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THE WAR WITHIN

Romans 7:21-25

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Romans Lesson 41

The War Within Romans 7:21-25

I recently saw a bumper sticker with the peace symbol around the border. It showed two children with their arms around each other. The caption was, "All the arms we need." I said to Marla, "What planet do these people live on?" When we dwell on the new earth, when all sin is completely eradicated, we won't need arms to defend ourselves. But as long as sin is in this world, we need arms not only to hug one another, but also to fight against enemies that seek to destroy us. As unpleasant as it is, the reality of life in this fallen world includes conflict.

That's also true in the Christian life. We all want peaceful lives. Perhaps you came to Christ because someone told you that in Him, you would find peace. That's true. In Christ, we experience peace with God (Rom. 5:1). Christ is the basis for peace between believers (Eph. 2:14). As much as is possible, we are to be at peace with all people (Rom. 12:18). And, in Christ we come to know a sense of inner peace, even in the face of tribulation, that we lacked before (John 16:33).

But while the Christian life is one of peace, it's also one of constant warfare. As we serve Christ and seek to extend His kingdom, we're at war with the evil powers of darkness (Eph. 6:10-20). We're engaged in the battle between God's truth and the lies of Satan that captivate the minds of the unbelieving (2 Cor. 10:3-5). And, as every Christian knows, there is a fierce inner battle that goes on between the flesh and the spirit, the old man and the new (Gal. 5:17). If we do not learn how to overcome the strong inner urge to gratify the flesh, sin will take us captive and enslave us. Paul describes this war within in Romans 7:14-25.

As I explained in the previous two messages, some godly scholars understand these verses to be a description of Paul as an unbelieving Jew, striving but failing to keep God's law. Others argue that Paul is describing the ongoing battle that he was experiencing as he wrote. Even mature believers have to fight this battle against indwelling sin as long as they live.

While I agree that mature believers must fight a continual battle against indwelling sin (the flesh or the old sin nature), I disagree that such a description adequately explains these verses. Paul is not just describing a battle here, but a *losing* battle. He describes himself as (7:14), "I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin." He is not practicing what he would like to do, but rather was doing the very thing he hated (7:15, 18, 19). He was a prisoner of the law of sin (7:23). As I explained (in the last message), he was on the merry-go-round of sin and he couldn't get off.

We looked at the first two cycles (7:14-17, 18-20) of sin and defeat. Now we come to the third time around the merry-go-round, which follows the same three-fold progression: Fact, proof, and conclusion:

Fact (7:21): "I find then the principle that evil is present in me . . ."
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 members, waging war . . ."
Conclusion (7:25): "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."

I reject the view that Paul is describing his experience as an unbeliever because he says things that are not true of unbelievers. I reject the view that he was writing primarily about his struggle as a mature believer because while mature believers struggle with sin and sometimes lose the battle, they do not live in perpetual defeat and bondage to sin.

I contend that these verses primarily describe an immature believer who has not yet come to understand that he is no longer under the law, but under grace. He has not yet learned to rely on the indwelling Holy Spirit to overcome the lusts of the flesh. (There is no mention of the Spirit here, but much is said of the Spirit in chapter 8.) But at the same time, the war that Paul describes here does go on, even for mature believers. The difference is that while sin is winning the war in chapter 7, Paul through the Holy Spirit is winning against sin in chapter 8. While we can never in this life obey God's law perfectly, we can learn to obey God consistently. We do not have to yield repeatedly to sin, which is the frustrating cycle that Paul describes here. This third cycle teaches us:

To win the war within, we must understand the magnitude of the inner conflict so that in despair we cry out to God for deliverance.

In 7:24, Paul cries out in despair, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?" His exclamation in 7:25 gives us a ray of hope, followed by a summary of the war within: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! 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." Chapter 8 goes on to unfold the deliverance that God gives us over sin through the indwelling Holy Spirit. I see three lessons in our text:

1. To win the war within, we must understand the nature and magnitude of the conflict between indwelling sin and the new man.

