

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 30

Sanctification

In the summer of 1980, I remember getting the new Keith Green album, "So You Wanna Go Back to Egypt." I wore it out. What an album! I am listening to it as I type this lesson! Go get it as soon as you can!

One of the standout songs in that album was simply entitled, "Romans VII."

The very things I hate, I end up doing,
The things I want to do, I just don't do.
Lord it seems so sad, why am I so bad?
When in my heart I only want to be like you.

The very ones I love I end up hurting,
The ones I want to help I pass right by.
Now I want to be, finally set free
The grace you've shown, the love I've known,
Please let it shine through me.

I want to love them, the way you do,
I want to serve them, by serving you.

Lord how I know your tender heart must be broken,
By all those unkept promises I've made,
The question still prevails; please take away the veil,
About how you forgive, and still you live inside me when I fail.

I want to love them all, the way you do,
I want to serve them, by serving you.
I want to be like you; Jesus I do.

I want to love them all, the way you do,
I want to serve them, by serving you.

Keith did a wonderful job at personalizing the anguish Paul expressed in Romans 7:15-25. Paul wrote:

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I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

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.

Have you shared Paul's frustration? Have you personalized Romans 7 in your life? Probably so! This is the lesson for you!

SANCTIFICATION

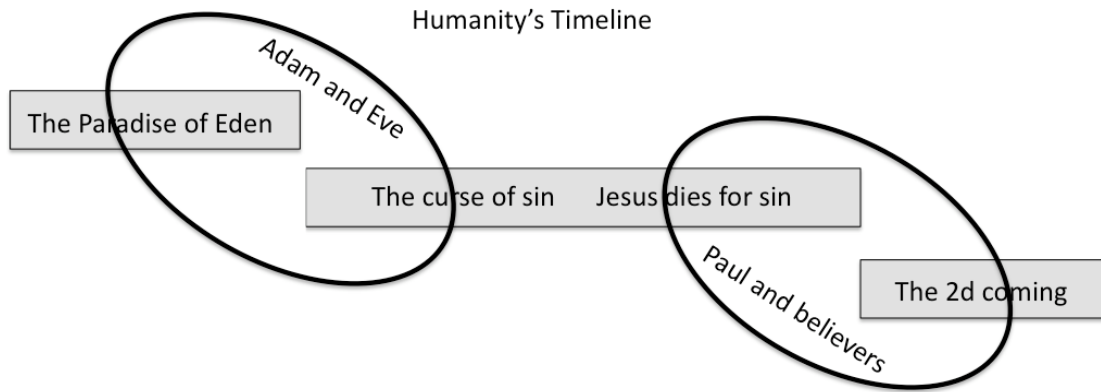
In the Romans 7 passage, Paul draws a stark distinction between what he wishes to do¹ and what he actually does. Paul begins his discussion stating, "I do not understand my own actions." A very literal translation of this sentence is, "I do not know what I do!" Paul wills to do good by the law, yet finds that he does that which the law prohibits. Paul finds himself defeated in this war (v.23) in despair as a wretched man (v.24).

Why was Paul having this problem? What was conquering the desire to do right? We can answer that from our own personal experiences with similar problems, but instead, we urge a close analysis of where Paul discerned the problem. In the verse that immediately preceded the portion we are quoting above, Paul sets out the principle that drives his analysis: "I am of the flesh, sold under sin" (v.14).

We should pause here and note that a good number of scholars (including some early church fathers) found it hard to understand how Paul could write these words as a born again Christian. They reason that Paul must have been putting on the image of an unregenerate sinner to try and reach those who did not have Christ. We find this position unlikely. Paul does not say he is speaking hypothetically. Further, his comments make sense for those born again.

¹ Paul uses some form of the verb "wish/desire/will" seven times in this passage.

Paul is writing about the Christian who lives in the overlapping time between the rule of sin in this world and the second coming of Christ. We might chart the time period in this sense:



We see the times of this world divided into three segments. First was the time of perfection in Eden, before the entrance of sin. Second is the time of the world from the sin of man, when the world came under a curse, until the world is destroyed at the second coming of Christ. The new heavens and the new earth are the third era/epoch in the above timeline.

When we break out this timeline, we see Adam and Eve lived in two epochs, that of Eden and that of the fallen world. Similarly, Christians today, and at the time of Paul, live in two epochs. Today, we still live in the world governed by sin and under a curse. Yet, as born again believers, we have already begun our eternal life. We have already begun the life of eternity in the presence of God.

