

Romans: The Hope of Righteousness (part 9 of 9)

The Inside Battle

Romans 7:21-25

Mark Vroegop

²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² 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. ²⁴ 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. Romans 7:21–25 (ESV)

When Sarah was pregnant with the twins in 1996, there were two books that were exceedingly helpful to us. The first, of course, was the Bible. We were in our first church, the Senior Pastor had announced his resignation, I was in the middle of seminary, and we were wondering about our future. It was a very challenging and intense season, and the Bible came alive as we clung to the promises of God.

The second book was not inspired, but it was extremely helpful. Many women will be familiar with it. The title was *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. The book is now in its fourth edition, there have been over 14 million copies sold in the last 25 years, and according to Amazon, it has been read by 90% of women who read a pregnancy book. USA Today even ranked it among the 25 most influential books in the last 25 years.

What to Expect When You're Expecting was incredibly helpful for one very important reason: it helped us understand what to expect through our first pregnancy. It gave us a comprehensive vision for what pregnancy would look like, and it helped at many levels. In particular, it helped us to "settle in" and "do life" without freaking out with all the changes that were happening. It helped to manage our expectations and give us a vision for what a "normal" pregnancy entails.

What To Expect When You're a Christian

Expectations are not only important for expectant parents but also for Christians to consider. What do you expect the Christian life to look like? What is normal Christianity? How do we think about sin, temptation, and even failure? What is our vision for igniting a passion to follow Jesus on a personal level?

I ended our treatment of Romans 7:7-20 with an illustration that proved to be more helpful than I realized when I wrote it. As I read this chapter of Romans and as I think about conversations that I have had with people as pastor, it seems that we often do not view the Christian life correctly. We tend to think that Christianity involves arriving at some victorious level where we sort of coast into

heaven (an up escalator). But it seems that the right vision is one of a constant walk up an escalator that is going downward. Christianity is counter-cultural in this respect, and successful Christians are not those who never struggle. Rather, they are those who never give up. Normal Christianity is a daily fight to keep walking up an escalator that is pulling us down. Therefore our vision for following Jesus does not involve either sinless perfection or sinful surrender. **To follow Jesus (this is the thesis for today) means gospel triumph in the midst of human tension.** It means real Christianity involves celebrating triumph while realizing that there will always be tension until Jesus comes.

Now Jonathan Edwards did not know about escalators, but he came really close to that vision when he said, "The way to heaven is ascending; we must constantly travel up hill, though it be hard, and tiresome, and contrary to the natural tendency and bias of our flesh, that tends downward to earth."¹ In other words, Christians should expect a constant struggle with sin and the flesh.

Three weeks ago we heard Paul say the following in verses 18-20:

¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. 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. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. Romans 7:18–20 (ESV)

Our text today, Romans 7:21-25 is the conclusion to Paul's discussion about how a believer lives and deals with the reality of indwelling sin², and it serves as a transition into Romans 8, which we will start on January 4 and examine for six Sundays.

Spiritual Triumph in Tension

The theme of this text is spiritual triumph in the midst of tension. Paul is going to give us a very helpful vision of what the Christian life is really like. I think you will resonate with what he says, and my prayer is that it will help you to "keep walking up the escalator."

There are three things that Paul does regarding the inside battle:

1) Assessing the Internal (vv. 21-23)

Paul's focus in verses 21-23 is on assessing what is happening inside of himself as he battles with the paradox of not doing what he wants and doing the things that he does not want. It is as if Paul peels back the layers of his soul. Notice how often Paul uses personal references ("my inner being," "my members," "who will deliver me?," "my mind," and "my flesh") and how often he refers to himself in the first person. This is a very personal section, and he helps us to see not only what is happening in him but also what is happening in every follower of Jesus.

¹ Dane Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 127

² For an explanation as to why I think Romans 7 is referring to a believer and not an unbeliever see

² For an explanation as to why I think Romans 7 is referring to a believer and not an unbeliever see

<http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/the-law-the-spirit-and-christ/> or <http://www.yourchurch.com/sermon/the-battle-on-the-inside/>

In verse 21 Paul identifies a “law” or a principle that exists within himself: “when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.” He summarizes the previous passage by acknowledging that somewhere inside there is a constant potential for a battle with sin to erupt. Sinful desires and actions are always lurking. The most righteous and God-honoring actions can quickly turn into sinful pursuits.