The Christian life is a constant battle against the world, the flesh, and the devil. Here the focus is on the flesh. "I find" implies that this was a discovery that came to Paul after some painful failures. He discovered this truth in the school of hard knocks. Even though Paul had experienced a dramatic conversion, it didn't immediately result in a life of consistent victory over sin. And so he portrays here the two combatants in this battle. We can picture them as boxers:

- A. In this corner: The reigning champion, the old man, waging war in my members to make me a prisoner.

Paul uses several terms here to describe the evil within. While they have different nuances, they basically describe the same thing: "the law that evil is present in me" (7:21); "a different law ... waging war" (7:23); "the law of sin" (7:23, 25); "the body of this death" (7:24); and, "my flesh" (7:25). All of these terms refer to the old man and its method of operation. The old man is not eradicated at conversion, but continues to be corrupted according to the lusts of deceit (Eph. 4:22). As we saw last time, *positionally* the old man was crucified with Christ, in order that our body of sin might be done away with (Rom. 6:6). But *practically*, we have to reckon this to be true in our daily experience by putting it off (Rom. 6:11; Eph. 4:22-24). If we don't learn to do this, the old man will make us prisoners to the law of sin (7:23). Note how the old man operates:

- (1) The old man (the flesh, indwelling sin) operates according to a law.

The word translated “principle” (NASB, 7:21) is literally, “law.” Some commentators argue that it refers to God’s law (as it does in 7:22 & 25), so that in 7:21 the sense is, “I find then that in reference to [God’s] law, evil is present in me” While that is possible, the fact that Paul specifies “the law of God” in 7:22 indicates that he is distinguishing it from the law that he has just mentioned in 7:21.

So he is probably using “law” ironically in 7:21, both to compare and contrast the law of sin with God’s law. In this sense, it rules us and with authority tells us how to live (although wrongly!). It promises rewards if we obey it: “You’ll be happier and more fulfilled if you experience the pleasure of this sin.” It threatens us with penalties if we do not obey it: “You’ll miss out on all the fun if you don’t do what I say.” So indwelling sin is powerful. It operates as a law, commanding us, threatening us, and enticing us. (I am indebted to Kris Lundgaard, *The Enemy Within* [P & R Publishing], pp. 23-26 for some of these insights about the law of sin.)

- (2) The old man operates by waging a cunning, relentless war.

Paul says (7:23), “But I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war” The war that the old man wages is a guerilla war. It doesn’t wear red coats and come marching towards you in formation, so that you can see it coming. It uses snipers and land mines and hidden roadside bombs and civilians posing as friends when really they’re enemies. In other words, sin is subtle and cunning. It lures you into traps where you get ambushed. And it’s relentless. If it loses one battle, it doesn’t pack up and go home, conceding defeat. It keeps coming at you until it brings you down.

- (3) The old man operates through our bodies.

This law operates “in the members of my body” (7:23). Paul laments “the body of this death” (7:24), which refers to his physical body that is under the curse of death. He contrasts the law of sin with “the law of my mind” (7:23).

We need to be careful here or we could fall into an error that became prevalent in the early church. Gnosticism taught that the

body is inherently evil, whereas the spirit is good. This led to two different extremes. Some said that since the body is evil, we must treat it harshly by depriving ourselves of food, comfort, and physical pleasure. This is asceticism, which Paul strongly condemns (Col. 2:16-23). The other extreme was that some said that since the body is evil anyway, you might as well indulge it. What the body does is unrelated to the spirit. So you could indulge in sexual immorality, but at the same time claim that your spirit was not in sin.

Since Paul elsewhere clearly denounces these errors, we would be mistaken to take his teaching here in that way. Rather, he is saying that the law of sin works through his physical body and manifests itself in evil deeds. But it takes his entire person captive (7:23, "making *me* a prisoner"). In this sense, by his members, Paul means his flesh (7:18), which is the old sin nature. Temptation always begins in our minds, but it appeals to and works its way out through our bodies. Thus one strategy against sin is to make it your aim always to glorify God with your body (1 Cor. 6:20).

