

Struggle * Romans 7

March 27, 2022 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

This morning's message is one that I've never heard preached before. And frankly, I think that's really too bad, because the question at its heart is a vital one for any honest believer: if I have been set free from sin, does that mean I'll never sin again?

Just last week in Romans 6, Paul told us that we have died to sin; it is no longer our master. Does that mean then that the Christian life is entirely free from sin? Should we expect ourselves as believers to never step outside of God's will again since we are free from the power of sin? Should we expect that we will sin no more?

There are certainly believers who have held that view through the years. Henry Boardman, for example, a leader in the Higher Life movement of Christian teaching says - "Christians will be delivered from all known wrong. [Sinful cravings] . . . will be so completely counteracted by Christ that . . . [a person] will cease from all voluntary transgressions of the Law. The Christian's life (will) . . . potentially become one of endless victory over every form of temptation and moral weakness."ⁱ

Is that true? I'd like it to be. But I'm not sure, based on my experience and the Bible itself, that that is an accurate picture of the Christian life.

So I want to look with you this morning, and be very honest with you, as we look at the last half of Romans 7 and a bit of Romans 8 to answer that question – will we never sin again once we've been saved?

Turn with me to Romans 7 and we'll start at verse 14. Romans 7, starting in verse 14.

14 We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. (Rom 7:14 NIV).

Now that's a strange thing for Paul to say because didn't he say just in the last chapter that we are *not* slaves to sin? I mean, Romans 6:18, Paul says 'You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.' He says essentially the same thing in verse 6, verse 14, verse 17, verse 22. 'We are no longer slaves to sin.' And yet here, not even a page away, he says 'I am sold as a slave to sin.'

What's going on here?

I think that the answer lies in the part about the Law. Paul says: (7:14) 'We know that the law is spiritual but I am not.' In the first part of Romans 7, Paul establishes that the Law is inherently good. It comes from God and reflects His character, so the Law is good, the law is spiritual, inside and out. God's Law is wholly good.

We, though, are a mix of both good and bad. We were made in God's image (good) but we have a tendency to wander from Him (bad), but we've been redeemed and brought back to Him (good). But even so, our time wandering far from God has left its mark on us.

It's a little bit like this. Whenever I'm baking and get out an egg, I always wash it. Get the egg out, under the tap, wash it off. Julie looks at me and goes 'why the heck do you wash the egg before you crack it? It's clean!' (And I did actually look and there are a lot of websites that say 'don't wash your

eggs before you use them'). But still I think it's weird not to wash the eggs. And so I stopped to think about WHY I wash my eggs.

Can you guess? I grew up on a farm. With chickens. The only eggs we had came straight from the chicken coop. Straight from the chicken. And I don't know if you've ever gathered eggs before, but eggs are not the only things you find in a chicken nest. So of course we wash the eggs. That's what I always did. That's just a part of who I am. It is engrained in me because that's just how we always did it.

The same thing is true for us and sin. We are redeemed and brand new people – yes – but before Jesus saved us, we were slaves to sin. We are so used to living under its control that we sometimes act as though we are STILL under its control. I don't HAVE to wash the eggs, but that's what I instinctively do; we don't HAVE to sin and yet sometimes that's what we instinctively do. And that's why Paul can say – somewhat hyperbolically – that it still feels like we are slaves to sin.

And yet, we are objectively not. We are no longer slaves to sin. Full stop. We know that. We are brand new people, committed to God, to living for His glory. And so when that old way of living rears its ugly head, we catch ourselves. In the past, we might not have given it a second thought, but now we are under new management, and we say 'Wait, that's NOT consistent with who I am now' and we find ourselves in this struggle between the old way of living and the new. And I think that's what Paul is describing in the rest of this chapter.

Look at verse 15.

15 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

Can you identify with that? That I think is the cry of a person who is determined to live a God-honouring life and yet still struggles under the old habits of sin. 'I know what is good and life-giving and God-honouring, and yet I still feel this compulsion to do the exact opposite! What I want to do I do not do, but what I DO do, I hate.'

Can you identify with that? I've been there. And it's the worst. Because, verse 16,

16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.

As a child of God, I know, from God's point of view, what's good and what's bad. And if I still do what is wrong, even if I know it's wrong, then my conscience stings, because I know that it is counter to the better way that God has for me. I agree that God's way is right because I know in my heart that it's the better way to go.

And Paul continues -

17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. [It is as if some other power is at work in me, wanting me to act in ways that are inconsistent with who I am now.]

18 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.

19 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.

20 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.

Like Paul said back in Romans 6, our old self is dead on the Cross, but it loves to get down off of there to influence what we do. That's what Paul's taking about when he talks about the sinful nature. Our old self, shaped by our old ways of living as slaves to sin, is still interfering and causing us to do things that we know in our hearts are not helpful.

