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WHO IS THIS WRETCHED MAN?

Romans 7:14-25 (Overview)

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June 5, 2011

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Romans Lesson 39

Who is This Wretched Man? Romans 7:14-25 (Overview)

We come now to one of the most difficult passages to interpret in the Book of Romans. With the exception of certain prophetic texts, there are not many other passages in Scripture where there is such widespread difference of opinion among godly scholars as there is for Romans 7:14-25. Is Paul describing his own experience here? If so, is it his experience before he was saved, his experience as an immature believer, or his experience as a mature believer? Since Paul is in the midst of teaching us how to overcome sin in our daily experience, it's an important text to understand. But we can't apply it correctly until we first understand it correctly.

In this message, I want to give an overview of the various views and their main arguments. In subsequent messages I'll work through the text in more detail. When you come to a text where so many godly men differ, it's important to be gracious towards those who differ and acknowledge that there is no neat, tidy view that answers all the difficulties. Each view has its strengths and weaknesses, and so you have to pick which weaknesses you're willing to live with in the view that you adopt. If someone claims to have solved all the problems, he is blind to the weaknesses of his view. If we could solve all the difficulties, then everyone would agree.

Also, when you come to a difficult text, it's important to interpret it in light of other texts that are more clear. We need to try to harmonize and integrate this text into the flow of Paul's unambiguous teaching elsewhere. And, as always, we need to confess our lack of understanding to the Lord and ask Him to give us insight through the Holy Spirit so that we will grow in godliness. Our aim is not just to solve the interpretive puzzle, but to become more like Jesus Christ.

The main problem that we have to grapple with here is that some statements make it sound as if Paul were not a believer, whereas other statements make it sound as if he were a believer. Among those who argue that Paul is describing the experience of an unbeliever, some say that it is the experience of a Jew under the

law. Some say that it describes a man under deep conviction of sin just before his conversion. Among those who argue that it describes a believer, some argue that he is talking about the normal experience of a mature Christian, whereas others say that he is describing the experience of a new or very immature believer.

Some argue that Paul is not speaking autobiographically here, but it seems to me that he is describing himself here. He uses "I" 24 times in 7:14-25, plus "me," "my," or "myself" 14 times. While Paul could be using this as a literary device, the most obvious way to take it is that he is speaking of his own experience. Obviously his experience is representative of the experience of all who have struggled against sin. But we're learning through Paul's experience.

Also, we need to keep in mind that Paul's main purpose is not to share this as an interesting story, but rather to establish the holiness and integrity of the law, while at the same time to show the law's inability to deliver us from sin. To have consistent victory over sin, we must learn to rely moment by moment on the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, which Paul explains in chapter 8.

With that as a background, let me walk you through some of the arguments for the various views. There are a number of variants within each view which we will not have time to delve into.

ROMANS 7:14-25 DESCRIBES AN UNBELIEVER.

This was the position of the early church fathers in the first three centuries of Christianity. Augustine held this view earlier in his Christian life, but later argued that it refers to believers. John Wesley and many in the Arminian camp hold to this view. Here are the strongest arguments for this view:

1. Paul uses language throughout the passage that could only be descriptive of an unbeliever.

This is the strongest argument for this position. In 7:14, Paul laments, "I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin." But in 6:14, he stated as a matter of fact, "For sin shall not be master over you." He also stated (6:17-18), "But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness." He reinforces this in 6:22, "But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to

God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.”

Also, in 6:2, Paul said, “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” But in 7:25b he says that with his flesh he is serving (the word means, “to serve as a slave”) the law of sin. In 6:6, he says that we were crucified with Christ so that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin. But in 7:24 he laments, “Who will set me free from the body of this death?” In 7:18 Paul says, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.” How could a man indwelt by the Holy Spirit say such a thing? In 7:23 he adds that he is “a prisoner of the law of sin.” And, how could a believer who has already been redeemed by Christ cry out (7:24), “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”

So the descriptions of our new position in Christ as believers in chapter 6 are totally at odds with these statements of the wretched man in chapter 7. He must still be an unbeliever.

