

Sermon 58: Romans 7:14-25: '...Wretched man that I am....'

OUTLINE

Statement of the problem
Description of the problem
Explanation of the problem
Solution to the problem

INTRODUCTION

The Christian should be the happiest of people. We rejoice in God's grace to us in giving us a free gift of perfect righteousness to justify us through the giving of His Son as our substitute. We rejoice in the assurance of our salvation, that there is nothing that can snatch us out of God's hand. We rejoice even in our sufferings realizing that they are God's design for our good and His glory. But the Christian should also be the most unhappy of people. Knowledge increases sorrows, and since we understand the terrible penalty that awaits all those who die without Christ, we carry a heavy burden of sorrow over the fate of the unbeliever. We know all the good that God made for us to do and can see man running in the opposite direction doing things and promoting things that are backwards and unnatural. But the biggest source of our sorrow is over our continuing sinfulness. We are a waking contradiction and deeply feel it. We see that God has declared us righteous in Christ, but we are not yet living in our glorified bodies but are still in these fallen ones which act as landing place for sin to perpetually attack us. We are in the words of Luther, 'Simil iustus et peccator.' Both righteous and sinful at the same time.

Paul captures this inner tension in the Christians life as he utters a phrase that every Christian in the history of the church has been able to relate to, 'wretched man that I am.' Here is a Christian forced to consider his sinfulness through the lens of the law and he gasps out this desperate cry of pain. But with this deep sorrow there is also hope and joy and he asks, 'who will deliver me from this body of death?' And then he gives the triumphant answer, 'Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' One day we will be glorified with Christ receiving bodies like His resurrection body, and then all this tension and war will be over. But until then we continue to live in this place of tension, this place we have called, 'the already but not yet.'

This is the best known and most disputed part of Romans 7. Because Paul gives us such vivid descriptions of the man in 14-25 that appear to match the condition of someone who is not a Christian there are those who have thought to interpret this portion as Paul continuing with the perspective of the unregenerate in 7-13 making the whole chapter from verse 7 a description of how the law exposes the sin in the unbeliever. The key descriptions would be v14, 'I am of the flesh,' which seems to contradict what Paul says about the Christian being of the Spirit in 8:9 and other places. Then the description 'sold under sin' in verse 14 seems to contradict what Paul has been saying in Romans 6 that we died to sin. The description of having no ability to carry out good in v18 and the description of 'wretched' in verse 24 all

seem on first glance to fit a description of an unbeliever. This line of interpretation is held by many Arminians who have no trouble with this person being an unbeliever who also delights in the law of God (v22), for they do not believe in man's full inability to do good. For similar reasons the Greek fathers and Greek Orthodox also hold this interpretation.

However, although the experience of this man in 14-25 appears to be sub-Christian, there are definite indications of a man who is regenerate. Firstly, you will notice that from v14 - 25 Paul moves from the past tense autobiography of 7-13, to a consistent present tense indicating Paul describing his present day Christian experience. Secondly, the description of a man who delights to do God's law is consistent with a Christian's desire not the unregenerate, (Romans 8:7). Thirdly, the distinction between the 'I' and 'the flesh' fits the Christian's experience of continuing to battle sin that uses our bodies as a launch pad. Fourthly, the future hope of Christ's delivering us from this tension in v25, and lastly, the concluding summary which, after alluding to our future hope in Christ sets the tension of the already and not yet before us in the form of the law of God and sin that continue to live in us simultaneously.

This has led to a number of other views that try to account for this 'sub-Christian' aspect of the passage. There is Lloyd-Jones view who claims that this is the experience of someone in between salvation and being lost, being in the place of under conviction of sin shortly before conversion. Some have suggested that it is describing a 'Carnal Christian' that is a Christian who is in need of a second blessing of one form or another. John Stott has suggested that it is describing the OT saint whose experience of the Spirit was 'with' but not 'in' and who were trying to be sanctified by the law apart from the Spirit. Some have gone even further and say that Paul is not sketching his autobiography but rather is projecting the fall of Adam or Israel and their breaking of the law and need for Christ.

