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THE MERRY-GO-ROUND OF SIN

Romans 7:14-20

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June 12, 2011

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Romans Lesson 40

The Merry-Go-Round of Sin Romans 7:14-20

Have you ever felt like you were on a merry-go-round of sin, but you couldn't figure out how to get off even though you wanted to? In that sense, it isn't a *merry-go-round*, but a *miserable-go-round*! You hate going around and around, but you don't know how to get off the stupid thing.

That's what Paul describes in Romans 7:14-20 about his spiritual experience: he hates what he is doing, but he can't stop doing it. He knows that God gave us the law; it's spiritual and good; it's the right thing to do. The problem is, he *can't* do it. He doesn't have the power to get off the merry-go-round of sin.

But the problem we face in trying to understand Paul (as I explained at length last week) is that it's difficult to determine whether he is talking here about his experience before salvation or after he was saved. Some of his statements sound as if he was an unbeliever, but other statements sound as if he was a believer. And, if it refers to his experience as a believer, how then do his words about being in bondage to sin (7:14) square with what he has said in chapter 6 about being freed from sin?

My understanding is that Paul is describing his experience as an immature believer, before he came to understand that he was no longer under the law and that he could experience consistent victory over sin by relying on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. I hold this view because Paul makes some statements that an unbeliever could not make. He loves God's law and wants to keep it from the heart (7:22). He hates his own sin.

But he also makes some statements that a mature believer could not make. He is not merely describing the ongoing *struggle* against sin that all believers experience, but rather an experience of *ongoing defeat*. He was habitually practicing the very evil that he hated (7:15, 19). This does not square with a person who walks by means of the Spirit and thus does not fulfill the desires of the flesh (Gal.

5:16). It does not line up with 1 John 3:9 (and 2:3-6), that those born of God do not practice sin.

It's reasonable to assume that after his conversion, Paul did not instantly understand his new position of being dead to the law and united to Christ (Rom. 7:1-4) or how to walk in dependence on the indwelling Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:4, 13). So I believe that he is describing his own frustrating experience as a new believer, before he learned these truths. And, as I also said, Paul's main point in the context is to show that God's law is holy, righteous, and good, but it is *not* able to deliver us from the power of sin.

As I also explained, I agree that the Christian life is never free from the *struggles* that Paul describes here. We have to do battle against indwelling sin as long as we live. But Paul is not merely describing a struggle here. Rather, he is talking about a life of *consistent defeat*. He's not just describing an ongoing battle, but a *losing* ongoing battle! I contend that this is *not* the normal Christian life of a mature believer.

Rather, as we grow to understand and live in light of our new identity in Christ and to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit, we can experience consistent victory over sin. We will never be sinless, but we will sin less as we grow. Also, as we grow we will come to see more and more of our inward corruption and more and more of God's holiness, so that we lament our propensity toward sin and long for our new resurrection bodies. But we will not yield to our sinful desires as often as we did as new believers. So that is my approach to these verses.

Several commentators (F. Godet, *Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], p. 282, is the earliest that I could find) point out the cyclical structure of Romans 7:14-25. Each cycle begins with a fact, then gives the proof of it, and a conclusion:

First cycle (7:14-17):

Fact (7:14): "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of flesh...."

Proof: (7:15-16): "For what I am doing, I do not understand...."

Conclusion: (7:17): "So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me."

Second cycle (7:18-20):

Fact (7:18): "For I know that nothing good dwells in me...."

Proof (7:18b-19): "For the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not...."

Conclusion (7:20): "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."

Third cycle (7:21-25):

Fact (7:21): "I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good."

Proof (7:22-23): "For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in ... my body...."

Conclusion (7:25): "So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but ... with my flesh the law of sin."

The second and third cycles in many ways repeat the first cycle, which is why I'm describing Paul's experience here as being on a merry-go-round of sin. He's doing the same thing over and over, in spite of his good intentions to the contrary. He wants to stop, but he can't. And so the overall feeling is one of powerlessness. He knows that he's doing wrong and he wants to please God, but he's not able to do so. Sin gets the upper hand again and again.

