

## Should Sin Frustrate Christians?

Scripture: Romans 7

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### The Condition

**For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. (7:14)**

The conjunction **for** carries the idea of *because* and indicates that Paul is not introducing a new subject but is giving a defense of what he has just said. He begins by again affirming **that the Law** is not the problem, because it **is spiritual**. Salvation by grace through faith does not replace or devalue **the Law**, because the law was never a means of salvation. As observed previously, Hebrews 11 and many other passages of Scripture make clear that the only means of salvation has always been the provision and power of God's grace working through the channel of man's faith.

**"But I,"** Paul continues, **"am still of the flesh.** I am still earth-bound and mortal." It is important to note that the apostle does not say he is still *in the flesh* but that he is still **of** it. He has already explained that believers are no longer "in the flesh" (7:5; cf. 8:8), no longer bound by and enslaved to its sinfulness as they once were. The idea is that, although believers are not still in the flesh, the flesh is still in them. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul describes the Christians there as "men of flesh ... babes in Christ" (1 Cor. 3:1). As the apostle confesses later in the present passage, using the present tense, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (7:18). Even as an apostle of Jesus Christ he possessed a remnant of the sinfulness that characterizes all human beings, including those who, in Christ, are saved from its total mastery and its condemnation.

But the Christian's spirit, his inner self, has been completely and forever cleansed of sin. It is for that reason that, at death, he is prepared to enter God's presence in perfect holiness and purity. Because his spiritual rebirth has already occurred, his flesh, with its remaining sin, is left behind.

Every well-taught and honest Christian is aware that his life falls far short of God's perfect standard of righteousness and that he falls back into sin with disturbing frequency. He is no longer of his former father, the devil (John 8:44); he no longer loves the world (1 John 2:15); and he is no longer sin's slave-but he is still subject to its deceit and is still attracted by many of its allurements. Yet the Christian cannot be happy with his sin, because it is contrary to his new nature and because he

knows that it grieves his Lord as well as his own conscience.

The story is told of an unbeliever who, when he heard of the gospel of salvation by grace alone, commented, "If I could believe that salvation is free and is received only by faith, I would believe and then take my fill of sin." The person witnessing to him wisely replied, "How much sin do you think it would take to fill a true Christian to satisfaction?" His point was that a person who has not lost his appetite for sin cannot be truly converted.

The phrase **sold into bondage to sin** has caused many interpreters to miss Paul's point and to take those words as evidence the person being talked about is not a Christian. But Paul uses a similar phrase in verse 23, where he makes clear that only his members, that is, his fleshly body, is "a prisoner of the law of sin." That lingering part of his unredeemed humanness is still sinful and consequently makes warfare against the new and redeemed part of him, which is no longer sin's prisoner and is now its avowed enemy.

Paul's strong words about his condition do not indicate he was only partially saved at the time but rather emphasize that sin can continue to have dreadful power in a Christian's life and is not to be trifled with. The believer's battle with sin is strenuous and life-long. And as Paul also points out later in this chapter, even a Christian can truthfully say, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (Rom. 7:18). *In himself*, that is, in his remaining fleshly being, a Christian is no more holy or sinless than he was before salvation.

Probably many years after he became a believer, David prayed, "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy loving-kindness; according to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (Ps. 51:1–3). The rendering in the *New International Version* of verse 5 of that psalm gives helpful insight: "Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." David well understood the truth the apostle John would later proclaim to believers: "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us" (1 John 1:8–10).

It was in that humble spirit that Isaiah, although a prophet of God, confessed as he stood before the heavenly throne: "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5). Like Isaiah, the more a Christian draws near to God, the more clearly he perceives the Lord's holiness and his own sinfulness.

The commentator C. E. B. Cranfield observed, “The more seriously a Christian strives to live from grace and to submit to the discipline of the gospel, the more sensitive he becomes to ... the fact that even his very best acts and activities are disfigured by the egotism which is still powerful within him—and no less evil because it is often more subtly disguised than formerly” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975], 1:358).

Thomas Scott, an evangelical preacher of the Church of England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, wrote that when a believer “compares his actual attainments with the spirituality of the law, and with his own desire and aim to obey it, he sees that he is yet, to a great degree, carnal in the state of his mind, and under the power of evil propensities, from which (like a man sold for a slave) he cannot wholly emancipate himself. He is carnal in exact proportion to the degree in which he falls short of perfect conformity to the law of God” (cited in Geoffrey B. Wilson, *Romans: A Digest of Reformed Comment* [London: Banner of Truth, 1969], p. 121).

Sin is so wretched and powerful that, even in a redeemed person, it hangs on and contaminates his living and frustrates his inner desire to obey the will of God.

The Proof

**For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. (7:15)**

Paul’s proof that sin still indwelt him was in the reality that **that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do.**

*Ginōskō* (**understand**) has the basic meaning of taking in knowledge in regard to something or someone, knowledge that goes beyond the merely factual. By extension, the term frequently was used of a special relationship between the person who knows and the object of the knowledge. It was often used of the intimate relationship between husband and wife and between God and His people. Paul uses the term in that way to represent the relationship between the saved and the Savior: “Now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again?” (Gal. 4:9). By further extension, the word was used in the sense of approving or accepting something or someone. “If anyone loves God,” Paul says, “he is known [accepted] by Him” (1 Cor. 8:3).