2. The flow of the context argues for 7:14-25 being a description of unbelievers.

Almost everyone agrees that 7:7-13 describes Paul as an unbeliever. If 7:14 shifts to his experience as a believer, you would expect a disjunctive word, such as “but.” Instead, Paul uses “for,” which indicates that he is explaining further his experience as an unbeliever. This is further substantiated by his immediately stating that he is “of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.” This goes back to 7:5, where Paul describes his experience as an unbeliever as being “in the flesh.”

Also, some argue that our text describes further the experience of 7:5, of the unbeliever in the flesh, whereas 8:1-17 picks up on 7:6, which describes the newness of serving in the Spirit. Also, there is the dramatic shift between the miserable experience of 7:14-25 and the “now” of 8:1 and the experience of victory that follows. Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 442-451) argues that Paul presents his experience as a representative Jewish unbeliever under the law to show that the law is impotent to save anyone from their sin, thus reinforcing the argument of

7:1-13. He also is persuaded by the contrasts mentioned under the first argument.

3. In 7:14-25, there is an absence of any references to the Holy Spirit, who indwells all believers, whereas in chapter 8, the Holy Spirit is mentioned frequently.

Paul makes it clear (in 8:9) that every believer is indwelled with the Holy Spirit. If you do not have the Holy Spirit, you do not belong to Christ. Since there is a glaring absence of any mention of the Spirit in 7:14-25, as contrasted with at least 17 references to the Spirit in chapter 8, chapter 7 must describe an unbeliever.

4. The person in 7:14-25 is not just struggling with sin but is defeated by sin.

Elsewhere Paul makes it clear that all believers struggle with sin, but that's not what he describes in these verses. His experience in 7:14-25 is not just a struggle, but one of repeated failure, defeat, and inability to obey God. This is descriptive of an unbeliever.

There are some variations of the view that these verses describe an unbeliever. Martyn Lloyd-Jones argues for the position (also held by Godet and the Pietists, Francke and Bengel), that Paul is describing the experience of a Jew who is under deep conviction of sin, but not yet reborn. Thomas Schreiner (*Romans* [Baker], p. 390) argues that "Paul does not intend to distinguish believers from unbelievers in this text." Rather, "Paul reflects on whether the law has the ability to transform human beings, concluding that it does not." So Schreiner says that the passage could be describing either unbelievers or believers. Stuart Briscoe (*The Communicator's Commentary* [Word], p. 147), somewhat in line with Schreiner, holds that "Paul is relating the struggles he had with the law of God before he knew Christ and which he continues to have since coming into an experience of the risen Lord."

ROMANS 7:14-25 DESCRIBES A MATURE BELIEVER.

This was the view of Augustine later in life, as already mentioned. It is also the view of Luther, Calvin, and most of the Reformers, along with Reformed men down through the centuries, such as John Owen, Charles Hodge, John Murray, James Boice, J. I. Packer, John Piper, and others. Here are the main arguments to support the view that Paul is describing the experience of a mature

believer. (John Piper gives ten arguments in favor of this view, but I can only list a few.)

1. The shift to the present tense argues that Paul is speaking of his present experience as a mature believer.

As I've noted, Paul makes a very obvious shift from past tense verbs in 7:7-13 to present tense verbs in 7:14-25. The most natural way to understand this is that Paul is here describing his ongoing struggle against sin when he wrote this letter.

2. The context of Romans 6-8 is a discussion of sanctification in the Christian life, not of an unbeliever's struggle with the law.
3. If 7:14-25 describes Paul's pre-conversion experience, it is in conflict with how he describes that experience elsewhere.

In Philippians 3 and in Galatians 1, along with a couple of places in Acts, Paul portrays himself before conversion as a self-satisfied Jew, bent on persecuting the church. There is no record that he went through an intense inward conflict such as that described here.