I agree with J. I. Packer's analysis of this portion. This is definitely describing a Christian; but how do we account for the apparent 'unregenerate' elements? The context of the passage and Paul's purpose in writing it account for these details. Paul you will remember is answering questions that relate to the law. Paul has made some statements that clarification, statements that have almost concluded that Paul is charging the law with sin. He has claimed that the law increases sin and arouses sinful passions. V7 asks the question that controls the content of this chapter, 'that the law is sin?' V7-13 are Paul's experiences of the law arousing his sin and killing, the conclusion is that the law is not sinful he is (v13). Paul is still dealing with the perfection of the law and the sinfulness of the human being. V14 begins with this contrast, 'For we know that the law is spiritual but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.' And following this contrast we see Paul using the Christians present experience of wrestling with sin to further prove that the reason for sin is ourselves not the law. The Christian is born again, and has the law freshly inscribed on his heart. He has a new heart that delights in the law. This results in a conflict within us because we are both born again and not yet glorified living in a fallen body. Paul uses this conflict which sets the Christian against himself in agreement with the law, to prove that the law is not the source of sin we are. And the horrible picture of our current conflict is swallowed up in hope as Paul announces that this is not forever but we will one day be delivered when we receive

our new bodies when Jesus comes again. The negative descriptions that relate to our bodies and flesh are the Christians insights into themselves when they gaze into their still imperfect natures through the perfect standards of the law. The descriptions of giving into sin should not be seen as a universal description of the Christian's life everyday. Paul is not speaking about Romans 6 or the work of the Spirit, but rather how the law shows up sin and cannot produce what only Spirit can. J I Packer says that this section '...reproduces Paul's present theological self-knowledge as a Christian; not all of it, but just that part of it which is germane to the subject in hand—namely, the function of the law in giving knowledge of sin. (The other side of Paul's self-knowledge, that is given him by the gospel, is set out in chapter 8.) The thesis of the paragraph, 'I am carnal, sold under sin,' is stated categorically and without qualification, but not because this is the whole truth about Paul the Christian, but because it is the only part of the truth about himself that the law can tell him.'¹ Through the lens of union with Christ we see other things, through the lens of the Spirit our perspective will put different things into the foreground, but through the lens of the law all we will see is our sinfulness, failure, bondage, and our dire need for deliverance. Essentially what we are saying is, we reject all the views that try and modify these verse to be speaking of a 'limited' Christian experience and instead claim that it is Paul shining light on Christianity from a limited perspective.

James Montgomery Boice has highlighted how Paul repeats himself three times in the verses before us, each of the repeats has three basic parts.² Verses 14-17, 18-20 and 21-24 are essentially saying the same thing. Each section states the problem indicating the origin of sin within ourselves. Then there is a description of the conflict showing how the new part of us and the old nature in us are in conflict. And thirdly, there are three concluding explanations that root the problem of sin within ourselves defending the law. We will use these three points and add a fourth in our consideration of these verses. We will look at the statement, description, explanation and solution to the problem of sin that the law highlights.

Statement of the problem

Paul has already proven from his pre-Christian experience that the problem of sin does not lie outside of him and can be blamed on the law, but the problem lies within him. Three more times Paul states the truth about the condition of his flesh. In V14 he writes, 'but I am flesh, sold under sin.' Again in v18 he writes, 'For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.' And then again in v21, '...when I want to do good, evil lies close at hand.' When you look at the 'not yet' glorified aspect of yourself, when you closely inspect your remaining sinfulness, these are the descriptions that best describe us. Under the spotlight of the law it is the imperfections, the sinful parts that will be exposed. And once we have travelled with Paul into the very depths of ourselves to see that sin is not something that we do, but something that we are, and that we are sinful 'beyond measure' (7:13), these are fitting descriptions indeed. 'I am flesh' would normally be a statement that an unbeliever would say about themselves because they are still in Adam. A believer would

¹ Keeping in step with the Spirit, p225-6.

² Romans Vol 2, p764.

say that we are in the Spirit in Christ. However, it is not altogether unheard of in Paul to credit Christians with being fleshly, we see this in 1 Cor. 3:1-3 where he rebukes those carnal Christians for acting like unbelievers. The trouble is, when the law gets a hold of us, and holds us up to the light there are two truths to us. Yes, there is the truth that we are born again and headed for eternal life, but the law when it holds us up highlights the cracks of our remaining sin, and we cannot but continue to say with the law that we are sinners. We are not yet perfect, we are not yet glorified, our hearts do continue to want wrong things, and so we could go on. Likewise the second statement in v14, that we are sold under sin, this does not mean that like Ahab (1 Kings 20:20, 25) we go and sell ourselves to sin, but rather that in Adam we were sold into sin and the remaining effects continue to be with us until we are glorified. V18 sounds exactly right, 'there is nothing good in me, that is, in my flesh.' I can't offer one good deed to God, it all has to be done in Christ and through Christ, there is no perfect part but every part has been affected by sin. Every good thing in us has its source in God and not in ourselves, our flesh gives birth to flesh, and it is characterised by sin, self and imperfection. So much so that our good deeds are constantly dogged and supplanted by the ongoing desire for sin within us, v21, 'So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.' The law truly does show us to be sinful beyond measure, for here we are, saved, justified, filled with the Spirit, having every motivation to do good, and do we still sin, do we still persist in breaking God's law and desiring things we know better now are wrong? Yes we do! If the purpose of the law is to create in us a knowledge of our own sinfulness, Paul is indicating that the law works especially well in Christians to create this awareness. In fact we feel more sinful after becoming Christians than we felt before.

