

Happiness and Holiness

Romans 7:21-25

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If you are new to this teaching series, it's a little like walking into a room of people watching a movie and it's almost done. So much has already happened that to retell it would take as long as the movie itself. We have been studying the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans all year and the last couple months we've been savoring Romans chapters 6 and 7. Today is the end of Romans 7. Next week is a Christmas message and then January is a whole month of messages on family and marriage and parenting. We call it Family Month. We won't get into Romans 8 until February. This gives us all something to look forward to as chapter 8 is arguably the greatest single chapter in the Bible and we will go low and slow through it all the way till summer.

Romans 6 – Salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus. The grace that saves us changes us from within, placing Jesus on the throne of our hearts and desires. It dethrones sin as our master.

Romans 7 – Indwelling sin remains in the soul of the believer. It weaponizes God's good law against us, creating desires to disobey. It is so effective that even the Apostle Paul describes his inner self as constantly being pulled away from what the Christian Paul wants toward what indwelling sin in him desires. He hates it. He hates that he isn't fully like Christ. He hates every sin he sees, yet he cannot overcome sin completely.

"So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin." (Romans 7:21-25 ESV)

That last verse acts as a summary of chapter 7 and we see in it the tension Paul feels intensely. His mind. His intellect. His spiritual self wants to obey God. But his flesh, that is, his carnal self, still serves the rule and pleasure of Darth Lord Sin.

While I illustrate with Star Wars, this is not a dualism of two equal powers, like the force. Christ is Lord supreme and all glory, power, and honor are his. Our sinful flesh is the remnant of the old regime. Weakened, but like a wounded bear, still incredibly powerful and dangerous.

Here is what lies behind this testimonial: Paul's hatred is a sign of spiritual maturity. Only a very mature Christian could understand sin's stubborn presence. The immature Christian is generally blind to its presence. Paul writes Romans 7 by the Holy Spirit's inspiration, as close to total holiness as any human could be. From that perspective of maturity, he treats the power of indwelling sin with fear and respect.

It's like a guy who is new working the electrical lines at NIPSCO. You watch him up on electrical poles. He's carefree. He's grabbing wires randomly. Whistling a tune. Distracted. What do the experienced linesman think? This greenhorn isn't going to live long. Does he

realize the power of what he's handling? No. The experienced linemen do, and it creates respect for the danger electricity poses.

Paul writes about indwelling sin like an experienced linesman writes about electricity. It's powerful. It's dangerous. It's treacherous. It's in me and I hate it.

The More Spiritually Profitable Something is, the More Inner Resistance to it I Will Feel

"So, I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand." (Romans 7:21) One paraphrase translation gets the sense of it. *"It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up."* (The Message)

This is an incredibly helpful verse on how sin works in our lives. John Owen wrote an entire book on indwelling sin from this one verse. While powerful, indwelling sin is quite predictable; so much so that Paul calls its predictability a law.

"When I want to do right." This is Paul's spiritual self with a desire to do something pleasing to God, something spiritually helpful, gospel-advancing, others-uplifting, personally enriching, whatever. Anything that God would call good.

When I have the desire to do something good, evil lies close at hand. The NIV states it, *"Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me."* Close at hand. In my face. Part of this admission is that we never do anything with motives that are completely free from any taint of sin. Even our very best motives and desires have some small old fleshly me in it. There's always something that smells a little.

Miss Susan, your service to the church this past year has been exemplary. I dare say I have never seen such dedication and faithfulness. What does Miss Susan feel inside? Grateful for the kind word of encouragement. Thankfulness to God for the opportunity to serve. Humbled that God would use someone like her.

But what also pulls at the fringes of her thoughts? *Is that all you must acknowledge about me? I wish others were as dedicated as me.* Now she is set up for the next opportunity for service to be motivated by the dopamine drop acknowledgment has brought. Something whispers inwardly, *they're lucky to have you. You deserve even better. Or perhaps, you must be saved; look at all you've done.*

What was the source of this temptation? The casino? The frat party? No. Serving Jesus in some way. Doing something good. And suddenly, from somewhere, is infused into our hearts all manner of self-pity, self-condemnation, self-elevation, and self-worship. Yesterday, I was praying for someone in need (and yes, as I say that, I want you to admire that I was praying and amazing) when I had the ugliest thought come to my mind. And I thought to myself, *where did that come from? And why can I watch basketball all afternoon and never have a thought like that?*

I'm encouraging you to identify the source of these kinds of things. And notice that Paul says it's not when I'm doing something bad. Here's the point: the better something will be for me spiritually, the greater resistance I will feel to it inside.

