

Struggle

BECAUSE SIN REMAINS A POWERFUL FORCE, BELIEVERS SHOULD
NOT BE SURPRISED WHEN DOING RIGHT IS A STRUGGLE.

I have met many Christians who feel like failures. Oddly, these have often been the very people who seem most committed. They are serious about following Jesus and becoming more Christlike in every aspect of their lives. As a result, they struggle with every failure. Their sin weighs on them more heavily, it seems, than sin weighs on less committed believers.

I have also met committed Christians who turn their critical eye on others. Rather than examining themselves and lamenting their own sin, they tend to judge and condemn those around them. I suspect that focusing on the sins of others makes such people feel a little better about themselves. If this is so, then in their hearts they are also lamenting the fact of their personal sin but dealing with it in an unhealthy way.

I have always found it a little odd when serious students of the Bible act as if they think they are capable of living flawless lives. Perfection may be a proper goal to aspire to, but it is never the reality. After all, the New Testament is filled with highly committed but also flawed believers. This does not mean that Christians should be comfortable with their sins. But it does mean that they should extend themselves and others a little grace when they fail to live up to the high standard of the stature of Christ. Even the apostle Paul confessed that he still struggled to reach that lofty goal. And rather than dwell on past shortcomings, he kept his eye on the goal and kept working to grow in Christ (Phil. 3:12-15).

In our session today, we read Paul's warning to those who think they can keep the law and in that way make themselves acceptable to God. He warns them that they will never succeed. All sin and fall short (Rom. 3:23). All need the grace of God. We will see that Paul himself struggled with sin and did not always win. The hallmark of Paul's faith then does not seem to have been perfection but struggle.

Good Christians do not wallow in their sin, but neither are they free from sin. Their commitment to Christ will not produce perfection in this life but does produce a persistent effort to mature and grow in Christ. The sooner we come to terms with this truth, the sooner we can be a little easier on ourselves and more gracious toward others.

Romans 6:15–7:25

Paul told the Roman believers that by sharing Christ’s resurrection, believers walk in newness of life with Him. Therefore, although believers are not obligated to observe the law, they still live godly lives because of their union with Christ (6:1-14). The apostle stressed his point using the human analogy of slavery (vv. 15-23). The master/slave relationship dictated both who the slave was and how the slave had to behave. In a spiritual sense, believers cannot serve two masters. They have turned away from sin and committed themselves by faith to God as their Master. Thus, the believers’ relationship with the Father, not to the law, dictates their behavior.

Paul then pointed out that all Christians have died in Christ and therefore also have died to the law (7:1-4). The work of Christ bringing an end to the law does not mean that the law is bad or was not of God. But it does mean that living in obedience to the law has been superseded by something even more powerful and more effective—living as a born-again, new creation in relationship with the living God, empowered by the Spirit of God, and following the resurrected Jesus.

 ▶ EXPLORE THE TEXT ◀

Freed (Rom. 7:4-6)

Paul used the example of marriage to demonstrate how a death can free a person from an obligation to a law. When a woman’s husband dies, her legal obligation to him ends. More broadly, Paul pointed out, “the law rules over someone” only “as long as he lives” (v. 1). What then does the fact that believers have died in Christ mean with regard to the law?

VERSE 4

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you also were put to death in relation to the law through the body of Christ so that you may belong to another. You belong to him who was raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.

Therefore . . . you also compares the Roman believers to the woman whose husband died and so was no longer subject to the laws related to her marriage (vv. 1-4). Similarly, Christians have been **put to death in relation to the law through the body of Christ**. This point builds on the fact that believers are united with Christ in both His death and resurrection (6:1-11). Christians not only died to sin and died to their old way of life, they also died to the law (Gal. 2:19-20). The law no longer serves as a tool to condemn and mark the sinner for wrath, since in Christ the believer's sin has been forgiven. Believers no longer seek to be made right with God by obedience to the law but have been made right with God through the work of Jesus (Rom. 5:1,9).

Death to the law, however, does not mean that the believer can live a lawless, sinful lifestyle. Believers cannot continue in the sin that characterized their pre-Christian lives (6:1-2). Their death in Christ marked the end of their obligation to the law specifically **so that you may belong to another**. Believers have been freed from the masters of sin and law. They can now serve **him who was raised from the dead**. The law as a guide to godliness has been replaced by Jesus as a guide to godliness.

