

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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2/1/2026

Sermon Title: The Struggle is Real

Sermon Text: Romans 7:14-25

Rom. 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

Rom. 7:15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Rom. 7:16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.

Rom. 7:17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Rom. 7:18 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.

Rom. 7:19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Rom. 7:20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Rom. 7:21 ¶ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

Rom. 7:22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,

Rom. 7:23 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.

Rom. 7:24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Rom. 7:25 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.

Main Point: Sin remains within the heart of a believer in this life, producing inner conflict between the God that he loves and the sin that he is still tempted by.

Outline:

1. The Believer's Delight in the Law (7:14, 16, 18, 21-22)
2. The Believer's Actions of Lawlessness (7:14b-20)
3. The Believer's Inner Conflict (7:21-24)
 - a. We must know our sin
 - b. Fill your mind with God and his majesty and holiness
 - c. Starve the sources of temptation in your life
 - d. Watch for sin's excuses and for self-justification
 - e. Put sin to death by the Spirit
 - f. Replace sin with righteous habits

Introduction

One of the most important writers that God ever used to shape my young Christian faith was J.I. Packer. His book *Knowing God* was (and still is) a deeply important book to me. It was a book on basic Christianity that took seriously God and his holiness. And I needed to hear what he had to say as a new Christian.

But a few years later, I learned that J.I. Packer had an incredible spiritual struggle of his own as a brand new Christian. He was converted in his first year of college, and the circle of Christians that he was converted by were what we might call "perfectionists." That is, they believed that it was possible for a Christian to... experience sinless. And I can testify in my early years in the Wesleyan church that people did, indeed talk like this in those circles. I remember my pastor telling me that he once knew a lady who went an entire day without sinning. Something I am skeptical of to this day.

Packer says, he tried the same approach, and that he found himself "scraping his insides," trying to ensure that his consecration was complete. He felt this incredible weight and pressure to be a better Christian, and felt ashamed for any

way in which he didn't measure up. And he said at one point, it almost killed me. But then God brought him rescue.

What rescued him? Well, Packer said, someone donated the works of the Puritan writer John Owen to his college, and he read Owen's book *The Mortification of Sin*, and he says that he credits that book with saving his life. What was it about that book that helped him so much? What Packer says is that Owen's book was "chemo for my cancered soul." And then he says what it was about the book that helped him:

Sin, [John Owen] told me, is a blind, anti-God, egocentric energy in the fallen human spiritual system, ever fomenting self-centred and self-deceiving desires, ambitions, purposes, plans, attitudes, and behaviours. Now that I was a regenerate believer, born again, a new creation in Christ, sin that formerly dominated me had been de-throned but was not yet destroyed. It was marauding within me all the time, bringing back sinful desires that I hoped I had seen the last of, and twisting my new desires for God and godliness out of shape so that they became pride-perverted too. Lifelong conflict with the besetting sins that besetting sin generates was what I must expect. (Packer, J I. *Puritan Portraits* p. 82-83).

So Packer recalls that once he realized that a lifelong struggle with sin is *normal* for the believer, and once he saw the roadmap of salvation that was laid out for him in Scripture, he was liberated by it.

And what I want you to know today is that the very thing which saved Packer's life is taught here by Paul in our passage from Romans 7. And the key is what Packer just said a bit ago about sin: "sin that formerly dominated me had been de-throned but was not yet destroyed." If you are in Christ, then sin *has* been dethroned. But it is still *present*.

And so if you are here today and in your daily experience *wanting* to please God, *wanting* to live up to God's law, and yet you find yourself falling short, there is not something abnormal about you. Even Paul can relate to your experience. Paul also knew what it was to *want* to be someone who lives for God, but who also knows that he keeps falling painfully short.

This is a passage where Paul is reckoning with his own experience between the man he wants to be – and *knows* he should be – and the man he still currently is. And the man he is... well he isn't there yet. He hasn't arrived. Why? Because sin is dethroned, but not destroyed. Not yet.

And I think this is hopeful for us because here God is telling us that he knows we continually experience a battle between flesh and spirit. And he knows this. And God isn't thrown by it. And in part, he included it in his word because he doesn't want us to be thrown by it, either.

1. The Believer's Delight in the Law (7:14, 16, 18, 21-22)

We begin with our first point, in which I want you to see that woven all throughout this passage is the believer's fundamental delight in God's law.

The entire passage is Paul telling us that he is speaking of himself as a converted person, who has been born again, who has had God's Spirit within him, but who still has this inner conflict between two contradictory heart principles. On the one hand, and this first point today, is the fact that even though we are sinners, we as believers really love God's law and have a deep inner desire to keep it.

