

Spirit versus Flesh: A Civil War

Turn in your Bibles to Romans 7 again, and we will wrap up this chapter today with a complex passage in which we get a very personal look into the life of one of the godliest men to ever walk the earth. There is some controversy among scholars as to whether he is describing his life before his salvation or after his salvation in these verses. If we pay attention to the verbs as I read through this you will see that they are almost all in the present tense. This is indicative of the fact that he is talking about his life in the present, and of course Paul was a saved man when he wrote this letter to the church in Rome. Keep in mind the chapter from Philippians that we read earlier, particularly verses 12-13 **Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. 13 Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet.** Paul does not consider himself to be perfect, he still has a sin nature, and here in Romans 7 he is talking about how sin operates in the life of the believer. He wants us to know our enemy so we can defeat him. So, here is Romans 7:14-25. **14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. 15 For what 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. 16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. 17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. 19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. 20 But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. 21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? 25 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.**

Pray

There are definitely some traps to fall into in this passage if it is interpreted incorrectly. We need to tread oh so carefully through this so as to not come to wrong conclusions, because they could have disastrous effects upon our Christian lives. If we think that Paul is talking about his life before he was saved we could conclude that this doesn't apply to us now, and we could just blow it off. In that case we would be missing out on the reality that we do still sin, and we do still have a sin nature that we must deal with. Another possible trap to fall into is thinking that this is a license to sin. After all, we really can't help it, it's just who we are. Nothing could be further from the truth in that regard. Paul has already addressed that potential position when he said in 6:1 **What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?** If you have paid attention at all in these sermons you know the answer to that question. May it never

be! We are not to continue in sin. We are not to use our sin nature as a license to sin, because we just can't help it. If we continue in sin we are not a clean vessel, and God will not use us. That is what sanctification is all about. It is about holy living so that we can bear fruit for God. That is the whole reason He saved us if you remember back to 7:4 **you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.** So, let's keep in mind that Paul is talking about the Christian life here. This whole section, chapters 6-8, remember, is about sanctification. If we do that I think it will be clear that Paul is talking about how sin works in us after we are saved.

Vacation

Remember last time we talked about the deception of sin and how sin, the sin nature uses the Law of God to produce sin in our lives, particularly in our minds. We know that this battle that we have with sin is either won or lost in the mind. Battling sin in your life is similar to any endeavor that takes some amount of planning. We make a plan for the simplest of tasks in our lives. If we are taking a vacation we plan when we are going to leave, where we are going to go, how we are going to get there, where we will stay at our destination, how long we are going to stay, and what sort of activities we will do when we get there. And all this is just for going on vacation. Yet, we will often times go about our day without thinking how to combat sin in our lives at all. We just take the temptations on as they come, and try to battle them when they are right in front of us. Well, if you are in the position that the temptation is right in front of you and you aren't prepared, you are well on your way to losing the battle. You need to have some sort of plan to escape the temptation before you get there. Imagine packing up to go on vacation without doing any planning. Ok kids let's get in the car we are going on vacation! Great, they will say, where are we going? I don't know just get in the car. Well, what kind of clothes do we need, is it warm or cold where we are going? I don't know, let's just go. How long are we going for? Who cares! Let's just go have fun! That type of planning just wouldn't work for something like a vacation, how could we possibly think it will work in battling our number one enemy of sin? It won't work; we need to know what we are dealing with in order to know how to live a victorious, sanctified life. In order to make a plan, first we need to know how sin operates. And last time we saw that the sin nature uses the Law to produce sin in our lives, but that does not mean that the Law is bad. The Law is actually the perfect will of God for our lives, and it shows us how to live the way God wants us to. And here in our section today, Paul is going to compare the Law and Spiritual things to evil, sinful things. He is going to show the battle that goes on in the life of the Christian after we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Law versus Flesh