The absence of an obligation to the law, therefore, does not lead to a lawless, unrighteous life. Believers freed from the burden of their sin and united with Jesus live to **bear fruit for God** which most likely refers to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). The analogy of bearing *fruit* emphasizes the natural and organic nature of the process. Christian living is not the result of obedience to an external system of law but grows in the believer from the inside out as he or she lives in close relationship with God.

VERSE 5

For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions aroused through the law were working in us to bear fruit for death.

The fruit that believers bear for God differs dramatically from the fruit they produced when **we were in the flesh**. The Greek term for *flesh* is used in multiple ways in Scripture. It can refer to the human body or parts of the human body. At other times, it can refer to all living things or as a designation for all humanity or human existence. Or, as here, it can refer to “the fallen condition of humans after Adam’s sin, a sinfulness incapable of conforming to God’s holy expectations (Rom. 7:5,18; 8:3-9; Gal. 3:3). In this sense, ‘flesh’ is unaided human effort—mere human strength without the power of the Holy Spirit. It is this ‘flesh’ that offers sin a foothold in a person’s life (Rom. 8:3-4,9; Gal. 3:3; 5:16-17).”¹ In this

sense, the term is also contrasted with life in the Spirit, of the believer who lives in union with Christ, and at the same time lives in the flesh, and these two realities war against one another. This term should not be taken to mean that human bodies are inherently evil. “Paul taught that Christ Himself came in the flesh and yet lived a sinless life (John 1:14; Rom. 1:3; 1 Tim. 3:16) . . . Furthermore, the body is God’s creation and therefore is good when it is devoted to God in holy service (1 Tim. 4:4).”² “But this body of flesh is weak (Rom. 6:19), and the thought of physical weakness leads on to moral weakness . . . When ‘we were in the flesh’ means when ‘we were characterized by fleshly desires and outlook.’”³

Since Paul used the past tense in the current sentence, believers *were in the flesh*, he was directing his readers to reflect on their pre-Christian lives. He reminded them of the **sinful passions** that were at work in them—and in him—at that time.

Paradoxically, these *sinful passions* were often **aroused through the law**. Paul’s comments bring to mind a child told not to do something who then becomes fascinated by the very thing he or she was warned to avoid. The law can have the same effect (7:7-8). Sadly, in the past such a fascination with the forbidden resulted in these *sinful passions* **working in us to bear fruit for death**. The *fruit* that leads to death are “the works of the flesh” that are contrary to “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:19-23).

VERSE 6

But now we have been released from the law, since we have died to what held us, so that we may serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the old letter of the law.

But now introduces a contrast between the believer’s past and present life in Christ. Christians **have been released from the law**. Sin’s use of the law as means of temptation has been broken since the believer is no longer obligated to the law. Paul elaborated on this very point in the following paragraph, using the example of one of the Ten Commandments, “Do not covet” (vv. 7-13).

In contrast, the believer lives by a very different dynamic. **We** [Christians] **have died to what held us**. Christ liberated believers from the law so that they could live a new life not shaped by law but shaped **in the newness of the Spirit**. Believers then no longer live guided by **the old letter of the law**. While the law is holy, just, and good (v. 12), it cannot save or produce the new life available through the Spirit of Christ. Only by God’s grace and through faith in Christ can a person find new life shaped by the transforming power of the indwelling Spirit of God.



Explore Further

Read “Law, Ten Commandments, Torah” on pages 993–997 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What is the difference between living in obedience to a system of laws and living in relationship to the God who gave the law? How do obeying God’s laws and bearing fruit for God differ?

Conflicted (Rom. 7:14-23)

If the law leads to sin, then is the law itself sinful or the cause of sin? Paul responded to these implied questions with an emphatic “absolutely not!” (vv. 7,13). The law clearly identifies sinful actions and creates an awareness of sin that fallen humanity often finds alluring, but the law does not force anyone to sin. Who then is responsible for sin?

VERSE 14

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold as a slave under sin.

Interpreters differ concerning the meaning of these verses. Some are uncomfortable thinking that Paul would describe himself as struggling with sin so mightily as these verses depict. They point to several statements which lament Paul’s sinful, even “wretched,” condition (7:14,18,23,24) and argue that they are too negative to describe a believer as mature as Paul. How could someone who struggled so with sin call for others to follow his example (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Thess. 1:5-6)? As a result, they argue that Paul in Romans 7:14-25 must have been describing his life before his conversion. Others point out that the entire passage is presented in the present tense. If Paul were describing his pre-conversion life, wouldn’t he have used a past tense? They also note that Paul described his pre-conversion life as one of spiritual confidence, not as one struggling with a sense of his own sin (Phil. 3:4-7). It was the post-conversion Paul who most clearly saw his own sin and described his Christian life as an ongoing struggle to grow in Christ (Rom. 7:14-25). Even near the end of his life, describing his time as a believer, Paul told Timothy that he had “fought the good fight” which translates more literally as “struggled the good struggle” (2 Tim. 4:7).