The flesh doesn't have to work hard in our vices. Pick your vice. Pick your, *yeah, I shouldn't do that.* Do you feel any resistance to doing that before or during doing that? No. This is why you can binge watch all eight *Star Wars* movies in a row. You don't get sleepy. Your

mind is engaged and undistracted. It feels good. Bags of chips disappear effortlessly. The flesh loves when we engage in unprofitable activities. We can do so for hours on end. Nothing else comes to mind that I should do but spend my entire Christmas break watching *Star Wars* for the 50th time.

But what happens when you think, *I should pray*? Within half a second, a thousand other things that you could do flood your mind. *I could pray, but I could also check the oil in my car. I could pray, but then I could look at old high school yearbooks.*

This is where social media and video gaming make it so clear. How long can you scroll through Facebook without a thought of doing something else? How long can you do anything spiritually profitable without thinking of doing something else? Is this a coincidence? No. Paul says, it's a law. The flesh is as predictable as the sunrise.

Indwelling Sin Keeps Us from What is Spiritually Best by Enticing Toward Something "Good"

We tend to think of temptation as the desire to do something evil. It is that. But much more common is for the flesh to create the desire for something neutral or even somewhat good if it will keep us from what is best. Rather than asking, *what is wrong with this?* Ask, *what will this replace that would have been spiritually best?*

A simple example is how we use our time. Choosing to do one thing is, by definition, choosing not to do other things. Indwelling sin will fill our minds and calendars with all manner of socially acceptable priorities IF they can displace good means of grace in our lives. Is it wrong to be in that bowling league or for your kid to play _____? If your weekends are sucked up by tournaments, you never have family devotions, and your son graduates from high school awesome at the backstroke but can't find Romans without the table of contents, who's winning? Indwelling sin always plays the long game. Its goal isn't necessarily to win today but to win someday.

If I have no time to serve God, no money to give to God, no margin for much of the kingdom of God, I may not be spending my time robbing banks, but I'm not cultivating a life of eternal values.

Pursuing Holiness as True Happiness

Identify the friend, identify the foe

How do you know if a desire is spiritual or of the flesh? This may sound easy but it's not because our hearts are pulsating with all kinds of desires all the time; natural desires for food, water, work, and rest which correlate to natural needs our body's rhythms require. We have relational desires for love, companionship, and communication. On and on we could go.

Spiritually, Christians have many inner desires fueled by the Holy Spirit and love for Christ. Then we have all these sinful desires. It can all be rather confusing. We must identify who is behind the desire. Who wants this in my life? The flesh or the Holy Spirit? The flesh is predictable if we know what to look for.

"Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned

you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”
(Galatians 5:19–21)

This is the direction the flesh is always heading. The Spirit heads a different direction:
“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” (Galatians 5:22–23)

Words of the Flesh		Fruit of the Spirit	
<i>sexual immorality</i>	<i>impurity</i>	<i>Love</i>	<i>joy</i>
<i>sensuality</i>	<i>idolatry</i>	<i>peace</i>	<i>patience</i>
<i>sorcery</i>	<i>enmity</i>	<i>kindness</i>	<i>goodness</i>
<i>strife</i>	<i>jealousy</i>	<i>faithfulness</i>	<i>gentleness</i>
<i>fits of anger</i>	<i>rivalries</i>	<i>self-control</i>	
<i>dissensions</i>	<i>divisions</i>		
<i>envy</i>	<i>drunkenness</i>		
<i>orgies</i>			
Galatians 5:19–21 (ESV)		Galatians 5:22 (ESV)	

It is incredibly important when a desire comes up to identify whether this desire is friend or foe. Indwelling Spirit or indwelling flesh?

Paul concludes this section in Galatians encouraging us to live by the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit. Practically, that means promoting and feeding desires that bear the fruit of the Spirit and killing desires that promote the fruit of the flesh.