The first thing we see is the spiritual nature of the Law, verse 14 says **For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.** The Law of God is not just a couple of stone tablets, or not just some words written on a page. The Law of God shows us His heart and desire for our lives. It shows us the kind of person that God wants us to be. The Law is a spiritual concept. The Law is not like the laws

that the government passes. Those laws do not have a spiritual connotation. If we do not follow them we will incur some sort of punishment, if we are caught. But, that is where it ends. Now, God does want us to be upstanding citizens, and follow the laws of the nation we are in, as long as they don't violate His principles, but that is a different matter. The actual laws of a nation do nothing for us spiritually. However, the Law of God is spiritual. It has an affect on our spiritual lives. Remember the Law is all about loving God, and loving our neighbor. The reason why the Law is spiritual is because if we violate those commandments we are spiritually separated from God. We become spiritually dead when we violate God's Law. In fact, not only is the Law of God spiritual, but the whole Word of God is spiritual. We know this because it was given by the Holy Spirit, this makes it spiritual. 2 Tim 3:16 says **All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; 17 so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.** That word "inspired" literally means God-breathed, or God inspired. 2 Peter 1:20-21 also shows that the Word of God came through the Holy Spirit **But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of ones own interpretation, 21 for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.** The fact that the Word came from God makes it spiritual as well. We have the words of life in this book, the Bible, it is God's word to us, and that makes it spiritual. But, Paul contrasts the Law of God, or the Word of God, with himself in the second half of the verse. The fact that the Law of God is spiritual is not all that there is to it. It says **but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.** This is the first indication that Paul is talking about himself in the present tense, as a Christian man. I am of flesh. This harkens back to Romans 5:12 **Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.** We all have a sin nature, and we cannot get rid of it, we can only contain it, and keep it in check, but it is still there. That is what Paul is saying here, the Law of God is spiritual, it shows us how to live, how to be spiritually right with God, but I am of flesh, I have a sin nature, and not only that, but I am sold into bondage to sin. Now, this is really interesting. The word for sold is not in the present tense, but rather it is in the perfect tense. This means that it was completed in the past, but the effects of which are still being felt in the present. This tense focuses more on the result of the action, rather than the past action. So, Paul is saying that he was sold into bondage to sin in the past, basically that he was born with a sin nature, which came through Adam, like we saw in chapter 5, David said in the Psalm 51 that he was conceived in sin. So what we have here in verse 14 is, the Law is spiritual, it is God-breathed, it is the very words of life for us, but we are of flesh, or carnal, like the KJV says, we have a sin nature. God's word is spiritual life; on the other hand, we are of flesh, spiritually dead. This is the contrast that we will see throughout this whole section, the Spirit versus the flesh.

The Three Do's

Now as we move on look at verse 15. **For what 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.** This is the conflict stated for us right up front, the old nature, versus the new nature. If you are an unsaved person, you do not have the new nature to struggle

against the old nature. All people do have a conscience, but that is different than what Paul is describing here. People have the ability to discern between right and wrong, but Paul is talking about the desire of his heart here, he is talking about the difference between his inner man, where the Holy Spirit dwells, and his flesh, where the sin nature dwells. It is important to realize that the flesh is not necessarily our actual body. That is what the Gnostics thought. They thought that all flesh was evil, and therefore Jesus could not have had a physical body, so they concluded that He was some sort of aberration, or just a spiritual being. That is incorrect, and misses the point completely. These are spiritual concepts. The sin nature is a part of who we are, it is in our makeup; it effects the way that we think, so it is not just contained in our fleshly body. My theory, and it is exactly that, just my theory, is that the sin nature is in our DNA; that is how it has been passed on since Adam. But, you won't find that in the Bible, so don't hold me to it. We have to use these analogies for our finite minds to be able to understand them at all. Similar to the way we have to come up with analogies to comprehend the Trinity. We have a hard time understanding how God can be three persons and yet one God, so we come up with ways to try to explain it, but in the end, it takes faith, our finite minds cannot fully comprehend an infinite God. And, it is the same with this concept. If we are born again of the Spirit, we have the Holy Spirit in us, our new nature, but this does not negate the fact that we also still have our old nature that we inherited from Adam.