In this message, I will look at the first two cycles (7:14-17, 18-20), which teach us:

After the new birth, immature believers often experience a frustrating cycle of being defeated by sin because they yield to the old nature.

I'm not saying that once you understand the truths of Romans 8, you will never suffer bouts of being defeated by sin. Romans 8 does not propel you into a life of effortless, struggle-free spiritual victory. The Christian life is a continual battle and there are setbacks and at times overwhelming failures. But I do contend that Romans 7, with its perpetual defeat, pictures an immature believer, whereas Romans 8 gives us the key to consistent victory. This means that if Romans 7 describes your life right now more than Romans 8 does, there is hope! Paul was once where you're at now. His frustrating experience teaches us three things:

1. When God saves you, He gives you a new nature, but He does not eradicate the old nature, which is corrupted by sin.

In Romans 6:6, Paul says that “our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.” In light of that, some, such as John MacArthur, teach (*The MacArthur Study Bible NASB* [Nelson Bibles], p. 1670), “The believer does not have two competing natures, the old and the new; but one new nature that is still incarcerated in unredeemed flesh.” As highly as I respect John MacArthur, I strongly disagree with that statement. I think it is unhelpful and dangerous, because it minimizes the spiritual danger that resides in every believer. I don’t care whether you call it the old nature, the flesh, or indwelling sin. But there resides in every believer a strong propensity toward sin that wars against the new nature that we received through the new birth.

Then how do I explain Romans 6:6? It reflects our new position in Christ, which we must count as true in the daily battle against sin. Paul often portrays the tension between our *position* and our *practice* in the Christian life. In Colossians 3:9-10, he says that as believers we have “laid aside the old self with its evil practices and have put on the new self....” But in the parallel in Ephesians 4:22-24, he commands us (almost all commentators take the infinitives as imperatives) to “lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit ...” and “put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” If we have already laid aside the old and put on the new, why does he command us to do it? The answer is, *positionally* it is true. But *practically*, we must count it as true and live in light of it.

You find the same tension between Romans 6, which emphasizes that we have died with Christ, and Romans 8:13, which commands us to put to death the deeds of the flesh. Or, in Colossians 3:3, Paul says that we have died with Christ, but in 3:5 he commands us to put to death (literal translation) the members of our earthly body with regard to various sins. We’re dead, so we need to live like it by putting our flesh to death.

So the point is, conversion does not eradicate the strong desires of the flesh or work to improve the flesh. The old man is “being corrupted according to the lusts of deceit” (Eph. 4:22). It won’t get better over time. You may have been a believer for 50 years, but you still must put off the flesh on a daily basis. That’s why the godly George Muller used to pray as an elderly man, “Lord, don’t let me become a wicked old man!” He knew that in him, that is, in his flesh, dwells nothing good (Rom. 7:18).

2. New believers are often still enslaved to sin because they yield to the old nature.

Again, while there is much controversy, with some saying that these verses describe unbelievers, while others argue that they reflect Paul’s experience as a mature believer, I contend that they describe an immature believer who is still yielding to his old nature. He has not yet learned to put on his new identity in Christ and to walk by means of the indwelling Holy Spirit, who gives us the power to resist the lusts of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

There has been a lot of confusion because of some popular teaching that Christians may be divided into those that are “carnal” and those that are “spiritual.” This teaching was popularized through the *Scofield Reference Bible*, Lewis Sperry Chafer’s *He That is Spiritual*, and Campus Crusade for Christ’s “Holy Spirit” booklet. Purportedly based on 1 Corinthians 2 & 3, the teaching is that you can legitimately be a Christian through a decision to invite Christ into your life as Savior, but you’ve not yet chosen to let Him be Lord of your life. So you live with self on the throne until you learn to yield to the Holy Spirit. After that, you bounce back and forth between “carnal” and “spiritual,” depending on who is on the throne: self or the Lord.

