

# Ministry of Grace Church

## Romans 7:13-19 - Flesh vs. Spirit Sermon Notes



### Background

It's not easy being a Christian. We have to fight a number of battles that the unsaved don't have to worry about. One of those, in fact, is more than just an occasional battle, it is more like an ongoing war between our spirit and our flesh, our sin nature. As we've already learned, because of Adam's sin, we will all die physically because sin causes death. But for a Christian, because of the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross, even though we still have to face the possibility of physical death, we will never have to face the second death, spiritual death, in the Lake of Fire.

Previously, we learned that the true meaning of death is separation. Physical death is the separation of the spirit from the body and spiritual death is the separation of our spirit from the Spirit of God. But, as a Christian, our spirit will never be separated from the Spirit of God because the Holy Spirit lives in each and every Christian, and God has said that He will never leave us nor forsake us. But we also learned recently that there is another type of death which is the separation of us from fellowship with God. When we sin, even though it has been paid for by the blood of Christ, God cannot fellowship with us. We are still saved, we are still indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we are still a child of God, but we are not in fellowship with Him. Then, when we pray to Him, the only prayer He listens to is our prayer of confession. But - when we do confess our sin, our fellowship is immediately restored.

This constant battle between our flesh and our spirit is a strange one. You see, we don't win the battle by gritting our teeth, bearing down, and trying with all our might to resist the temptation. As a Christian, we can't work our way to victory and we can't fight, our way to victory. This battle can only be won by surrendering - not to the temptation, but to God. That's what Paul will tell us in the next chapter of this letter to the Christians in Rome:

For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, (Romans 8:5-6)

In other words, we win this battle by focusing on the Word of God and being submissive to the Spirit of God. The first part of the victory comes from knowing the Word, which can only come by constant reading of the Word. The second part of the victory comes from being submissive to the Word, giving-in to God instead of giving-in to temptation.

As we've already learned, there are some churches who believe that we can reach a state of "complete sanctification," where we no longer commit sin, but that is not supported by Scripture. As long as we are in this physical body, we will battle against our sin nature. But – and this is very important for all of us to understand, just because we battle against our sin nature, even though we may frequently lose the battle, it doesn't mean that we are not saved. In fact, the battle against our sin nature is, in itself, evidence that we are saved. As I said earlier, the fact that we fight this battle is an indication that the Spirit of God is living in us!

The Christians in Rome, to whom Paul wrote this letter, also experienced this battle. It appears that they thought that they had this battle because they didn't keep the whole Law. That's why Paul is spending so much time and effort, showing that the Law does not prevent this battle. But neither does the Law cause us to sin. The Law actually empowers our sin nature to battle against our spirit. Anticipating another theoretical objection, Paul now asks another of his rhetorical questions.

### **Romans 7:13**

**Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by working out my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.**

The theoretical objection that Paul is addressing here is this, "Is it possible that what we know to be good and pure (the law), might be transformed into something evil?" Paul's response to this question is the now familiar, *me genoito*, that is, "No way!"

This next sentence is very confusing to read in most translations. Let me take the liberty of making a couple of alterations to the translation so that it might appear to us more clearly what Paul is saying:

Rather it was sin, which became obvious, completely accomplishing death in me through that which is good (the law); so that through the commandment sin might become exceedingly sinful.

Do you see what Paul is saying? The law has not become death to us, it does not cause us to sin, but it causes sin to be revealed as it truly is, very sinful, and it is the sin which causes death.

There was a comedian some years back by the name of Flip Wilson. He had a comedic alter-ego named Geraldine who, whenever criticized by her husband, would use the excuse, "The devil made me do it!" Well, if Flip had been around in Paul's day he probably would have said, "The Law made me do it!" That is precisely what Paul is arguing against. The law does not make us sin, but it does cause sin to be exposed for what it really is so that we are without any excuse whatsoever.

So we can't blame the law for our sinfulness. We have to take full responsibility for our own sin. Then we return to 1 John 1:9. Do you remember what that verse says?

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

## **Romans 7:14-15**

**For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am fleshly, having been sold into bondage under sin. For what I am working out, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.**

Now, before we continue, we need to look at a couple of the words that are used here. The first is “practicing,” which is translated from the Greek word *prassō*. This word means to do something intentionally and repeatedly, like someone practicing a musical instrument by repeatedly and intentionally going over a piece of music. This use of the verb in Greek indicates that it is something that Paul is currently not doing. This will have even more significance when we get to verse 19 where he uses this word again.

The words, “I would like,” are from the Greek word *thelō*, which refers to a person’s determined will. It is usually translated as “purpose” or “determine.” But there is another word often translated as “will.” That is *boulomai*, which refers to a person’s desirous will and is often translated as “will” or “want.” So, what Paul is saying here is that he is not practicing what he had previously determined to do.

