

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, May 5, 1996, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 7:14-25

THE CIVIL WAR INSIDE YOU

If you grasp what we're going to speak about this morning, it's going to save you a lot of confusion and heartache in your Christian life. I think it's true to say that when a person first becomes a Christian everything goes splendidly! You were filled with joy and a new sense of peace. But after a while you start having problems again. Old habits become very alluring again, and you say to yourself, "I thought I was through with that. Maybe I'm not even a Christian." And many believers say, "I want to do what's right, but I just don't seem to have the ability to do what I know is right. Why do I keep on doing what I know is wrong?" Have you ever felt like that? I have. Now this is what Paul is talking about in Romans 7:14-25.

Perhaps you feel that there are two distinct personalities inside you: One that wants to do good, and another that wants to do the very opposite! We've all read Robert Louis Stevenson's novel, The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Part of me really wants to live for Christ, and part of me really doesn't. What's the problem?

In Romans 7 Paul explains that as a Christian you have two natures within you. There is a new nature. In Ephesians 4:24 Paul describes it as "the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness." You were given this new nature when you became a Christian. And this new nature wants to do what's right and to please God. But the Bible says that you also have an old nature, the nature you had before you became a Christian. And it didn't die when you became a believer. You still have it, which means that you have two natures in your life.

Look at Galatians 5:16 which tells us that there is a conflict between these two natures: "So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit..." Now what can we say about the old nature? Two things:

- (a) It always wants to sin; it never wants to do right.
- (b) Your old nature will never change. As long as you live on this earth, you're going to have some of those old desires.

And so you have to learn — how do I win the civil war in my life? In Romans 7 we have the grim portrait of a struggling Christian, and it's Paul's autobiography. I think it's comforting to know that we're not alone because Paul uses some gut-level honesty here. He shares his struggles as he talks about a Christian who tries to live under the law. What does it mean to live under the law? It means trying to please God by your own unaided efforts. We have discovered

already that you just can't do that because it only leads to frustration and defeat. In fact, Paul in this passage shares five feelings, and as we go through them, I think we're going to identify with Paul.

1. Verse 14: "We know that the law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin." The first thing Paul says is this — "I have a problem." It's the problem of these two natures. He says, "Sin wants to dominate my life." Now the key to this passage is the word "I." This word appears 27 times in 12 verses! Paul had an "I" problem! And that's your problem and mine. It's that old nature. It reminds me of the Pogo cartoon that said — "We have found the enemy, and he is us!"

Folks, our biggest problem is not the devil. My biggest problem is "me." My old nature continually wants to do what's wrong. Do you have the same problem? And there is that war in our life. We have a problem!

2. Paul says, "I'm confused." Look at verse 15, "I do not understand what I do." That is very comforting to me — to know that even the great apostle did not always understand why he behaved the way he did. He had two perplexing questions which he asked himself:

- (a) How can I stop doing bad things?
- (b) How can I ever start doing good things?

And he says, "For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate, I do." Did you ever start a day with the best of intentions? And you've said, "God, today is going to be different. Today I'm going to be kind and patient toward that person at work. God, today I'm going to stay on my diet." And that's how you start off; but by bedtime you've fallen on your face a dozen times!

3. In verses 17-20 Paul says, "I'm frustrated." I have the finest intentions, but I just can't seem to pull them off. Nothing seems to change. "As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out."

You remember Peter in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus came and Peter had fallen asleep, and Jesus said, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak." (Matthew 26:41)

Recently I found a story that summarizes Romans 7. I'm going to read it to you. It's from a profoundly theological book called, Frog and Toad Together by Arnold Noble. "Toad baked some cookies. 'These cookies smell good,' said Toad. He ate one. 'And they taste even better,' he said. Toad ran to Frog's house. 'Frog, Frog,' cried Toad, 'taste these cookies that I have made.' Frog ate one of the cookies. 'These are the best cookies I have ever eaten,' said Frog. Frog and Toad ate many cookies, one after another. 'You know, Toad,' said Frog, with his mouth full, 'I think we should stop eating; we will soon be sick!' 'You are right,' said Toad; 'let's eat one last cookie and then we will stop!' Frog and Toad ate one last cookie. There were many cookies left in the bowl. 'Frog,' said Toad, 'let us eat one very last cookie, and then we will stop.' Frog and Toad ate one very last cookie. 'We must stop eating' cried Toad as he ate