But Scripture does not present the option of accepting Christ as your Savior, but not as your Lord. And you don’t bounce back and forth between being carnal or spiritual. Granted, there is a lifetime of growth involved in yielding every area of life and every thought to Christ. But if you are not seeking to obey Christ in every area of life, you need to examine whether He has changed your heart. All who are born of God strive to please God in every way. (See Ernest Reisinger’s booklet, *What Should We Think of the Carnal Christian?* [Banner of Truth], for more on this.)

It is better to say that Christians, like humans, grow through various stages: infancy, youth, and adulthood (see 1 John 2:12-14). Paul addresses the Corinthians as “infants in Christ,” who needed milk, not meat, because they were still fleshly (1 Cor. 3:1-3). Just as human babies must grow from milk to solid food, and from being fed to learning to feed themselves, and from being carried to crawling to walking, and in many more areas, the same is true spiritually. Newer believers usually yield more often to the old nature (the flesh or indwelling sin) than more mature believers do. Maturity involves learning to reckon yourself as dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. And it involves learning by the Spirit to put to death the deeds of the flesh (Rom. 8:13).

Here, Paul gives us a glimpse of his losing battle against sin as a babe in Christ, which he calls being “sold into bondage to sin” (7:14). Note six things about this enslavement to sin:

- A. This enslavement to sin stands in complete contrast to our new identity in Christ, creating an intense internal battle.

Romans 7 stands in such stark contrast to the truths of Romans 6 that many have concluded that it describes an unbeliever. If it were not for the inner struggle, you’d look at Paul’s behavior and conclude that he is not a believer. He is in bondage to sin. He does not obey God’s law, but rather does the opposite. In other words, Paul knew that he was living in disobedience to God. But internally, this war was raging, because he knew that his behavior did not match what he was supposed to be and what he desperately wanted to be.

This means that living in continual defeat to sin does not necessarily mean that you are not saved. But if you are saved, you can’t live *contentedly* in sin. You will *hate* what you’re doing and you will *fight it* desperately until you gain the victory. Spiritual complacency is not a good sign! Even young believers experience this intense internal conflict.

- B. This enslavement to sin causes inner turmoil, because it conflicts with the desires of the new nature.

Jonathan Edwards argued forcefully in his *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of

Truth] 1:236), "True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections." In other words, when God saves us, He gives us new holy desires. Edwards argues (1:239, italics his), "So holy *desire*, exercised in longings, hungerings, and thirstings after God and holiness, is often mentioned in Scripture as an important part of true religion."

We see that here. Paul wants to obey God's law and do what is right, but he's failing. He confesses that God's law is good, but he's not able to obey it. His desires for holiness are evidence that God has imparted new life to him, but his inability to do what God requires is causing this inner turmoil. If you know that you're disobeying God, but you just shrug it off, it may mean that you're not born again. Those born of God's Spirit are in turmoil when they disobey Him.

C. This enslavement to sin causes mental confusion.

"For what I am doing, I do not understand" (7:15). By "understand," Paul may mean that he does not approve of what he is doing (C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* [ICC, T. & T. Clark], 1:358). Or, he may mean that he does not fully comprehend the depths of sin that are still in his heart (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 373). But it's obvious that he is a confused man. He doesn't understand his own behavior. Sin always clouds our minds and causes us not to think clearly.

D. This enslavement to sin does not eradicate our recognition of God's holy standards.

Paul agrees with the Law, confessing that it is good (7:16). Even though he is defeated by sin, he still recognizes that God's ways are right and his own ways are wrong. He isn't disputing with the law, as if it were unfair or even wrong.

E. This enslavement to sin stems from the ongoing existence of indwelling sin, not from our new, true identity in Christ.

