

Main Street

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Romans 7:35-8:2 **“Honest About The Battle”**

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

ROMANS 7:13-8:2 "HONEST ABOUT THE BATTLE"

Q&A, Elaboration, Conclusion // 7:1-12 (3 Parts)

B' vv.13-25 FALSE INFERENCE: DOES THE LAW BRING DEATH?

Pessimism About Humans, Optimistic About Grace

1) v.13 Question: Diatribe Transition, False Inference About The Law Refuted.

Culprit Not Law But Sin In Us, Personified As A Power

13a Q "Did that which is good (i.e. God's law), then, bring death to me?" //vv.7a, 5, Opponent's Question
 b A1 By no means! //3:6, 6:2, 15; 7:6

Thesis

c A2 But, it was Sin, //v.8, Sin = Total Rebellion Against God, 3rd Agent (Sin = Cosmic Power)
 working death in me through what is good, good (vv.12, 13b, 16, 18, 19), Like Produces Like
 in order that Sin might be shown to be Sin, Diagnostic, Not Therapeutic, Malignant, 11QPs. 19:9-10
 and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. //vv.8, 11, 5:12, Offense Against God!
 Looks Back On Ongoing Struggle Of Self Under Sin: Present

2) vv.14-25 Paul's Reasoning About The Sin And Evil: An Elaboration. Why I Can't Obey

Christ Must Reign Internally Over The Divided Self

Confession 1

a. v.14-21 Reflection One: 2 Forces At Work, Divided Self. 5:1 Chiasm

Shift To Present Tense, Carnal, Divided Self (Indented)

14 1 FOR WE KNOW that the law is spiritual (*pneumatikos*); v.12, Law Is From God/Heaven, *m. Sanh.* 12:1
 but I am carnal (*unsarkinos*), sold under SIN. 3:9b, Not Free: Personal Bondage, Self As POW

15a For I do not understand my own actions. Lament, I Am A Contradiction, Mystery To Myself

Law Is A Mirror Of God's Good Will, But I Am A Divided Self

b 2 For I do not do what I want, Will vs. Performance = Standard *Topos* //vv.19-20, Reasons (3)
 but I do the very thing I hate. Issue = Inability, Modern Example = Addictions

16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. Links Variation: *Sin* (3x) // *Evil* (2x)

17 So then it is no longer I that do it, Cohabits With/ Resists The Will

but SIN in which dwells within me. A Frustrating Alien Power Inside Me

Unredeemed Ego Has Lost Power To Make Its Decisions Stick

18a 3a For I KNOW that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. Fallen Nature

b b For I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. Conflicted Self, Gap: Ideal/Real

Not Just Try Harder, Sin As Gravitational Pull

19 2' For I do not do the good I want, Sin Succeeds! Pessimistic Anthropology (*I Form*, 1QS 11:9-10)

but the EVIL I do not want is what I do. Ovid, *Met.* 7:19-10, *Sin/Evil* (vv.19b/v.21)

20 Now if I do what I do not want, Individual Is Not Captain Of His Ship But A Prisoner

it is no longer I that do it, Sin-power Stronger Than Will-power

but SIN in which dwells within me. *residing/ setting up house*

Only When Christ Enters Is The Battle Made Clear

Conclusion 21 1' SO I FIND it to be a law (principle) that when I want to do good, Conclusion (*ara*) // v.25b : Conflict

EVIL lies close at hand. Opposition Is Always Present, 1 Foot In Kingdom, 1 Foot In World

v.21 = Dual Function: Inclusion (v.14), Bridge To v.22

Confession 2

b. vv.22-25 Reflection Two: 2 Forces At Work, Divided Self. 4:2 Chiasm

Long Battle With Sin In The Process Of Sanctification

22 1 For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, Inner Person, Word Play: 4 Uses Of Law, Reason (1)

23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind Total Battlefield, Gal. 5:16-18

and making me captive to the law of Sin which dwells in my members. 14b, 6:12,19, I = Occupied Territory

