

THE WAR WITHIN, ROMANS 7:14-25

Pax Romana #16

◆ **Intro:** I remember seeing a movie in college many years ago. I don't remember it's name or recommend it, but now that I've said that I realize that many of you will now want to see it.

◆ [As in our text v7-8: Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire." Romans 7:7, 8, NIV.]

◆ College kids tend to do things in crowds that may very well be the sin they don't want to do and may very well go against the good that they really want to do. Anyway, it was about some hotel in the woods where the people were really werewolves. If they scratched you or bit you you'd become one. And there is a psychologist who sent people there for rest, but he's a werewolf too! There was some good in him in that he tried to keep people with werewolf-ness out of society and holed up in this retreat in the woods. Long story short: scary stuff happens and there's a show down between a guy and a girl and the pack of wolf people including the doctor-wolf. They taunt him to use his rifle on them (because they can't be killed except by a silver bullet). So he shoots one and it dies right there. That's when they realize that he has actual silver bullets. The werewolves back away in fear but the doctor-wolf does something interesting and this is the part I can still see in my mind. You can see in his mind he is

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tormented by this whole wolf thing. You can see he wants it to be over, and so he makes a calculated move. He turns toward the fellow with the gun, crouches and just a little, transforms his face into wolf face and growls. The man promptly shoots him. I don't recall any dialogue but I was distinctly left at least with the impression that the doctor was glad to die and be done with his evil.

◆ That picture has stuck in my head all these years, because it struck me as analogous to the Christian struggling in a world of sin, where there is a presence of evil inside a person, and try as we might to keep it beaten down and hidden away, it wants to come out and wreak havoc for its own pleasure. When one becomes sick of this inner evil, and finds inside the rising desire to actually combat said evil and help others find health, such a one also begins to long more and more for their contradicting existence to be over. Such is the state of one touched by the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

◆ Now some of you here today sense this propensity inside and grit your teeth in frustration. Your hearts long to be free of sin. To do good. To always choose holiness by default. And, some here today just aren't all that concerned with on-going sin. Frankly it doesn't bother you that much and you're not sure you really have any. You might not even be able to think of a single sin you lived this week. If God asked you what you wanted to be forgiven for,

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you might respond, "I'm good." You would be wrong of course, but we've already seen that in the book of Romans. I have nothing to say about that today. It's really only the first group I want to talk to today; those here that are tired of doing the wrong things, saying the wrong things, thinking the wrong things. Those who long for heaven not first to see Grandpa, but first to hug Jesus and finally be done with every trace of darkness and sin. Paul has some encouragement for us about that.

◆ **1. Do real Christians still struggle with sinning?** Paul has so far in chapter 7 been trying to assure us that God's law is not evil even though it seems to arouse sin in people (5). Now the broader question in our text is "How does Paul's description here of spiritual struggle help us see, as we saw last week, that God's law is actually a good thing?"

◆ **A.** Our text today is hotly debated and well known among God-followers, and Scripture commentators since the early centuries! The question is "Do true, mature believers still struggle with sin? Can Christians fall, or lapse into sin and still be believers, not only that but in fact, be saved people? Let me summarize the **controversy**."

◆ 1) On the one side, some say that v14-25 are Paul speaking as if from his pre-Christian state. They say he is describing the life of a person apart from Jesus regeneration of their soul because a true Christian isn't "sold under sin" and a true Christian no longer desires wrong things, and

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makes progress in holiness. Further, how can you describe the state of being saved by Jesus as a “wretched man”? Doesn’t conversion bring you into a state of joy? Some on this side believe once baptized and repentant, you have become free of sin. It’s all gone. You are now good with God and needn’t worry any longer about your choices because all is secure.

◆2) On the other side are those who say that Paul is speaking here as a Christian person, a believer in Jesus. And as it turns out, believers have two natures: a spiritual forgiven nature given them by Christ; and a sinful nature still present in them from Adam and Eve. These two natures do battle though all of life until finally at death the sinful nature is completely gone, and the forgiven spiritual nature lives on in the presence of God.

◆**B.** Now how you come down on that question will also influence your interpretation of the passage. First let me establish why I believe the second interpretation is correct. Then we shall go on to consider what it is saying to us.

◆1) Paul changes the tense of his verbs in v14 to first person present. The most straight forward reading is that he’s talking about now, his present state.

◆2) Paul says among other things that he “delights in God’s law” (22). An unbeliever cannot delight in God’s law. (8:7).

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◆3) He says and that he “wants to do good” but he doesn’t do it. He admits he’s lost and has nothing good on his own. (18). Unbelievers are unaware of being lost like this. They do not think they are bad, and they do not think that they are unable to earn credit or salvation. Martin Luther said that only a spiritually wise man can know he is sold to sin and be displeased with that!

◆4) The thanksgiving in v25 is not in the language of an unbeliever.

◆Ok, if it is the case that Paul is describing his condition as a follower of Jesus, then what do we learn from this?

◆**2. Christians have two simultaneous and opposing natures: sinful and redeemed.** Yes all Christians still have the reality of a sinful nature. Even the great Apostle Paul, writer of most of what we call the New Testament, God’s holy word. This should come as some comfort to us. But it is also a challenge. It means then that the problem of sin is not the other guys problem. It’s mine. When you repent before God and Jesus forgives you sin you are clean in God’s eye. The Bible says you are a new creation. The Bible says the Holy Spirit of God takes up residence inside your soul. Now a new power is alive in you because of God. A new nature. You are seen as righteous because Christ is righteous and has taken your place, your

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punishment. But this side of heaven you still have a sinful nature that hasn't evaporated.