There are some who think Paul is talking here about a person before they come to Christ. But if you look closely you can see that this is a converted person. Let me just give you one argument, and here it is: the person Paul is speaking of says that he loves God's law; and not just on the surface, but in his inner man. Deep down, he loves God. He loves what he's like. He loves the character of God that the Law presents us with.

Now, is that something that an unconverted person who hasn't been born again can say? Well let's look. First, look at what this law is like that Paul says he loves.

In verse 14, Paul says that "the law is spiritual." What does it mean that the law is "spiritual"? Peter Martyr Vermigli says it means two things. He says that the law is spiritual because it comes from the Holy Spirit, and because it requires the obedience of our spirit—our whole heart.

So the spirituality of the law means that it came from God, and it requires the whole heart of a person. Now, the question is, can a person who has not been born again love that kind of law? Well let's look for the answer in Scripture:

Paul tells us in 1 Cor. That "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit... they are spiritually discerned." Only the spiritual person sees and embraces spiritual things or desires them. David tells us in Psalm 1 that the blessed man delights in the law of the LORD and meditates on it day and night. Psalm 40:8: "I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." Over and over again, the psalmist says things like, "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who greatly delights in his commandments" (Ps. 112:1).

The unbeliever knows God's law in his heart, but he doesn't love it. Actually he hates it, because it condemns him, because it represents a holy God, because the natural man loves himself and doesn't live in a God-centered universe at all. Life (as far as he is concerned) is about him or her, not about God. If the unbeliever *does* have any regard for God's law it's the regard that a slave has for his master.

But the believer's love for the law is not the love of a slave for a taskmaster. It's the love of a child who delights in the will of a good Father. It's a love that reaches all the way to the heart.

An unbeliever may admire the law externally for its beauty or morality, but he does not delight in it. There are lots of people out there right now – even those who once opposed Christianity – who are arguing that we need more Christianity for the sake of society. They have some kind of appreciation for the law. Even Richard Dawkins now says it's important for England to be Christian, because he knows how detrimental its absence has been – especially as Islam has spread throughout England. They admire God's law for what it produces or gives, but that doesn't mean they love or delight in God's law. Love for God's law is not natural — it is supernatural. It is the fingerprint of the Spirit.

How would an unconverted person "delight in the law of God, in my inner being"? They would not.

And to point ahead a bit to our third point, unconverted people do not experience any conflict between the law of sin and the law of God. The law of sin completely

runs the show. They may not love what sin does to them (or their family, or the society), but they don't *delight* in God's law.

Paul is speaking here from the perspective of a person who really delights in the spiritual law of God all the way down to the level of the heart.

And I think this is a very helpful encouragement for believers – especially if you are discouraged by what feels like your own lack of progress in the Christian life. The very fact that you want to obey God...is one kind of proof that you are His. Because God's enemies may want comfort, prosperity, and happiness – but they have no desire to please God or be like him at all.

And so this is crucial for appreciating just how special this passage is: it reminds us that the believer does delight in God's law in the inner man.

2. The Believer's Actions of Lawlessness (7:14b-20)

Now second, we need to understand that even though we do delight in the law as Christians, we see something else at work. Our own actions are lawless and don't match up with our desires.

So here Paul is: he's born again. But his experience is one where sin still dwells in him. So he says things like, "I am of the flesh, sold under sin...I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...[it is] sin that dwells within me...nothing good dwells in my flesh."

Why is this the believer's experience if he loves God's law in his inner man? Because even though we have been born again, sin is still present. We haven't entered into glory yet. We saw this last week when we looked at the fourfold state of man. Believers are in the third state where we've been changed but not yet perfected. We have the ability to sin, but now we also have the ability to not sin.

Paul says that there is "another law waging war against the law of my mind." Now, he does say that this law of sin is "making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." There Paul is showing us what sin is trying to do in its struggle against the Spirit within us. Sin isn't just trying to have its own peaceful existence, but it's actually always vying for the throne of our heart. The flesh – this law of sin

that Paul talks about – isn't interested in coexistence with the Spirit because they are enemies and hostile to each other.

One of the clearest places we see this is Galatians 5:16: "For the desires of the flesh are *against the Spirit*, and the desires of the Spirit are *against the flesh*, for these are *opposed to each other*, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." Do you see that combat/conflict language? We have these two principles within us that are fundamentally opposed to each other. On the one hand, we love God and his law. On the other hand, we love ourself and our own desires.

1 Peter 2:11: "Beloved, I urge you... to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul." There it is again: why do the passions of the flesh wage war against your soul? Because you're born again, and the law of sin is still there and hates that new Spirit.

