

It's a Process

(Romans Session 22)

About a month ago SpaceX launched a huge missile. About 4 minutes into the planned 90-minute flight the missile experienced what was termed “**a rapid unplanned disassembly**”. The terminology sounds a bit unusual to the average person, but it's not unheard of in rocket science circles.

What actually happened was that their missile exploded mid-flight.

A rapid unplanned disassembly—that's a pretty creative way of describing a catastrophic failure. And that got me to wondering—maybe that terminology would be useful in our study of **Romans chapter 7**.

Because from what I have observed, it is not uncommon for a Christian to sometimes experience **a rapid unplanned disassembly** of all their best intentions. When they really do intend to do the right thing, and end up doing the wrong thing.

Have you ever been there? I have. Let's talk about it.

Well, it seems we have made it to the part of **Romans 7** where Paul is going to lead us down the path of serious self-analysis. And he's not just writing out abstract principles. He is teaching from what appears to be personal experience, because most of his pronouncements are made in the first person.

And by taking that approach, I think he's speaking for all of us to one extent or another. Because I think most of us would agree that sometimes it's downright difficult to understand our own intentions and subsequent actions. Listen to the spiritual quagmire that Paul lays out for us.

Romans 7:14-19

14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

15 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

16 If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good.

17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.
19 For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.

Now a case can be made for different interpretations regarding the identity and spiritual condition of the individual described in this chapter. Some would say that Paul has constructed a composite figure, using this made-up character to help to illustrate a point.

Others will say that the person speaking in Romans 7 represents Jewish people who are struggling over the claims of Christ.

And then there are those who say that the man speaking in **Romans 7** is Paul, but not as he was at the time of writing, but as he was during his pre-conversion days, wrestling with his awakening conscience.

So that Romans 7 is said to be a description of Paul's moral and spiritual struggles before he came to faith in Christ.

However, if we allow the text to speak for itself—and resist the temptation to superimpose any kind of pre-existing framework over it—well, it seems pretty clear that Paul is describing his own experience. And not from the distant past either, but in terms of his present circumstances.

I understand very well the impulse of wanting to relocate this narrative to a time much earlier in Paul's history. Because Paul is a great hero of the faith. And we have the view that he was always victorious. That he managed to live a life of such complete devotion to Christ that he never missed a beat. It seems almost blasphemous to think any less of him.

But if we allow the chapter to speak for itself and stand on its own merits, we have to admit that Paul is speaking of things that he dealt with all along. To assert otherwise would require some serious literary contortions on our part.

No, it's obvious that Paul is writing from his own personal experience, and he's doing so contemporaneously. Hold onto that thought.

One of the main thrusts of this chapter is the fact that the struggle against sin in our lives as Christians is a continual thing. Even in the life of an Apostle, the battle is a daily one. And in any battle, you're going to take some hits.

Once again, I need to make a distinction between the doctrine of justification and the doctrine of sanctification.

To be justified is *to be declared righteous*. To be sanctified is *to become righteous*. Justification is the legal pronouncement of your salvation. God declares you righteous, because of your faith in Christ. It is an instantaneous change of status.

Sanctification on the other hand has a different time frame. Sanctification doesn't come all at once. It is a gradual process, much like the process of growing physically from childhood into adulthood. Almost imperceptible on a daily basis. But over time, you see the differences becoming more apparent.

Now there are groups that teach something called *entire sanctification*. John Wesley is probably the most famous proponent of this teaching. Now I am a great admirer of John Wesley. But I have to take exception to this aspect of his theology.

He taught that once we are saved, there is a separate and subsequent work of grace that we need to experience in our soul. With this special work of the Holy Spirit, the root of sin is removed from our hearts, and after that we are always victorious over sin.

Wesley taught this, because he firmly believed that the Bible taught it. But after all was said and done, he had to admit that he personally had not experienced it for himself.

Wesley is a very interesting man to study. If you've never read his biography, you have missed out on a big blessing. Most of us know that Wesley was the founder of the Methodist church. He did not intend for that to happen, by the way. All his life he was a loyal member of the Church of England, and strongly resisted any notion that he was building a separate denomination.

