuagint* for Adam knowing Eve and Eve conceived.

Paul says, “I believe the sin that I commit, I really don’t love.”

In fact, Paul goes on in his example to write, in verse 15b,

for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.

Paul continues on to provide an explanation, in verses 16 and 17,

But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

Is Paul excusing his sin? It sounds like he is saying, “It’s sin’s fault.”

No. Paul is actually taking responsibility for his sin by admitting that sin within himself was in control of his flesh. He is admitting he is sinful.

The unbeliever would never admit to sinful corruption. He would say, “The devil made me do it.”

Right? That would be his excuse.

Adam said, “It was Eve, Lord, . . . she made me do it.”

Eve said, “It was the serpent . . . it’s his fault.”

Paul is saying in effect, “I have, living within me, a propensity to sin; sinfulness lives in my flesh. And while the new me, the new creature in Christ, wants to do the right thing; the new me wants to be holy, sometimes the person that I no longer am gives in to the very thing I have now come to truly hate.”

Paul lives with the theological tension between who he is in Christ – clothed in righteousness and seated in the heavenlies – and his old flesh – still bound to him, sometimes allowed to control his actions, and constantly at war with his new spirit.

Let me pause at this point, long enough to say this. The internal principle and dynamic of sinful flesh will try to do two things to the believer. It will:

- try to deceive the mind of the believer;
- try to control the body of the believer.

The unbeliever's mind is already deceived and blinded by sin and his body is already under the control of sin.

The believer has been liberated, but still battles against the pull of sin, back into the old ways of the flesh.

That is why Paul warned Christians, in Romans, chapter 6, verse 12,

... do not let sin reign in your mortal body . .

.

And, in verse 13,

... do not go on presenting the members of your body . . .

(literally, your body parts),

... to sin as instruments of unrighteousness .

..

He also challenged the Philippian believers, in Philippians, chapter 1, verse 27, to,

... conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ . . .

He wrote to the Colossian believers, in Colossians, chapter 3, verses 8 and 12,

But now you also, put them all aside: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive speech from your mouth. . . . put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience

The truth about the battle is: *we will be delivered from the flesh eternally . . . we must do battle with the flesh daily!*

Section 2 – Romans 7:18-20

Paul moves to his second exposure. Look at verse 18.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.

The more mature a believer becomes, the more aware he is of this truth. Our flesh will never accomplish one good thing because nothing good dwells in our flesh. Only that which is done through

the power of Jesus Christ would ever be characterized as good.

Even when you do something through Christ which is good, your flesh wants to take over, doesn't it? As soon as you are complimented for doing something, your flesh rises up and says, "You really are something special."

You beg God to help you be a good mother or father and when someone comes along and says, "Man, I really admire the way you parent your children," you are immediately tempted to think, "I guess I really am a good parent." You forget that you had begged God to help you be that way!

The most dangerous fifteen minutes in a preacher's life is just after the service closes. He stands by the back door and everyone files out and says, "Wonderful message . . . What a great story you told . . . You're so interesting . . ." and by the time they are through with him, he is entirely corrupted with egotistical pride!

Howard Hendricks told my seminary class to never stand at the back door and make everyone file past. They will only feel obligated to say something nice to you, and you do not deserve it! Hendricks called that fifteen minutes of handshaking that takes place at the back door of sanctuaries all across America, "The glorification of the worm ceremony."

The older you become in Christ the more aware you are of how difficult it is to do and think and speak anything holy, and how easy it is to do and think and speak things that are sinful.

A couple of days ago, I read about this little dilemma. Two men died and waited at the Pearly Gates for admission into heaven (don't you love these theologically corrupt stories?). Peter comes along and declares, "Listen, we've got room for only one more – which one of you is more humble?"

Do you think Paul was not tempted with pride? He was the great one; he would compose more biblical books than any other living human being; he received more revelation from the risen Lord than any other apostle. And, he will introduce the bride – the church – to her bridegroom, the Lord.

Do you think Paul ever got caught up in his incredible platform of ministry?! Listen to Paul as he writes, in II Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 7,

Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, . . .