James 4:1ff., Sin/Rebellion Not Out There But In Here

24a 2 Wretched man that I am! Lament (Diagnosis) + Q & A, Grace In Struggle Now, Full Victory Later!

b Who will deliver me from this body of death? 8:23, Dominated Body Headed For Death

1) law of God, 2) my mind, 3) law of sin (vv.21-23/v.25b)

25a 2' Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! The Risen Lord! Future Freedom, Praise

Conclusion b 1' So then, I of myself serve the law of God //v.12, So (then) = *ara* (v.21/v.25b), Self vs. Fallen Nature (Flesh)

with my mind, Stalemate => 8:1-2, Conclusion, Recognizes God's Law With The Intellect

c but with my flesh I serve Struggle, Whole Fallen Nature, Not Yet A Resurrection Body, Rom. 8:18-21

the law of Sin. v.25b Restates vv.22-23, Question And Answer At Center!

Paul Does Not Believe That To Know The Good Is To Do The Good (Gk)

A' 8:1-2 NO CONDEMNATION FOR BELIEVERS BUT FREEDOM (*Legal Image).

1* 1 There is therefore now no condemnation //8:34, New Regime! 5:16-18, Legal Metaphor = No Judgment Against Us

2 for those who are in Christ Jesus. In Realm Of Messiah Jesus, Assertion (v.1) How Can This Be? (v.2)

2 2' For the law (rule) of the Spirit of LIFE in Christ Jesus //7:6b, law = Personal Union, New Rule & Location

1' has set you (sg.) free from the law (rule) of sin and death. p.v., //7:3*, Testimony, Experiential Truth, 2 Cor 3:17

A Brief Treatment Of Romans 7:13-25, 8:1-2

The larger unit into which this material falls is 7:1-8:2 which is arranged in a 4:2 concentric pattern: A. 7:1-6, B. 7:7-12 // B' 7:13-25, A' 8:1-2 with *free* (7:6//8:2) as the inclusion for the whole. The central components (B//B') share the same outline: 1) Question and negative answer (v.7a//v.13), 2) Elaboration in one (vv.7b-11) or two paragraphs (vv.14-21, 22-25), and 3) Conclusion(s) (v.12//vv.21, 25b). The issue is the right function of the law. The core problem is that the law is diagnostic rather than therapeutic; it is exterior to the sinful self. It reveals and energizes Sin, but it cannot heal our relationship with God. That is reserved for Jesus Christ to whom we now belong. In the new regime, the Spirit indwells the believer and changes our hearts. The power of Sin that indwells us frustrates our obedience. It is stronger than our wishes or wills. We are in deep bondage and cannot free ourselves. But the Holy Spirit, our new inward companion, empowers us for obedience, thus we fulfill the law indirectly out of a new relationship. We cannot keep the law, but he can— in us!

The philosophical assumption behind v.7a//v.13a is that *like produces like*, and if the law is from God and good, why did it produce death (something bad) in me? This is impossible (v.13b). All it did was reveal the extent and horror of sin that was latent within (v.13c). Sin is understood here not first as a discrete act of transgression, though it produces many, but as a personified power hostile to God and in open rebellion. *Sin* (vv.13c, 14, 17, 20, 23, 25c, 8:2), *Evil* (vv.19, 21), and *Death* (v.13c, 24b, 8:2) are a trio of hostile cosmic powers managing our bondage. Our distrust of God (sin) opens us to moral malignancy (evil) and leads to dissolution (death). It's really bad!