Can you relate to this? I’m sure you can. If you are a Christian and you have lived long enough to have some experience with yourself, you know how easily and quickly you can be overtaken with a lingering wrong thought, a spiteful word, or a flash of selfishness. Even if you are not a Christian, I would suspect that you know that this is true in your own life or as you have watched it unfold in the lives of others. To be human is to always have evil lying close at hand.

Now Paul calls this “a law,” and I think he uses this word because Law is the theme for the entire chapter. As we walk through verses 21-25 we are also going to see Paul refer to the “Law of God (v. 22), the “law of sin” (v. 23), and the “law of the mind” (v. 25). Previously Paul has talked about the Mosaic Law as something outside of himself (see 7:11-12) and the sin that was inside of him (see 7:20). But now, as he observes his own soul, he sees “another law” inside of him. He sees a battle between two internal laws.

Verses 22-23 provide even more color on this struggle. On the one hand (v. 22), Paul finds himself delighting in the law of God in his inner being. This is a restatement of his desire to do what is right in verse 21. On the other hand, he recognizes “another law” that is at work which results in being made captive to the law of sin that dwells in his members. This sounds remarkably similar to what Paul tells the Galatians:

¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. Galatians 5:17 (ESV)

However, in 7:21-25 Paul does not use the categories of Spirit/flesh. Instead he uses a cluster of words to contrast the inward man and the outward man. The inward man is described with terms like “inner being” (v. 22) and “the law of my mind” (v. 23). Both describe the good-desiring, law-delighting, commandment-keeping part of Paul. The outward man is described with terms like “law of sin,” (v. 23) “body of death,” (v. 24) and “flesh” (v. 25). And this outward man principle uses the members of Paul’s body as instruments of sin.

When Paul assesses what is happening inside of himself, he sees two competing realities. In 2 Corinthians 4:16 Paul said *“though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.”* In other words, there are two sides to Paul (and you!). Now the two sides are not equal in power or authority, but there are two very real competing forces on the inside of every believer.

As Paul analyzes himself, even after becoming a Christian, he sees a constant battle that rages on the inside. Or to use our escalator illustration, Paul senses that the descending movement of the escalator is always ready to take him down if he allows that to happen. Now, do not read Romans 7 and think that Paul is excusing his failures or acquiescing to the power of the flesh. Rather, he is assessing this internal battle so that what follows in Romans 8 will be heard even more clearly.

But in Romans 7 Paul is simply providing an assessment of what is happening on the inside. Why is this internal assessment important to consider? It helps us in number of ways:

- It reminds us that the Bible is able to correctly diagnose the human condition and reveal what is really going on. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that *“the word of God is living and active...discerning the thoughts and intents of the heart.”* We ought to be extremely thankful that God has revealed what is going on inside of our hearts, and we ought to be warned that human beings are not good at self-diagnosis apart from divine revelation. Without God’s revelation, we would come to the wrong conclusions about ourselves, our sin, and the solution. The Bible mercifully shows us who we really are.

For some of you, that is a problem and that is why you have some level of resistance to Christianity or some person in spiritual authority in your life. If you are honest, you do not want to be told what is wrong with you. Hearing the Bible’s diagnosis of our condition assaults our pride and that is painful and uncomfortable. The essence of sin is not agreeing with God about who he is and who you are, and that perspective and belief is what separates us from God and sends us to Hell. It would be foolish to be angry with a radiologist who shows you a broken limb. The correct diagnosis is the first step toward healing. So too the Bible provides a x-ray of the soul.

- It helps us by keeping us out of the extreme margins of despair or deception as we recognize that Christianity is a constant battle and, if we are honest, that everyone is constantly fighting this battle. It normalizes the struggle with wrong desires, giving us encouragement to keep fighting, and it dismantles the “perfect Christian aura” that we love to present and protect.

Some of you grew up in homes or churches where it seemed that you were the only person who ever struggled with sin, and that often leads to giving up or resentment. And I would like to encourage you to not repeat the same mistake. Embrace what Paul says here and be a follower of Jesus who is real – really honest and really righteous.

Romans 7:21-25 is extremely helpful because it assesses what is really happening inside the heart of the follower of Jesus as we wrestle and battle with sin. It gives us categories to understand ourselves, and it gives us a framework for fighting: don’t be alarmed at wicked desires that come out of nowhere, expect a battle and fight hard to win!