The remainder of the chapter, starting with this verse, is another passage of Scripture that has been the subject of much debate for at least the past several centuries. The discussion is over whether this description of Paul’s is in reference to a time before his conversion or subsequent to his conversion. I believe that there is sufficient evidence to determine that Paul is making statements about his condition **after** conversion. First of all, it is the most obvious explanation of what Paul is teaching. Secondly, Paul has already shown that the Law doesn’t produce righteousness; rather, it makes sin more sinful and the sinner guilty. He doesn’t have to prove that again. Thirdly, the expressions that are used are not those that an unrepentant sinner would use. Instead, they express the same frustration that all Christians feel regarding their continued propensity to sin. And fourthly, there is a change made here from past tense to present tense, so Paul is expressing what is currently happening in his life (he is currently not practicing it) as a born-again Christian who is currently struggling with his sin nature.

He starts off this passage by restating what he has already said; the Law is spiritual. That is, the Law is a spiritual entity, it was developed in the realm of spirituality, and it was developed to show mankind what spirituality looks like. It is holy, that is, without sin itself, and it is basically good.

Mankind, of whom Paul uses himself as a representative, is not inherently spiritual. Rather, we are fleshly according to Paul. The sentence structure is one that contrasts spirituality (that which pertains to and is controlled by the spiritual part of man) with fleshliness or carnality (that which pertains to and is controlled by the non-spiritual part of man, called the flesh, or the sin nature).

It is this dichotomy and conflict between the realms of spirituality and the sin nature that Paul will spend the remainder of this chapter on. Though we were created with both a body and a spirit, it is the sin nature (which is part of our body) that controls much of what we do, rather than our spirit.

Paul is here expressing his frustration over the power that his sin nature has over him. He starts out this verse by confessing that he doesn’t understand why he acts the way he does. The thing which he has determined to do (be obedient to God) he doesn’t always do. He is not saying that he never does

the things he is determined to do. He is saying that he doesn't consistently do them. Paul is determined to obey God and do those things which will glorify Him, but he doesn't always do them. Instead, he finds that the things that he hates are the very things that he continually finds himself doing. He says, "I am not practicing what I have determined to do."

This is a very revealing (and to the rest of us, comforting) aspect of Paul's walk with God. He is the Apostle to the Gentiles, the most prolific writer of the New Testament and probably the finest example of "obedience to God" in the entire New Testament. And yet, he had a constant battle with his sin nature and had not reached a state of perfect submission to Christ. Allow me to paraphrase this verse,

I don't understand my actions. For that which I have determined to do I don't always do. On the other hand, that which I hate to do I keep on doing, over and over.

Does this sound familiar?

### **Romans 7:16-18**

**But if I do the very thing I do not want, I agree with the Law, that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one working it out, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the working out of the good is not.**

So, Paul's conclusion now is that if he really wanted to keep the Law, then the Law (and avoiding sin) must be good. Remember from just a few verses back, Paul said,

So, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. (Romans 7:12)

He then reiterated this fact and compared it to sinful man,

For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am fleshly, having been sold into bondage under sin. (Romans 7:14)

Finally, in the previous verse and the current one, Paul is showing that we all must admit that the Law is good but we are sinful.

I like what Albert Barnes said about this struggle that Paul has just expressed:

*The fact of struggling against evil, the desire to be free from it, and to overcome it, the anxiety and grief which it causes, is an evidence that we do not love it, and that therefore we are the friends of God. Perhaps nothing can be a more decisive test of piety than a long-continued and painful struggle against evil passions and desires in every form, and a panting of the soul to be delivered from the power and dominion of sin.*

Do you feel this constant struggle against your own sinful tendencies? Does it make you wonder sometimes whether you really are saved? Barnes says that this very struggle is clear evidence that you **are** genuinely saved. The fact that you are aware of your sinful tendencies and that you are saddened every time you let your sinful nature win the battle is evidence that you are the child of God. And, since you are a true child of God, a born-again Christian, you will continue to have this struggle until the day that you pass into eternity and receive your perfect, sinless body (without a sin nature).

Until that day, however, we are to continue to struggle against our own sin nature, and though we may occasionally lose a battle, we will ultimately have the victory. We know that He will never leave us nor forsake us and ultimately, He will win not only the battle, but also the war against evil.

