



“Who is the Wretched Man?”¹

Romans 7:13-25

A few years ago, a movie came out that excited both adults and children: the Lego movie! If you’ve seen the movie, there’s one song that probably came to your mind immediately: “Everything is awesome!” That song described the attitude of all the characters who lived in the town of Bricksburg. At first, that might sound great to have everyone declaring “everything is awesome,” the reality was that *not* everything was awesome. There were significant issues – especially with the man who was deceptively taking over the town while everyone happily moved along, living in ignorance.

Now, obviously, I’m not bringing this up in order to talk about the pros and cons of the Lego movie. I’m bringing this up because I think sometimes Christians can live in so-called blissful ignorance. In churches, we can sing only *happy* songs. We can preach messages that ignore the pain. The church gatherings sometimes becomes a place to forget that pain exists. Then, when we read our Bibles individually, we jump over difficult or painful passages. And, in essence, we’re singing “Everything is awesome,” but it’s not. There are painful things. There are difficult things.

But what does all this have to do with the sermon I’m preaching this morning? Well, as a person who grew up in the church, I had a general idea that everyone in church was relatively perfect. They knew how to worship God. They prayed with “thees” and “thous.” They studied the Bible. They wore suits and dresses. They looked like their lives were all buttoned up and good. Then there would be salvation testimonies shared. It seemed like all of them were “I was a mess. I came to Jesus. I’m so happy now!” Please know I’m not against those testimonies. Praise God if that’s true; however, my testimony was, “I realized I was a sinner. I trusted Jesus. Then there was warfare.” Honestly, I don’t think I knew warfare like that *until* I trusted Jesus. Everything didn’t *feel* awesome – even though I had been reconciled to God.

As I grew up more, new and different temptations came to me. They were intense. I gave in and struggled with sins. And yet, I wanted God. I wanted to pursue him. But I never wanted to talk to people within my church because for them, “everything was awesome!” Then came a day when I was talking with my mom. I don’t even remember how old I was or what the circumstances were, but she quoted to me from Romans 7. She said something like, “Even the apostle Paul struggled against sin. She said, “The things I want to do, I don’t do. The things that I don’t want to do, that’s what I keep on doing.” I can’t tell you how much of an encouragement that was to me. I felt I wasn’t the only one. I felt that I could still be secure in God’s arms while feeling the battle of temptations. Ever since that day, Romans 7 has served as a tremendous encouragement to me in the battle against sin and the fight for holiness.

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

However, I believe it was in college when I found out that this passage's meaning is debated by many people. Over the years, I've discovered that some people have differing views on whether or not Paul really was stating his Christian experience here. Some think Paul's not a believer here. Others think he's a believer, but he's a carnal one in chapter 7, and then in chapter 8, he describes a Spirit-filled believer. Others think Paul isn't emphasizing whether or not he's a believer here at all. So, we shouldn't really take that into consideration.

Because of these varying views, I've decided to focus today on discussing *who* Paul is talking about here. Then, next week, we'll study the whole passage and it's bigger intentions as it relates to the argument Paul's making in chapters 6-8.

With this understanding, let's read the passage together: Romans 7:13-25. And, let's pray together before I read the passage. I'll give you time for silent prayer, asking for God's wisdom. And then I'll close in prayer (pray for MacPhail-Fausseys and Nate Birkholz @ Lakeshore).

¹³ Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. ¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 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. 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. ²

In reading this, you might quickly understand why there's disagreement over what Paul's talking about. Is he a Christian? How can he say "sold under sin?" Doesn't he say in Romans 6 that we are no longer slaves to sin? But then he does praise Jesus. Before I go any further, I do want to qualify this message with two things.

First, if you come to a different conclusion that I'm purporting this morning, this is not an issue of separation within the church. Yes, it's a disagreement; but there are good arguments made by people on many sides. Second, I'm going to spend the bulk of my time arguing *for* this being part of Paul's Christian experience. At different points, I'll mention arguments that people bring against this view. So, I hope to explain why I don't believe this is Paul as a carnal Christian. I don't believe that this is Paul describing

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:13–25.

himself as an unbeliever. I also don't agree with people who say the question doesn't matter because Paul's just explaining how the law convicts.

