

Discovering Our Sinfulness

A Study on Romans 7:14-20

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Every Christian who has sought to be honest with himself and God has found, through experience, the sinfulness of his own being. When we were first saved, we were all excited about Christ and our new walk with him (and we certainly should have been). But as we began to grow in grace and knowledge of the Word, we began to see God's standards for Christian living and our inability to meet these standards. The harder we tried to keep God's law, the more impossible it seemed. Then one day we realized that in our basic person, even after we were saved, we were utterly unable to live the Christian life in our own strength, that we were sinful in our very natures. We became discouraged and sometimes defeated, even to the place of despair.

At this point, feeling we will be ostracized by other Christians, most of us do not tell anyone of this conflict. We put up a good front, pretending we are satisfied when we are inwardly unhappy. We do not realize that this is a normal experience to bring us to the end of self, and that God has provided the Holy Spirit to help us live the Christian life. He never intended for Christians to be constantly defeated, and never expected us to live the Christian life in our own strength and effort. God has provided a supernatural power for us to live a supernatural life: the law of the Spirit in Christ Jesus.

Romans 7:14-25 tells us of Paul who experienced something of this disillusionment, defeat and discouragement as he realized his own sinfulness and inability to keep the spiritual requirements of the Mosaic Law by his own efforts.

From childhood Paul was raised to love and respect the Mosaic Law. When he was saved he felt as though he could keep the Law in his own strength and by his own effort simply by virtue of being a regenerated man. He desired and longed to keep the spiritual requirements of the Law, but he lacked the power to defeat sin in his own life. The Law simply stirred his sin nature to activity. This struggle took place between the time Paul was first saved and when he went to Antioch for his first ministry. He was learning to walk by the Holy Spirit. God used the Law to bring Paul to the end of himself, and self effort in order to teach him to trust the Holy Spirit to accomplish the impossible in him.

BACKGROUND

In Romans 7:7-13 Paul spoke of this struggle in the past tense, but in 7:14-25 he used the present tense. This appears to be an autobiographical account of his struggle with sin and law as a saved man. One can feel the drama and intensity of this personal struggle.

If Paul had this struggle, surely every Christian can expect to have a similar one.

The “I” in this passage refers to Paul’s inward personality (inward man, vs. 22), but it consists of two parts: mind and flesh (vs. 23). More simply, the mind is the renewed mind or new nature, and the flesh is the unrenewed flesh or sin nature. There is one person with two capacities constantly working within him, each seeking dominance over him in his experience.

The mind (new nature) delights in God’s Law and longs to do it, but the flesh (sin nature) is hostile and refuses to submit to the Law.

Let me stress once again that the conflict we are discussing is that of a Christian man who loves the spiritual requirements of the Mosaic Law, a reflection of God’s holiness and will for ethical purity. (The Mosaic Law, especially the Ten Commandments, is also a reflection of the eternal moral law of God.) He wants God’s will, he yearns for it, but finds that even as a saved man he cannot do it in himself. He discovers that the principle of sin is a real factor in his life.

INDWELLING SIN — Romans 7:14

“For we know that the law is spiritual.” The Mosaic Law is spiritual because it originated with God and was given by the Holy Spirit. It is a reflection of God’s holy character.

“But I am carnal [fleshy], sold under sin.” “Carnal” refers to a weakness toward sin because of the sin nature. It is what I am, even as a Christian, in myself. The flesh dwells in me and assaults me, and I am no match for it. Rather, in myself and if left to myself, I am its slave, its reluctant, resistant slave. This is normal Christian experience because every Christian finds himself in conflict with God’s holy requirements in the Law. This is a conflict that we cannot avoid because we are still sinful. This is also subnormal Christian experience because it is trying to produce the righteousness of the Law by self effort. Sin is not just doing something wrong, it is also trying to do something right in our own efforts.

When Paul viewed God's holy Law and tried to keep it, he acknowledged that he was sinful by nature and did not have the power in himself to keep the Law. He knew that he had been forgiven his sins, but he had to learn that even as a saved man he could not put down the flesh in himself. He had to make the discovery of indwelling sin and his need for divine help to keep it down!

Paul was trying to live the Christian life by keeping the Law in his own strength. This subnormal Christian life was not because of acts of sin, but because of self-effort apart from dependence on the Holy Spirit. Paul was living below the possibilities that God had provided in the Christian life.

This struggle may be seen in a Christian's experience in the following ways:

False Consecration: After he has trusted in Christ, every Christian soon learns that his life is below par. There may be initial excitement of salvation, but after a time the Christian grows cold, finds a lack of power in his life, and discovers that he has no real effectiveness and no real spiritual fruit. He may try a number of things — going forward at a revival meeting, throwing a fagot on the fire at a consecration service, determining before God that he will give him his time, talents, abilities, his life. But after a time he finds himself back in the same old grind and he may cry out, "Lord, I am trying to serve you. Why is there no power?" The problem is that he is trying to serve and live a Christian life apart from the Holy Spirit who is the Christian's power.

False Teaching: People may have been told that they are to keep the Law of Moses, a creed, a moral code, or some man-made religious standard. And they may be told nothing about the work of the Holy Spirit. Legalism blinds people to the truth of the Holy Spirit and puts them in bondage to false laws.

False Service: A Christian, whether a preacher, Sunday school teacher, missionary, Christian worker, or layman, who attempts to do anything by self-effort, apart from dependence on the Holy Spirit, is falling back into a works system and depending on self rather than the Holy Spirit for results.

