

Romans 7:7-25 - The Battle Within

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[0:00] That's Romans chapter 7, verses 7 through 25 on page 1133 of your church Bibles. What shall we say then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not. Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law.

For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, you shall not covet. But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting.

For apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.

I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous, and good. Did that which is good then become death to me? By no means. Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, he used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment, sin might become utterly sinful.

[1:11] We know that the law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do. For what I hate, I do.

And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.

For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not know, I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do.

This I keep on doing. 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. So I find this law at work. Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

For in my inner being I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

[2:16] What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

This is the word of the Lord. Thank you, Dan, for reading for us. Before we make a sort of proper start, I kind of want to begin with an apology.

I know that's probably not a great way to start a sermon, but I want to apologize. I'm not actually really going to cover verses 7 to 13 in the passage that Dan just read for us. You might look down at it now and you'll notice that it is kind of bookended by the repetition of the word nevertheless, right?

Nevertheless is said in verse 7 and in verse 13. And in that sort of nevertheless section, Paul is asking a specific question that kind of addresses some of the things we were looking at last week.

So he's basically saying, listen, if the law, as in the rules, won't make us holy, are the rules bad? Now, if I'd been a really smart pastor, I would have covered all of that material last week.

[3 : 29] But here's the news for you that I start with is I'm not really that smart. And so we're not actually going to cover those verses really in very much detail. My hope is that as Dan read them, you mostly understood them, that while the law is not able to make us holy, the law itself is good.

The problem is not with the law. The problem is with us. And in the interest of time, I am going to not say anything else about verses 7 to 13. And you can ask me later if you want to.

And we're going to zoom in on verses 14 to 25. And I'm going to pray as we look at those. Let's pray and ask for the Lord's help. Gracious God and loving Heavenly Father, thank you that despite our weakness, my weakness, still your word is powerful and effective.

Amen. Sharper than a double-edged sword. Able to cut right into us and right through us and what we're thinking and feeling and perceiving.

To teach us the truth of who you are and what you've done for us in the Lord Jesus. Lord, how we pray this morning that you might help us to be good listeners to your word.

[4 : 39] As we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Now, the big idea in our passage this morning is that the hardest part of being a Christian is not the struggle that we have with the things outside in the world.

You know, the biggest struggle for the Christian is not that people might tease you for being a Christian, that people might disrespect you or give you a hard time. That is difficult, but it's not the most difficult thing about being a Christian.

Nor is the most difficult thing about being a Christian the struggles that might be in this room with one another that we might have. Again, it's hard, isn't it, when church is not running well or people in church don't behave as they should.

But the point of the passage is that that itself is not the hardest thing about the Christian life. The battle for the Christian life is not an external one, but an internal one.

The battle that the Christian faces is the battle with indwelling sin. That despite the best of our intentions, despite the privilege of having the Bible in our hands readily available to us, despite being in a vibrant church community and church family, despite having that great wealth of Christian resources at our fingertips on the internet, despite having friends who will challenge us and encourage us and pray for us, despite all those good Christian books that you have on your shelves at home, still we get angry.

[6 : 06] Still we're bitter. Still we lust after things that we should not have. Still we think more of ourselves than we should. Still we find ourselves gossiping and talking about others in ways that we shouldn't.

Still we covet the success of others. We worship material success. We crave the next purchase. We imagine that comfort will bring us contentment or that material success will deliver us happiness.

We even lie in our beds at night, imagining winning arguments that we feel like we lost during the day. In our idle moments, our thoughts don't wander to God and his goodness, but to trivial nonsense.

We seek escape in the sort of endless, mindless banality of our phones. And there's no let up, right? If you speak to an honest Christian, honest Christians are hard to find, aren't they?

But if you find one and you ask them, it doesn't matter whether you've been a Christian 10, 20, 30, 60, 70 years, the battle still rages. Augustine, the great African bishop writing in the fourth century, describes his Christian life as a struggle every day.