In this verse we have three different words that are translated as "do" in the English. It is critical to see the different words here to really understand what is being said. It will make it a little more clear, especially if we see what the first "do" in this verse really means. It says, **For what I am doing, I do not understand**. This word for "doing", *κατεργάζομαι*, is the same word that was translated as "producing" back in verse 8, where it said **But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind**. So, what Paul is talking about here is the same thing that he was talking about in verse 8. Literally in verse 15, he is talking about what is being produced in his mind. What is being produced, I do not understand. This is absolutely essential to see, because he isn't talking about committing physical sins with this word. He is talking about where sin is produced, and like we have seen before, that is in the mind. He certainly isn't saying that he is going around committing sins, and he just doesn't understand what is happening, that he is out of control, or has no control over his actions. He is talking about what is going on in his mind here, where the sin is produced, this is important to see now, because this word comes up again later in the passage. But, this producing does lead to sin, as we saw last time also, in that the sin nature deceives us, and through the commandment kills us spiritually. The sin nature produces the sin, but then we practice it, or do it, and that is what we see in the rest of the verse, **for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate**. There are two more do's in this part of the verse in the Greek. Literally, the second half of this verse says, "for I am not practicing what I would like, but I am doing that which I hate." The first do in this part of the verse is translated as "practice", and that means just that. It is like practicing the violin, or practicing a sport, or a new language. You aren't really using the skill for its intended purpose when you practice; rather you are trying to make it better. For example, Michael practices the violin for hours every day, but the practicing is not what the violin was made for; it wasn't just made to be practiced, it was made to entertain other people with. So, what Paul is saying here is that because of the sin that is

produced by the sin nature in his flesh, he is not practicing the way he would like, rather, he is doing things he hates. The third “do” here is ποιῶ, and this is like our word "do". It means to make something, or to do something. This would be like the performance with the violin. The violinist practices so that he can perform, and this last do is the performance. You can really see the back and forth here between the two natures. "For what I (in my sin nature) am producing, I (in my new nature) do not understand." There is a conflict here, and that is what the rest of the passage is about. And we need to keep these different words that are translated as "do" in mind as we go along. We also need to see the difference between when he is talking about his new nature, and when he is talking about his old nature. I know this is deep stuff, but we need to understand this, it is really important for our Christian lives.

In verse 16 we get a real look into the heart of Paul, where he says, **But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.** If I do the thing that I don't want to do, then I agree with the Law of God, and that the Law of God is good. Paul could honestly say that when he did sin that he did not want to sin. Can we say the same thing? Can you honestly say in your heart of hearts that you do not want to do whatever sin you do? This is why the Word says that we are to examine ourselves. 2 Corinthians 13:5 says **Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?** Test yourself to make sure that you really don't want to do the sin that you do. If you come to the conclusion that you would rather do the sin than obey God, then you have a serious problem, but if you, like Paul here can honestly say that you don't want to do the sin that you do, then you are in the faith, and you agree that God's law is good. This word for "agree" is an interesting one as well. It is similar to the word symphony, in fact that is just what it sounds like in the Greek except the n sounds like an m, σύμφημι. So, if I agree with the Law it is like being in an orchestra with God. All the instruments in the orchestra play the same piece of music. All the instruments are not the same, like we are not all the same, but they are all playing in the same key, and under the direction of the same composer, and that makes a symphony. And, that is the way we are if we agree that our sin is bad, and God's law, or the way that God wants us to live is good. We should test ourselves often to make sure that we can honestly answer this question. We need to honestly be able to say that the sin that we do is not what we want to do.

Then, if we can honestly say that we do not want to do the sins that we do, then we can apply verse 17 to ourselves. **So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.** The only way that we can honestly say that we do not want to do the sins that we do is if we have been born again of the Spirit. This being born again is what gives us the new nature; this is the only way that the Holy Spirit can indwell us. If we have put our faith in Christ, then we can honestly say that we don't want to do the sins that we do, then we see that Paul says here that our new nature no longer is the one “doing” the sin. Here again we see καταργάζομαι, or the word that was translated as produced up in verse 8. This is important to see, because he isn't saying that he is not responsible for his sin here. We could easily conclude that without understanding just what is being said here. So, Paul is saying here that I, in my new nature, am not the one producing the sin. The old nature, the flesh, the sin nature, is the one producing the sin, my new nature, the one I got when I was born again does not produce the sin, the old

nature, my fleshly nature, the one that I inherited from Adam produces the sin. He isn't talking about the actual commission of sin here, he is talking about the producing of sin in verse 17. This doesn't absolve us from the sins that we do commit, it just says that if we are saved, if we have the new nature, if we are in Christ, then our new nature does not produce sin, the old nature does.