(Peterson paraphrases this, “to keep me from getting a big head”),

. . . there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, to torment me – to keep me from exalting myself!

God gave Paul something, the nature of which we do not know, to keep his head from swelling up and his pride under control.

Did it work?

If you could have interviewed Paul, like a sportscaster interviewing an athlete after an incredible play, you would ask him, “How does it feel to be the world’s greatest missionary? How does it feel to have the church hang on your every word? What is it like to be the mentor of every new believer and every future leader?”

He would respond, “You don’t know me very well . . . you see, I can’t help but think of what I could have done had my flesh not gotten in the way . . . you see, there is nothing good in old Paul, nothing good at all in what you see.”

Section 3 – Romans 7:21-24

Paul would deliver his third statement of exposure in verse 21, as he answers,

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

Let me give you an example of how this works, in verses 22 and 23.

For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.

Paul says two things an unbeliever cannot say!

- First, the phrase, “I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,” could be translated, “I love the law of God from the bottom of my heart . . . this new inner man.”
- Secondly, Paul just said that sometimes, even though he loves the holy standard of God, his flesh makes him a prisoner of sin.

An unbeliever cannot say that he becomes a prisoner of sin because he is already a prisoner. Paul says, “When I sin, I become a prisoner of sin again.” In other words, “I can refuse what I love in my heart and follow after what I want in my flesh and find myself chained to the old life.”

How do you explain it? Paul continues on to write, in verse 24,

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

(Or, from the flesh; from this body of corruption and decay).

Do you say that a believer sins? Yes. If Paul sins, I think I probably do too!

What happens when an unbeliever sins? Nothing! He is dead in his sins and trespasses, condemned, deceived and yet, proud of how good he is. He does not feel a thing!

What happens when a believer sins? What happens when a believer loses the battle within? At least twelve things happen:

1. He grieves the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:30);
2. His prayers go unanswered (I Peter 3:7);
3. His life disqualifies him from productive ministry (I Corinthians 9:27);
4. His praise of God becomes unacceptable to God (Psalm 33:1);
5. God’s blessing is withheld (Jeremiah 5:25 – “. . . your sins have withheld good from you.” II John 1:8 – an unrepentant believer forfeits his full reward);
6. He forfeits joy in salvation (Psalm 51:12 – David, upon confessing his sin, asked the Lord to restore to him the joy of his salvation);
7. He experiences God’s discipline (Hebrews 12:5-11);
8. His spiritual growth is hindered (I Corinthians 3:1-3);
9. His service for Christ is limited (II Timothy 2:21 – “Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things [sins listed in the previous verses], he will be a vessel for honor, . . . useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.”);
10. The length of his life is endangered (I Corinthians 11:30 reveals that some believers had died early because of their unrepentant lives);

And if all of these are not enough, you cannot keep from adding the next two facts to the list.

11. The testimony of the church is damaged (I Corinthians 5);

12. God is dishonored (I Corinthians 6:19-20 – glorify God in your body!).^v

It is no wonder that the true believer hates sin and battles against the flesh.

On the other hand, an unbeliever is unable to embrace the truth of his sin; unable to admit the corruption of his flesh. He makes sin acceptable; makes wrong seem right.

I received an email this week from someone who is more deceived by sin than anyone I have ever encountered. He does not attend church, but was encouraged by someone in this church to ask for my advice. He explained that he wanted to make sure that when he got married, he would be able to keep his wedding vows because he knew God would want that. So, in order to make sure he and his girlfriend were truly able to make sure they could keep their vows, they were determined to make sure they were absolutely compatible in every way, including sexual relations. He went on to say that he was not convinced that the Bible forbade sexual relations outside of marriage.

Then, he got to the interesting part. I have heard all that other stuff more often than you would believe. He then went on to say that when Jesus was tempted by the devil, He responded by saying, “Thou shalt not put the Lord your God to the test.” He then explained that to not do everything to make sure they could keep their vows, including fornication, would actually put God to the test, which would be wrong.