[7 : 24] Augustine was probably one of the greatest minds that ever lived. And that's how he described his Christian life. He talks about his inability to delete images of the past, or even to mourn for them properly.

He says this, But for the present, I am a burden to myself. There is a struggle between joys over which I should be weeping and regrets at matters over which I ought to be rejoicing.

And which side has the victory, I do not know. Alas, Lord, have mercy upon me, wretch that I am. Paul describes it.

Verse 24 of chapter 7 in our passage this morning. What a wretched man I am. Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Now, I wonder if I can ask you, before we go any further, if you're willing to be that honest about your own Christian life.

Do you know how Paul feels? How Augustine feels? I know I do. The longer I go on as a Christian, the more acutely I am aware that the fight for my Christian life is not with anybody else, but it's with me.

[8 : 35] It's in me. That whilst knowing the gospel is true, and understanding that God loves me, and he gave his son for me, still, as I think about my battle for holiness, I feel weak and wretched.

You know, past sins that I thought I'd be well beyond by now. Unwanted thoughts, hard-heartedness, unkindness, thoughtlessness, the absence of generosity, those aren't imposed upon me from the outside, but they are in me, and come out from me.

And if you're honest this morning, that's true of you too. And that's why Romans chapter 7, verses 14 to 25 are in our Bibles. Because they want us to understand why that is the case, and where to find hope in that situation.

So let's think about this together. Firstly, let's think about the nature of the battle. The battle that we feel in our Christian lives is described by Paul as a war between what he describes as the inner man, the inner man who, according to verse 22, loves or delights in God's law, loves the expression of God's righteousness, loves to obey, the inner us that considers God's law as spiritual, in verse 14, this inner us that wants to do good, in verse 21, and then what he calls the flesh.

Verse 14, our NIVs have weirdly translated it, I am unspiritual. Really it is literally, I'm in the flesh. The war is between the new inner man, the inner us, and this flesh.

[10 : 04] Sin living in me, he calls it in verse 17. The body of death, he calls it in verse 24. And these two realities inside the life of the Christian are at war with one another.

New life by the spirit that agrees with God and wants to live for him and the old flesh that still loves to sin.

Paul summarizes it, verse 22, for in my inner being, I delight in God's law, verse 23, but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.

Let me say, this is such an important category for you to understand if you're a Christian this morning. That whilst if you're a Christian, you are born again, you've been given new life by the spirit, a life that is turned to God and trusted in him, has turned from its sin and longs to live for him.

Though you are fully forgiven, justified, declared not guilty before the perfect God, you have that in lieu of judgment day even now, still, you will not be perfect in this life.

[11:14] You will never be perfect in this life. As long as you're alive in the flesh, you will still carry around an old sinful nature, a defeated sinful nature, yes, a dead sinful nature that's dead at the cross, yes, yes, the penalty and the moral debt that that nature owes has been written off in Christ, but you still carry it for now.

So that, as Luther would say, of you, Martin Luther, the great reformer, would say, you are both a saint and a sinner. You are holy in Christ and you still fight temptation and the wickedness of your flesh.

If you're not a Christian this morning, it's great you're here, we're really pleased you're with us this morning, welcome. This is not your battle, right? This is the Christian's battle, not the non-Christian's battle.

Not because if you're not a Christian this morning, you don't have a moral conscience or feel bad about the things that you've done. No, rather because it is impossible, and Paul has said this over and over again, it is impossible for any of us in our own nature, by ourselves, to say that we delight in his law, right?

By ourselves, without this new life by the Spirit that he gives as we turn to him, we will not delight in his law. If you're not a Christian, the law is a burden to you, right?

[12:31] The law is a problem. The law, the list of what God expects of you, is a burden to you. It's a list of your failures. It's like that for all of us. It's like a charge sheet against us.

This is what we did not do. And we hate the law because it condemns us. So even if we're earnestly trying to obey God's moral law, even if you think, well, I'm trying to live with a clear conscience, I'm trying to be good, I'm trying to do to others as I'd have them do to me, let me tell you, that's not delighting in God's law as it's written here.