In fact, the name "*Methodist*" was not a term coined by Wesley himself. It was actually a term of derision,

applied to Wesley and his friends in college. Other students used the word Methodist to mock them, because they employed so many methods to try and regulate their religious lives. There were rules for everything. In fact, they had a list of 22 questions that they were supposed to ask themselves every day.

Just a few examples:

#1—Am I consciously or unconsciously creating the impression that I am better than I really am? In other words, am I a hypocrite?

#16—Am I jealous, impure, critical, irritable, touchy or distrustful?

#20—Is there anyone whom I fear, dislike, disown, criticize, hold a resentment toward or disregard? If so, what am I doing about it?

So you can see how serious and thorough they were when it came to self-examination. They worked very hard to always try and do the right thing. Which is a fine thing to do. To be methodical in your approach to living life as a Christian.

The problem that John Wesley was unwittingly making for himself was that he was leaning on his methods as a means of salvation, instead of leaning on Christ Himself. He was trying very hard to live for God in his own strength. It was both bad theology and very, very frustrating.

Thankfully, he eventually came to Christ by faith alone. He did that at the age of 35, and for the next 53 years John Wesley did a mighty work for God. Many thousands and in all likelihood millions will be in heaven because of the way God used John Wesley.

But in spite of his usefulness in the work of the Kingdom, Wesley struggled all his life with feelings of failure and despair because of his misunderstanding of what Paul is teaching in Romans chapter 7. This chapter can be absolutely liberating if it is understood correctly.

So in the way of a preview, let me say that the way to approach our struggle with sin is not to double down on making up more rules and regulations to try and methodically corral any ungodly impulses. Paul is showing the absolute futility of taking that approach in this chapter. The way of sanctification will not be found in the accumulation of many rules and regulations.

If we can grasp the big picture of what Paul teaches in Romans chapters 6 through 8, we will be able to avoid extremes in two opposite directions. Either to say that holiness is unnecessary or that perfection is possible in this age. Paul is teaching us how to live between those two extremes. That is the sweet spot, as a golf pro might be wont to say.

I think that some of what Paul is saying in this chapter has to do with our individual perception as we try to navigate the waters of holy living.

Look again at our text:

Romans 7:16-17

16 If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good.

17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

He says, “I am carnal, sold under sin.” And yet in the previous chapter what did he say on the subject?

Romans 6:14

For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

How do we reconcile the two statements? And then towards the end of the chapter, Paul makes this self-assessment:

Romans 7:24

O wretched man that I am!

Those words are written by the same man who said this in another place:

Philippians 1:21a

For to me, to live is Christ...

What’s going on here? I’m getting dizzy from all the back and forth view of things. Well here’s the point: Paul is illustrating an uncomfortable reality in the life of a Christian. There will be times when we will struggle with a Jekyll and Hyde type of struggle.

Romans 7:15

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

His heart and mind seem to be in the right place. He has the best of intentions. But it doesn’t seem to be enough to get him victoriously through this particular moment. It’s an exasperating pattern, and he is severely disheartened by the experience.

But this Jekyll and Hyde thing, this conflict with sin is par for the course in the life of a Christian. We must remind ourselves of that. We are in a war, and there will be a back and forth of both progress and setbacks. What may feel like an unrecoverable failure at the moment turns out to be nothing more than a tactical defeat. The setback is momentary, it is not final defeat. Even though it may feel like it at the time.

We have to acknowledge that we still struggle with sin. But this struggle is not pointless. It is leading us somewhere. To greater dependence on God. Into more consistent obedience.

There may be times when we feel like Simon Peter, after he denied the Lord. So empty, so weak, so useless. When all we can do is hang our head and weep for our failure.

But that’s not the end. It’s a regrettable event that we need to learn from. And yes, it is a sin that we will need to confess to the Lord and repent of. But it’s not the end of the road. We’ve got to understand that this is a process we are in the midst of. Sanctification is a process. Two steps forward one step back kind of thing. It’s normal. It’s universal. Paul experienced it too. He continues his self-assessment in **chapter 7**.

Romans 7:20-23

20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.

22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. (flip)

23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

Here is a crucial and practical teaching that we must understand—that there is in all of us Christians, as long as this fallen age lasts and as long as we live on the earth, there is the reality of “*indwelling sin*”.