another. ‘Yes,’ said Frog, reaching for a cookie; ‘We need will power.’ ‘What is will power?’ asked Toad. ‘Will power is trying hard not to do something you really want to do,’ said Frog. ‘You mean like trying not to eat these cookies?’ asked Toad. ‘Right,’ said Frog. Frog put the cookies in a box. ‘There,’ he said, ‘we will not eat any more cookies.’ ‘But we can open the box,’ said Toad. ‘That is true,’ said Frog. Frog tied some string around the box. ‘There, now we will not eat any more cookies.’ ‘But we can cut the string and open the box,’ said Toad. ‘That is true,’ said Frog. Frog got a ladder. He put the box high up on a shelf. ‘There,’ said Frog, ‘now we will not eat any more cookies.’ ‘But we can climb the ladder, and take the box down from the shelf, and cut the string, and open the box.’ ‘That’s true,’ said Frog. Frog climbed the ladder, took down the box, cut the string, and opened the box. He took the box outside and shouted in a loud voice, ‘Hey, birds; here are cookies.’ Birds came from everywhere. They picked up all the cookies in their beaks and flew away. ‘Now we have no more cookies to eat,’ said Toad sadly; ‘not even one.’ ‘Yes,’ said Frog, ‘but we have lots and lots of will power!’ ‘You may keep it all, Frog,’ said Toad, ‘I’m goin’ home to bake a cake!’”

Now that’s exactly what Paul is talking about in this passage. He says in verse 18, “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.” C. S. Lewis once said that you discover the power of an army, not by surrendering to it, but by trying to resist it. So it is with sin. When you become a Christian and begin to fight sin, you soon discover how fierce a hold it can have upon you. Paul had a problem; he was confused and frustrated; and

4. He says, “I’m in a battle, and I’m losing — I’m getting tired and I feel like giving up.” look at verses 21-23: “So I find this law at work. When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being (that is, my new nature) I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.” He says there is “a law of sin” and it is like the law of gravity, and it pulls you down. You may flap your wings all you want, but you will never get off the ground by your own effort. Do you know that the Holy Spirit is not mentioned once in this passage? Will power is not enough. To be victorious we must have the power of the Holy Spirit as we open up our lives to Him.

5. Paul says, “I feel trapped and condemned.” Look at verse 24: “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Do you know where that phrase comes from? In ancient Rome, when they convicted a murderer, they would sometimes take the body of his victim, lay it on the ground, and then place the murderer on top of that dead, decaying corpse; face to face, body to body, and then bind him with ropes to his victim, and leave him to die of thirst and starvation. Often such a person would go raving mad. Some commentators feel that this was what Paul was referring to here — “Oh wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this corpse?”

And Paul says, “That’s the way I feel. I can’t get rid of my old sin nature.” As long as we live on this earth you will have your sin nature; and the sooner you realize it, the sooner you’ll come to despair; and the sooner you come to despair, the sooner you will come to victory, because Romans 7 is the key to Romans 8.

The problem with most of us is not that we’re too weak; it’s that we are not weak

enough! A man was drowning one day in a river. His wife shouted for help, and a man came running. He stood and watched while the helpless victim went down once, then twice. And finally, as the man was going down for the third time, the rescuer plunged in, swam to him, grabbed him, and towed him to shore. The wife couldn't understand why he waited so long before going to the rescue. But the man quietly replied, "Well, I'm a swimmer, but I'm not that strong a swimmer. Had I gone out before your husband's strength was utterly exhausted, he would have drowned us both. I was waiting until he got weaker, and when he got weak enough, I knew I could save him."

Paul is at the end of his rope and he says, "I'm doomed! What a wretched man I am!" And then he sees a ray of hope. Look what he says: "Who will rescue me?" The answer is in verse 25, "Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Folks, the only way you can live the Christian life is to let Jesus Christ live it through you. You cannot live it in your own strength. The Christian life is not a hard life; it is an impossible life; and the only way you can live it is to let God's power live it through you.

In Romans 8 we're going to see how God answers every one of these feelings that Paul has in Romans 7 — frustration, guilt, condemnation.

Now let's draw some applications, some lessons from all of this:

1. The first lesson I want you to remember is that we have two natures, and these two natures are in constant conflict and even though you are a Christian, you still have a desire to do wrong. We all do, and we shouldn't be shocked when it happens. It's part of my old nature, and it's still there, and these two natures are in conflict.