That's using God's law for your own ends. And so the battle you face is a real battle, but it's not the one being described here. In fact, it's a worse battle because you're trying to use the law to earn God's favor and that is a battle that everybody loses.

Our battle is that we delight in God's law, but still we fight an old nature. Now, there are some Christians and some preachers, especially on the internet, there are especially books that you might read which try to deny this battle.

They'll tell you, oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, Paul, it's not describing the Christian life here. You're fully redeemed in Christ. Total freedom from sin, they'll tell you. If only you come and receive this particular blessing, you will escape that temptation to sin.

[13:55] If you come to this meeting, if you develop this habit, then you'll be free from the battle. Paul says, that is utter nonsense. The battle is the Christian life.

And in a way, in a sort of paradoxical way, it is feeling and knowing and experiencing that battle in your heart which helps you know that you're a Christian because it means that God has made you alive and there is something to fight the sinful nature.

So that's the nature of the battle. Next thing with me about the ferocity of the battle. Really, these are the same two points but I've split them up just so that you might remember them. And I don't want us to miss this or deal with it too quickly.

Look at verse 15 and notice how Paul describes this. I do not understand what I do. for what I want to do, I do not do.

But what I hate, I do. Here it is then. The battle means that in an important sense, life for the Christian is mysteriously difficult. We don't understand what we do.

[15:03] We shock ourselves. We find ourselves capable of things we thought we would not be capable of. I thought I was well beyond that. I didn't think I would struggle with that.

I've noticed that other people do but I didn't think that would be me. I can't imagine that I would still be bitter towards them so many years on. I can't imagine that I'd be so petty.

But I'd be so committed to people pleasing that I'd be so insecure. I would have thought that that gossip wouldn't interest me anymore. I would have thought I would have forgotten those images by now but I haven't.

And so there's a sort of insanity to this that our lives are not marked by perfect holiness but by surprising sin. So much so that we find ourselves doing the very things that we hate.

Things maybe that others do to us and we hate them doing them to us and now we find ourselves doing the same things. But actually it's worse than that isn't it?

[16:01] It's not just that we do wrong things that we wish we wouldn't. Verse 19 For I do not do the good I want to do but the evil I do not want to do this I keep on doing. This is what we were thinking about with the children isn't it?

These are the sins of omission. Good things that we wanted to do that we find we don't do. You know I really didn't mean to stop reading my Bible.

I really had intended to give more generously to gospel ministry. I really did want to be regular at church.

I really did want to share the gospel with my colleagues before I left that place of work. I really did intend to send a word of encouragement to that Christian friend but the good I wanted to do I didn't do it.

Now obviously Paul understands that this dynamic is a symptom of the war or the battle that he's in. It's important isn't it? It's not this new nature from the spirit that is sinning it's the old him that is not yet got rid of completely.

[17:07] Right? Look at verse 20 he says now if what I do now Dan this is difficult isn't it? Right? It's harder to read this than you think. Now if I do what I do not want to do it's no longer I who do it but sin living in me that does it.

Right? Now he's not meaning that as an excuse it's not like haha it wasn't really me it was sin living in me he's not saying it like that rather he's explaining the battle he's in the ferociousness of it where we find ourselves doing what deep down we don't want to do and not doing what we really do want to do as we carry around this sinful nature that's dead but still twitching.

It's worth thinking about how this works out for us as Christians I don't know a lot about war I know there are some people in the room who do in God's kindness I've never had to fight in a war but I imagine that those in the most danger in a war are those who don't really realise they're in it right?

Those who've lost concentration those who've forgotten that they're in a battle those who've let their guard down those who've turned up ill prepared what's the phrase like bringing a knife to a gunfight it's those people isn't it?