And so Paul says –

21 So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

22 For in my inner being I delight in God's law;

23 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.

That is the struggle at the heart of Christian life. The new part of ourselves delights in God's Law, we WANT to live in good and God-honouring ways, we WANT to show the world what a difference He's made in our lives, and yet, we still wash our eggs. We still have these old habits and tendencies that keep us from being all that we know we can be as children of God.

And Paul reflects the frustration that comes from that in verse 24 -

24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Have you ever felt like that? Desperately wanting to honour God with all that you are and yet feeling weighed down by the burden of sin?

I remember years ago feeling like this contradiction – knowing full well that God had saved me by grace through faith in Jesus who loved me enough to die for me – and yet falling short of that grace, feeling like I'd let Him down in all that did. I certainly felt like Paul, a wretch in a dying body.

And yet, I came to the same conclusion that Paul did – verse 25 -

25 Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Who will save me from this body of death? Jesus will. Jesus did. Thanks be to God! It's already been done. Paul's been, I've been, you've been set free from this struggle that Paul describes in chapter 7. Although this may sometimes be the way it is for us, it doesn't have to be, because we are new creations, reborn and remade in the image of Christ. Chapter 7 may be a part of our Christian story, but it's not the whole story which is why we need to keep going, just a little ways into chapter 8.

That being said, Paul wraps up chapter 7 with this awkward statement -

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.

But then he goes on to chapter 8 -

NIV Romans 8:1 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,
2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

Paul is probably realizing at this point that we need some good news. The reality of Christian life is that sometimes DO struggle. We DO have to unlearn the old ways of doing things and we DO need to stand against the siren call of sin. It DOES sometimes feel as though our bodies are slaves to sin, even when our hearts desire freedom in Christ. But there is good news underlying it all.

We may lose a fight but we're going to win the war. Jesus has already set us free from the law of sin and death and there is now no condemnation for anyone who is in Christ. The price for sin has already been paid and so not only are we free from sin, we are free from God's wrath against sin, because Jesus bore it for us. You know the hymn 'Before the throne'? "Because the sinless Saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free." That's exactly what's happened.

We are free from condemnation and we wrestle with sin to overcome it with the confident assurance that God is on our side; that God's wrath is not hanging over our heads like an axe. We wrestle with sin to overcome it with the confident assurance that God has already saved us and will not change His mind.

Look at verse 3 -

3 For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.

Child-proof Tylenol bottles are great, but if your arthritis keeps you from getting into it, then they're completely useless unless you get somebody else to open it for you.

Same here. The Law is great, but our sinful nature kept us from keeping it. So God sent His Son to become like us and to die in our place and to do what we could never do ourselves, opening the way to God.

Paul continues -

And so he condemned sin in sinful man, 4 in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

Jesus made us right with God, made us measure up to God's righteous requirements by giving us His righteousness, and then gave us His Spirit to live it out! We are free from the Law in the sense that we don't have to keep it to earn God's favour; instead, we receive God's favour by grace, and then when we live by the Spirit in us, we find ourselves naturally keeping the Law that we know in our hearts is ultimately good.

And so, Paul says,

5 Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires.

6 The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace...

Paul says, in the struggle against sin, let the Spirit lead. Yes, it may feel sometimes as though you're still a slave to sin, but you're not. Don't give in and let your mind reset to what the sinful nature wants; instead, set your mind on the things the Spirit desires and let Him lead you into life and peace.

Let the Spirit lead in your struggle against sin.

This is probably a good time to stop and revisit our question from the beginning of this message – if we as believers are free from sin, does that mean we'll never sin again?

Well, what does Romans 7 & 8 teach us? As children of God, we are free from the power of sin and we are free from wrath but that doesn't mean that we will never sin again or that we will never feel its pull.

As long as we live in this life, we will continue to struggle against sin, but as we set our mind on the Spirit, letting Him change us from the inside out, our desires and priorities, we will find that we honour God with our lives more and more and act in sinful ways less and less. I wish I could say that sanctification happens all at once, that you will never feel the pull of sin again when you're a believer, but that's just not true.

Why else would Jesus have told His followers to keep praying 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others?'

Why else would chapters 7 and 8 sit next to each in Romans?

As believers, we will struggle with sin, but 1. There is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus and 2. When we set our minds on the Spirit, we will stumble less and less and shine for God more and more. As Douglas Moo puts it 'We will never be sinless, but we will certainly sin less.'ⁱⁱ

So let me say three things by way of application.

1. Remember, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

I remember as a new believer not doing the things I wanted to do and doing the things that I didn't want to do and thinking 'oh jeez, how long until Jesus pulls the plug on me and says 'well, that's enough of him. He didn't pan out.'