Verse 18 continues that thought, and expands it in more detail. **For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.** He says that nothing good dwells in him, and immediately qualifies that by saying in his flesh, that is, in his old nature, the old man, the nature that he, and all of us, inherited from Adam. There is nothing good in our old nature. Now the word "dwells" is important. He doesn't say that my whole being is completely bad. Our flesh can be used for good deeds or bad deeds; really it is neutral. Our body is a tool that can be used for good or evil, like the example of a gun that I used in an earlier message. Guns can be used for good or bad, they are neutral in and of themselves. They don't cause crime; rather criminals use guns to commit crimes. Or, on the other hand, good people can use guns to defend themselves or their homes, or their country. This is the way our bodies are; they can be used for good or bad. But, what *dwells* in our flesh is bad, this is the sin nature. The willing is present in him, but the doing of the good is not. Again here we have *κατεργάζομαι*. The willing to do good is there, but he is not able to produce good in his flesh. This is reminiscent of Jesus in the Garden with Peter, James and John when He found them asleep. He told them "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak". They had the will do it, but their flesh was unable to do it because it is sin tainted. The willing is present within Paul here, because he is indwelt by the Spirit, but the producing of the good is not. This is why we have to walk under the influence of the Spirit, we do not have the good within ourselves. We have sin, the sin nature within ourselves. We must rely on the Spirit to produce anything good through us. That is really key to see in our battle against sin, we do not produce the good, only the Holy Spirit can produce good, and He produces the good, we do not do it ourselves, like Paul says here we can't produce the good in our flesh. We can only produce sin in our sin nature.

Then in verse 19 he restates the hypothetical statement of verse 16 and applies it to himself. Verse 16 was **But if I do the very thing I do not want to do.** Now here in verse 19 he says **For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.** So, in his heart of hearts Paul can say here that when he sins he does not want to do it. He really wants to do good all the time, to God, and to all people, but instead he does things that he does not want to do. This is the committing of sins here in verse 19 that he is talking about. He wants to do good always, but instead he does the bad that he doesn't want to. Again, this gets back to our heart condition. Do we really want to do good? We need to make sure that we do, and confess it as sin and repent when we don't. Verse 20 is like verse 17, just applied to Paul's life as well, similar to the way verses 16 and 19 are related. Verse 20 says **But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.** Here we see a couple of "do's" again, and it is critical to see the difference between the two. So, he says here, if I am doing, that is the *ποιῶ*, actually doing what I don't want to do deep down in my heart, then I am no longer the one "producing" it, but sin which dwells in me. The second "do" is *κατεργάζομαι* again. So, he is restating the principle here of the

sin nature producing the sin in him, that is in his flesh. The sin nature works to produce the sin in us. Notice that the word *if* is here in verse 20. If I don't want to do the things that I do, then I am no longer the one producing it. The only way we can truly not want to do those things is if we have been born again, then we are no longer the one producing it, but it is the sin nature. Only if we have accepted Christ in faith are we no longer held accountable for our sin. Only if we have accepted Him are we no longer the one producing the sin, but the fault is put on the sin nature. This is a conditional statement here. If you have not put your faith in Christ, then you are still the one producing the sin. The "old nature" is the only one that you have, you do not have the new nature, you have not died to sin, you have not been buried with Christ, and you have not been raised to walk in the newness of life. If you have put your faith in Christ, then you have all those things, and you are not held accountable for producing the sin in your life, but rather the sin nature is.