And so it is in the Christian life and that's why Paul writes this passage he's not writing this to depress you or me to think that Christian living is a hopeless task he's going to go to great lengths to prove that Christian living is not a hopeless task we'll come to that in a bit and in weeks to come but the point here is to warn you to warn you and me that there is a ferocious battle inside of myself and I cannot just thoughtlessly live my life you know you're if you're a Christian you cannot just thoughtlessly follow your wants and your desires because your wants and your desires are the location of the battle that he describes if you carelessly follow what it is that you want to do you will find yourself in terrible places not every desire that you have will be a prompting of the spirit not every aspiration that you have will be a godly one not every dream that you wish for will be good if it happens because there's a battle going on and it's not out there it's in here and it's ferocious!

[19 : 27] Just think about how this cuts through naivety right? Think about it from two angles notice that Paul is essentially saying that you will surprise yourself I will surprise myself at what I am capable of even as a Christian now if I find myself ever thinking oh I wouldn't do that I'm in grave danger I'm the guy who forgot he was on a battlefield right?

Or if I imagine that you know what I don't really need God's moral law I don't really need his moral instruction I don't really need the Bible to teach me what it is that God values because I can just kind of follow my instincts I kind of know what God wants uh uh no because that's where the battle is it will not be okay if we imagine that just because we're Christians all our ambitions will no longer be tainted by selfishness or that we won't be tempted to be unfaithful in our friendships or our marriages that we won't kind of lose it with our kids we're wrong if we don't understand that we'll be tempted not to do the things that would be spiritually best for us to do you know if you if you live your Christian life without imagining that your desire to attend church will always be equivalent to the amount that you should attend church in order to be spiritually healthy you are gravely mistaken because your desires will not match up it's the same with giving and speaking and praying we'll have good reasons won't we why we don't do those things you know it's true isn't it that our old nature although dead in Christ still twitches and has a really good lawyer right who's really good at persuading us that it's right when it's wrong and if we don't understand that we'll be hopelessly naive but the naivety works the other way around as well it means if you think if you're a Christian you think that other Christians will not let you down or that if they do let you down somehow the gospel is not true and really you should give up on the whole thing then you are hopelessly naive because this is every Christian's battle right

Christians around you will sin against you and you will need to forgive them church leaders will let you down church pastors will be imperfect perhaps imperfect in ways that you would be better than they are Christian friends will gossip about you Christian friends will hurt you be unkind to you upset you behave in ways towards you that you will not believe because they too are in this battle and sometimes they find themselves not doing the good things that they want to do but doing the evil things that they wish they weren't doing because they're in the battle now this doesn't mean of course that we shouldn't have high expectations of one another or that we should live as if it doesn't matter of course it does matter there's great grief in these words isn't there rather the point is that you shouldn't pretend that this is not the world that we live in we shouldn't imagine that the Lord's prayer instructs us to seek forgiveness as we forgive those who sin against us for no reason because if we do we'll spend much of our life sorely disappointed and in grave danger you know if we organize church life as if our members and our leaders are not tempted to sin we're hopelessly naive over the years

I've had a number of friends who are alcoholics most of them Christians church members one of them a pastor and what's obvious is that the most destructive alcoholics are those who will not admit that they've got a problem with alcohol you know they pretend they've got it under control no no no it's not really an issue for me when really they don't but for those who will admit it for them it requires a level of seriousness having admitted that this is their struggle it requires a level of seriousness to deal with it doesn't it we're not going to have any alcohol in the house I'm not going to have the first drink I'm going to be really honest with my close friends and my family well listen if you're a Christian this morning you might not be an alcoholic but let me tell you that you and I in the flesh are sinaholics we are addicted in the flesh to selfish rebellion that the inner us the new life by the spirit absolutely hates but it's still there and the most dangerous Christian is the Christian who doesn't recognize it and the safest