God doesn't think like that. Jesus did on the Cross what the Law could never do, what I could never do, that is, restore me to God and there's no changing that. There is no condemnation for those of us who are in Christ Jesus. It is finished. Frankly, if you're aware of the struggle and frustrated by it, that's good, because that's the Holy Spirit in you and your own conscience saying 'I don't like this and I want to live for God.'

C. E. B. Cranfield writes – "The fact that there is such a conflict in the Christian proves that there is within him that which acknowledges the goodness and rightness of the law. And this something within the Christian, this centre of commitment to God's law, is the work of the Holy Spirit."ⁱⁱⁱ

That's good, so don't be discouraged by sin and give up.

Martin Luther famously wrote in his commentary on this chapter that we are simultaneously sinners and saints – saints made holy forever by the blood of Jesus but still wrestling with the way we used to be when we were slaves to sin. If you stumble, get back up. Confess your sin and carry on.

That's 1 John 1:9. The goal is to not sin, but, if we do sin, we have a Saviour who is faithful and just to forgive our sin and purify us from all unrighteousness when we confess it to Him.^{iv} His sacrifice, not our effort, is what makes us right with God.

Now that being said, I don't want you to go home and post on Facebook – 'You'll never believe it – Pastor Graham says we can sin all we want!' That's not what I'm saying. Romans 7 is not an excuse to wallow in sin, to say 'oh, well, God will forgive; it's all good. My life is ok if it's all doing what I don't want and not doing what I do want.'

That's not what I'm saying at all. I'm only saying that if you feel the struggle and you're eager to leave it behind, know that there is no condemnation for you and that by inviting the Spirit to change you from the inside out, you will feel it less and less. Don't get discouraged but keep on keepin' on. Hebrews 12:1 puts it like this - Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

So remember, there is no condemnation for you in Christ Jesus and 2. Set your mind on the Spirit.

Something I've been thinking about a lot in the last few weeks, spending time in Romans 6-7-8, is that when we hear these words, I think we often think about active sin. Like, you feel the temptation to do something and then the application here would be – invite the Spirit to help you out of that temptation. Ask Him to show you the way out and then surrender your will to Him to help you out. And that's true.

But I think this applies to what you might call passive sin too. There aren't technical terms, I'm just making them up as I go here, but let me show you what I mean.

A person might feel the temptation to fudge the numbers on their income tax filings and then they have to resist the temptation to do so. That's what I'm calling active sin. But there's this 'passive sin' too, the kind of sin that just slips out without really thinking about it. Like, somebody at work says something snarky to you and you snap back in a way that really cuts them down. Or you start looking at Instagram and all of a sudden you find yourself obsessing over what they have and what you don't. In God's eyes, anger and greed are just as much sin as lying and cheating and I dare say those are more of a problem for many of us than spectacular sins are. And yet, we need the Spirit's help to get away from them too.

So make an intentional effort to cultivate your relationship with the Holy Spirit. He is just as much God as Jesus is and His job is to transform you more and more into the image of Christ. Romans 12:2 says 'Don't be conformed any longer to the ways of this world but instead be transformed (by the Spirit) by the renewing of your mind.' Set your mind on the Spirit – "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about those things" (Philippians 4:8).

Don't live according to your sinful nature, but instead, set your mind on the things of the Spirit and let Him lead you into life and peace.

Remember there is no condemnation; let the Spirit lead and finally accept help.

We don't need to struggle alone. I think one of the dirtiest tricks the devil's ever pulled is making us all so ashamed of our sin that we're not willing to talk with one another about it to get help from one another. We are clearly made as believers to help one another. And while the Spirit works in invisible

ways, we often need help from other people to make the shift from old to new. We need accountability partners to help us to break old habits, to remind us when we speak out of our old self rather than the new.

Don't be afraid to accept help. Don't be afraid to ask for help, and for goodness sake, if someone asks you for help, take them seriously. It takes a lot to admit sin to another person and they are probably feeling like the wretch of a person that Paul describes in Romans 7 – there is an inner turmoil that they want to get free from. Find out how you can help them with that. It may be a phone call or an email. Maybe it's something more. But I do think it's important that we get better at helping each other in our struggles with sin. Because on this side of eternity, we will still struggle.

But remember, there is no condemnation for those of us who are in Christ Jesus. Let the Spirit lead. Help each other with your struggle against sin.

Jude 24-25 - Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.

ⁱ Henry Boardman, *The higher life doctrine of sanctification*, quoted at <http://gospelforlife.org/http/gospelforlifeorg/articles/2012/4/23/a-critique-of-the-higher-life-movement.html>

ⁱⁱ Douglas Moo, *Romans* (New International Version Application Commentary), pg. 246.

ⁱⁱⁱ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans Vol. 1* (ICC), 360.

^{iv} 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1Jo 1:9 NIV).