2. The second lesson we get from Romans 7 is this — you will be powerless to change your old nature. You cannot change your old nature by making New Year's resolutions. "I'm going to be a better person if it kills me." That's what Paul tried. The only living thing that turns over a new leaf successfully is a caterpillar! Paul admits — I desire to do what's right, but I cannot do it." The law is unable to change you, and you will never have any victory in your Christian life until you realize that you can't be a Christian in your own strength.

3. And then the third lesson is that the only deliverance is through the power we receive through a complete commitment to Jesus Christ, relying upon His Spirit to give us victory. When Jesus lives His life through you, then love will come out of you, and joy and peace and patience and self-control, and all the other fruit of the Spirit will come out of you.

How do I do that? Well, we'll tell you when we get to chapter 8! I'll let you into a little secret! In the first seven chapters of Romans, the word "Spirit" is used only one time. In chapter 8, one of the greatest chapters in the Bible, the Holy Spirit is spoken of 19 times. And when you read Romans 8 you encounter a man who is totally different to the man in Romans 7. You see a man who is saying, "Praise God, I'm not under any condemnation. I know that all things work together for good to those who love God. I know that nothing can separate me from God's love. I know that if God is for me, no one can be against me. I know that the Holy Spirit prays for me in

my weakness.” And Paul is just on top of the world. Why? Because he has recognized that you can’t live the Christian life in your own strength. Only the Holy Spirit has the power to enable you to overcome the tendencies and desires of your old nature.

Now in conclusion I want to talk about being realistic as a Christian; because what I like about Paul is that he is so honest about his weaknesses. He frankly admits that it is a struggle even for a mature Christian. You’ll never be completely rid of your old sin nature here on earth. Dr. Alexander Whyte, that great old Scottish preacher of the 19th century, used to say that the hounds of temptation will pursue you until you die, and they will leave the marks of their slaving jaws upon the very gates of heaven in their attempt to get at you, even when you’re safe inside!

The fact is that living the Christian life without struggles is impossible; and even Paul was not consistently victorious in his Christian life. Is that an encouragement to you? It certainly is to me. Paul had been many years a Christian when he wrote this letter; and he is simply pointing out that even though he knew the truth that the Holy Spirit was the key to set him free, he still occasionally stumbled and fell. It wasn’t that he learned the truth and all of a sudden, he never had any more problems.

So I want us at Faith church to be real, and not pretend that we have it all together. Has anyone here got it all together? Is there anyone here who never stumbles or falls? I wish I was at that point in my spiritual pilgrimage, but I know I never will be until I go through the pearly gates.

So how do you cope with the struggle? You might want to write these thoughts down:

1. Admit it when you’re confused. Stop trying to give the impression that you’ve finally arrived and that you have victory over every sin in your life. Paul didn’t; you don’t; and neither do I. Paul wrote it all down here in Romans 7 so that we could read it 2,000 years later! He says, “I’m struggling, folks. So often I just can’t do what I want to do.”

2. Try to accept your own imperfections. Paul admits in verse 18, “I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature.” He simply realized that he could never know victory until he admitted there was a part of him that there was nothing good in! Remember “the old nature”? And he’s honest about acknowledging his imperfections; and we need to do the same.

3. Leave room for failure. Paul did. He says in verse 19, “For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing...” Paul makes no excuses for his behavior. He’s not saying, “Oh, the devil made me do it.” He’s simply re-affirming the fact that when you are a Christian you still have that “old nature.” So he says, “Leave room for failure.”

Why don’t we ever have meetings when we testify to our failures?! We’re always testifying to our spiritual successes! — “How I got control of my weight in two weeks.” I’ve been struggling with that one for years! When you only have success testimonies, then it sets up

an unrealistic standard, and people like me think, “I must not be normal as a Christian, because I don’t always do what God wants me to do.” Do you sometimes fail? I do. If I were to ask for testimonies of failure this morning, you’d probably have a lot of them — because you look like a bunch of failures!! (No: I’m only kidding!) All I’m saying is that there has got to be room for failure in your Christian life.

4. Admit your true feelings to God. Be honest before God about the struggles you endure. I’ve sometimes had a hard time with God when I’ve had an unanswered prayer, for example. In Psalm 44 David exclaims, “You have made us a reproach to our neighbors, the scorn and derision of those around us. . . Yet for Your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Awake, Oh Lord! Why do You sleep? Rouse Yourself! Why do you hide Your face and forget our misery and oppression?” (Ps. 44:13, 22-24) David really let it all hang out, didn’t he?