So we see that the believer belongs, in a sense, to two epochs. We belong in the era ruled by sin; and yet spiritually, we are born again into the age of Christ and his purity.

This may help us see why Paul, and we, struggle with what is occurring. We find ourselves at war internally. God's Spirit confirms us as born again believers, seeking and yearning for God's purity. While at the same time, the fallen bodies we still inhabit are part of the fallen world and under sin's power. We have bodies of sin and minds of sin. God is at work renewing the mind,² but this work is not

² Romans 12:1-2, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will."

completed until we lose our fallen bodies and come into the presence of the Lord. Then, we shall “know fully,” just as we “have been fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12).

If we look carefully at the Greek, then we see that Paul uses the perfect tense on the verb “sold” as he wrote Romans 7:14, “I am of the flesh, sold under sin.” The perfect tense in Greek is not simply a reference to something that occurred in the past. The perfect tense is used when a writer wants to emphasize the present effect or current condition that resulted from a past action. Here, Paul is emphasizing his current condition as one that results from the past life as one sold under sin.

We do not find it hard to understand how Paul, a holy and saved man, could struggle with sin’s tight grip over his life. Indeed, as James Dunn has recognized commenting on these verses:

It is precisely the saint who is most conscious of his sinfulness.³

As we delve into this issue, we must refer the reader to lesson 13 in this series.⁴ That lesson, on the Holy Spirit, spoke of “living in the gap” between the time Jesus returned to heaven and the time of his second coming to earth. During that gap period, we have the time of the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is a time where the Holy Spirit operates on earth indwelling the believer and bringing the work and message of Christ to fruition.

We explained in that lesson that core to the work of the Holy Spirit is the release of the believer from the bondage of sin. With the Holy Spirit, the believer has the power and the motivation to say, “No!” to sin. Yet in this lesson, we are exploring how it is that man still seems under the power of sin at times. This lesson is the logical extension of lesson 13, and the two concepts belong together. For while the believer has the power to say no to sin, and while the believer has the power to do good, these powers are directly the work of the Spirit in the believer. Absent the Spirit, the believer can do no good deed (Rom. 3:10-12).⁵

Yet the indwelling Spirit is working inside the bodies of fallen people. Our minds and bodies are not perfected, and as fallen people we still live in the two epochs set out above. This gives rise to a measure of control sin exercises over the believer, although not in the degree or measure it does in the life of one not born again.

³ James D. G. Dunn, *Word Bible Commentary: Romans 1-8* (Thomas Nelson 1988) at 389.

⁴ Lesson 13. Like all lessons, is available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

⁵ Even our best deeds, apart from the Holy Spirit, are not the deeds of God, and hence not truly “good deeds.” They may be good, moral activities for society, but that is different than the goodness of completing God’s plan in our lives and the lives of others.

The key to understanding Paul's struggle and the interplay of the indwelling Spirit lies in the word "sanctification." Let us now turn to Paul's theology on that important doctrine.

WHAT IS SANCTIFICATION?

What exactly does "sanctification" mean? A standard answer we find in a Bible dictionary is, "human progress toward and final achievement of holiness and righteousness."⁶ Teachers often teach sanctification as the process that follows justification. In other words, in "justification," we find God declaring us righteous, while in sanctification God makes us truly righteous.

We read Paul writing of sanctification in a number of places. Paul told the Romans to, "present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification" (Rom. 6:19). He then added, "now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life" (Rom. 6:22).

Paul ties sanctification to Christ in 1 Corinthians 1:30 writing, "because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption." In 2 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul ties sanctification to the Spirit explaining, "God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth." Paul also ties sanctification to God the Father in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

What is Paul saying? How do we understand sanctification in these passages? Our best approach might be to study the word Paul is using for sanctification.

Paul writes of sanctification using a noun in Greek, *hagiasmos* (αγιασμος), which is translated "sanctification" or "consecration." The word is best understood in light of the adjective form used countless times in Scripture. The adjective is *hagios* (αγιος) which is translated "holy." This is the word used in reference to the Holy Spirit (*i.e.*, Rom. 5:5; 9:1; 12:1; 14:17; 15:13, 16, etc.). It is used in reference to holy garments (Ex. 35:21⁷), to the Sabbath (Gen. 2:3); the ground at the burning bush (Ex. 3:5); sacrificial offerings (Ex. 29:33, 34), and the various places in the tabernacle and temple (Ex. 29:30; 2 Chron. 36:14), and more.

We readily see from the many passages that speak of holy things the root meaning of "holy." "Holy" means "set apart." Things that are holy are things that are set

⁶ The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Eerdmans 1988) Vol. 4 at 321.