Paul has been highlighting the goodness of the Law, but he's also emphasizing how if we're judged by the Law, we will *not* be saved. Last week, we looked at how the Law teaches our hearts to fear the Lord. It shows us our sinfulness. And, if we're judged by the Law alone, we are condemned. Paul transitions into verse 13, and through the end of this chapter, I believe Paul highlights that if he (as a Christian) were judged by the Law alone, he would be condemned, too. The Law is good, but it doesn't save a Christian. We need more than the Law to empower us to obey. We need a relationship with the Triune God. This relationship changes and shapes us over time. So, it's not like becoming a Christian makes you perfect. Everything is *not* awesome in the Christian experience. There's still sin. But, what we see here at the end of Romans is that the Christian battles. The battling isn't a sign of not being a Christian. Instead, it's a sign that there's been a change.

I hope this sermon encourages and strengthens Christians here today. I hope it causes you to see the seriousness of sin. But I also hope that it encourages you in the love, mercy and grace of God. I hope this sermon serves to lead you to bow before God daily in dependence on him. And, especially for those of you who feel the weight of the Law's demands, I pray that this message would lead you to see the beauty and goodness of God in reconciling us with him through Jesus!

So, with this backdrop, I will give 6 reasons **why I believe Romans 7:13-25 is describing Paul's experience as a Christian**. Please also keep in mind that as we go point-by-point, you could go through each individual point and say, "Well, that point doesn't seem strong." And you could pick each individual point. But, here's a lesson in listening to arguments. Don't take arguments individually. Take them cumulatively. If I just used *one* of these reasons to argue for Paul being a Christian here, that's not strong. But seven makes it more likely! So, I hope you take this cumulatively, as is intended. Now, let's jump into the first reason.

1. Paul's use of personal pronouns.

To many, most or all of us here in this room, we might all read this text and think it's obvious that Paul is talking about himself. However, some people think Paul's using personal pronouns figuratively, but he's really talking about the nation of Israel or Adam? I have read some of the arguments on this, but *woooooow, talk about stretching!*

Obviously this first point isn't an argument for Paul being a Christian, but I do want to state what I think is obvious. Paul, when using personal pronouns, is talking about Paul. In this passage, Paul uses the personal pronouns like "I," "me" or "myself" around 40 times! That's a lot of times in 13 verses. I have a very difficult time believing Paul's *not* talking about himself when he emphasizes himself so much in these verses.

Ventura, this should encourage us on the outset. Whether or not you hold the same view I do, it should be tremendously encouraging that Paul is relating to his readers. He's giving personal illustration to them to help them understand God's truth. In addition, Paul is open and transparent about sin. He doesn't put on a mask.

What an example to us, too, Ventura. As I said earlier, when I was a child, I didn't want to open up with people in church because they looked "fine." When I saw all this "put togetherness," I wasn't helped to

speak out. Now, this doesn't mean that we as Christians should just wallow in our sin and think sin's ok. But we need to recognize the value of transparency. If spoken in a way to honor the Lord, it honors the Lord and helps others!

And this is what I see Paul doing here. Paul's writing to the Christians in Rome. He's never met them, but he's concerned for them. He wants them to grow in godliness. He strips any pretense of "holier than thou" attitude, and shows them God's amazing work of rescue in his own life! This now leads to my second point, and this is the first reason why I believe Paul's talking about his Christian experience.

2. Paul's shift to the present tense.

Read verses 10-11 with me: ¹⁰The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. ¹¹For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.³

I have a question I'm about to ask, and I want you to respond to me out loud. What tense is Paul writing in here? Past tense. Great. And this is how Paul talks in his previous illustration about the Law. It's all past tense. But then, let's read verses 14-16 together: ¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.⁴

Again, here's a question. What tense is Paul speaking in these verses? Present tense! Great! Now, some people will argue correctly that in the Greek, writing in the present tense doesn't have to mean that it's present tense. And, yes, that is correct. However, context decides whether or not the present tense should be understood as present. In addition, you should always go with the most probable understanding of a tense.

So, when I read Romans 7, I think it's noticeable that Paul moves from past to present. The whole previous section is in the past. The whole current section is in present. That gives weight to Paul saying he's speaking of himself as a Christian. And, this usage of present tense also seems to indicate Paul's not talking about himself as a past Christian – as though he was talking about the time period when he was carnal. If present tense means the present timeframe, then he's speaking about experiences in the recent time.