2) Desperate Rejoicing in Deliverance (vv. 24-25a)

The second thing that emerges in this text is a desperate cry and an expression of gratitude for the deliverance that comes through Jesus Christ. Paul momentarily resolves the tension that he has created in verses 21-23 regarding the struggle between the inward and the outward man.

But first we hear a gut-wrenching cry of frustration and alarm: *“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?”* (v. 24) Paul is lamenting and groaning (see 8:23) under the weight of what he has just described and the struggle with his fallen humanity. The New Living

Translation renders this verse as “Oh what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?” Paul is weary of the battle.

The Greek word “wretched” is used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament for ruined lands and devastated countries (see Micah 2:4, Joel 1:10, and Jeremiah 4:20). In other literature, the word was used for men toiling in quarries, for the fatigue of long marches, the effects of war or the results of a plague. I think you get the point. For Paul, this emotionally charged word is fitting in light of what he feels. As he looks at the tension within him and the constant battle between these two competing laws, he is dismayed. There is no hope in himself. In fact, it seems the more that Paul describes and analyzes his condition, the more concerned he becomes.

I read a great comment on Paul’s concern that I think is very helpful and insightful:

“The farther men advance in the Christian life, and the more the mature their discipleship, the clearer becomes their perception of the heights to which call God calls them, and the more painfully sharp their consciousness of the distance between what they ought, and want to be, and what they are.”³

I have found it to be paradoxically true that the more I have walked with the Lord, the more I’ve experienced life, and the more I understand myself, the more alarmed I’ve become over my own sinfulness. My history with me is not good. It seems true that the more godly a person is, the more clearly one can see his or her guilt. I knew I was a sinner at age 7, but I know it at a much deeper level at 43.

Gratefully, Paul does not leave us there. He makes a beautiful turn from lamenting over the struggle with sin to rejoicing in the hope that comes through the person and work of Jesus. Notice that he begins verse 25 with worship and gratitude. He could have simply answered the question in verse 24 with a theological statement. Instead he says, “Thanks be to God!” It is statement of joyful celebration of the deliverance that comes through Jesus.

Do not miss the fact that Paul swings from two extreme statements. On the one hand, he is dismayed over the struggle that he see, and he longs for ultimate deliverance. And yet, on the other hand, he is filled with gratitude and joy for what God has done for him. Paul was sorrowful yet rejoicing (2 Cor. 6:10); he was groaning under the weight of sin yet hopeful in God’s plan of redemption (Rom. 8:23-24). This is what true Christianity is all about. It involves a realistic outlook on the brokenness of life, a level of sorrow at the consequences of sin, and deep unsettledness that things are not right in the world. And yet there is hope because of what could happen if the gospel were to take root. Christians are neither pessimists or idealists; they are weeping worshipers. Christianity embraces both the brokenness of the world and the hope that comes through Christ.

Paul’s worship and his hope are based on the important phrase “through Christ Jesus our Lord.” These five words capture the essence of the gospel and the message of the book of Romans. Let

³ Robert Mounce, *Romans: The New American Commentary*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1995), 166. Quoting Cranfield.

me give you a high-level summary of the ways that we have seen this theme of “through Christ” in the book of Romans. Let these verses remind you of the glory of being “in Christ.” This is our hope!

- We are justified by grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24)
- Righteousness will be counted to us who believe in him...(Romans 4:23)
- We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1)
- Through him we have obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand (Romans 5:2)
- We are justified through his blood and saved from wrath by him (Romans 5:9)
- We rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ by whom we have now received reconciliation (Romans 5:11)
- Grace reigns through righteousness, leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:21)
- We were buried with Christ and we were raised with him so that we can walk in newness of life (Romans 6:1-4)
- While the wages of sin is death, the free gift is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 6:23)
- There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)
- The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:2)
- If Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness (Romans 8:10)
- We are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Romans 8:37)
- Neither death nor life, angels nor rulers, things present nor things to come, no powers, or height or depth or anything in creation will be able to separate us from the love that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38)

Why do we have such verses and so many of them in the Bible? Why do we have these “fighter verses?” Because we live in the midst of a broken world, broken bodies and broken desires, deliverance through Christ is possible, and it is our hope! As we wrestle with the reality of a world and a heart that is divided, we refuse to give up and give in by looking to Jesus who alone is able to help us now and who is able to save us eternally. We are desperately rejoicing in Christ’s deliverance. We are weeping worshipers.