4. Paul's desires in these verses are those of a believer, not of an unbeliever.

He says (7:22), "For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man." He is seeking to obey the law, not just outwardly, but with the "inner man" (7:15-20, 22). Unbelievers may put on an outward show of obedience, but their hearts are far from God (Matt. 23; Mark 7:6-13). Unbelievers do not seek after God (Rom. 3:11) or desire to please Him (8:8). His heartfelt cry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" sounds like the cry of a man who yearns for God and the new resurrection body, which will be free from sin. The closer a man draws to God, the more he sees the corruption of his old nature and the more he desires to be free from all inclination to sin.

5. The battle between the two "I's" describes a believer, not an unbeliever.

Unbelievers only live in the flesh, but believers have a new nature and the indwelling Holy Spirit that war against the flesh (Gal.

5:17). Every Christian who is honest acknowledges this inner struggle against sin that goes on throughout life. Paul's lament (7:18), "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh," indicates that there is more to Paul than just flesh. He has a new inner man that longs for God and His holiness, although he has not yet attained it.

There are more arguments for each side and each side has arguments to rebut the arguments of the other side. For sake of time, I cannot go through each of these. Rather, I will now give you the correct view (yeah, sure!). As I said, there are strengths and weaknesses with every view, so we have to pick a view that seems most to harmonize with other Scriptures and to have the fewest problems. I actually was pushed toward this view by reading Martyn Lloyd-Jones' volume on Romans 7 where he argues that these verses describe a Jew under intense conviction of sin, just prior to conversion. (He would not be happy that his argument pushed me in this direction!)

ROMANS 7:14-25 DESCRIBES AN IMMATURE BELIEVER WHO HAS NOT YET LEARNED THAT HE IS FREE FROM THE LAW AND THAT HE HAS THE POWER OF THE INDWELLING HOLY SPIRIT TO OVERCOME SIN.

Let me begin by acknowledging that the main weakness of this view is Paul's use of the present tense. It sounds as if Paul is speaking of his current experience, not of a past experience that he had as a new believer. But Paul could be using the present tense as a vivid way of sharing his experiences as a new believer. For reasons that I will share in a moment, I cannot accept that Paul is describing his experience as a mature believer.

Also, I want to distance myself from what is called the Keswick teaching, popularized by *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret*, Watchman Nee's *The Normal Christian Life* and Ian Thomas' *The Saving Life of Christ*. These and other books of this persuasion teach that Romans 7 describes a "carnal" Christian who has not yet learned the secret of the "exchanged life." When you learn the secret, "not I, but Christ," you break through into the experience of Romans 8. It is sometimes pictured as moving from the wilderness to the Promised Land. This teaching gives the impression that once you break into the Romans 8 experience, the Christian life becomes an effort-

less, struggle-free, sin-free life. You never worry, you're never ruffled by trials, and you experience perpetual joy and close fellowship with the Lord. These books convey that if you're struggling against sin, you haven't learned the secret of letting go and letting God. That is *not* my understanding of the biblical Christian life!

I understand the Christian life to be an ongoing, lifelong struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. We never arrive at a place in this life where sin no longer tempts us, where trials are not a difficult burden, and where we have attained sinless perfection. Jesus Himself cried out to God with loud crying and tears (Heb. 5:7). Paul was burdened so much that he despaired of life itself (2 Cor. 1:8). He describes his Christian life as a fight, not an effortless rest (2 Tim. 4:7). The author of Hebrews commends his readers in their *striving* against sin, and encourages them to submit to the difficult discipline of the Lord that for the moment does *not* seem joyful, but sorrowful (Heb. 12:4-11). So I'm not saying that in moving from Romans 7 to Romans 8, life becomes an effortless, ecstatic experience of perpetual victory. Even mature believers fall into sin on occasions and they always fall far short of perfection.