I take comfort from the fact that Jesus didn’t condemn “doubting” Thomas. He knew about Thomas’ skepticism, but He simply said, “Thomas, look at My hands and My feet and My side”; and Thomas became a believer. Admit your feelings to God. And then,

5. Do not depend on rules and regulations for your Christian life. You see, there are two ways to try to live the Christian life: One is to live under the law, which means, “I’m going to try to keep all the rules and regulations in my own strength”; and you’re doomed to failure. The other way is to relax in God’s grace, and let Jesus live out His life through you.

All our best intentions are not good enough; and when we break them, we come crying to God, “Oh God I’ve really let You down.” And He says, “No, you didn’t let Me down because you weren’t holding Me up!” You don’t hold God up; He holds you up. So often we aim for the stars, and we hit the dust, and we get discouraged. That’s what Romans 7 is all about. The law was never intended to change your life. Only God, by the power of His Holy Spirit can work that miracle.

Even when I sin as a Christian, God still loves me and offers me forgiveness when I repent. This is what Paul affirms in Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...” God loves me just as much on my bad days as He does on my good days because His love is not based on my performance but on His grace.

Let me read something to you from a fine little book on Romans entitled How to be a Christian Without Being Religious, by Fritz Ridenour. He says, “What’s your problem — temper, impatience, self-control, being honest, your thought life, pride, laziness, self-centeredness? Everyone has skeletons in his closet; and they don’t always stay in the closet. You blow up in front of your family or a lot of people, and you’re real embarrassed. You want to choose obedience, but you choose sin. Sometimes you’d almost swear you were a split personality. Paul admits that he had to fight this war too. We all experience the frustration of knowing what is right and failing to do it. This isn’t supposed to be the Christian’s experience, but Romans 7 draws an accurate picture of the vicious circle we all get into. So we may as well be honest. This new life in Christ is no snap. We came to Christ as sinners. We are saved by God’s amazing grace. We’re forgiven and justified before God. But we’re still sinners after we

believe. The inescapable fact is that by ourselves we cannot do the right things. Knowing the rules, “golden” or otherwise, doesn’t make us able to obey. We just keep on falling into the same old trap called sin because we choose to. The old nature is still in every Christian and trying to keep the new nature from taking over; and there’s no peaceful co-existence. The Christian is a walking civil war. Paul has the answer to winning this war: “First you have to understand who’s fighting it; and then you have to have the right strategy.”

And thank God, we will discover what that is in Romans 8!

AMEN.

Epilogue

Some of you today may feel defeated, and you’re thinking to yourself, “How in the world can I ever live this Christian life? I want to do what’s right, but I just can’t; and these old thoughts and desires and habits keep coming up in my life.” And you’ve been trying to use will power, and you’ve made resolutions, and you fail again and again because that’s not the way.

Some of you have been trying to do what you thought was right, but you just get more and more defeated. You cannot live the Christian life in your own strength. You can’t; but Christ can. “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Would you say, “Thank You, Lord: I trust You that I am forgiven.” No condemnation! What a load that is off our mind and heart! You cannot change your old nature, but there is nothing that can stop the power of the Holy Spirit in your life. He can give you the power to overcome.

Lord, we’ve tried so many times to defeat our old sin nature. As a result, some of us are confused, frustrated, tired, defeated; we feel guilty and condemned. We’ve tried so many different ways to change. Father, we thank You for Your Holy Spirit. Help us to realize that it is only as we relax and let You live through us, that we can have victory. And help us to realize that although You have made it possible for us to live in continuous victory, the fact of life is that even people as mature as Paul, struggled. Help us to be honest concerning that struggle. Help us to realize that revealing our feelings is the beginning of healing. Help us to realize that You want not perfection, but honesty; and that as we are honest with You, then You can work in our lives.

Lord, help us to come to the point where, like Paul, we say, “Oh wretched man that I am”; because then we know that as we’ve looked at ourselves and realized that there really is a desire to do wrong; that then, and only then, can we experience the victory You talk about in Romans 8 — the law of the Spirit that sets us free from the law of sin and death. So out of the agony of defeat may there come the thrill of victory!

Thank you, Father, for sending Jesus. Lord Jesus, live through us this week!

In Your great victorious Name we pray.

AMEN.