

*All Roads Lead Here: What Kind of a Christian Are You? Part One*

*By Jason Huff*

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*Psalm 119:69-72; Mark 12:28-34; Romans 7:14-8:2*

Our final Scripture reading today is Romans 7:14-8:2. May God add His blessing on the reading of His holy Word. “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. 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 against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. 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, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.”

In any complex task, it's important to remember the fundamentals. The vast majority of practice even for pros in their fields is built around the fundamentals. It's getting your footwork right, practicing your stance, catching and throwing time after time day after day after day. Musicians who play complex and challenging solos still practice scales...a lot faster and more proficiently than they did as beginners, but it's still fundamentals. My sermons start the same way every time – I don't start with illustrations or three points but by working to understand the basics of the passage we're studying. Fundamentals.

Today's passage is one of the hardest in the whole Bible. For two thousand years, theologians have argued what precisely Paul is describing. He discusses an incredible war inside himself between righteousness and sin, good and evil. But is this battle before he knew Jesus as his Savior and Lord or after? Is this the picture of a struggle before belief or after belief?

We solve this riddle by going back to the fundamentals of faith, understanding what it means to be a Christian and applying it to this passage. Once we know what Paul is talking about, we can see how it applies to our lives. It's going to take a couple of weeks, but this passage will help us gain assurance in our faith, our salvation, and our way forward with Jesus.

So let's set the stage: Paul describes a war within himself, the war that rages inside of us when we become believers. Once we understand that war, we can start to deal with the sin nature inside of us by the power of the Holy Spirit. But the war is real and nasty. There is a tug-of-war, a constant back and forth between the good he wants to do and the sinful things that he actually winds up doing. Paul himself says, “I do not understand what I do.” No wonder it can be confusing to us too!

But is this a picture of the victorious Christian life? Many over the centuries have said no. How can this passage describe a true Christian if there's still sin in it? 1 John 3:6 says, "No one who lives in Jesus keeps on sinning." Paul in Romans 6:1-2 says, "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" Hebrews 10:26 warns of judgment on those who deliberately keep on sinning after they receive the knowledge of Jesus. Plenty of biblical evidence says, "The true Christian does not continue in sin." A couple of weeks ago, we discussed how important it is to take sin seriously as God-dishonoring, soul-killing evil.

But before we say, "Oh, this was Paul before he knew Jesus," we need to go back to the fundamentals. One fundamental we look at in every biblical passage is language, things like voice and tense. In Romans 6, Paul moved back and forth between addressing an audience in the second person plural ("you all" or "y'all" as we'd say down in Kentucky during seminary) and the first person plural ("we"). Depending on the situation, he used different tenses – past, present, and future. In the first part of Romans 7, he described how when he learned God's good law, sin seized the opportunity to twist that law and to urge him to break it. In the first part of Romans 7, everything is in the first person past tense – this is what happened back then.

But in the second part of Romans 7, today's passage, Paul switches to the first person present tense. "I do; I know; I find; I love; I see." It's not "I did; I knew; I found; I loved; I saw." Paul writes about a present reality in his life. The war between the good he wants to do and the evil he does is raging right now, in the moment. Paul, the great apostle and teacher of the church, 25 years after his conversion on the road to Damascus, describes the war as going on right now. He isn't looking over his shoulder and saying, "Boy, you folks have a long way to go before you get to my level." As he writes, he is still fighting the war.

And Paul talks about the fight in the present tense often. In 1 Corinthians 9, he says, "I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize." In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul describes our battle in an ongoing spiritual war against everything that opposes Christ. It's only in his second letter to Timothy as he awaits a death sentence that his tone changes. In 2 Timothy 4, he finally writes, "The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day -- and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."

Paul talks about this war in the first person present tense. But that's only one clue of many fundamentals that show us that Paul is describing the state of a Christian, not an unbeliever. Let's look at those together.

