

Struggle
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Romans 7:4-25

Opening: “The struggle is REAL!” That’s become a popular punchline when someone describes a “first-world problem”—a minor inconvenience that hardly qualifies as a real struggle. For example: “Ugh! The Wi-Fi doesn’t reach the back patio! The struggle is real!” “My heated car seat takes TWO minutes to warm up! The struggle is real!” “What?! You’re out of oat milk for my venti latte?! The struggle is real!”

Those “struggles” are more ridiculous than REAL. In Romans 7, the Apostle Paul describes our REAL STRUGGLE: The ongoing battle we all face against the sinful desires that remain within us even after we have followed Christ.

The Point: Even though Christ has freed us from sin’s mastery, the struggle with our sinful nature is real. We cannot overcome that struggle through our own strength. Our hope is in Jesus Christ.

This week’s text builds on what we saw in chapter six last week and points toward chapter 8. Last week in Romans, chapter 6, we learned this good news:

Romans 6:14 (NLT) — 14 Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God’s grace.

Romans 6:22–23 (NLT) — 22 But now you are free from the power of sin and have become slaves of God. Now you do those things that lead to holiness and result in eternal life. **23** For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.

- That is all good news! Here is more great news.

Romans 7:4–6 (NLT) — 4 So, my dear brothers and sisters, this is the point: You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are united with the one who was raised from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God. **5** When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced a harvest of sinful deeds, resulting in death. **6** But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit.

- Because we “died to the power of the law”...and now are “united” with Christ through His sacrifice, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God.
- Here’s the problem: The law of God is important to Christ-followers but it cannot justify us (we can’t work our way to salvation) or transform our sinful nature.
- This is what Paul will explain in Romans 7.

- When it comes to our sinful nature, life is much more like a game of tug-of-war. Just when you think you've won, the other side gets a foothold.
- Question: If you want someone to obey a rule, common sense tells you to put up a sign like, "Stay off the grass," or "Speed Limit 45."
- Or we say to a child, "Don't touch any of those things on that shelf."
- When you put up that kind of sign or say something like that, what is bound to happen? Why?
- Paul said in verse seven: The law is perfect! "In fact, it was the law that showed me my sin." I didn't know coveting is wrong, until the law said, "Don't covet."
- But my sinful nature is so twisted, it "used this command to arouse all kinds of covetous desires within me!" To paraphrase: Don't covet made me want to covet!
- This is why legalism doesn't work. Telling my sinful nature not to do something is like (as my Daddy used to say) saying, "Sic 'em to a bulldog!"

(NLT) — 13 But how can that be? Did the law, which is good, cause my death? Of course not! Sin used what was good to bring about my condemnation to death. So we can see how terrible sin really is. It uses God's good commands for its own evil purposes. **14** So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. **15** I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.

- Paul basically said, *"It's not that the law doesn't work. It is the law's job to diagnose my sin problem, not fix it."* Illustration: Think about an MRI. An MRI can reveal a serious problem inside our bodies, but it cannot heal that problem.
- We shouldn't resent the MRI for showing us what's wrong. We're grateful for it!

16 But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. **17** So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

- As discouraging as my disobedience to God's commands might be, the encouraging thing is now I know what the problem is: it is my sinful nature.
- If a medical test reveals a condition I've had since birth, though I didn't create that condition, I'm still responsible for responding to the diagnosis and seeking treatment. Likewise, although we were born with a sinful nature, we remain responsible for the sinful choices we make.
- To make sure we understand this, Paul gets very personal and transparent about his own struggle with sin.

19 I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. **20** But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it. **21** I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. **22** I love God's law with all my heart. **23** But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. **24** Oh, what a miserable person I am!