Description of the problem

All three of these repeats also amplify the conflict that we as new yet not yet glorified people feel. All three highlight the contradiction of desires at work within us. All three describe pictures which agree with what Christians are. We are new by the Spirit, loving God's law and seeking to fulfil it, yet we are not yet glorified and so we continue to lust against the Spirit and frustrate all our own good intentions. V15, 'For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.' V18b-19, 'For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.' V22-23, 'For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.' As a Christian does this describe you? Have you done things you hate? Have you felt captive to bad and wrong things? Do you continue doing wrong things when you know they are wrong? Do you feel unable to do the good you want at times? Do you feel like there is a war going on inside of you and at times the bad guys seem to be winning? This is the tortured place of the already but not yet. If you were not a Christian you would not be fighting, you wouldn't care, you wouldn't think you were bad, and you would probably give excuses why you should give in. But because you are a Christian you feel the contradiction. You have the contradiction that lives within you amplified. In fact, if you don't feel this contradiction then you aren't a Christian. When I worked in a rehab giving

bible studies and visiting with the addicts, I would see a lot of people falling back into their old sins. One of the big questions that these recovering addicts would ask me is, can I be a Christian and still fall into my old ways? Let me give you the answer that I gave them. When you fall you fall to what you know. If you had been a heroin addict doing heroin is not as hard to imagine as it would be for someone who has never done drugs. In fact if you who had never done drugs and a recovering addict who did heroin daily both do it, you would be the more guilty and have taken the bigger step towards sin, going further out of your way to do it. Having fallen into such a serious sin the addicts who had made commitments to Christ would worry over their salvation wondering if they could be Christians at all if they could do such a bad thing. My answer always came from Romans 7, the smallest evidence of a true work of grace is a hatred for the sin that you do. Romans 7 shows us that you can be one who does sin and who hates it and be a Christian the whole time. This is not an excuse for you to use to go and sin but an insight into the evidence of new life that lives in the old soil of our fallenness. Here is an encouragement for you when you do a David, or a Peter and sin big. Here is a reminder that we are a work in progress and one of the proofs of God's grace to us when the joy is swallowed up in guilt, and the nearness of God's presence in prayer is gone, is this, you hate the things that you do.

How does this contribute to Paul's arguments in defence of the law? Well, we are born again, have the law on our hearts and love and delight in God's law, but this newness in us encounters the oldness in us, the flesh that still remains in us, ubiquitous to life in this present evil age, and we are at war with it. The deep part of me, that part that is new, that is united to Christ rises up against it. And all of this proves that my sin cannot be blamed on the law, that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh and am not yet perfect. My agreement with the law as a Christian proves that the law is not the problem but our sinfulness is. The law is vindicated by our regenerate hearts agreeing with it against the sin in us. The law is vindicated by it agreeing with the newness in us against the oldness in us, showing its purpose not as saviour but to increase the knowledge of my sin.

Conclusion of the problem

Paul states the conclusion to this problem by naming the sin in us as the source, of our sin. In V17, 'So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.' V20, 'Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.' And finally he roots it in our bodies of death, (v24). These statements of Paul blaming the sin in him have been seen by some to be Paul excusing his behaviour. Is Paul trying to psychologise himself out of his guilt? No, he is not. You will notice that he identifies himself as 'I' in relation to the flesh and sin v14 owning it as his own. No Paul is attempting as far as language will allow to capture the dual nature of our existence, that we are living in the already but not yet. He attempts to do this in v22 when he identifies the new part as his 'inner being' and this is set in contrast against his body, flesh and members, or 'outer man' as Paul calls it in 2 Cor. 4:16. However, language is limping here because Paul does not mean that sin is only done by the body but not the mind or emotions. He is generalizing his point using the words 'body', 'flesh' or 'members' as short hand for his sinful nature. The reason this is suitable is because the body is where our sinful passions are sourced, it is the place from