The next point is regarding:

3. Paul's verbiage about the Law.

Look at verses 22 and 25 with me: ²²For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,⁵ . . . ²⁵Thanks 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.⁶

Paul says he delights in God's law, in his inner being. Verse 25 is a concluding statement and he says that he serves the law of God with his mind.

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:10–11.

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:14–16.

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:22.

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:25.

There are a couple of important things to note about this. First, maybe the more obvious point, Paul says he delights in God's law. Can an unbeliever delight in the law of God? Well, some people will say, "Yes, people can delight in God's Law and not be saved by Jesus. Look at the Pharisees!"

Ok, let's look at the Pharisees. They studied the Law. Jesus speaks about how intense they were in following the Law – even tithing off their mint leaves. Jesus says that people's righteousness has to exceed the righteousness of the Pharisees in order to make it into the Kingdom. Oh, but wait, that's an important statement to understand. The Pharisees had external righteousness. Jesus highlights that. But as we learned last week, God's Law confronts our desires. What do you really long for? And so, Jesus would confront the Pharisees hearts. They might externally obey the rules, but on the inside, they didn't love God supremely.

This is how many people think today. We compare ourselves with others and we say, "Well, I'm not as bad as this other person." But, is that how God judges? No. God is Life. God is the Ruler. If you refuse to love Life and you refuse to submit to the Ruler, you are condemned. "But I do ok actions, Pastor Timothy." So, you're saying you do good actions to manipulate God to give you what you want? God doesn't need your actions. God created you. God summons you to Life. Through Jesus, if you turn from your sins and turn to him, God promises to forgive you and reconcile you to him. And, he promises to change you from the inside-out. And, in that change, you begin to love God truly, and you love what he commands.

You see, the Pharisees didn't love God from the heart. However, in verse 22 of Romans 7, Paul says that he delights in God in his inner being. Paul could not be an unbeliever here. Some translate "inner being" as "true self." Can a naturally born sinner's true self delight in God's Law? You could still argue against this, but let me read Romans 8:7: **⁷For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.**⁷ In Paul's argument, the mind cannot submit to God's Law. And yet, in verse 25, Paul says he serves God's law with his mind. And verse 22 says Paul delights in the Law in his inner being. Only a Christian actually is changed to want to follow and serve God. Now, let's look at the fourth point:

4. Paul's qualification of "me."

It's actually intriguing to me how many people don't seem to notice one *very important* qualification in these verses. Paul uses personal pronouns almost 40 times, and he himself states what he means when he says "I" and "me." Read verses 17-18 with me: ¹⁷So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. Stop. It almost sounds like Paul's justifying sin here. Kind of sounds like people who say, "Well, it's not my fault" or when someone says, "It was just a mistake." Is this really a confession, Paul?! Sounds like self-justifying. But, you have to move on in verse 18: ¹⁸For 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.⁸

Verse 18 starts off with Paul admitting sin. *Nothing good dwells in me.* Right here, people say, "Hold on! Paul's a Christian. Nothing good dwells in him? What about Romans 8 that says the Spirit of God dwells in us?! Is the Spirit not good?"

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 8:7.

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:17–18.

That is a great argument; however, it ignores the qualification Paul gives. When he says “me,” he doesn’t mean his whole self. He doesn’t mean the “inner self” he was referring to. He says in verse 18, “that is, in my flesh.” The “me” here is referring to Paul’s “flesh.”

Just in case you don’t know what the flesh is, Paul’s not talking about flesh and bones. He’s talking about that thing that is affected by sinfulness. Some people refer to it as a sinful nature, but I prefer to simply call it the flesh. So, every human is born a sinner, meaning that we’re all bound to sinfulness. But what happens when someone recognizes their sins and knows that they cannot do *anything* to rescue themselves? What happens when they turn to Jesus alone as their rescuer?

Paul has already said that we are given God’s righteousness as a gift because Jesus took the punishment for sinners, and Jesus gives us his righteousness as a gift. But Paul’s also spoken of and is speaking here to the reality that our inner self is changed, too. Now, I need to also emphasize that when Paul speaks of this “inner self,” Paul is highlighting his ultimate identity here.