The Christian life is one of struggle. The godless do not struggle in the same way because they do not acknowledge and battle against their own sin. Also, Paul repeatedly admonished believers to renounce the ways of the old man and put on the new man (“old self” and “new self,” Eph. 4:17-32). Believers struggle to do this because of their new commitment to Christ. The struggle does not mark them as non-Christian or even as bad Christians, but as growing Christians. In fact, their struggle to live in love and righteousness is one of the main things that identifies them as true believers.

Paul’s comments in the following verses reflect his Christian struggle. Although still living in the flesh, believers are alive to God and desire to live according to His will. As a result, they find themselves pulled between the influences of the flesh and their new nature in Christ (Eph. 4:24). Paul’s comments in the remainder of this chapter both acknowledge that struggle and ultimately celebrate the victory provided through Jesus (Rom. 7:25-8:1).

The law is from God and teaches spiritual truths. Sin arises from the nature of the people interacting with the law. **I am of the flesh** points out Paul’s ongoing struggle with spiritual things. He is a fallible human being, and no number of laws telling him to stop sinning can change the nature of physical existence. Paul added to this that he is **sold as a slave under sin**. Using the language of the slave market, describing himself as having been *sold* identifies him as a person enslaved to another. Paul identifies *sin* as his master to whom he is under its control. Paul’s statement does not deny the freedom he had found in Christ but rather laments the basic condition of a person still living in the flesh. A person who is *of the flesh* must continue, even after conversion, to struggle with the influence of a fallen world and its temptations.

VERSE 15

For I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate.

Paul lamented, **I do not understand what I am doing**. He found it incomprehensible that he would still occasionally sin as he did. He confessed, **I do not practice what I want to do**. His deep desire to please God gives evidence of his commitment to Jesus and his new life in Christ. Still, he observed, **I do what I hate**. His hatred of sin reflects his new nature. But in his fleshly existence he still falls victim to temptations to sin.

VERSES 16-18

Now if I do what I do not want to do, I agree with the law that it is good. So now I am no longer the one doing it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it.

The conflict between Paul's desires and his actions reveals a truth. The things the law condemned were wrong, and he did not want to do them. The things he wanted to do were consistent with the law. The conclusion he drew from this fact was, **I agree with the law**. The law could not save. And the prohibitions in the law could even result in temptation to do the forbidden things. But neither of those facts meant that the law was bad. Rather, Paul's own sense of right and wrong confirmed that the law **is good**.

Given these facts, why did Paul still struggle to do good and reject sin? He reasoned that his new, true self in Christ would renounce sin. But sin, personified as a resident in his physical existence, is not so easily evicted. Knowing the nature of his true self, Paul asserted, **I am no longer the one doing it**. Rather, it is the **sin living in me** that persists in violating God's will. As long as believers live in the flesh they should acknowledge, as Paul did, that **nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh** ["in my sinful nature," NIV]. Even believers with **the desire to do what is good** find that they lack the **ability to do it**.

Paul was painting a dark picture of human existence. His description highlights the evil inherent in fallen humanity and the ongoing struggle against that evil that is the lot of anyone who desires to serve God. The *ability* to obey the law of God is absent, even for those who greatly desire to do so. What could rescue humanity from such a desperate plight?

VERSES 19-20

For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do. Now if I do what I do not want, I am no longer the one that does it, but it is the sin that lives in me.

Paul's statement sounds like a cry of despair—I **do not do the good that I want to do**. *The good* is a broad and general term, encompassing any accurate expression of the will of God. Paul wanted to obey God, but in his own power all too often failed. Stating the other side of the same coin, Paul confessed, **I practice the evil that I do not want to do**. The *I* and *me* in these desperate statements continue to describe Paul's struggles

“in my flesh” (v. 18). It was not the whole story of Paul’s existence, but as long as he remained in the flesh, it was a very real part of his story. And all believers will find that they share Paul’s experience.

Now introduces a conclusion Paul had reached. The **if** clause that follows expresses a statement assumed true. Since Paul found that he did things that he did not want to do, then there must be a force within him that promoted such behavior. He identified the culprit as **the sin that lives in me**. Paul was personifying *sin* as a force for evil within him. His depiction of the power of sin in the flesh served as a means of condemning sin even as he highlighted his struggle against it.