Christian is the one who takes it seriously who is honest about it who deliberately steers away from the desires of their hearts who doubts their gut instincts who is quick to repent when challenged who doesn't fake it brush it under the carpet or keep people at arm's length church is at their best when people are honest with one another forgiving each other where corporate repentance in the life of the church it's not it's just that thing that we do right that's kind of you know traditional maybe no repentance is a moment of honesty in a world of fakers right where people around you encourage you to feed this new inner man and starve the old sinful nature of worldly indulgence let's finish though if it feels a bit hopeless let's finish by looking at the victory in the battle the victory of the battle look with me at verses 24 and 25 let me read them to you as we finish what a wretched man I am who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death thanks be to

[25 : 23] God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord notice then that hope hope for victory is not in our own strength it's not that we are different from those who have gone about I know I know that other Christians have this struggle but I don't really and I'm going to be victorious it's not that is it no the hope is that Jesus delivers us Jesus will deliver us in the end that is the hope that in the present strength and future victory will be ours in the Lord Jesus Christ so that we fight the battle not with our own resources not even with the resources of the law for it has none to offer but with the resources of the grace that is ours in the Lord Jesus Christ I think about this this week thinking why why do some Christians resist Romans 7 why do we why are we tempted to think this is not really what the Christian life is like or should be like and I think it's because we think that really it should be easier we imagine don't we well the Lord the Lord could make me perfect couldn't he surely the Lord could liberate me from this particular struggle surely the

Lord could defeat all my impulses to selfishness my temptations to pride surely my addictions are nothing to God are they why would he make his fight can't be right can he if God loved me why would he make me fight like that interestingly Augustine who he started with that fourth century African bishop wrestled with this question in a book called the confessions when Augustine was a young Christian he read Romans 7 and assumed that this was written about someone who wasn't a Christian later in his Christian life he came to realise no actually this is written about me this is the Christian life and then he was thinking well why is this the Christian life why would God make the Christian life a battle well this is the answer that he came up with his answer to the question why why make it so difficult was joy joy might be surprising to you his illustration which I don't think scans very well but you might imagine it was that the emperor does not have great joy over land that already belongs to him but has great joy over land he's conquered right his other illustration which is perhaps easier to connect with is that to enjoy a great meal and a fine glass of wine you must first be hungry and thirsty and so he says here in order to enjoy the victory of Jesus we need to be in the battle our ongoing battle with sin is not meant to ruin us and defeat us and depress us but is meant to be a perpetual reminder to you and me that we need

Jesus and Jesus is brilliant and he's all sufficient for me and I need to keep repenting of my sin and turning to him because joy and we experience it in part now but we'll experience it fully in eternity is that Jesus is victorious that in the ferocity of the battle there is one man who stands tall and that man fights for me and his name is Jesus so I understand when I didn't lose my temper even when my plans were thwarted and my day came crashing down that patience wasn't my patience that was the Lord Jesus at work that was his victory you know sound the trumpets wave the flags Jesus won a victory in my life you know when I repented to that friend against whom I sinned even though my internal lawyer had given me a thousand reasons why it wasn't really my fault still I saw my sin I owned it I said sorry for it that was

Jesus is victory sound the trumpets wave the flags victory for Jesus you know see I came to church I read my bible I prayed honestly I love sincerely I gave sacrificially that wasn't me that was victory for Jesus wave the flag sound the trumpets he is great he is my victor one day I will be free from sin free from the love of sin free from the desire to sin I will live in the presence of my Lord and really it will be the sweetness of the victory over sin that I will rejoice in I have been forgiven I have conquered in Christ I came through the battle victorious because of Jesus and the scars will be the stories of victory and not the stories of defeat let me pray for us oh heavenly father please help us in these moments now not to do that silly thing that

Christians are so good at doing which is pretending that we're better than we really are but help us now in these moments in our hearts before you to be really honest we are in the midst of the battle and the battle is littered with stories of our own personal failure but also with victories for the Lord Jesus and we thank you that though now we find ourselves in a ferocious battle we know one day the ultimate victory will be ours in him so keep our hearts turned to Christ keep us looking to him trusting repenting to you and to one another and enjoying this great joy in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ Amen