- (4) The old man operates through strong compulsion or feelings, not through reason alone.

Sin uses reason, however faulty, to appeal to us. Satan reasoned with Eve that God surely would not impose the death penalty for eating a little piece of fruit. He also used faulty reasoning to get her to doubt God's goodness in imposing the command. The fall brought our minds as well as our bodies into captivity to sin.

But in addition to reason, temptation always appeals to our feelings. Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Apollos/Eerdmans, p. 294] refers to it as "the compulsion to do evil." It's not purely rational. In fact, sin is usually irrational. If we were to stop and think about the consequences both for us and for others, we'd resist the temptation. Don Kistler pointed out the irrationality of sin when he astutely observed (in "Why Read the Puritans Today?" referring to Jeremiah Burroughs' thesis in *The Evil of Evils*), "Sin is worse than suffering; but people will do everything they can to avoid suffering, but almost nothing to avoid sin."

So, in the first corner, we have the reigning champion that has dominated the human race ever since the fall: the old man.

- B. In the other corner: The new challenger, the inner man, joyfully concurring with the law of God.

Paul wants to do good (7:21). He says (7:22), "For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man." He says that with his mind he is serving the law of God (7:25). This must refer to the mind of a regenerate man. So by *the inner man* and *my mind*, Paul is referring to the new man, which through the new birth "has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth" (Eph. 4:24). Leon Morris (p. 295) calls this "the real Paul." F. F. Bruce (*Romans* [IVP/Eerdmans], rev. ed., p. 146) identifies it as "the 'new nature' in Christ that is daily being renewed in the Creator's image." He adds (*ibid.*), "In light of 8:7-8 it is difficult to view the speaker here as other than a believer."

One of the marks of the new birth is that God gives you new desires. You have a new love for Christ, who gave Himself on the cross for you. You love God's Word and desire it like a newborn babe desires his mother's milk (1 Pet. 2:2). You long to be holy, just as Jesus is holy. You hate your own sin. You love to be with God's people and talk about the things of God. And yet, at the same time, you know that in your flesh there is still a strong desire to do evil. In new believers, the desires of the old nature (the reigning champion) often win out over the new desires of the new nature (the new challenger) until the new believer learns how to fight.

That's the picture of Paul here. He has a new nature that joyfully concurs with God's law in the inner man, but he's still dominated by the old nature. Unbelievers do not have two natures warring against each other and they do not joyfully love God's law in their hearts. But mature believers have learned to put on the new man and put off the old, so that they experience consistent victory over sin. But before we begin to see consistent victory, we often experience frustrating defeats because of the power of the reigning champion, the old man. Let's examine what deliverance from the old nature looks like:

2. Deliverance in this conflict consists of consistent victory over sin in this life and perfect, permanent victory in the resurrection.

In addition to Paul's dramatic use of the present tense, one strong argument that he is describing mature believers here is that even mature believers identify with the struggle pictured here. Even after we've learned to overcome temptation on a consistent basis and after we've walked in obedience to the Lord for years, we still find ourselves sinning. We lash out in anger at our loved ones. We act selfishly with no regard for others. We see a seductive woman and lust floods into our thoughts.

But I do not see Paul describing here a lack of perfection, but rather a lack of obedience. He is not *doing* what he knows to be right. He is *practicing* what he knows to be wrong. He is failing completely. I agree with Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: The Law: Its Functions and Limits* [Zondervan], p. 222), who argues that Paul's cry of anguish (in 7:24) is not caused by the fact that he is in conflict against his old nature, but rather by his *persistent defeat* in yielding to that old nature (7:23). So let me make three observations to try to picture what deliverance looks like:

- A. Deliverance does not refer to a state of sinless perfection in this life, but to consistent victory over sin.