◆**A.** In theological language we call the reality that Paul is describing "indwelling sin." or sin that is "living in me"(17, and again in 20). In v18 Paul calls it his "sinful nature". So here is the point: the law is good. I'm the problem. Three times he says it.

◆v14 *"We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual (flesh, sarx)*

◆v16 *And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.*

◆v22 *"For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war..." Romans 7:23, NIV.*

◆Every time he says, 1) the law is good and 2) I'm the problem. I have both a old self or a false self, and a new self or a true self.

◆you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator." Colossians 3:9, 10, NIV

◆I have God's Spirit, and I have the sinful nature. Call it what you want, there is this war in me as a follower of God!

◆*"the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. Gal.5:16-17*

◆That certainly verifies our interpretation of today's text.

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◆**B.** Now lets pause to apply this a bit. A young man confided in his father one evening. He opened his closet door to reveal a year calendar poster on which a great many of the dates were blackened. "I try and try not to (_a particular sin_). Those are all the days I did it anyway," he sobbed there on the edge of his bed. The father said, "Son, take that down and throw it away. I love you anyway, and God loves you even more than I do. I know your heart is sorry. And I know you father in heaven forgives the sorry heart. That calendar is only Satan talking and it's not who you are in Jesus. Jesus paid for all that already. There's no point in you hanging onto it when he doesn't. Plus there are things you can do that help you win over that."

◆Fellow believers in Jesus, **don't not be shocked** at sin as you learn to recognize it in yourself. It's there. Theologian and writer J I Packer points out that a sensitive person could easily be led to suicide by the fact of indwelling sin. But that is not your true self as a Christian. As a Christian you are joined to Christ by faith so that sin is not who you really are. You are on the way to holy health! It is like sick people who are being treated by a physician: they are really sick, but on the mend. They hope to get better, and it's already begun inside. Don't not be discouraged!

◆**C.** Now did you notice in the scripture passages we've looked at that we are not to settle for this dichotomy within. We are at

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war!! [*but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind. Romans 7:23*]

◆*...put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires...and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness Eph 4:24*

◆There is no war for the unbeliever. There's no longing for the new, the forgiven self meant to be like Christ. But there is for a believer. To become a Christian is like enlisting to go to war. On the one hand do not be discouraged at the presence of sin inside, but don't accept that reality either! That's what Eastern religion teaches: there is the Yin and there is the Yang. There must be a "balance in the force" so we accept both the good and the bad. Some must die. Some must live. Some must be poor. Some must be wealthy. That's not what Christ teaches. We work to save everybody! We work to eradicate poverty and sin. And in ourselves, yes there is the good and the bad but we are called to live in the Spirit and to constantly be killing the sinful nature off. We call that the process of conversion, or sanctification.

Conversion is life long. No one is fully converted to Christ in this life, not even the Apostles. We must always strive forward.

◆*"... train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come." 1 Timothy 4:7-8, NIV.*

◆**3. If I am a follower of Jesus, I am promised victory.** If all we know is that there is a battle waging inside us, that's a tall

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order, but not necessarily good news. Where is the hope in the fact that you have to go to war? Where is the hope in knowing you are a “wretched man”? (24)

◆But, do not be discouraged. Every believer is on the way to holiness. It is God’s intention for you. Paul knows how the movie ends with God. Like Mercy Me sings in one of their songs: “We Win!”

We get pushed down, we get beat up
So afraid life's gonna keep us
Up against the ropes
But hang on there's hope
'Cause if Christ is inside us
it won't be a fair fight 'Cause
Deep down we know
How the story goes

This goes out to anyone down for the count
It's not over
Don't give up, don't throw in the towel
Just remember,
who you belong to
Let Me remind you
How this ends
We win
Woah, we win

◆Paul doesn’t leave this out.

◆“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God--through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Romans 7:24, 25, NIV.

◆It is not your power but you can cooperate and progress in this life too. Paul says in Galatians 5 “since we live by the Spirit let us

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keep in step with the Spirit.” So clearly we can get out of step, and we can get back in step too.

◆ I remember in college something else: I got sick and went to the doctor and he gave me an antibiotic and I went home and started taking it and in a few days was feeling better so you know what I did? Being the thrifty guy that I am (you know what’s coming, don’t you?) I saved the rest of my medicine for later, for if I got sick again. Know what happened. I never did get better. I got sick again right away and had to get even more because now I didn’t have enough to kill the germs! Fighting the spiritual battle is like sick people who are being treated by a physician: they are really sick, but on the mend. They hope to get better, and it’s beginning inside. But they would be a fool to claim before the disease has been killed off that they are well (perfected, sinless) and no longer need their medicine. The life-long fight of the Christian is like taking your meds all the way until their gone, not just until you feel a little better. Christ is your medication. You will need him all the way to heaven.

◆ **Conclusion:** We should not overstate our holiness as believers, as though we have arrived or can this side of heaven. Sinless perfection does not happen here. Neither should we understate the measure of holiness possible even in a fallen place when Christ redeems someone. The bad

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news is you are far worse than you have ever imagined.
The good news is you are far more loved by God than you
will ever fully comprehend. Who will rescue you? Jesus
Christ and him alone. Ask him to.