The first elaboration (2a. vv.14-21) is arranged in a 5:1 concentric pattern (1-2-3-2'-1') with claims to knowledge at the beginning (*For we know*, v.14a), end (*So I find*, v.21), and center (*For I know*, v.18a). That the thought unit is explanatory is indicated by a chain of six supports, each beginning with *for*/Gk. *gar* (vv.14a, 15a, b, 18a, b, 19a). Together they give a thick support for the thesis of v.13c on the proper functioning of God' commands to reveal pathology. The 2. vv.15b-17 and 2' vv.19-20 components each begin with *For*, are parallel in form (a-b//a'-b' = stair step) and nearly exact in content. They build on the contrast between the good I want and the evil I perform. My mental agreement with the law indicates it is good, but the power that overwhelms my intentions and leads to the opposite (*the very thing I hate*) in indwelling Sin and its companion Evil. There is a deep split within the self. It is— to use a slavery metaphor— not its own but *sold under Sin* (v.14) and in need of liberation. No human capacity is exempt from compromise and corruption, therefore nothing in me remains innocent or pure, thus the insight of v.18a, “For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is in my flesh (my embodied fallen nature in all its capacities). The unit ends in v.21 with a summary conclusion on life as conflict, frustration, guilt and shame. It's bleak!

The second paragraph continues the chain of support with its opening *For* (v.22). It falls into a 4:2 concentric pattern (1-2//2'-1') with a question and answer at the center (2. v.24 // 2' v.25a). The opening observation (1. vv.22-23) and conclusion (1' 8:1-2) about the conflicted self share three terms of inclusion (*law of God* [v.22//v.25b], *my mind* [v.23a//v.25b], *law of Sin* [v.23b//v.25c]). The *inmost self* and *my mind* delight in God, but there is a war within I cannot win. Who will come as a champion to rescue us from this awful state of being? None other than Messiah Jesus! Note how each paragraph of elaboration ends with an inference (*So*, v.21 // *So then*, v.25b). Evil is always near, and I am an internally split human being. But there is a new way to live, and this Paul brings before us in 8:1-2 which both ends this larger section and opens the next (8:1-39). In Christ, legal condemnation is no more. The Liberator has come within the self to share his freedom.

HONEST ABOUT THE BATTLE

“Wretched man that I am!”

What we see when God cuts on the lights.

R O M A N S 7 : 2 4a

On August 23, 1973, Jan Erik Olsson, on parole from prison, held up a bank in Stockholm. When police showed up, Olsson took hostages, and the stand-off lasted six days. At one point, he called the Swedish Prime Minister to say he'd kill the hostages, then put one of the captives, Kristin Enmark, on the phone. She said to the Prime Minister, "I am very disappointed in you I think you are sitting here playing with our lives."

Despite Olsson's threats, Enmark decided she felt safer with the bad guy than the police. She wasn't the only one. Other hostages actually resisted rescue attempts and refused to testify against their captor. Some even raised money for his legal defense! What's going on here?

When you hear of a hostage who identifies more with their captor than their rescuers, the condition is *Stockholm Syndrome* or— more technically— *Survival Identification Syndrome*, and it bears some similarities to the psychological dynamics of battered women who defend their men in spite of all.

It's most likely to occur when captivity is extended for several days or more, when the captives are with their captors and not isolated from them, and when there's some act of kindness towards the hostages, even if it's just not killing them.

Amazing, isn't it, how people can get so psychologically turned around they can no longer tell the difference between the good guys and the bad guys.¹ To survive, you seek to make peace with those who mean you harm.

¹ PreachingToday.com search under Romans 7:13-8:2.

And, could it be, that we do the same with our captors and keepers, our jailers and slave masters, the cosmic powers that Paul label as *Sin* with a capital S and *Evil* with a capital E and *Death* with a capital D, three related but distinct powers now arrayed against us all. We are simply not in a position to resist such powers on our own. We are weak and compromised, under their sway, and they've been at it a very long time. But they are unveiled and exposed in the light of Jesus Christ who took them seriously as his opponents, enemies of God and all his children. Jesus faced down Satan in the wilderness and routed the demons in every encounter; he forgave sins in his Father's name and let himself be crucified to bear the sin of the world as God's innocent Son; he entered death and the realm of the dead only to explode out of its grip in the blast of life that was his resurrection from the dead.