This means that there is always going to be some degree of the struggle expressed in Romans 7 in the Christian life, even in Romans 8. In that, I agree with those who argue that this is the experience of a mature Christian. As we grow to know God and His ways more deeply, we will always be painfully aware of how far short we fall. We will always lament our propensity toward living in the flesh and yielding to the sin that so easily besets us. There will always be the battle between the two natures. I do not agree with those who say that believers only have the new nature, or that we only sin occasionally. It is a daily battle with many setbacks.

But I disagree with those who argue that Romans 7 describes the "normal" Christian life. The man in Romans 7 is not just struggling against sin, which every Christian must do all through life, but he is consistently defeated by sin. He describes himself as "sold into bondage to sin" (7:14). He is "not practicing" what he would like to do, but is doing the very thing he hates (7:15). He wills to do good, but he does *not do it* (7:18). He *practices* the very evil that he does not want to do (7:19). He describes himself as a *prisoner* of the law of sin (7:23). These descriptions are contrary to 1 John 3:9,

which says that believers cannot continue to sin as a normal way of life. Believers do sin, but they do not live in perpetual defeat to sin as Paul here describes. Mature believers do not continue practicing sin or living in slavery to it.

I'm sensitive to the argument that in light of chapter 6, no believer could say that he is "sold into bondage to sin" and "a prisoner of the law of sin." As I said, that is the strongest argument that this is an unbeliever. But an unbeliever would not experience this intense hatred of his sin and inner desire to be free from it. And a mature believer would not describe himself as being in bondage to sin. Thus I think that Paul is describing his experience as a new believer, before he understood that he had died to the law and been joined in marriage to Christ and before he learned to walk by means of the Holy Spirit.

Since Paul before his conversion was a legalistic Pharisee, it's not likely that immediately after his conversion he understood that he was dead to the law or that he now could live by the power of the Holy Spirit. He probably began his Christian experience by striving to obey the law in the flesh. After a time of trying and failing and trying again and failing again, he finally broke through to realize, "Sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace" (6:14). He came to understand that since he was identified with Christ in His death, he was now free from the law, so that now he could serve in newness of the Spirit (7:4, 6). He grew to understand his new identity in Christ. He realized the glorious truth, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). But it probably took him a while, perhaps a few years, to work through all of this both theologically and practically in terms of his daily experience. My understanding is that he is sharing those early struggles in Romans 7:14-25.

Conclusion

I'll go back and work through these verses in more detail in coming messages. But for now, let me leave you with a few practical issues to think about.

First, if you do not hate your sin and struggle against it, you need to examine whether you are saved. Those who have experienced the new birth hate their sin and they desperately want to have victory over

it. If you shrug off your sin as no big deal, it is not a sign that the Holy Spirit is dwelling in you. A life of ongoing repentance is the mark of the new birth.

Second, if you have trusted Christ but are defeated often by sin, so that you feel in bondage to it, there is hope for deliverance. Your defeats do not necessarily mean that you are not born again. At the same time, you need to realize how serious your sins are and that God did not save you so that you would live a defeated life. He has provided the Word, the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the body of Christ to help every Christian gain consistent victory over sin, beginning on the thought level. We will never be sinless in this life, but we should be *sinning less* as we grow to maturity in Christ. If you learn to walk in the Spirit, you will not carry out the desire of the flesh (Gal. 5:16).

So wherever you're at spiritually, I want to offer you genuine hope in the Lord. If you are not saved, cry out to God: "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Rom. 10:13). If you are defeated by sin, so was none other than the apostle Paul. But he learned to live in consistent victory in Christ, and so can you! Romans 8 will help point the way.

Application Questions

1. In your opinion, which are the strongest arguments for each view? Which are the weakest arguments? Which view do you think is the best?
2. What are some of the practical ramifications of each view?
3. Some deny that believers have an old sin nature, emphasizing 2 Cor. 5:17. Why is this view spiritually dangerous?
4. Have you heard of the Keswick teaching? Why is this view spiritually dangerous?

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