And the result of all of this is that the believer's heart is in fundamental conflict with itself.

3. The Believer's Inner Conflict (Between the Law of God and the Law of Sin) (7:21-25)

And that brings us to our third point today, as we are taken by Paul to the inner conflict that all believers this side of glory face, which is intense, difficult, and life-long.

Look at verse 21 again:

"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?" (Romans 7:21-24)

So notice the conflict, warfare, battle language Paul uses here. When I was a teenager I can't tell you what a relief this was to see: that even Paul knew what it was like to wake up each day, to love God on the one hand – to want to please him – but also to think, "I'd really like to do life my way." You see, there it is: that inner

battle that Paul is talking about... that inner battle that all believers know all too well.

Now, I don't want to dwell on this without also bringing in verse 25. Because the battle against sin in our own hearts isn't possible without verse 25. If I just stopped at verse 24 and then brought in 25 as a cliffhanger, I think that would be wildly irresponsible. Because in verse 25 Paul concludes this chapter with these words: "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."

So Paul says, I do battle against the foe that is sin, and I engage in lifelong combat against it. But I don't battle hopelessly. This isn't the Alamo here where eventually sin is going to overrun us and destroy us. Instead, this is like D-Day. And the enemy lines have been broken, and now sin is on its heels. It's still fighting back, it's running guerilla tactics against the new occupying power, but it is defeated and is in its death throes. This is d-day, not the Alamo.

Sin may be present, but Scripture tells us that now its power has been broken. Scripture makes these claims about us now that we are in Christ: "our old self was crucified with him" (Rom. 6:6); "Sin shall no longer have dominion over you" (6:9); "We have been delivered from the domain of darkness" (Col. 1:13); "Christ disarmed the powers and authorities" (Col. 2:13-15); "Christ destroyed the one who had the power of death...and freed those enslaved by fear" (Heb. 2:14-15); "the reason the son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8).

Right? That's D-Day. Once the Nazis had firmly taken France, the conflict was over. The Nazis could even rest on their laurels because the French had been subdued. The conflict really only kicked up once D-Day happened, and the beaches were stormed and there was now a beachhead for the allies to push through France and ultimately into Berlin where they found the enemy cowering in his bunker.

And for the Christian, the battlefield has fundamentally changed. Because now there's conflict, but sin doesn't have dominion any longer. It doesn't have the upper hand. And our new posture is one of warfare.

How do we make progress against this law of sin in our members?

I mentioned what a help John Owen was to J.I. Packer. Let me very quickly give you six battle tactics from John Owen to help you in your fight this week:

1. **Know your enemy.** Sin thrives in the dark, so identify your specific patterns of sin and call them what they are. Don't use euphemisms like calling them "mistakes," call them sin. And admit that it is you doing it. Take responsibility for your own sinful desires and identify them as sin.
2. **Fill your mind with Christ.** You cannot starve sin by looking at it or obsessing over it; you must look at Christ. Owen says that sin shrinks when Christ is big in our hearts.
3. **Starve the supply lines.** Do not deliberately place yourself where your sin grows easily. Destroy the occasions for sin before the fight even starts.
4. **Watch for excuses.** When you hear the voice that says things like, "Just this once" or "No one will know," or "I deserve this," recognize it immediately as the enemy's propaganda.
5. **Kill sin by the Spirit.** Do not coddle your sin; kill it using the weapons God gave you: prayer, Scripture, and worship. He has given you other believers. Take advantage of all of them. Anything to increase your love of God's law and of Christ, and anything to diminish the appeal that sin might have within you. Take an active posture. As Owen famously said, "Be killing sin or sin will be killing you."
6. **Replace the weeds.** You cannot just pull up the bad; you must plant the good. Don't just stop the sinful habit; replace it with a righteous one.

Conclusion

Let me bring these things together as we close. Paul is showing us today that the Christian life involves a continual, Spirit-empowered war against sin, in which we actively resist it, starve it, and pursue holiness with effort that depends on grace.

I mentioned J.I. Packer and the help he received from John Owen explaining the very things I've been telling you here today from Romans 7. But listen to this.

Packer, in his book *Puritan Portraits* mentions that he received the following note from someone in prison. And I just want to end on this:

“I found this book ... near a toilet on the floor Immediately after I finished reading...I got on my knees on the floor of my cell and begged for Jesus to come into my miserable life and redeem me ... and for the first time in my entire life I meant every single word that I professed Thank you, Jesus!”
(Packer, J I. *Puritan Portraits*, p. 83).

This man may have been in prison, but he was also free. Wouldn't you like to be able to say the same thing as him?

Let's pray.