INABILITY TO OVERCOME EVIL IN THE FLESH BY THE LAW — Romans 7:15-17

"For that which I do [am working out] I allow not [do not understand]." Paul is sincerely attempting to keep the Law in his own strength but even as a saved man he does not understand his own actions.

“For that which I would [I am desiring] that I do not [am not practicing].” It was Paul’s earnest desire as a saved man to keep the righteous demands of the Law, but he found that he could not put into practice what he desired.

“But what I hate, that do I.” Paul loved the spiritual requirements of the Mosaic Law and hated every evil way that was contrary to the Law, but he found that the sin he hated was what he was doing. At this point, he didn’t understand about the Holy Spirit and how the Spirit could produce in the Christian the righteous requirements of the Law.

“If [since] then I do that which I would not [de not desire], I consent [concur, agree] unto the law that it is good.” Paul agrees once again that the Law is good, that there is nothing wrong with it. It is from God and is holy, just and good, and its requirements are abiding.

“Now then, it is no more I [new nature] that do it [is working it out], but sin that dwelleth in me.” Paul does not voluntarily give himself over to the sin nature, but finds that it is a subtle force constantly working in him to make him sin and not do the things of God. The problem is indwelling sin and how to control it. Here Paul discovers the principle of indwelling sin, which makes it impossible to fulfill the Law in his present experience. The answer is not law or self-effort, but the Holy Spirit.

Paul discovers that he is not only sinful, but also helpless because of indwelling sin. It is a terrible awakening to make this discovery, to become again convicted, this time not of sins, but of indwelling sin, of a hateful power that seems to be one’s very self but in reality is the sin nature.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon said,

“There are some professing Christians who can speak of themselves in terms of admiration; but, from my inmost heart, I loathe such speeches more and more every day that I live. Those who talk in such a boastful fashion must be constituted very differently from me. While they are congratulating themselves, I have to lie humbly at the feet of Christ’s cross, and marvel that I am saved at all, for I know that I am saved. I have to wonder that I do not believe Christ more, and equally wonder that I am privileged to believe in Him at all — to wonder that I do not love him more, and equally to wonder that I love Him at all — to wonder that I am not holier, and equally to wonder that I have any desire to be holy at all considering what a polluted, debased, depraved nature I find still within my soul, notwithstanding all that Divine grace has done in me. If God were ever to allow the fountains of the great deeps of depravity to break up in the best man that lives, he would make as

bad a devil as the Devil himself is. I care nothing for what these boasters say concerning their own perfections; I feel sure that they do not know themselves or they could not talk as they do. There is tinder enough in the saint who is nearest to heaven to kindle another hell if God should but permit a spark to fall upon it. In the very best of men, there is an infernal and well nigh infinite depth of depravity. Some Christians never seem to find this out. I almost wish that they might not do so, for it is a painful discovery for any one to make; but it has the beneficial effect of making us cease from trusting in ourselves, and causing us to glory only in the Lord.

INABILITY TO DO THE DESIRED GOOD OF THE LAW — Romans 7:18-20

“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing.” Paul, regenerated new creation, found that he needed more than justification to deliver him from the power of present sin. He needed divine intervention. He had to learn that in himself he was powerless to produce righteousness. Before he could appropriate a Saviour for indwelling sin, he had to be shown that he was indeed sinful.

The honest and humble acknowledgment of the hopeless evil of our flesh is the first step to holiness. Some of us are not leading holy lives for the simple reason that we have too high an opinion of ourselves. No man ever cries aloud for deliverance until he has seen his own wretchedness. The only way to arrive at faith in the power of the Holy Spirit is along the road of self-despair.

We can only see our sinfulness when we see the holiness of God. The lives of God’s saints prove this point:

Abraham: When Abraham walked with the Lord he exclaimed, “Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes” (Gen. 18:27).

Job: When Job came face to face with God, he said, “Behold, I am vile” (Job 40:4), and again, “I abhor myself” (Job 42:6).

Daniel: When he had that wondrous vision of Christ, Daniel declared, there remained no strength in me; for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength” (Dan. 10:8).

Isaiah: When Isaiah entered the divine presence, he cried, “Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5).

“For to will [the desiring] is present with me; but how to perform [work out] that which is good I find not.” Paul’s desiring good did not enable him to meet the requirements of the Law.

“For the good that I would [am desiring] I do not; but the evil which I would not [am not desiring], that I do [am practicing].” Paul finds a complete conflict in desires. As a saved man he desires to keep the Law, but in reality can find no power to carry out those desires.

“Now if [since] I do that I would not [am not desiring], it is no more I that do it [am working it out] but sin that dwelleth in me.” Once again Paul acknowledges that because he is not able to produce the good required by the Law, it is not the Law’s fault. It is his fault because the sin nature is still in him.

Sin cannot be put down by the Mosaic Law or by self effort. Only the Holy Spirit can enable a person to put down sin and the activity of the flesh.

CONCLUSION

If you are without Christ you really have no understanding of the holiness of God, the sinfulness of sin, or the work of Jesus Christ to take away sin. The Bible says that for the person outside of Christ there is only sin, spiritual death, and ultimately eternal judgment. If you will turn to Christ, he will forgive your sins and deliver you from the guilt and penalty of sin. Christ is your only hope for salvation in this world.