A couple of verses back Paul lamented, “For that which I am determined to do I don’t always do but, on the other hand, that which I hate to do I keep on doing” [my translation]. In the current verse he appears to absolve himself of any responsibility. What does he mean when he says, “no longer am I the one working it”? We have to refer back to verse fifteen to answer this. There he said, “for I am not practicing what I have determined to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.” You see that it is Paul’s will (determination to do good) versus his actions that he is talking about. So, in the current verse he says that in his innermost self his greatest desire is to do good, but this gets overpowered by the sin that dwells in him.

Now, what does he mean when he says that sin “dwells in me?” Paul is telling us that sin has taken up a permanent residence in him (and us); therefore, the natural propensity to sin is a permanent part of our human bodies. We can’t get away from it and we can’t overcome it. So, we’re not responsible when we sin, right? -- Wrong!

Before we were saved, this was true; we had no choice but to sin. But now that we have been saved, we have someone else living inside us. When we were saved, a marvelous thing happened. God the Father gave us a token to guarantee His promise to redeem us, a seal of our salvation (see **Ephesians 1:13, 14**). That token, that seal, that guarantee, is the 3<sup>rd</sup> person of the Godhead, God the Holy Spirit. God is actually dwelling in us. That’s one reason that we are told that God will never leave us nor forsake us. He will always be with us because He dwells in us, that is, He has taken up permanent residence in us.

Now consider this, of the two that dwell within us, our sin nature (which Paul has been talking about here) and God, which do you think is stronger? “Well, that’s obvious!” you say. “God is stronger!” You are absolutely correct. As we yield ourselves to God, as we surrender our will to His, He has control, and He overcomes our sin nature. But, when we take the reins of our own lives, when it is our will that is calling the shots, our sin nature takes control because it is stronger than we are.

### **Romans 7:19**

**For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.**

This is very similar to what we were told in verse fifteen. But we can see that there is a slight difference between these verses. Verse fifteen says:

For what I am working out, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. (**Romans 7:15**)

There he was contrasting what he is determined to do versus what he hates. In the current verse (**Romans 7:19**) he is contrasting what he is determined to do versus evil. Paul is saying that his determined will is to do good, but he doesn’t do it. His determined will is also not to do evil, but that’s exactly what he does. This is another indication that Paul is truly saved. Only someone whose heart has been regenerated will truly desire to do good and truly desire not to do evil. Unfortunately for Paul, and for the rest of us as well, the sin nature that dwells in this flesh of ours continues to overpower us even against our own desire.

The significant thing to take away from this is the fact that it is not the will of man that draws him away from God. Few people, if any, actually want to be evil, but none of us, left to our own devices, will avoid evil because of the powerful sin nature that has mastery over us.

Once again let me say that the only way to have victory over this sin nature is first to be genuinely saved and then to submit your will to God and obey Him as your master instead of your sin nature. As we submit to God and commit to His ways, we have victory and peace!

### **So What?**

It is relatively easy for each of us to excuse our own sinfulness for a variety of reasons. But the Law makes our sinfulness so apparent that we no longer have any grounds for denying it. Recognizing and admitting our own sinfulness is the first step to recognizing our need for salvation from the penalty of sin.

If you have ever been frustrated by the fact that you sin at times and in a manner in which you don't want, be encouraged because we are learning that Paul had this same battle. The Apostle Paul, one of the master builders of the Church of Jesus Christ and one of the greatest spiritual leaders of the early church, battled with his sin nature.

Can you identify with Paul? Of course you can! Any Christian who is completely committed to God will undergo this same sense of frustration as he or she contemplates his or her daily walk with God. We want to be obedient, but we don't always obey, and we don't understand why. The reason, my friend, is our sin nature. It is constantly battling against us to produce sin in our lives, even when we want to be totally obedient to God.

But you must understand that doesn't excuse us! We are still guilty of the sin, but confession, and forgiveness through the grace of God, will restore our fellowship with Him even when we do that thing which we hate!

Don't be discouraged when you lose the battle against your sin nature that you are determined to overcome. Instead, be encouraged and recognize that He will win the victory for you! And in that day, we will praise Him perfectly because He is worthy! The person who desires to please God must continually surrender his or her will to God. That is the only way we can live a victorious life! As I said before, in order to win the battle, you have to surrender – to God. We don't stand up and fight to get the victory, we simply give in. It's totally against everything we have ever learned. We have to surrender to win the battle. Let us all pray that we will continually surrender our will to Him who has declared us righteous. Keep this in mind, we're not righteous because we earned it, but because He declared it!

It is more “natural” for us to do that which is evil than to stand and fight for that which is good. And as difficult as it seems, it is easier to stand and fight against evil in the face of incredible odds, than it is for us to stand against our own sin nature. That's why we need the power of the Holy Spirit. Only a committed Christian surrendered to the will of God can succeed in overcoming his or her sin nature.

And, who gets the praise when we submit to God's will?

Let's pray.