

Blessed Are the Bankrupt

The War Within – Part IV

Romans 7:24-25

Introduction

One of my seminary students related in class, the Associated Press story of Mark McGowan. McGowan is a graduate student himself, at Goldsmiths College in London. It seems he was rather overwhelmed with his twenty four thousand dollars of student debt, so he determined to raise the level of public pity for huge debts owed by the students of England. In an act of self-sacrifice and great determination, Mark McGowan succeeded in pushing a peanut with his nose, along the pavement, all the way from the steps of his school to the front porch of the Prime Minister. He crawled on his hands and knees for eleven days. There was a picture, along with the news article, of Mark McGowan with his nose bandaged and his face to the ground, giving that peanut one more push. It turned out, unfortunately, that the Prime Minister was not impressed and that Mark McGowan would still have to pay his school bills.

In yet another Associated Press release that I pulled from my newspaper this past week, a Buddhist priest, nicknamed “the marathon monk,” finished an ancient running ritual in the remote Japanese mountains. The run took seven years and covered a distance equivalent to a trip around the world. He spent seven years systematically running, praying, and fasting – sometimes for nine days at a time without food, water, or sleep. This particular Buddhist sect dates back to the eighth century and believes its grueling tradition to be the path to enlightenment. Any monk, and forty-six others have survived it, who fails to complete the journey is duty

bound to take their own life by either disembowelment or hanging.

This particular monk who recently finished the marathon, found people lining the path, kneeling before him, to have him touch their heads, believing it would give them special spiritual blessings.

The stories are not the same, but the fundamental principle is – mankind believes that a great debt, whether spiritual or financial, can be eliminated by great sacrifice. The greater the debt, the greater the sacrifice you must make.

If you push a peanut with your nose for seven miles, or run for seven years, people will probably be impressed and might even wipe out your student loans or line up for you to touch them on the head.

But what about your greatest debt? What do you do about that lingering, daily sense that you are sinful and owe God holiness, while you are not giving it to Him and are disappointing Him over and over and over again?

The apostle Paul, coming to that point in his letter to the Romans, reaches the end of his transparent autobiography of sinfulness and cries out, “Wretched man that I am!”

Paul did not say, “was,” but “am.” After twenty-five years of Christian service for Christ, Paul says, “I am still doing things I hate and not doing things I love.”

- “Wretched man that I am.”
- “Wretched father that I had.”
- “Wretched education that I had.”

- “Financial help that I never had.”
- “Wretched man that my professor is or my boss is.”
- “Societal connections that I never enjoyed.”
- “Wretched husband or wife or children that I have.”

“They are my problem. It’s my culture’s fault; my parent’s fault; my boss’s fault; my career choice’s fault; my children’s fault; my school’s fault . . . it’s somebody’s fault! And they ought to pay!”

That is the conclusion of the unbeliever. He is a victim of someone else’s sin. He is certainly not a sinner. And someone ought to pay for the fact that he now does not have what he wants out of life.

Two days ago, the story broke of an Egyptian lawyer who sits as the dean of the law faculty at one of Egypt’s Universities. He is planning to sue the world’s Jews for plundering Egypt thousands of years ago, as recorded in Exodus, chapter 12, verses 35 and 36. When the Israelites were about to leave Egypt, God instructed them to plunder the Egyptians. Basically receiving compensation for hundreds of years of unpaid labor, this Egyptian lawyer is now asking if “plunder” has a statute of limitations. Never mind the deprivation and brutality at the hands of the Egyptians, the Jews got gold and silver and precious gems and fine clothing. That would be basically the pay the Jews had never been given for four hundred years of forced labor. And, the Egyptians turned over their material things gladly, knowing they had offended Israel’s God who had brought terror and death into the land. They were more than happy to be rid of the Jews. Now – Egypt does not owe the Jew anything for those centuries, Israel owes Egypt!¹

“Wretched people that these Jews are to me.”

The War Within . . . The Believer

The fascinating thing about Paul’s testimony in Romans, chapter 7, and verse 24, is that it comes from the pen of a mature believer who has reached the truth. And, the truth is not, “Wretched people who live around me,” but,

Wretched man that I am! . . .

Paul goes on to say, in the last part of verse 24,
. . . Who will set me free from the body of this death?