His was a spiritual combat, a life of love for people and resistance to the awful powers that crush us, and in the end— despite the initial appearances— he was utterly victorious, his life backed by the Father and the Holy Spirit along the way and then most spectacularly on Easter after the horror of two days before. And as his followers, we have a new power given to us to forgive and be forgiven, to name and resist evil in all its forms, to mock the threats of death and live with courage. Salvation means Jesus has met and defeated the network of powers that stand against us and opened up a new way to be a restored human being in a still broken world this side of God's kingdom.

But some say, "It's really not so bad as that, Pastor Phil. You overstate the case. Sin is just normal human stuff, easy to overlook with the right psychology; and Evil is reserved for the few who are truly monsters in this life— the sick ones, not the rest of us; and Death, well, it's just part of the circle of life. Why make such a big deal? It's the way things are and have always been."

I do not buy this minimized and sanitized modern version of the story. Behind the appearances of life are powers loosed upon the earth that hold us in bondage and from which we cannot be freed without God's direct assistance. We and our beautiful world are fallen off course. It's why there's so much pain and loss and violence and deception and cruelty and misery and unbelief and bad religion on the earth. Heart and mind cry for an adequate accounting, and

the large story Scripture tells us– as brought to a focus in Jesus Christ– is that we are alienated from our good Creator and made vulnerable to destructive powers that lie to us and enslave us and distort us and misuse our wonderful capacities to know and love God and one another.

We may speak about these powers in mythological terms, but that does mean they are less than real, just so large and pervasive it’s hard to speak about them any other way. And these powers– which Paul calls *Sin* and *Evil* and *Death*– are properly alien to us. They are not intrinsic to who we are, not part of God’s image. They are squatters and vandals on God’s good earth, and one day– when God’s kingdom comes– will be no more. They are our enemies; they are unnatural; they are not our friends, and followers of Jesus are to resist them within and without. No Stockholm Syndrome with Sin and Death and Evil.

There’s a good reason we live with such frustration and discouragement. We’re not free and never have been. It’s an illusion. We inherit a fallen nature, a deep bent away from God, a spirit of rebellion and neglect of our Maker and his holy law, an inclination to evil, but actual guilt and culpability are accrued, not in having received a compromised nature, but in acting upon it, which we all do.² We each add to the weight of the world our own sin, and the drama continues as each new generation repeats the deep patterns. This is the background darkness that makes Jesus such a bright light and a real alternative.

Before it’s an action against God and people, Sin with a capital S is an encompassing power that envelops us and lures us towards Evil and pays us in dead souls now and dead bodies later. Under its influence all are capacities are

² United Methodist official teaching is found in our Articles of Religion, Article VII: Of Original or Birth Sin, “Original sin standeth not in the following of Adam (as the Pelagians do vainly talk), but it is the corruption of the nature of every man, that naturally is engendered of the offspring of Adam, *whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness, and of his own nature inclined to evil, and that continually*” (ital. ad, *The U.M. Book of Discipline* 2102: 65).

compromised, and no part of us is unaffected: not our minds or our bodies, not our feelings or memories, not our impulses and appetites, not even our dreams.

Sin is not just this or that discrete act and thus a minority report in an otherwise solid life. It is— rather— a systemic, whole-person, chronic moral disease. It is rebellion and lawlessness; it is deliberate transgression of a known boundary; it is a perverse and crooked orientation that finds delight in what is wrong; it is an inability to stay on a true and straight trajectory like an arrow that always misses the target;³ it is the loss of self-control and a vulnerability to all that is false and foolish and dark and deceptive, and it is already within the walls of the self just like a cell punctured and coopted by the AIDs virus which degrades the immune system. I have never known myself without this awful, corrupting spoiler, and there is no escape from this three-fold enslavement to Sin and Evil and Death apart from Jesus Christ. And what I have, you have; and what you have, everyone has, everyone except one, and that is what makes his life such a tipping point. Jesus Christ is the only one qualified to heal us.