- Scholars have debated whether Paul was describing himself before salvation or after. I'm convinced that these verses refer to when he was already in Christ.
- Why do you think Paul was so transparent about his own struggle with sin?
- How could someone read those last few verses and be discouraged?
- This is an example of why context is important in Bible study. If you just read verses 19-24 and not the prior verses, would you be encouraged or discouraged? Why? Now if you read them in the context of everything, Paul just said before that why is there cause to be encouraged?
- Let's talk about how we apply these verses in our own lives.
- First, let me speak to those possible feelings of discouragement.
- We may think: *"If I were maturing as a Christ-follower I wouldn't have this struggle."* John MacArthur writes that Paul seems to be describing *"the most spiritual and mature of Christians, who, the more they honestly measure themselves against God's standards...the more they realize how much they fall short. The closer we get to God the more we see our own sin".ⁱ*
- **Greater awareness of our sin** isn't necessarily evidence we're becoming less spiritually mature. It may be evidence we're becoming more spiritually sensitive.
- **"White knuckling" doesn't work.** Chuck Swindoll writes, *"Anyone who has experienced physical dependence on anything will affirm that the craving is never far away. The addict is never really 'cured.' The addiction will always be a part of their lives. However, addicts can remain 'in recovery' forever...All of us are chronically addicted to sin. Long after we are saved, our bodies crave that which gave us short-term pleasure and caused long-term anguish. And the pull to indulge the craving for sin will always be a part of our lives ... at least until we are freed from 'the body of this death' (v. 24).ⁱⁱ [My term: recovering sinners.]*
- In verse 24, Paul calls himself "miserable" or "wretched." It pictures a man exhausted from struggling to free himself from captivity and failing.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Legalism also doesn't work.** Warren Wiersbe wrote, *"Believers who try to live by rules and regulations discover that their legalistic system only arouses more sin and creates more problems. [Speaking of the churches in Galatia he said,] Their legalism did not make them more spiritual; it made them more sinful! Why? Because the Law arouses sin in our nature."^{iv}*
- The flaw in legalism: It can produce outwardly acceptable behavior, but doesn't change our inward attitudes. Sooner or later, what is in the glass sloshes out.
- **We are not "off the hook."** Although we inherited a sinful nature, we're still responsible for our choices. Paul isn't making excuses for his sin; he's identifying the enemy within him. We must turn to God for what we cannot do for ourselves.
- You may be thinking: "Okay, now that you and Paul have thoroughly discouraged me and told me what won't work, what WILL WORK?"
- Verse 24: Paul brings us back to the good news. Exasperated, he asked this question: **24** ...Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? **25** Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord...
- Next week as we move into Romans, chapter 8, we will begin to see how we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit to win this struggle with sin. I want to give you just a little taste of that so, look at chapter 8.

Romans 8:1–2 (NLT) — **1** So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. **2** And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.

Romans 8:5–6 (NLT) — **5** Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. **6** So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace.

- How do we do that? How do we let the spirit control our mind so we can have life and peace in Christ? You'll have to come back next week for chapter 8. ☺

So, What's the Takeaway?

- Now you know why I began with “the struggle is real.” That’s no joke when we’re talking about our sin nature even after coming to Christ. But there IS HOPE.
- The struggle with sin is a normal part of the Christian life. But that doesn't mean we are destined to live in continual defeat.
- Chapter by chapter Paul helps us understand how to enjoy our “newness of life” in Christ. Romans 6 — Freedom from sin's mastery. Romans 7 — The struggle with sin's presence. Romans 8 — Life and victory through the Holy Spirit.
- Chapter seven has been all about “diagnosis.” The law (as revealed in God's Word) acts like an MRI pointing out our problems. But an accurate diagnosis isn't enough. We need the remedy that only God can provide.
- We shouldn't be surprised or automatically discouraged when we recognize the struggle between wanting to do right and falling short. In fact, recognizing that struggle may be evidence that we're becoming more spiritually sensitive—more aware of our symptoms. That said, it is still our responsibility to turn to God for the strength to overcome sin.
- We can't get spiritually “well” through our own determination. When we try to overcome sin simply by imposing more rules on ourselves, our sinful nature can rebel even more. Eventually, like Paul, we become exhausted and frustrated — “wretched,” as Paul describes himself.
- We will (like Paul) cry out: *“Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?”* And we’ve learned the answer to that question: *“Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”*
- Next week Paul will encourage us with these truths: *“There is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus...”* and *“...all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”* (Romans 8:14, NLT) Don't miss it!

ⁱ The MacArthur New Testament commentary - Romans 1-8—Commentaries.

ⁱⁱ Swindoll, Charles R.. Insights on Romans (Swindoll's New Testament Insights) (p. 134). (Function). Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Telford Studies: Romans Telford, Andrew • Wordsearch • 1980

^{iv} Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 536). Victor Books.