When Paul says that nothing good dwells in “me, that is, in my flesh.” He’s saying that his flesh is not his ultimate identity. Yes, it’s a part of him in some way, but it does not define him. His desires for sin don’t define him either. Jesus defines him, and God has given him new life from the inside-out. One commentator who wrote on this idea said: **“Although sin remains in me with a lot of strength, it no longer controls my personality and life. It can still lead us to disobey God, but now, sinful behavior goes against our deepest self-understanding. Even in defeat, the Christians has a change of consciousness: . . . the *real* me, loves the law of God”** (Keller, pp. 169-70).

This reminds me of a pastor I had when I lived in South Carolina, and on multiple occasions he would talk about a believer wanting to obey God. And then he’d say, “Sometimes we simply want to want God.” But he went on and said, “even that is an evidence of grace!” God places within his children desires for *Him*. They may be faint or they may be strong. But if we are in Christ, our flesh doesn’t define us!

But just because the flesh doesn’t define us doesn’t mean that the flesh doesn’t remain. Some people will ignore the flesh. They’re ignore sin. But it’s still there, Christians! Some theologians refer to this as remaining sin or indwelling sin because Paul also says in verse 20, “sin that dwells in me.” That’s the flesh! There is still a real part of ourselves that *wants* sin.

That means, Ventura, that everything is *not* awesome in my life. Paul highlights that through his words in chapter 7. In verse 14, Paul says “¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.”⁹ In verse 21, he says “evil lies close at hand.” He also speaks of being “captive” to sin. And finally, he says “Wretched man that I am.” Now, I know that some people actually use these verses to say, “Paul can’t be a Christian here. These descriptions don’t fit.” So, for example, in chapter 6, Paul says we’re no longer slaves to sin. So, how can we be captive to sin? Or, Paul says that we’re righteous. How can we be wretches? To the reality of be a slave, remember that in chapter 6, Paul says that we are not slaves, but he also tells us to not let sin reign. Clearly, Paul is saying there’s a reality that sin doesn’t rule over us ultimately, and yet, in practice, we can allow sin reign.

⁹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:14.

I see this happening here in Romans 7. Paul's *not* saying that sin is his master, ultimately. But that doesn't mean sin doesn't wreak havoc in his life. But what about the "Wretched man" statement? Is Paul really a wretched man? Well, some of you here might say, "Of course a Christian still sins, and I've felt wretched before!" But I do want you to hear the concerns of some with this statement. Personally, I think sometimes, Christians can spend far too much time on how wretched they are instead of their status as righteous, holy, chosen and loved. And so, they end up wallowing in self-pity as they affirm over and over again, "I'm wretched. Yep, that's me!" But, based on the context of these verses, Paul's highlighting how the Law is right and good, and when he says "Wretched man that I am!" he's emphasizing a couple things. First, when he says "I," he's referring to the flesh! The flesh is wretched! That part of us that is still sinful is sinful. And, secondly, since a Christian's inner being delights in God's Law, I affirm the Law's statements about sin! The indwelling sin is wretched!

Everything is not awesome! Daily, sin springs up. Daily, the Law wants to condemn me. Daily, I still do battle against the sin that wages war inside. Some days the battle feels harder than on other days. And, in my inner being, I want God. Sometimes I feel I've failed. Other times, I feel I've succeeded. But every day, I get to preach to myself that Jesus has united me with him, and my hope is based on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness!

The battle, from the first day of my spiritual life, is not a sign of sin controlling me. It's a sign of God's work in me! So, I believe Paul's qualification of the "me" is highly important to understand. But, going outside of the book of Romans, I think what Paul says here fits with Paul's argument in the book of Galatians.

5. Paul's cohesion with Galatians 5:17.

Galatians 5:16-17 says, **"¹⁶ But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 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."¹⁰**

After these verses Paul talks about God the Spirit, and how he works in and through us. And, this is precisely how Paul speaks in Romans 7-8. But, Paul takes more time in Romans. Galatians is a shorter book. But, let me say this, I don't know of *anyone* who believes Galatians 5:17 is speaking to unbelievers. The desires of the Spirit are against the flesh. They're opposed to each other. And, get this. They keep you from doing the things you want to do.