⁷ The Jewish translators of the Hebrew Old Testament used the Greek word when they translated the Old Testament into Greek. This was done in the two centuries before Paul wrote. It is called the "Septuagint."

apart from the ordinary and profane things of the world. So, holy food is distinguished from normal food. Holy places are set apart from those places that are ordinary. The Sabbath as a holy day was set apart from normal days as special to God. Even among these holy places, like the temple in Jerusalem, there was one place more set apart than the rest. This was called the “holy of holies.”

The concept, common across cultures in Paul’s day, was one of compartmentalizing things into two categories: (1) the common or secular (also called the “profane”), and; (2) that meant for and separated to God (or the gods, in polytheistic cultures). Those things set apart as God’s or for God were termed “holy” to distinguish them from the profane and ordinary things.

Now in this sense, we get a noun that speaks of the process of making one “holy” or set apart – “sanctification.” We might say that as Christians, we have already been set apart for God. We are, in that sense, already “holy.” This is why Paul can write to the Corinthians as “those sanctified (from *hagiasmos*) in Christ Jesus, called to be saints (*hagios*) together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2). “Saints” is the translation used by the English Standard Version for the “holy ones.” In biblical language, “saints” are those “set apart” for God; they are what we commonly call “Christians.”

In the Corinthians passage, we can see Paul using the words “holy” and “sanctified” in the sense of something that has *already occurred*. In other words, in a sense once people become Christians, they are already set apart for God and holy/sanctified, yet there is another sense in which Paul uses the word.

Paul uses the word “sanctified” in an ethical sense, beyond the simple idea of being set apart for God. The ethical dimension of being “set apart” or “holy” or “sanctified” centers on the heart, mind, and behavior of the Christian. We see this as Paul compares the ethics of sanctification to the ordinary ethics of the world. In this sense, consider 1 Thessalonians 4:3:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.

Paul contrasts the common place approach of ethics in the world, one of sexual promiscuity, to that of the believer, called to abstain, called to be set apart, holy, different from the ordinary.⁸ Paul wants the believer to understand: God is at

⁸ This is especially worth noting in our culture where people find the reason for sexuality outside of Scripture’s teaching with the excuse, “things are different today.” The truth is that things might be more promiscuous than in earlier generations, but they are far from more promiscuous than the times in which Paul wrote. In Paul’s day, promiscuity rose to heights far beyond ours today. People engaged in lewd and sexual acts in the name of religion, as well as simply to satisfy every type of lust. Paul does not condone common ethics in his day! Paul is emphatic that

work renewing the mind. God has placed us into the kingdom of his Son. God dwells within and we have become his temple. As such, the believer is called to a life of Christ's ethics and conduct. We are to "have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

This is a life of "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6). Paul explained to the Colossians:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:1-4).

HOW DOES THIS WORK

Armed with this knowledge, we now return to the start of this class. How do we live set apart? How do we live holy? What do we do with tempers we cannot control? How do we process tongues that seem to wag with gossip before we even realize what is happening? How do we avoid the fires of lust that tempt at every turn in 21st century America? How can we process away the envy or spite we feel towards others? How are we ever supposed to forgive those who do not merit our forgiveness? How can we find harmony in marriage when our spouse is _____? (Fill in the blank!) Are we really supposed to believe that cheating and stealing is always wrong? Even if it is a part of business? How can we tithe when we are in debt? How can we avoid debt when our needs outweigh our income? Why can't we control the basics of eating and exercise in ways that build our bodies up rather than destroy them?

If we are "set apart" and called to behave in ways that are different than the world, if the Holy Spirit indwells us and empowers us to live differently, then why is it so hard? Is there a magic bullet we are missing?

Do you ever feel when you are struggling with sin that there is something peculiarly wrong with you? Do you struggle with the same sin over and over and over? Do you see others and wonder why they do not have the same struggles? Do you ever feel it is futile and you just want to give up and give in to sin?

Here is where we need to stop and consider a bit more of Paul's teachings on sanctification and holiness.

the Christian is "set apart." The Christian's behavior is based on God's ethics, not that of the world.

First, There Is No Magic Pill. It would be wonderful if God saw fit to give us a pill we could take whenever temptation came. Better yet, if he gave us a vaccination that stopped temptation from even getting close! But God has not done so. He has empowered us with the Holy (set apart) Spirit that had the power to raise Jesus from the dead. There is power to conquer sin, but the Spirit does not always act independently of our own volition. We have the power to live by the Spirit, and we have the power to quench the Spirit. Paul recognized his own shortcomings as he wrote the Philippians:

Not that I have already obtained this [the resurrection from the dead]
or am already perfect (Phil. 3:12).