Paul takes great pains in chapters 6 through 8 not to overstate or understate the measure of holiness possible in this fallen age. He teaches that Christians are delivered from the dominion of sin, and yet still groan while awaiting the full redemption of their bodies from the “**law of sin**” connected to them.

The point of this chapter is not that we should make peace with sin, but that we should make war on sin in our own lives. And along with that, we need to understand ourselves and know how to respond when we suffer tactical defeats in the war.

Chapter 6 makes clear that we will win the war against sin. And **chapter 7** makes clear that it will not be without tactical defeats. The mercy that He extends when we need it most will make us love our Savior all the more.

It’s the earnestness with which we approach the war, and the response to the any defeats that manifest your Christianity. It’s not your ability to attain perfection.

One of the reasons this emphasis is made by Paul is to rescue us from the devastating hopelessness of perfectionism. There is a hopelessness that comes from having perfectionistic standards where no place is allowed for the existence of sin in the life of true believers.

Paul’s teaching in this passage helps us navigate the troubled waters of aspiring to Christ’s perfection while living in this fallen world with a fallen nature of our own to contend with.

He discusses the need for a balanced understanding of what’s going on inside of us with a little more detail over in **Galatians**.

Galatians 5:17 AMP

For the sinful nature has its desire which is opposed to the Spirit, and the [desire of the] Spirit opposes the sinful nature; for these [two, the sinful nature and the Spirit] are in direct opposition to each other [continually in conflict], so that you [as believers] do not [always] do whatever [good things] you want to do.

Here is a crucial and practical teaching that I will close with—that there is in all of us Christians, as

long as this fallen age lasts and we live on the earth, the reality of “**indwelling sin**”. Or a fallen nature, or the old man, or Adam’s likeness. Call it what you will. Thank God for this great salvation. But we are stuck with certain aspects of this heritage we have from Adam until we step out of it once and for all on that day when we go to be with Christ.

Paul finishes up with a couple of opposing thoughts. Or at least, two thoughts that are so different they are kind of jarring when coupled together like this.

Romans 7:24

O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Somehow, this fallen nature is headquartered in our bodies. He doesn’t elaborate much on the subject, but alludes to it several times in this chapter. And he speaks of being delivered from it. How will that happen? By what means? He spells it out in the first part of the next verse.

Romans 7 :25a

I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord...

The deliverance from our fallen nature and the sin that so easily besets us—it will come to us through Jesus. When He returns, we are raised in power, and we shall be like Him for we shall see Him as He is. And that’s a huge motivator.

I Thessalonians 4:16-18 NLT

16 For the Lord himself will come down from heaven with a commanding shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet call of God. First, the believers who have died will rise from their graves.

17 Then, together with them, we who are still alive and remain on the earth will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Then we will be with the Lord forever.

18 So encourage each other with these words.

Soon it will all be over. No more struggles with sin. We will be like Jesus. Absolutely holy. Perfect because of Him. Serving God will all our hearts, at perfect peace with Him and with ourselves. We will be home at last, doing all that we were created to do. Bringing glory to our Savior with every breath we breathe. Filled with joy unspeakable and full of glory.

But for now, we must live in this world in these amazing examples of God's engineering genius—fallen though they may be. Our bodies. Our divided nature that is rooted in them, and that gives us such a struggle.

And Paul seems to be reconciled to that fact, and passes his wisdom—his sympathetic perspective—on to us.

Romans 7:25b

..So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

So to conclude, I am *not* saying that Christians are to live in defeat. I am saying that no Christian lives in perfect victory over sin. And in those times when we fail to triumph over sin, **Romans 7** shows us the normal way a healthy Christian should respond. We should say:

- I love the law of God (**verse 22**).
- I hate what I just did (**verse 15**).
- Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death (**verse 24**)?
- Thanks be to God! The victory will come through Jesus Christ my Lord (**verse 25**).

Be encouraged this morning. You have made your commitment to follow Jesus. He is your Leader. Your Commander in Chief.

And when the inner struggles are there, remember that He is your shepherd. He goes looking for you when you stray.

What's more, Jesus said that you are in His Father's hand. And no one—no demon in hell and no human on earth—can pluck you from that mighty grip.

Take a deep breath, take another look at Him in faith, and keep on fighting the good fight. One day, that crown will be yours.