Would you notice again, that Paul does not say, “What will set me free? What three things do I need to do?”

Do you need to start pushing peanuts to erase your spiritual debt? Will scraping your nose along seven miles of pavement impress the Prime Minister of heaven? Should you begin a trip equaling the distance around the earth? Will that empower you to be a blessing to others? Will your fasting and deprivation and sleepless nights of self-effort bring you to the path of enlightenment?

The world would say, “Yes! You’ve got to do something to get right with whatever god you believe in.”

The problem remains, however, both for those who do not believe in Christ and His word, and those who do. Inside the walls of the church, superstition and false teaching abounds as well, when it comes to this battle within – this fight against the flesh and sin.

Ways Many Christians Try to Win the Battle Against Sin

James Montgomery Boice provoked my thinking when he wrote that the average American Christian tries to win the struggle against sin in a number of ways. Let me give them to you.

Many Christians pursue spiritual formulas

1. First, many Christians pursue spiritual formulas.

These Christians want a quick fix; some special secret. They are always on the lookout for some new book; some secret truth; some special prayer; some title or seminar that gets their attention, such as, “three steps to spiritual victory” and “four keys to spiritual freedom”. Perhaps it is a one liner like: “Let go and let God,” or, “Just let Jesus take control,” or some other expression of what we could call, “bumper sticker theology”.

“Surely the battle against sin can be solved if I simply know one more thing; learn one more clever principle; take one more study; read one more book . . . I’ll get to the point where I know enough formulas to keep me from ever sinning again.”

Go back in this paragraph in Romans, chapter 7, and read statements such as verse 19,

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

In other words, “I know what I am supposed to do and I know what I am not supposed to do, but knowing is not enough! The things I want to do, I don’t do, and the things I don’t want to do, I do.”

Paul knew what he needed to know, but knowing is not the answer. Think about it this way. How many great coaches do you know who are superstar athletes?

I have watched a little Wimbledon tennis in recent years. A thought has always struck me when they show the coach sitting on the sidelines. I wonder to myself, “Who is that guy? Is he some former pro who is unknown and is therefore, probably not all that stellar in his own personal career, but here and now, coaching a superstar?”

Why can’t they pick up the racket, with what they know, and beat the dickens out of everyone on the planet? Because knowing how does not mean you can!

I can go out on the golf course with my two sons, who are now both taller than I am, and they can crush the golf ball. I stand over the ball I have teed up and my life verse for golf comes back to me: “the things I want to do, I do not do, and the things I don’t want to do, I do.” My ball takes a couple of lurching bounces and goes into the water. Who put that pond there?! My son gets up there and tees his ball up, and what do I do? I say, “Remember to keep your head down . . . you’re standing too far away . . . keep your arm straight.”

Mr. Waterlogged is now going to coach guys who can crush the ball and who graciously let me play with them, probably because I am paying.

The truth is, knowing what to do does not necessarily mean you will do it. More knowledge is not the answer.

Many Christians pursue a new experience

2. Secondly, many Christians pursue a new experience.

They believe that with some new experience with Christ; more dramatic encounters with the Spirit of God; some moment when some light shines and breaks open some mystery that they will be liberated from sinful desires.

They might pursue speaking in tongues, or a second blessing, or some special commitment, or an emotional moment of worship, or a second work of grace – something that brings them into a state of perpetual victory so that they never have to really battle sin again.ⁱⁱ

They believe that a Christian can and should reach some sort of state of maturity through

commitment or dedication or personal vow so that they will, from then on, live on the mountaintop!

By now then, the apostle Paul would surely have arrived, right? Look at his experiences as a believer. I have compiled a short list and it is a breathtaking resume. Paul:

- was personally arrested by the risen Lord along the Damascus road and heard the voice that you and I would love to hear audibly from heaven – he heard it! (Acts 9:4).
- was privately tutored by the Holy Spirit for three years (Galatians 1:12,18).
- was given miraculous ability to heal; even those who touched his garments were at one point in his ministry, healed of all their diseases (Acts 19:12).
- even raised someone from the dead (Acts 20:10).

What an experience raising someone from the dead would be. Imagine, Paul is asked, “Honey, how’d your day go at church?”

“Oh, fine. I went to a funeral today and decided to just raise the guy from the dead. Everyone seems happy about it. I might even get a bonus.”