Is this a depressing description? You bet it is, and an accurate one as well. One reason our churches are weak and our witness insipid is because we preachers have fudged the diagnosis, telling a patient the tumor is benign when we know it's malignant because we don't want them to feel bad. It's malpractice, whether it occurs in a doctor's office or in a pulpit. We are all sick unto death, weighed down by what we inherited and what we then added. We are guilty. Could it be that people feel so little need for Jesus Christ because we have lied to them about our bleak human condition? Yes. Warmed over pop psychology about self-esteem and being the real you and finding your best self and five techniques for the good life are not our message. Ours is not about improving an old life but getting a new one from Jesus because your old one is killing you, whether you know it or not.

One of the most interesting parts of my calling is listening to lots of people, and over time you see certain patterns or styles of faith. Some seem to

³ The list to this point is adapted from Michael J. Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 667-668.

think they've struck a private deal with God. If God gets what God wants, which is for them to believe in Jesus and be good in nice sort of way, then they should get what they want, which is a largely trouble free life which ends in heaven. I call this *the vacation model* of discipleship, and it's more common than you think in our American Christian ranks⁴.

We all want that special trip to the beach or Disney to be just like the travel brochure; we spend time dreaming how wonderful it's going to be. But then, when something goes wrong with the fantasy— even something small— we feel annoyed, disappointed, maybe even enraged as if we've been cheated by someone. Some folk I interview have a long list of complaints against God and the church and the pastor because their vacation dream of the Christian life has had some big disappointments. And so, if I work up the courage to blow their cover, I ask, "Do you feel you and God have some sort of secret deal, that if you believed, everything would go smoothly?"

The honest ones think a minute, "I guess I did, but I never gave it much thought. I assumed from what I heard that Jesus' job was not make my life as good as possible and fulfill my dreams, sort of like a rich, indulgent uncle with no kids of his own." The less honest will often wiggle around bit, since it's so ridiculous to hear yourself say out loud what you've been thinking.

"Well," I say, "there's another model that makes more sense of the Scripture and experience, and it's called the *battlefield* or *warfare model*.⁵ Life with Jesus is not a endless cruise to glory or an exotic destination at an all-inclusive spiritual resort, though there are some great times along the way. It's

⁴ See Greg Boyd, "Vacationing in a War Zone," reknew.org/2016/09/vacationing-war-zone; also his "What is the warfare worldview?" reknew.org/2008/01/what-is-the-warfare-worldview.

⁵ For a review of several warfare models, see James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy, editors, *Understanding Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), especially Chapter 3, Greg Boyd, "The Ground Level Deliverance Model," 129-172.

a lot more like warfare and hand-to-hand combat, longer periods of training and preparation followed by intense engagements where the fire is live and the casualties real. But the really disturbing news is that the battle is not just outside the self but inside. You're not only *on* a battlefield; you *are* a battlefield. Your biggest enemies are not just outside the gates, they're inside the walls. And that is the model of Jesus and of Paul⁶ and the other apostles like Peter⁷ and James,⁸ a model that makes the most sense to me and my reading of Scripture.

The modern *vacation model* is naive; the ancient *battlefield* model much more realistic. If people take a big hit on vacation, it's a news story, but on a field of conflict such is expected and prepared for. And here we have something to learn from Islam with its concept of *jihad* or *struggle*, outside with the world and the powers, inside with the self and its distortions.⁹ It is an encouragement to me that our first two United Methodist baptismal vows, in line with ancient Christian practice, are so clear about the *warfare model* and the multiple levels of conflict which are invisible above us, visible around us, and internal within us.¹⁰ Listen carefully because this is not just cute, empty, religious talk. It's describes a world and a stance within that world on three fronts and in two dimensions: outward and inward.