That seems to be the meaning here and is consistent with the last half of the sentence. Paul found himself **doing** things he did not approve of. It was not that he was unable to do a particular good thing but that when he saw the fullness and grandeur of God's law, he was not able to measure up completely. It was not that he could never accomplish any good at all, nor that he could never faithfully obey God. The apostle was rather expressing an inner turmoil of the most profound kind, of sincerely desiring in his heart to fulfill the spirit as well as the letter of the law (see 7:6) but realizing that he was unable to live up to the Lord's perfect standards and his own heart's desire.

It was not Paul's conscience that was bothering him because of some unforgiven sin or selfish reluctance to follow the Lord. It was his inner man, recreated in the likeness of Christ and indwelt by His Spirit, that now could see something of the true holiness, goodness, and glory of God's law and was grieved at his least infraction or falling short of it. In glaring contrast to his preconversion self-satisfaction in thinking himself blameless before God's law (Phil. 3:6), Paul now realized how wretchedly short of God's perfect law he lived, even as a Spirit-indwelt believer and an apostle of Jesus Christ.

That spirit of humble contrition is a mark of every spiritual disciple of Christ, who cries out, "Lord, I can't be all you want me to be, I am unable to fulfill your perfect, holy, and glorious law." In great frustration and sorrow he painfully confesses with Paul, **I am not practicing what I would like to do.**

The Source

**But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwell-s me. (7:16–17)**

Paul now deals with the reason, or the source, of his inability to perfectly fulfill the law, and he begins by staunchly defending the divine standard. "Whatever the reason for my doing **the very thing I do not wish to do,**" he says, "it is not the law's fault. **I agree with the Law** in every detail. My new self, the new creation that placed God's incorruptible and eternal seed within me, is wholeheartedly **confessing** that the law **is good**. In my redeemed being I sincerely long to honor the law and to fulfill it perfectly."

Every true Christian has in his heart a sense of the moral excellence of God's **Law**. And the more mature he becomes in Christ, the more fully he perceives and lauds the law's goodness, holiness,

and glory. The more profoundly he is committed to the direction of the Holy Spirit in his life, the deeper his love for the Lord Jesus Christ becomes, the deeper his sense of God's holiness and majesty becomes, and the greater will be his longing to fulfill God's law.

What then, is the problem? What is the source of our failure to live up to God's standards and our own inner desires? "**Now** it is **no longer I** who is **the one doing it**," Paul explains, "**but sin which indwell-s me.**"

Paul was not trying to escape personal responsibility. He was not mixing the pure gospel with Greek philosophical dualism, which later plagued the early church and is popular in some church circles today. The apostle was not teaching that the spirit world is all good and the physical world all evil, as the influential Gnostic philosophy of his day contended. Proponents of that ungodly school of thought invariably develop moral insensitivity. They justify their sin by claiming it is entirely the product of their physical bodies, which are going to be destroyed anyway, and that the inner, spiritual person remains innately good and is untouched by and unaccountable for anything the body does.

The apostle had already confessed his own complicity in his sin. "I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin," he said of his present earthly life as a believer (7:14). If the "real" inner Christian were not responsible for sin in his life, he would have no reason to confess it and have it cleansed and forgiven. As noted above, John makes clear that a claim of sinlessness makes God a liar and proves that His Word is not in us (1 John 1:10). A true believer is continually recognizing and confessing his sin (v. 9).

Throughout this chapter Paul has spoken in personal, nontechnical terms. He has not been drawing precise theological distinctions between the old preconversion life of a believer and his new life in Christ. He was certainly not teaching that a Christian has two natures or two personalities. There is just one saved person, just as previously there was one lost person.

In verse 17, however, Paul becomes more technical and theologically precise in his terminology. There had been a radical change in his life, as there has been in the life of every Christian. *Ouketi* (**no longer**) is a negative adverb of time, indicating a complete and permanent change. Paul's new **I**, his new inner self, **no longer** approves of the sin that still clings to him through the flesh. Whereas before his conversion his inner self approved of the sin he committed, **now** his inner self, a completely new inner self, strongly disapproves. He explains the reason for that change in his letter to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered

Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20).

After salvation, sin, like a deposed and exiled ruler, no longer reigns in a person’s life, but it manages to survive. It no longer resides in the innermost self but finds its residual dwelling in his flesh, in the unredeemed humanness that remains until a believer meets the Lord at the Rapture or at death. “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh,” Paul further explained to the Galatians; “for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Gal. 5:17).

In this life, Christians are somewhat like an unskilled artist who beholds a beautiful scene that he wants to paint. But his lack of talent prevents him from doing the scene justice. The fault is not in the scene, or in the canvas, the brushes, or the paint but in the painter. That is why we need to ask the master painter, Jesus Christ, to place His hand over ours in order to paint the strokes that, independent of Him, we could never produce. Jesus said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The only way we can live victoriously is to walk by Christ’s own Spirit and in His power, in order not to “carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).

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