How? In the midst of the desire or emotion or temptation, stop and ask, *down which path is this desire taking me?*

One Sunday in our upcoming Family Month is about family conflict. So, this Christmas some disagreement begins to form. Words are said. The argument is beginning. The Spirit promotes peace. The flesh loves dissension. Pick your sin. Indwelling sin seeks baby steps that direction. It's nearly imperceptible. A little compromise here or there. A small breach of integrity. Whatever. But where is it heading?

We must be good at identifying, *is this desire from my flesh?* If so, I don't want to feed it or follow it. It wants to control me and destroy me.

Resist the enemy and he will flee from you

This is an adaption of James 4:7, *“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.”*

I read a book some time ago entitled, *Resistance*. I don't believe the author was a Christian, but his basic premise was this: we generally feel resistance to things that are ultimately profitable to us. Conflict resolution. Exercise and healthy choices. Ending negative habits, etc. His point was that rather than giving in to resistance, we need to see resistance as flashing lights indicating a path toward happiness. Use resistance against itself. Through this prism see what Paul says,

"For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." (Romans 7:22–23)

He delights in and desires God's law and will. But he has this other seat of desires that *wage war*. That's a military term against the delighting in God's law. When it wins, it makes me a captive to sin. There's another military term: captive; a prisoner of war. Don't think *Hogan's Heroes* and a bumbling Colonel Klink (old TV show I used to binge watch). Think Dachau. Think death camp. Sin is a death camp. Captivity there means death.

Use resistance against itself. Recognize resistance to something spiritually profitable as not of the Holy Spirit. If it's not him, then I know where this is coming from. Use resistance as motivation.

So tomorrow when you think, *I should read my Bible*, and checking the oil or darning your socks suddenly comes to mind, think, *there you are enemy. You have exposed your hand. I resist your resistance.*

If there is a desire in me to resolve conflict with my sibling by forgiving, BUT another desire to avoid the awkward call arises, which should I resist, and which should I do?

If there is a desire to engage in ministry in some way, but then another desire arises to stay comfortable or flexible, which should I resist, and which should I do?

In big and small things this is immensely helpful. By understanding that anytime I have any level of desire for something God wants I can flat expect a contrary desire to appear, I see what the enemy is up to. I can resist the flesh, and with the Spirit's help, intentionally do the opposite.

Sin is misery; holiness is happiness

"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24–25)

Only a mature Christian would lament his sin like this. For the mature Christian, sin is a miserable reality. Why? The mature Christian wants to be like Christ and hates everything in his life that isn't like Him.

The sinner is the opposite. Sin seems to be the best of what life has to offer. In the words of C.S. Lewis: we are *"like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*¹ The sinner is content in the fleeting pleasures sin provides, but this is because they don't know Christ. They haven't experienced God's grace; they don't understand divine beauty.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, p. 26.

But the Christian has a new heart with new and better desires and besides the glory of God, Christlikeness is what we want most.

Why does Paul lament, *"wretched man that I am"*? Because for Paul, sin isn't happiness. Holiness is happiness. The Jesus life is the best life. To see sin's influence in his life is painful because he knows it diminishes his true joy.

In this, Paul sets a wonderful example for all of us. *"Blessed are the poor in spirit.... Blessed are those who mourn."* (Matthew 5:3, 4) Jesus said that. What does it mean? There is more joy in mourning sin than in doing sin. Sin is no path to happiness. What does it bring? Death. Guilt. Shame. Pain. Who in their right spiritual mind would say, *that's what I want in my life?*

No. Would that we all want to be like Jesus so much that we hate anything that isn't like him. Like the horse sculpture last week, how do you make a horse? By chipping off everything that doesn't look like a horse. How do we become like Christ? A critical component is loving Christ so much that we hate to see anything in us that isn't like him.

I wonder, can you say with honesty, *O wretched man or woman that I am?* If not, don't try to think less of your sin; try very hard to think more of Christ. The higher in our affections he is, the more we will hate our sin.

"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of death?" (Romans 7:24) Paul concludes, only one. *"Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* (Romans 7:25)

The work of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit is the basis for our justification AND it the foundation of our hope for sanctification. On our own we cannot do this anymore than sculptures sculpt themselves. God is the divine sculptor and our hope for Christlikeness rests in his work in us. *"He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion."* (Philippians 1:6)

What follows all this? Romans 8:1, *"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* All praise be to him. Romans 8, we will see you in February.

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