Now it would seem that this text should end at verse 24. Paul has walked through the battle that he sees within himself, and he has resolved it by pointing us to the ultimate solution, which comes through Jesus. With that kind of thought, we could ride off into the spiritual sunset. At least until the next wicked thought flashes across our minds or we are faced with another substantial temptation three seconds later.

I love the fact that Paul does not end Romans 7 with an overly triumphal theme because it is simply more realistic, and it helps us set our expectations for what it means to be a Christian in the real world. This brings us to our third and final reality when it comes to the battle on the inside.

3) Living in Tension (v. 25b)

This glorious and important text ends in tension! Don't miss this fact. Paul ends his treatment of (in my view) the Christian life and the hope of righteous by providing a conclusion that does not feel like much of a conclusion. Or is it?

He says "So then" which is a marker for a summary statement. Romans 7:25b is the concluding restatement of Paul's observation in verse 21 that when he wants to do right evil lies very close at hand. In other words after Paul assesses himself and after he rejoices in deliverance through Jesus, he concludes that there is a real and difficult tension.

Look at what he says: "I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." (v. 25b) What is Paul saying here?

First, he is acknowledging that there is two-sided battle that is simply a part of his existence as a Christian. He is a divided man. Part of him wants to do what is right. Another part of him wants to do what is wrong.

Second, Paul talks about two laws. The law of God is set against the law of sin. Essentially, these represent two opposing ways of living. The law of God is the righteous, good, and holy commands from God. And the law of sin is anything contrary to the law of God. They could not be any more different.

Third, Paul identifies the location of the law of God as the mind and the location of the law of sin as his flesh. Now he is not creating a hard and fast dichotomy between his mind and his flesh as if his mind is good and his flesh is bad. What he is saying is simply that he has every mental and intentional desire to do what is right and serve the law of God. But the best intentions and best desires still have to be lived out. And that is not a simple or easy task.

Being a Christian involves right thinking and training your mind on the right objects of affection. If you fail to do this, the right actions will never follow. But setting the mind on the right things will only work if you then do battle with the actions that must follow. And what a fight this can be! Right thinking precedes right actions. But it is often the case that a battle also precedes right actions.

Listen! The Christian life is a battle – a struggle on the inside to bend your mind and shape your life in accordance with the heart of God. While there are victories – real and substantial – there is no moment when you are not in a battle. Defeat begins when you start to coast and the gravitational pull of the downward escalator begins to have its effect on you. The vision of the Christian life is to keep walking up the escalator.

In Romans 8 we will see the way in which God has helped us by the provision of the Spirit. We are called to set our minds on the things of the Spirit (Rom. 8:5), to walk by the Spirit (Rom. 8:13), to be assured that we are the children of God by the Spirit (Rom. 8:16), and to know that the Spirit is interceding for us as we keep walking (Rom. 8:26).

So God has not left us to walk up the escalator in our own power or to walk alone. He has provided the powerful presence of his son by the Holy Spirit to encourage us, enable us, empower us, and preserve us all the way to the end. But the key is to keep walking.

Is that your vision of Christianity? Do you expect there to be a long, hard-fought battle? Are you in this struggle for the long haul? Are you still fighting, still setting the mind on the right things, and asking God to help you bend your life to his will?

I love that Paul leaves this chapter with the real tension of what it means to Christian. We are a people who have been gloriously saved, and yet there is a real battle that must address every single day of our lives. Through Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, it is a battle that we will ultimately win. But in the meantime, we are called to fight and fight and fight. And never give up.

We must keep on walking!

One of great songs on our IGNITE album really captures this. "I'll Keep on Walking" is how we are going to end our service today. As Eric leads us and as we sing along I want to invite you to recommit your heart to "keep on walking." Even if the darkness is thick today and if you can't see where God is right now, you need to keep walking. If your high places and idols are haunting you, use this time to reach out to the Lord.

And ask him to help you keep on walking...to keep on knocking...until you find peace with him.

© College Park Church

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce this material in any format provided that you do not alter the content in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: by Mark Vroegop. © College Park Church - Indianapolis, Indiana. www.yourchurch.com