In this life, I will *never* love God as completely as I should, with my entire heart, soul, mind, and strength. I will *never* love others as much as I love myself (Mark 12:30-31). I will *always* fall short of these commands. But a lack of perfection is not the same as persistent disobedience. As a new creature in Christ, by God's Spirit, I *can* choose to love God by spending time with Him each day in His Word and in prayer, by gathering with His people to worship Him each week, and by honoring Him with the money He entrusts to me. I *can* love my wife, my children, and others in a self-sacrificing manner. The deliverance that Paul is crying out for (in 7:24) may include the perfection that will come when we get our resurrection bodies. But he wants to be freed from his present enslavement to sin (7:23). He wants to obey God consistently, even if such obedience can never be perfect in this life.

- B. Deliverance from sin always creates tension with the growing awareness of your many sins and shortcomings.

There is an irony in the Christian life: As you walk more consistently in obedience to God and grow closer to the light of His

holy presence, you see all the more how dirty you really are. When Isaiah saw God in His holiness, he immediately saw how sinful he was (Isa. 6:5). Paul's cry here may have stemmed partly from this awareness of his sinful imperfection. In that sense, it's a cry that we will continually echo as we grow in Christ.

But it seems to me that Lloyd-Jones is right when he connects Paul's cry in this context mainly with his disobedience and defeat, not just with his imperfection (7:24 follows 7:23). Yet at the same time, growing to know Christ and obey Him more always leads to a greater awareness of how sinful you still are. Deliverance from sin's power does not eliminate this tension of how far short you fall.

- C. Deliverance from sin means consistent victory over it, but it does not eliminate the lifelong struggle against it.

After Paul's jubilant exclamation (7:25), you'd expect him to move on to talk about victory over sin. But instead, he summarizes the war he has just described, in which with his mind he serves the law of God, but with his flesh, the law of sin. It leaves you with the feeling that sin is still consistently winning. Victory doesn't come until chapter 8. Bishop Lightfoot (*Notes on Epistles of St. Paul* [Baker], p. 305) says that while Paul's thanksgiving is out of place, he can't endure to leave the difficulty unsolved, so he gives the solution parenthetically, even though it interrupts his argument.

But while the struggle against sin is a lifelong battle, when we do learn that we can't win it in our own strength and when we learn to walk in the Spirit, we can experience consistent victory, which is the flavor of chapter 8. But even when we walk in the Spirit, the daily struggle against sin goes on. The war within of chapter 7 is never eradicated in this life, but the difference is, chapter 7 pictures persistent defeat, whereas chapter 8 pictures consistent triumph and victory, even in the face of severe trials. By God's grace, we can put the defeat of chapter 7 in the past and experience the consistent victory of chapter 8.

- 3. To experience consistent victory over sin, we must despair over our sin and cry out to God for deliverance.

As I cited my friend Bob Deffinbaugh last week, the problem with many Christians is not their despair, like that of Paul, but their lack of it. They don't feel the anguish of their persistent disobe-

ence. They avoid the struggle, often by minimizing their sin as a “personality quirk” or as “just being human.” They excuse it as normal: “Everyone has his faults.”

But you will not gain consistent victory over sin until you first see God’s holy standard and realize how often you’re disobeying that standard. You must also realize, often through repeated failures, that you cannot obey God in your own strength. Then, in despair, you cry out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” As you search God’s Word for answers, you learn that “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death” (8:2). You learn to walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit (8:4). You begin to experience consistent victory over sin in your daily walk, beginning on the thought level.

Conclusion

Dwight Eisenhower once said, “War is a terrible thing. But if you’re going to get into it, you’ve got to get into it all the way.” Underestimating the power of the enemy is a sure way to lose. The war within will be with us as long as we live in these fallen bodies. It is winnable, not perfectly or permanently, but consistently. But we can’t be half-hearted. If we fully engage the battle using God’s resources, we can consistently win!

Application Questions

1. Some argue that the way to victory over sin is to see yourself as a saint who occasionally sins, not as a sinner. Why is this at odds with the biblical strategy for victory?
2. Why is underestimating the power of indwelling sin a sure path to spiritual defeat?
3. James Boice points out that Christians often avoid the battle against sin by a formula, a new experience that supposedly will give instant victory, or avoidance. To which of these are you most prone?
4. Why is it important to distinguish between perfection and consistent obedience? What problems result if we don’t?

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