First, Paul says that he is unspiritual – he knows nothing good lives in him. Surprising, right? We think of pastors as spiritual, people who study their Bibles daily as spiritual, maybe people who post quotes from Oprah as spiritual (!). A huge subset of people in America today doesn't attend any worship in any faith tradition; they call themselves "spiritual but not religious." Being spiritual in our culture means simply that you are interested in things beyond the here and now – being interested in the eternal, in what's real beyond what we see.

But Paul, as a believer in Jesus Christ, knows that he is naturally unspiritual and enslaved to sin. Paul is closer to God than the vast majority of people. But he knows that everything good in him, everything that reflects the love of God, every noble thought, every desire to do what is right, comes from outside of him. It comes from Jesus working in him through the Holy Spirit.

That's the description of a Christian. A Christian knows and acknowledges the words of Jesus in Luke 18 – “No one is good except God alone.” In the Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” The poor in spirit are those who know they bring nothing to the table, who throw themselves on the mercy of God because they know that's their only hope.

Contrast that viewpoint to that of the Pharisees, Jesus' enemies. The Pharisees were convinced that they *were* spiritual. They accused Jesus and His disciples of not being spiritual enough – of not ritually washing their hands before they ate, of eating and drinking with tax collectors and notorious sinners. They bragged to God about their spirituality. Every person who believes that they are good enough that God will *have* to let them into heaven when they die follows in the footsteps of the Pharisees. But Paul in Romans 7 believes nothing like that about himself. He knows that the only good in him and the only hope he has for salvation is Jesus.

The second reason we know Paul is describing his struggle as a Christian is that he loves God's ways – he agrees that the Law of God is good, and he delights in God's law in his inmost being. This can't be someone who doesn't have faith and trust in God. Remember back to Romans 1 – the unbeliever's first sin against God is suppressing the truth of the law. Romans 1:32 condemns the unbeliever by saying, “Although they know God's righteous decree that those who [break the law] deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” Scripture says the chief way you can know unrepentant, unredeemed people is that “there is no fear of God before their eyes.”

In comparison, the cry of the faithful Old Testament believer was delight in God's ways. The very first Psalm, Psalm 1, teaches us that the one who delights in the Law of the Lord is blessed by God. Psalm 119 mentions God's law 25 times, and the psalmist's greatest asset, his greatest assurance, is that he loves God's law. The only way that a person can truly love God and His Law is to have experienced God's redemption.

The third clue that Paul is describing a believer is that Paul desires to do what is right and good and has a deep inner conflict about his inability to follow God completely. Psalm 53 tells us that no one seeks after God or desires to do what is good in God's eyes. Paul describes a genuine change in his life where he truly seeks God's ways; he's broken through the barrier Psalm 53 describes. In Philippians 3, Paul described all his personal piety before he became a servant of Jesus – a huge, long list – and called it all “rubbish” in comparison to knowing Jesus and having found his true life in Jesus.

He wants to do what is right; his soul and spirit ache for godliness and true righteousness with God. And when he can't live that way fully, he is heartbroken. "I'm a wretched man!" he cries out. "Who will rescue me?" He then thanks God for his salvation in Jesus – because Jesus' sacrifice for us has rescued us and set us free from the law of sin and death. All who believe, who persevere through the struggle, are not condemned but saved by God.

Now we might ask, "How can we both have peace with God and this awful internal conflict?" Paul promises in Romans 5 and Philippians 4 that through Jesus, we have peace with the Father. Paul starts most of his letters like, "Grace and peace be yours in God and our Lord Jesus Christ." So how do we have this huge war going on inside?

Here's the thing: to be at peace with God is to be at war with sin. You can't have one without the other. You might remember back a few months ago when President Trump got into trouble because he met with the leader of Taiwan. Taiwan is an island country that China claims belongs to them; they say it's a renegade province and not its own separate country. To have diplomatic relations with Taiwan is to be at war with China. That's why President Trump, who pretty much says and does what he wants, had to back off. The same thing is true in other places of the world: a country can't be on perfect terms with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority or both North and South Korea. It just isn't going to happen.