Paul knew he was imperfect. In spite of all his knowledge, all his faith, his time in the mission field, his visions and experiences with the Lord, and the indwelling of the Spirit, Paul was still imperfect. He had his own sin and shortcomings, even as he desired to be wholly holy.

Second, Recognize the Goal. This is what we have already covered in this lesson. We need to be aware that holiness is a big deal. Living holy before God has never been the basis of one's salvation, but it is what believers were called in Christ to do. Would not a faithful believer seek to live set apart from the world in faithful obedience to the Lord? That is what the Spirit moves in us to promote. Paul continued his explanation to the Philippians, referenced in the last paragraph, by setting out the goal. In spite of Paul's imperfection, he said,

But I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me
his own (Phil. 3:12).

Earlier in the letter, Paul had encouraged the Philippians to have the same attitude and mindset that they found in Christ. They were to seek to model themselves after Christ in thought and behavior. ("Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus" Phil. 2:5).

Third, Treat Sin as Sin. Paul knew what sin was. With sin should come confession and repentance. There should be genuine regret over the sin, even when the sinful desires remain. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the godly grief they felt that moved them to repentance:

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death (2 Cor. 7:9-10).

Fourth, Press On Beyond the Sin. After confession and repentance, believers should not dwell on sin. Rather, they should move past the sin and continue to work toward God's purity and holiness. Paul set this principle out in Philippians 3 completing the thought we began in number 1 above:

One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those who are mature think this way (Phil. 3:12-15).

Please understand that this is not a formula Paul delivered to save us from the despairing of Romans 7. A formula is a bit akin to a magic pill. These are features of Paul's life and theology that we get from the Scriptures that God has provided for the church. Although not a To Do list, these features are worthy of our consideration and practice. Paul admonished the Philippians to, "join in imitating me" (Phil. 3:17). Later in the letter Paul was more emphatic:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:8-9).

Fifth, Fill Your Life With Holy Deeds. This is part of Paul's point in the above passage of Scripture. If we dwell on things that are honorable, just, pure, lovely and of good repute, then the time and brainpower that lean to sin are minimized. This is similar to the teaching of Jesus about sweeping out demons, but failing to fill the house. The demons return more numerous than ever! ("When the unclean spirit has gone out of a person, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, but finds none. Then it says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when it comes, it finds the house empty, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and brings with it seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they enter and dwell there, and the last state of that person is worse than the first. So also will it be with this evil generation" Mt 12:43-45).

Sixth, Know that God is at Work with you in the Task of Holiness. We made this point earlier in the lesson. The Christian's sanctification is God's work. Still, it is not something God does without us. Like the last lesson on predestination, the paradox is that God does the work, while man does the work. Paul says it this way in Philippians:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own

salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me?”* (Rom. 7:24).

Do you know Paul’s struggle? Have you experienced difficulty with sin? Do you have areas in your life that still need attention? Does it bother you? It should! As Christians, we are God’s temples. The Holy Spirit dwells within us. We are to be set apart, to be holy, to be special and godly. Our lives are not to reflect the world’s normalcy or sin. This is true in the “big areas” as well as the “little ones.” The only answer will be found in God.

2. *“This is the will of God, your sanctification”* (1 Thes. 4:3).

God does not want his children unholy. God does not want his children to suffer the damage of sin. He did not want Adam and Eve outside of his will; nor does he want you or me outside of his will. God is at work in us, to will and to work for his good will. Shall we join him or fight him? How can we truly call him Lord, and not seek to follow him in this. Sanctification is a process. Let us prayerfully renew our commitment to him. Yet, as we do so, remember Rome was not built in a day! God’s promise is to sanctify us, and he works on that daily. We need to understand the time and the process as we consider not only our own lives, but also that of those around us!

3. *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you”* (Phil. 2:12-13).

We know what to do and we know who empowers us to do it; we now need to do it. This is not a call to perfection. Paul did not reach it in his life; neither will we. This is a call to struggle for growth -- to strive, to press on, and to seek out God’s holiness. When we fall, we repent, we get up, and we press on. After repentance, we do not dwell on past failures beyond learning from them. We set before us the examples of holy ones. We learn from Paul, we learn from others. Most especially, we learn from Christ, who lived the perfect example for us before dying to save us from our sins. Who delivers us from our wretched state? Thanks be to God who does through our Lord Jesus Christ!