which sin launches its attack, those in the intermediate state who are disembodied souls, or those who have resurrection bodies do not suffer sin's attack in the same way due to the absence of a body. In verse 23 Paul attempts another contrast this time using the language of 'law of my mind' versus 'law of sin that dwells in my members.' Once again if Paul had to be perfectly precise he would kill this already confusing passage with a thousand qualifications because sin also uses the mind. But for all intents and purposes the mind is the place where things have been made new and transformation has begun. We have not yet begun to experience the power of the resurrection in our bodies but we are presently being transformed through the renewing of our minds. So in the midst of what is a very difficult thing to express we need to allow Paul some leeway as he attempts to imperfectly express that there are two principles at war within us, sin no longer defines us nor controls our eternal destiny and so it is put at a distance. But how much distance can you make when you are talking about yourself, so Paul identifies sin with the part of us that still awaits the resurrection to be applied to it. Then on the other hand Paul who is united to Christ who is a new creation in Christ and is presently experiencing the benefits of the new birth is also partly new, Paul identifies himself more primarily as 'I' as opposed to body when it comes to describing this part. The messiness of Paul's language is merely an attempt to try and express the contradiction that we are, it should be no wonder that these expressions cause some confusion and appear contradictory.

Solution to the problem

If Romans 7:14-25 was the end of our salvation, being saved wouldn't be such an amazing and attractive thing. But this is not the end. Paul giving well suited expression to the contradiction that we feel about ourselves, the remaining sinfulness that fills our gaze at times cries out in v24-25, 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.' Here we have the reminder that one day the war will be over. That the feeling of being a stranger to yourself, having to constantly be alert and battling against yourself. The feelings of self-loathing for having sinned against perfect love again. The torture of being torn between loving God and still having desires for sin. The feelings of depression when we have sinned. The loss of the sight of God's smile and the loss of the joy of our salvation. The dimming of our first love when business, sin and suffering drive it out of us. The numbness towards spiritual things. The constant frustrating of our good intentions. The disappointment of hurting and letting down our loved ones. These and many other things will one day be over. Christ has won the victory and one day we will be released from this dying condition. Death is a release from this body, but it is not the full reversal of what we now experience. It will be peaceful and joyful and a relief but it still will not be life as God will one day make it when we get new bodies and a new heavens and a new earth. We do not long for death, though it is something that we welcome, we long for the resurrection. Paul speaks of this inward groaning in the next chapter, 8:18-23, 'For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the

creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.' We don't have to feel hopeless because there will be a resurrection and that makes all of our efforts worthwhile. It is because of this hope that we continue to fight with determination not a sense of resignation to failure. We know the victory is coming we are just holding the fort until the cavalry arrives.

We must draw this message to a close. What are some of the applications we can make?

What does it matter that we are new and not new, living in this place of the already but not yet, saints who still have remaining sin? Here are some things we need to always do while living in this present condition.

We always need to be prayerful and on our guard. In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus told his disciples to watch and pray because the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. Paul has shown us how the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, and prayer is how we lean on God for the strength to help us overcome the remaining sinfulness in us.

We always need to depend upon grace and not law and self-effort. This portion graphically illustrates how the flesh is weak and the law is not a magic remedy to make us holy. Any growth in holiness will not come from our drawing on our own strength and resources, or attempting a new formula as a type of silver bullet to get magic results. The only thing that will overcome the weakness and inability of our flesh is God's Spirit working within us by grace. The good news is that this grace is offered freely, not only for justification but for sanctification as well, and we come in dependence and faith for sanctification just as we did for justification.

We always need to be patient with the sin in others. We can see how sinful we are, how weak and incapable we are, how it is only by God's grace that we are anything and have any good in us. So we do not look at others and judge them thinking, if I can do it they should be able to as well. We should know better than anyone else the weakness of our natures and be patient knowing that God is the one that transforms us. We need to point our kids, our spouses and our brethren to Christ for aid, we are merely the orderlies who bring the patients to God who is the doctor, we are not the ones with the cure.

We always need to keep our mind on the hope of the resurrection. When you are battle weary, and you have got cramp, and feel that you can't go on any more, we remind ourselves that the battle is won and we are merely holding the fort.

We always need to be people who confess our sins and ask for forgiveness; who are engaged in a life of self-evaluation recognizing that sin is with me till the end. We should be those who pray the Lord's prayer every day, 'forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'

We always give God the glory for any progress in the war against sin. Paul has shown us how in ourselves we are not able to rise above ourselves. For when you fight against yourself, the trouble is you always win, we need our help to come from without. Transformation into Christ's new kingdom glory and likeness is not an accomplishment that anything that belongs to this present evil age can accomplish we need the Spirit who will one day bring in the new heavens and the new earth, and who resurrected Jesus from the dead to work His power within us, and He does, and so we need to credit God with any good in us.