Paul:

- had been taken out of body into heaven for a personal tour (II Corinthians 12:2).
- had personal visions as Christ came to him with revelation (Acts 18:9-10).
- was one of the apostles (Galatians 1:1).
- was the leading missionary and church planter and theologian and author and pastor of his generation!

And after twenty-five years of this incredible ministry and personal visits from Christ and private instruction from the Holy Spirit, you would think Paul knew the formula; you would think he had had the experience! If there was something to know, he would have known it! If there was something to experience, he would have experienced it! By now, Paul should be breathing the air of perpetual “mountain top” Christianity!

Yet Paul, after knowing what he knew and experiencing what he experienced; after twenty-five incredible years filled with commitment and dedication and worship and service, cried,

Wretched man that I am! . . .

Someone might say, “But Paul experienced something in Romans, chapter 7, verse 25a, when he reaches this triumphant statement of victory,”

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! . . .

That is indeed, a great statement of victory. However, if it signaled the end of the battle for Paul, why would he, in the next breath, say in verse 25b,

. . . So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

In other words, why did Paul continue to have a battle within, between what he knew was right (the law of God), and what he did that was wrong (the law of the sin)?

The truth remains, at least by taking this passage literally and at face value, there is no formula; there is no special experience that removes the maturing believer from the war within.

Many Christians pursue spiritual deflection

3. Thirdly, a way that I would add to this list, is that many Christians, to avoid the battle, are doing what I would call, spiritual deflection.

Any problem that you are having with sin is the devil’s fault; it is a demon’s doing. So, you go and get freed from the demon of lust and the demon of pride and the demon of gluttony and then, you can even be freed from the demon of debt.

I turned on the television some time ago, and watched a pastor tell his crowd of thousands and his television audience of millions to send him their credit card bills. He would then pray over them and the people would be released from their demon of debt. I was kind of hoping that one would work!

What about compulsive spending? What about discipline? What about financial planning? What about personal responsibility to creditors whose money you have used? None of that – this is a demon’s fault.

This view has a generation of believers under the impression that bad thoughts and bad deeds are not their fault and therefore, not their responsibility. Their wrongs are the fault of a demon they need to exorcise; of the devil they need to bind.

Paul knew demonic activity. He sensed it in a young woman who followed them (Acts 16); he warned the believers about the wiles of the devil

(Ephesians 6). Paul was no novice . . . he knew full well what spiritual warfare was all about.

However, there is no demon in Romans, chapter 7. There is no devil to cast out; there is no shifting of blame to an unseen world. Paul says, in effect, “My primary problem is me.”

And do you know what? The flesh is impossible to cast out!

The Deliverer From the War Within – Jesus Christ

Paul goes on to write, in the last part of Romans, chapter 7, verse 24,

. . . Who will set me free from the body of this death?

Paul’s testimony

What does Paul mean?

During the days of Paul, Roman tyrants would chain dead bodies upon enemy captives following a battle and they were made to carry them upon their backs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Certain types of criminals were executed by the Romans with special brutality. Sometimes if the man had committed a murder, he was bound hand to hand, face to face with the corpse of his victim and then thrown out into the heat of the Mediterranean sun, or hung on a cross, and as the corpse decayed, it literally ate death into the living man who usually died totally insane.^{iv}

Perhaps Paul had this kind of torture in his mind when he cried out, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?”

However, I do not believe that Paul did not know the answer to his question. “Who will set me free?” Paul asks.

The Greek verb “rusetai” (ρυσεται), was used to refer to the act of a soldier who ran at his comrade’s cry to rescue him from the hands of the enemy.^v

Paul is in enemy hands – and the enemy is his own flesh. Who will rescue him; who will deliver him?!

The deliverer is Jesus Christ. The answer to “this body of death” is *His* body of death. He bore our shame; He groaned in death under the corpse of our flesh; He paid for it all and will one day entirely deliver us from its evil presence and passion.

Paul is not crying a prayer of defeat, but of acknowledgement. He is both sinful and saved. He is in agony over his sinfulness and rejoicing in his Savior.

The Scottish theologian, Robert Haldane, once wrote that men perceive themselves to be sinners in direct proportion as they have discovered the holiness of God and His law.^{vi}

This is the testimony of Paul.