VERSES 21-23

So I discover this law: When I want to do what is good, evil is present with me. For in my inner self I delight in God’s law, but I see a different law in the parts of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body.

Even as a new person in Christ, Paul continued to live “in the flesh” with all its weaknesses and failings. The **law**, or in this context the “principle” (NASB), that his personal struggle revealed was that even when he wanted to do good, the impulse to sin and commit **evil** (morally reprehensible acts) remained within him.

Paul expressed the same idea by distinguishing between his **inner self** over against **the parts of my body**. The latter phrase refers to the various parts of a physical body, so refers to *the flesh* (vv. 14,18) and the sin that lives within (vv. 17,20). Paul mentioned the *inner self* in two other passages in his letters. In one he prayed that God would strengthen the church “with power in your inner being through his Spirit” (Eph. 3:16). In the other, he told the church that although their “outer self is wasting away” their “inner self is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16, ESV). The three passages together seem to refer to that spiritual aspect of a person which is capable of relating to God and enduring beyond death as opposed to “the flesh” with its fallen, sinful, and temporal nature.

As for his inner self, Paul asserted, **I delight in God’s law**. In contrast, a **different law** was operative in his fleshly self, a **law of sin**. He described the conflict between the impulse which would lead a person in godliness and that which would lead a person to sin as two powers **waging war**. Paul’s desire was to live according **the law of my mind**, that is according to what his spiritual self wanted (7:15-16,18,21).

Yet because of the fleshly nature of fallen humanity, he experienced the law of sin persistently trying to dominate and take him **prisoner**.

Paul intended his personal experience to serve as a window into the human condition. Why do Christians do bad things? Because for as long as we live in the flesh, our fallen self will continue to do battle with our spiritual self. The Christian life, therefore, is not one of ease or perfection. It is one of struggle. But thanks be to God, we do not struggle alone.



Explore Further

Read “Flesh” and “Flesh and Spirit” on pages 577–579 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. What do these two terms, “flesh” and “spirit,” refer to? And what is the result of the influence of each in the life of the believer?

Hope (Rom. 7:24-25)

Paul’s letters are full of admonitions for Christians to renounce sinful practices and grow in godliness. Conversion brings forgiveness and a relationship with God but also launches a personal war against the sin which dominates in our fallen world. How could believers hope to be victorious as they struggle to put sinful ways behind them and grow in godliness? Only through the power of God.

VERSES 24-25

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I myself am serving the law of God, but with my flesh, the law of sin.

Paul lamented, **What a wretched man I am!** He was miserable as he contemplated the weak and sinful tendencies of **this body of death**. Unable to win the war with sin (v. 23) in his own power, Paul cried out for help, asking, **who will rescue me?** Paul sought deliverance from his personal sin and the strength to persist in the pursuit of godliness.

Paul's question leads to a proclamation of the only solution to the problem of sin. No one, not even believers, can successfully struggle in their own strength against the power of sin in their mortal bodies. Pointing to the only solution to the plight of fallen humanity, Paul cried out, **Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!**

So then introduces a summary statement which concludes the chapter. Paul, as a born-again follower of Jesus, described his personal commitment and condition as an example for all believers. **With my mind I myself am serving the law of God.** *I myself* is emphatic, and *mind* is the same word used in the phrase "the law of my mind" (v. 23) referring to the "inner self" which delights in the law of God (v. 22).

The **flesh** can never entirely escape the **law of sin**. Paul and every other mortal being live in a world dominated by sin. As a result, everyone who desires to obey God will struggle with sin. But they need not be condemned by it, and they need not serve it.

Paul's innermost commitment was to serve God. Yet he knew that the nature of his physical existence and the world he occupied would continually compel him to combat its influence and temptations to sin. As believers who share Paul's condition and commitment, we too can express gratitude to God for the deliverance and victory only He can provide. We too struggle to serve Him, not in our own power, but as followers of Jesus, and in the power of the Spirit. Thanks be to God!

There were no chapter breaks in Paul's original letter. Chapter 8 elaborates on how believers can live victoriously.



Explore Further

Pray about specific struggles that you have faced as you have sought to serve God. How is your life different now from what it was before you became a Christian? What has changed and what enabled you to make those changes? What would you like to see happen next in your personal journey in Christ?

1. Kevin J. Youngblood and Chad Brand, "Flesh," in *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 578.

2. *Ibid.*

3. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 274.