Isn't this exactly how Paul is talking in Romans 7? I don't do the things I want to do. Now, this argument doesn't mean that Romans 7 *has* to be saying the same thing, but Paul's argumentation in Romans aligns very well at times with the book of Galatians, and I have a difficult time seeing much divergence between letters on this point.

As we look at this "wretched man" of Romans 7, I hope you see something I've mentioned on various weeks in our study in Romans. Right here, Paul is highlighting the "already-not-yet." In other words, in chapter 6, Paul talks about how people who trust and follow Jesus are no longer slaves. We're free. He says God is our Master and God grows us in righteous acts until we reach eternity. But we could be confused as to what that looks like? We could think the Christians experience is to only be a bed of

¹⁰ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ga 5:16–17.

roses. There should be no problems. There should be no struggle. Christians are practically perfect, right?

Here, in Romans 7, Paul shows the “not yet” of the Christian experience. Yes, those of us who have turned from our sins and turn to Jesus are already declared righteous by God, but we are not yet righteous in all our behavior.

That said, there is a battle. Now, I need to clarify this a little because a lot of people talk about “struggling” with sin. I personally don’t like that word because “struggle” can mean so many things. It could just mean you’re tempted and you give in every time. But “battle” means that there’s a fight on your part. I’ve known many people who have been tempted to believe they’re not Christians because a battle rages. Temptations come out of nowhere or they’re so intense. The temptations are so scary they don’t want to tell anybody else, but they feel they have to. They come to me sharing all the weight they’re experiencing. And, you know one of the things I tell them? The battle doesn’t mean you’re not a Christian. Should a soldier think he’s not successful as a soldier because there’s an enemy throwing bombs and shooting bullets his way? NO! The soldier is affirmed as a soldier!

If there’s no battle against sin, then there might be a problem. But within the Christian experience, there’s a war. The flesh, indwelling sin, lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh. Now, let’s move on to a sixth reason:

6. Paul’s summary statement in verse 25b.

Read verses 24-25 with me: ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks 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. ¹¹

Paul’s confession is in alignment with the truth. There’s no skirting around his sin. There’s no denying that there’s a part of him who really wants it. So, he says “wretched man!” But then he doesn’t say, “What will deliver me?” The Jewish people in the first century might have said that. No, Paul says, “Who will deliver me from this body of death.” The body of death is referencing the flesh and indwelling sin. Who will rid it completely, and who will help me each step of the way until sin is finally eradicated? Verse 25: Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. The answer to our sin is God through Jesus Christ. Jesus, who took the wrath we deserved. Jesus, who rose from the dead to give us life. Jesus, who is with us each step of the way until we see God face-to-face.

Then, at this point, Paul brings a conclusion. When Paul says “so then,” he’s giving a conclusion on the whole segment. The “so then” is the culmination of his argument – not “I thank God through Jesus. . .” Paul is saying the battle against sin and then our continual looking to God and his mercy through Jesus is a continual reality in the Christian life.

Paul isn’t saying that the Christian life is one of continual defeat. Nor is Paul saying the Christian life is one of unceasing victory over sin. The Christian life is a battle of ups and downs, questions and answers, joy and pain. But these things do not change our hope in Jesus. Romans 7, to me, is just a larger scale

¹¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:24–25.

exposition of Romans 3:23: ²³ **for all [who believe] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,** ²⁴ **and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. . .**¹²

Paul's struggle and failings with sin didn't change his status. Paul's going to say this again in 8:1. And then Paul's going to continue to reiterate the struggle and groaning of this life. At the end of chapter 8, Paul talks about how creation itself groans. Creation awaits the day when we experience the fullness of our adoption and when all the affects of sin, and sin itself, will be eradicated. Already-not-yet.

So, Romans 7 expresses our personal groaning, and Romans 8 expresses creations groan. But in the midst of our groaning, we continually remember that where sin abounds, grace super-abounds. In the midst of the sin, we thank God through Jesus. In the midst of the battle, we know nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Until that day we see him, we will battle. And, when we see him, sin will be no more!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Boice, James Montgomery. *Romans: Justification by Faith (Romans 1-4)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker. 1991.
2. Keller, Timothy. *Romans 1-7 For You*. The Good Book Company North America. 2016.
3. Moo, Douglas. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans. 1996.
4. Schreiner, Thomas. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 1998.

¹² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 3:23–24.