In other words, he did not say, “I know what I’m doing is wrong, do you think God will overlook it?”

He was not saying, “I don’t think God really thinks it’s wrong.”

He was actually saying, “Not only is this not sin and not only does God not think it’s wrong, this is actually an act which God requires of us and which God will hold us accountable if we do not engage in, because if we don’t, we can’t know for sure we’ll make the marriage last and that would put the Lord our God to the test when we take our vows.”

So sin not only became an act which God endorsed, it became sinful if he did not engage in it.

He ended his email by saying, “Please send me your thoughts.”

So I did. I sent him a few thoughts.

This may sound strange, and I hope you understand what I mean when I say this. For the unbeliever, sin does not matter now. However, it will

one day, when he stands and the books are opened and he is judged by those things which he did.

For the unbeliever, sin will become a very serious issue on the edge of eternity, but for the believer, sin is a very serious issue now. Our eternity is not at stake in heaven, but so many other things are at stake on earth!

With that in mind, why do we sin? Because God did not do a good enough job cleaning us up when we were saved? Because He did not give us a completely new nature? Because He did not pay entirely for our sin and so we have to try and do good things to make up for it?

No! We sin because we are sinners, even though we are saved! Sin is bound up in our flesh, and while we live in the flesh we will battle the propensity to do what the flesh wants to do – and that is sin.

Paul’s explanation in verse 24 is,

Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

Notice that he did not say, “*What shall deliver me . . .*” as if there is something we can do, but “*Who shall deliver me . . .*”. For Christ is the only power on earth that can not only save us from the penalty of sin, but from the power of sin.

Application – Two Exhortations

We will look at that more closely in our next discussion, but I want to give you, before we close, two exhortations. They are short and easy to remember.

Get real!

1. Exhortation number one is to get real!

Do you want to be like Paul? Then stop trying to sound so perfect to everyone else.

You do not have to try to pass yourself off as a person who has everything under control; as a believer who has reached a place of order and discipline and consistency.

If I could be so blunt, do not put any poodles in your portrait. Do not put on a show for the saints. You do not have to “put on the dog” for anyone.

Get real with yourself and before God. Get as real as Paul in Romans, chapter 7.

Stay put!

2. Exhortation number two is to stay put!

Stay in the fight! Paul would one day write to Timothy, in II Timothy, chapter 4, verse 7,

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course . . .

So, do not throw in the towel because living a holy life is an uphill climb! Expect it. If Paul lived it and battled it, so shall you!

When God made you alive in Christ, He called you into a life of battle with sin. So face it, accept it, and fight it!

J. I. Packer calls this perspective “spiritual realism”. He says that,

Spiritual realism has to do with our willingness to face uncomfortable truths about ourselves and start making necessary changes . . . we are constant blamers of others for whatever goes wrong in our relationships, families, churches, careers and so on; complacency and cleverness in acting as the

injured innocent are among the most Spirit-quenching traits imaginable, since they become excuses for doing nothing in situations where realism requires that we do something and do it as a matter of urgency. We are called to a constant spiritual warfare in this life and this warfare calls for rigorous preparation, constant alertness, dogged [persistence] and moment-by-moment trust in Him who alone can give us the victory.^{vi}

So get real . . . and stay put!

Or, to put it in words that Robert Chapman, a godly warrior for Christ who lived two hundred years ago, was fond of saying, “Keep low . . . look up . . . and press forward!”

Say that with me, “Keep low . . . look up . . . and press forward!”

Say it again, “Keep low . . . look up . . . and press forward!”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/21/2003 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2003 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.

ⁱ Webb Garrison, What's In A Word (Rutledge Hill Press, 2000), p. 170.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, Freedom From Sin (Word of Grace Publications, 1987), p. 166.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Romans (Crossway Books, 1999), p. 143.

^{iv} Life Application Bible (Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), p. 144.

^v John MacArthur, Freedom From Sin (Word of Grace Publications, 1987), p. 167.

^{vi} James Boice, Romans: Vol. 2 (Baker Book House, 1992), p. 767.