Paul concludes the first section (7:17), "So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me." We need to be careful not to fall into error over verses 17 and 20, which say essentially the same thing. Paul is *not* saying, "I'm not responsible for my sin. I'm just a helpless victim. I didn't do it; sin did it!" Rather, he is acknowledging the powerful inner struggle that takes place in every

believer. He's personifying sin not as an honored guest or a paying tenant, but as an uninvited squatter who is difficult to eject (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 293). But since Paul commits the sin, he is responsible for doing it. And he is acknowledging that when he sins, he is acting against his new identity in Christ, which is his true new person. As new creatures in Christ, we are responsible to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ (Rom. 6:11).

- F. This enslavement to sin shows that indwelling sin is a powerful force that we are not able to control in and of ourselves.

You can resist sin outwardly by sheer will-power, but it will keep wearing away in your inner man until it wins. In other words, outward morality is not enough. The Pharisees were outwardly moral, but Jesus nailed them for their hypocrisy and the evil that was in their hearts (Matt. 23). You have to judge sin on the thought level. It is so powerful that Jesus graphically portrayed dealing with it as cutting off your hand or plucking out your eye (Matt. 5:29-30). To live in consistent victory over indwelling sin, we need nothing less than the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. We all tend to minimize our sin, excusing it as no big deal. But these verses should show us that we're dealing with a powerful force that is out to control and destroy us. We need more than will-power.

Thus, we all have a battle within due to the existence of the new man and the old in the same person. If we yield to the old man (the flesh, indwelling sin), it will dominate and enslave us.

- 3. A new believer's enslavement to sin feels like a merry-go-round of defeat due to the inner battle between the two natures.

In large part, verses 18-20 are a repeat of verses 14-17. Paul is explaining further the conclusion of verse 17, and his conclusion in verse 20 is almost identical with his conclusion in verse 17. He's on the merry-go-round and can't figure out how to get off. The repetition serves to drive home the facts that sin is more powerful than human will power, that the flesh is corrupt, and that if we let it, the old nature will dominate the new, even against our desires to the

contrary. So we need nothing less than the very power of God to overcome the power of indwelling sin.

Conclusion

There are no answers to this huge problem of indwelling sin in Romans 7:14-25, except for the brief exclamation of hope in verse 25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" The answers come in chapter 8.

But in one way there is an answer here: Sometimes God lets us come to the end of ourselves so that we will be driven to trust in Him alone. By our proud fallen nature, we're prone to trust in ourselves, first for salvation, and then for sanctification. God has to show us that we cannot save ourselves by our own righteousness or good deeds. God only saves sinners who cast themselves upon His mercy in Christ. And He has to show us that we cannot conquer sin by our own will-power and effort. If we could, we'd boast in our holiness! Peter had to learn that painful lesson by denying the Lord. We have to learn it by going through the Romans 7 merry-go-round of resolve and failure, until we learn that the victory is not in us; it's in the Lord.

My friend, Bob Deffinbaugh, who is a pastor in the Dallas area, put it this way (bible.org/seriespage/war-within-romans-714-25): "The problem with many Christians is not their despair, like that of Paul, but their lack of it." He goes on to point out that until we come to the end of ourselves in utter despair, we will not come to Christ, because we think that we don't really need Him. Until we see the magnitude of our sin problem in the inner person, we'll assure ourselves that it's under control because we're outwardly moral. The first step to get off the merry-go-round of sin is to cry out (7:24), "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?" Thankfully, the answer is clear: God will set us free through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Application Questions

1. Why is it important to recognize that believers have both a corrupt old nature and a redeemed new nature? Why is it dangerous to say that believers only have a new nature?
2. Why is it erroneous and spiritually dangerous to teach that believers can get to a place of complete victory where there is no internal battle?
3. At first glance, it seems as if Paul (7:17, 20) is disassociating himself from his sin, as if he is not responsible. What other Scriptures show that this is a wrong interpretation? What does he mean in these verses?
4. Why is the popular “carnal” Christian model unhelpful and misleading? Isn't that what Paul teaches in 1 Cor. 3:1-3?

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