If you love God and want to serve Him, if you belong to Jesus Christ, the world will hate you and persecute you because you have declared war on it and vice versa. Jesus said it to His disciples the night he was betrayed; in their letters, the apostles Peter and John repeated it. Because we're human, until we have been remade at Christ's second coming, we're going to carry around the sin nature, the "flesh," of our humanity. During this life, we're always going to fight it. We'll be at war with it. But that war with sin means we are at peace with God.

That's what I want us to consider in our final moments together. The number one question most people have asked me over the years is, "How can I know that I'm saved? How can I know that I'm going to heaven, that I'm really one of God's people?" A lot of people hope they've been good enough – we know that doesn't work. Some of us were taught that you need to say a prayer saying you are sorry and asking for forgiveness, and that prayer would get us into God's good graces. But that plan and that prayer aren't found in the Bible. What does it look like to be a saved member of God's family?

The fundamentals we see in this passage tell us what to look for. Are you concerned whether or not Jesus has saved you? Here are some tell-tale questions to ask based on what we have just read. First, have you given up on saving yourself? Paul clearly doesn't believe that there is anything good in himself that he can give himself a leg up with God.

Would any of you here, without one lesson, come up and play guitar for worship? Would any of you volunteer to sing a new song without the words, without ever having heard it? That's what it's like when we think we can be good enough for God. We think we can play God's song without knowing the tune, and if we believe that, we're in trouble. But if you have come to the end of yourself, if you are relying on the love and mercy and forgiveness of God to save you and not your own goodness, you are in the right place.

Another tell-tale question: do you find your love and delight in God, His ways, and His Word? It's impossible to love God and not want to know Him or spend time with Him. To be fair, there are scholars who spend tons of time in God's Word and don't love Him. The key word is "delight." When your schedule falls apart and you don't have your usual quiet time with God and His Word, does it throw off your day? On the rare occasions you miss church, are you disappointed you didn't get to spend time enjoying God's presence in worship? Do you spend time reading God's Word or listening to worship music in the car or seeking out Bible studies just because you want more of Him?

We have to be really honest with ourselves. You can keep busy with God stuff and not love God. But the redeemed have a genuine love for God and want to please Him. If you have genuine affection for Jesus as He truly is, as we know Him in Scripture, that's a sign God has redeemed you.

Last tell-tale question for today: are you at war with your sin? When you are tempted to do what you know God disapproves of, is there a battle raging inside your mind that you sometimes win? Because there is no inner conflict with sin for the unbeliever. The unbeliever may be conflicted over what to do because of consequences – an unbeliever might not drink a lot of alcohol, but to avoid a DUI or a hangover, not because drunkenness displeases God. An unbeliever might not commit adultery, but not because God says so but because they prefer to keep their marriage intact.

The believer, on the other hand, struggles mightily with what God wants. Our moral standards might not be higher than the unbeliever, but they have a different basis. We want to please God, and that means avoiding anything God's Word condemns. It means we stay far away from sin, not flirting with it but running in the opposite direction. And there are some things we avoid that the world embraces – and not because we understand why God says "no" to them, but simply because God says "no."

If you regularly ask what God wants of you and you struggle when you want something different, you're in a good place. If you struggle because you want to speak kindly about your neighbor that frustrates you and you often grumble about her instead, if you struggle because you want to pray for the co-worker whose politics are so different from yours but you often speak ill of him, you are experiencing what Paul is talking about. You are in the Kingdom, and God is working in you to grow you into the kind of person He wants you to be.

You might not be experiencing this struggle yet. You might not yet delight in God; you might not yet battle with sin. But if that's the case, there's still hope. Turn to God today. Trust in His Son Jesus. Acknowledge you can't please God on your own. Ask God to plant a desire in you to pursue Him. And He will do it.

Despite its tone, we've learned today that this passage is the war cry of sinners saved by grace. God isn't done with us yet. There is a war in our souls over sin. The good news is, the war hasn't been lost...we are on our way to victory. We'll talk more about this war next week and how we can be assured that God will conquer the sin remaining in our lives.