The Two Laws

Now, we come to the final section of the passage where Paul describes the two laws that war within us. Here we have the Law of God and the law of sin. This is similar to the contrast that he showed between Christ and Adam back in chapter 5. That chapter was all about how people in general are either in Christ through faith, or they are in Adam; their natural state. Well, these last few verses of chapter 7 put that on a personal level. Here we see how the Law of God, and the principle of sin really wage war against one another within the individual. In verse 20 we saw that the sin, which dwells in the person, produces sinful actions. So, now Paul applies it to himself, and notice that all these verbs are in the present tense. Really all the verbs in this passage have been except in verse 14. We see in verses 21 and 22 this **I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man.** That word for "principle" is the same root used for the word law. So, it is a definite, proven thing that Paul has evil present in him; this is the sin nature. He wants to produce good, because he is saved, and bearing fruit is what we are saved to do. All he wants to do is good, but he finds that sin is still being produced within him. He knows that he wants to do good, because he joyfully concurs with the Law of God in his inner man. When Paul put his head down to sleep at night he could rest easy because he had a clear conscience. He knew in his heart that he was right with God. The word for "in" is also an interesting one here in verse 22. It doesn't just mean *in*, but it means throughout, or deep within. So, Paul joyfully concurs with the Law of God with his whole being, his inner man. Incidentally this is where the Spirit is as well. He is talking about within his new nature. Can we say this as well? Do we joyfully concur with the Law of God throughout our whole inner self? Or are we holding on to some sin in our life that is just too satisfying? If we are holding onto something it really does need to be dealt with. This is the sanctification process. We aren't perfect in our lives, since we do have the sin nature still within us. But, when we see areas that are deficient it should be our hearts desire to correct those areas, and joyfully concur with the Law of God. Then in verse 23 we see the other law, **but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.** There is a different law within

Paul here that wages war against the Law of God that he has in his mind. Here Paul is using the metaphor of the body versus the mind. He is saying that the sin nature lives in the flesh and it wars against the new nature that dwells in the mind. This makes it easier for us to understand, but again it does not mean that our flesh is evil. Notice though the emphasis on the fact that the battle is in the mind, and importantly, that Paul has the law of God in his mind. This is where the battle is fought, in the mind. We need to have God's Word in our minds in order to defeat our enemy, sin. Psalm 40:8 that we read earlier says **I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart.** Psalm 119 is a great place to go to see what our attitude should be towards God's law and God's word. Ps 119:9-11 is a particularly good passage for this, the ESV says **How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. 10 With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! 11 I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.** We battle sin with God's Word, just like we saw Christ do last time when He was tempted by Satan. Here we see that we need to do the exact same thing. We need to know God's Word and have it ready like a sword to do battle against sin. In the armor of God, found in Ephesians 6, the only offensive weapon is the sword, which is the word of God. We fight sin with the Word.

Conclusion

Then we see that Paul is just exasperated when he considers his own personal sinful estate. The KJV puts it this way **O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?** Paul here is lamenting his own helplessness in the face of sin. Within our own flesh, by our own power, we do not have the ability to fight off sin. Our old nature cannot produce the good, remember. That is why Paul asks, who will deliver him from the body of this death, this body that is held prisoner by sin, this sinful flesh that has no good thing dwelling in it. It is helpless and hopeless in and of itself. However, we are not left alone in this struggle. Christ has provided a way, He is the Way. Through Jesus Christ our Lord we can have victory over sin. Verse 25 says, **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.** Here again Paul makes the point that in his new nature he can serve the law of God with his mind, however as a reminder he includes the fact that his old nature, the old man still serves the law of sin. We will never be rid of this battle as long as we reside in this flesh, in this body of death as Paul puts it here. It is a body of death because it will die, and it dies because of sin. But, we do have a hope for the future. If we are in Christ we have one of two things to look forward to, either we die in this body, and if we are in Christ, or born again, we will be present with the Lord. 2 Cor 5:6-8 says that when we are absent from this body we are present with the Lord. The other possibility is that we will be here at the time when Christ comes again, and in the twinkling of an eye we will be changed, and receive a new body, like we read about in our Scripture reading this morning, Phil 3:20 **For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; 21 who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself.** So, this is our hope for the future, eternal

life with Christ in an imperishable body, what a hope that is! And all of us who have put our faith in Christ for our salvation have this hope. But, in the meantime we are to live sanctified lives, we are to live holy lives, and when we do this we will fulfill the reason that Christ saved us in the first place; we will bear fruit for Him. This is quite a battle, it is quite an endeavor to live a victorious life over sin, but it is possible, and frankly it is expected of every believer in Christ. We are all to live holy, sanctified lives, and we can only do that with the help of the Holy Spirit and God's holy Word.