Blessed are the “bankrupt,” for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

The truth is, we are not used to hearing or seeing someone demonstrate an attitude and spirit that Jesus Christ said would reveal true repentance and conversion.

Look at Psalm, chapter 38, verses 3 through 8,

There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin.

For my iniquities are gone over my head; as a heavy burden they weigh too much for me.

My wounds grow foul and fester because of my folly.

I am bent over and greatly bowed down; I go mourning all day long.

For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh.

I am benumbed and badly crushed; I groan because of the agitation of my heart.

Let’s face it, this kind of prayer would not be a best seller today.

. . . I groan because of the agitation of my heart!

Brokenness is not part of the formula today; contriteness is not an experience to pursue.

Listen to what Jesus had to say when He delivered His first sermon. This sermon was so shocking that the text says, when He finished, His audience was amazed, or literally, in the Greek, “ekplesso” (εκπλησσω), which means, “to be stunned” or “to be beside oneself”.

His very first words were, as recorded in Matthew, chapter 5, verse 3,

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In other words, the people who are getting into heaven are poor in spirit.

What did that mean?

The key word is the Greek word for poor. In the days of Christ, there were two kinds of poor people.

The Greek word “penes” (πενης), referred to a poor person who worked hard at his job all day, got paid in the evening as they did every day, went home, used every bit of it for food, clothing, and shelter and had nothing left over. If he got sick, he had nothing to fall back on. He knew nothing of savings or financial security. He lived one day at a time, not knowing if he would have anything to eat the next day.

There was another kind of poor person who was referred to as a “ptochos” (πτωχος). This person did not have a job to begin with. He had no way of purchasing food, clothing, or shelter. He was the village beggar, totally dependent upon someone else for anything. He was absolutely destitute.

This second word is the word Christ used. “Blessed are the poor in spirit” then, means “blessed are the poverty stricken who have absolutely nothing to begin with.”

The person who gets into the kingdom of heaven is someone who understands they are spiritually bankrupt. They offer God nothing of themselves. In this person, there is no self-sufficiency; no egotism; no arrogance.

Blessed are the bankrupt, for they inherit the eternal treasure of the kingdom of God.

The apostle Paul is merely reflecting, in Romans, chapter 7, someone who is bankrupt, but eternally blessed.

This is illustrated best, perhaps, by the parable our Lord told of two men who came into the temple to pray, as recorded in Luke, chapter 18, verses 9 through 14.

One of the men was a proud, self-assured, spiritually correct Pharisee. He had just pushed a peanut seven miles with his nose up to the porch of the temple, and he expected God to be impressed.

The other man was a tax-collector – the universal symbol of Jewish corruption and greed; a Jew who had sold out his countrymen to Rome for the right to tax his own people on Rome’s behalf. And, by overtaxing them, he was able to keep the extra for himself. These men were wealthy, but hated.

They both show up at the same time to pray! The Pharisee stood and prayed, in verses 11b and 12,

. . . God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all I get.

While he is praying, according to verse 13,

. . . the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me, the sinner!"

Jesus then said, in verse 14,

I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.

When the Pharisee prayed, he was impressed with himself. When the tax-collector prayed, he was impressed with God.

Would you like to know what I have discovered in Paul's diary in Romans, chapter 7? I have discovered a man unimpressed with himself, yet totally impressed with God; poor in spirit, yet filled with the treasure of heaven.

You do not have to walk twenty four thousand miles to find peace with God; you do not have to sacrifice the skin on your nose to impress the Prime Minister of heaven . . . unless you happen to skin your nose by simply bowing and saying, with humility and at the same time, with great joy, "Wretched man that I am . . . thanks be to God!"

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/28/2003 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ World Magazine, (Sept. 27, 2003).

ⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, Romans Volume 2 (Baker Book House, 1992), p. 765.

ⁱⁱⁱ Roy L. Laurin, Romans: Where Life Begins (Kregel Publications, 1988), p. 240.

^{iv} John Phillips, Exploring Romans (Moody Press, 1969), p. 119.

^v Fritz Rienecker and Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Zondervan, 1976), p. 365.

^{vi} John MacArthur Jr., Romans, Volume 1 (Chicago, Ill., Moody Press, 1991), p. 392.