“On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:
Do you renounce/ the spiritual forces of wickedness, (Invisible evil)
reject/ the evil powers of this world, (Visible corruption)
and repent/ of your sin?” (Internal rebellion)
I do. (On all three levels and in both dimensions)

⁶ Romans 7:13-8:2.

⁷ 1 Peter 5:8ff.

⁸ James 4:7ff.

⁹ See Phil Parshall, *Understanding Muslim Teaching And Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994), Chapter 9, “Jihad and Violence,” 97-112.

¹⁰ *U.M. Hymnal, 1989: 34.*

Romans 7:15-8:2. 10

In other words, the church wants to know if you will say a permanent *No* to everything and every power that opposes God, even if it's within you? Something, or rather several somethings, must be named and renounced and rejected and turned away from every day all your life. Serious stuff! And the second vow, logically linked to the first, is that— having declared your primary loyalty— will you now take up the fight against these powers and not sit on the sidelines? This offensive position is the clear intent of vow number 2:

“Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you (Our armaments) to resist *evil*, injustice, and oppression (The word *evil* for a 2nd time) in whatever forms they present themselves?” (Often disguised)
I do.

In other words, will you take up a Christian form of jihad? Awareness of our enemies and their strategies plus continual resistance and discipline. These vows clearly presume the warfare model of following Jesus and being empowered by him, not the vacation model. And so when people look at me confused and bewildered and ask, “Why is this happening to me?” I reply, “This is what a battlefield looks like; welcome to the struggle.” And when they ask, often a bit angry, “Why did no one tell me about this?” I reply, “We did. It was in every baptism service and every communion, a thread woven throughout Scripture. You just weren't able to hear it. You were captive to the vacation model, hoping it was true. But now your experience has shown how shallow it is, so are you ready to follow Jesus in a new way, a tourist no longer, but now a soldier?” It's a big decision.

So the title of today's message is— fittingly— *Honest About The Battle*. And here Paul the apostle and actor puts on a mask of sorts and gives us a monolog about the powers that are arrayed against us all. His personal experience is part of the story, but this is more than autobiography; it's a detailed analysis about our common condition and why we are so divided. But first a story from the Wimmer family of Benton, Arkansas:

“On a warm, summer night, my wife and I were driving with Micah, our 3-year-old son, who sat in the back seat. After miles in the

dark, we came to a stop in a remote area. The brightness of the traffic light revealed all the dirt, dead bugs, and insects on our windshield. Micah piped up, ‘Look, how dirty!’

We didn't give his comment a thought until we drove away from the light back into the darkness. We could no longer see the mess on our windshield, and Micah quickly piped up, “Now the glass is clean!””

Then Pastor Wimmer’s commentary on the anecdote, “Before the law came, the dirt within us hidden under the darkness. But when God gave the law, its light revealed the filth we'd collected on our journey. The law cannot cleanse us or make us whole. But it does starkly highlight the true situation. In others words, seeing how bad things are can wake us up and push in the right direction.”¹¹ Pastor Wimmer got his insight from Paul.

Through long reflection on the person and work Jesus, using the Hebrew Scriptures he inherited and his own observations, Paul has come to a sophisticated view of the human being before God. All bear the divine image and are loved; all are infected with Sin and distorted; all are open to opportunistic Evil; all are headed for Death and judgment; and Christ came and died and rose for all without exception. So when the Lord created for himself a select people by rescuing a nation of slaves from Egypt, it was with the intent of setting a divine standard in their midst, the Ten Commandments, which is what it looks like when people live together with God and each other in faithfulness. It’s good and holy and just and right, but it’s set in the midst of a people who are anything but, and so it functions as a traffic light to highlight the crud on the windshield and show the truth about our lives. That we resent such moral authority is a sure symptom we have the disease.

The law was given to be kept, but the whole cannot be kept, because the Hebrew people, though rescued externally, have not been changed internally. They now know what health looks like, but they still have the inward disease. So it’s perfectly understandable for a fellow Jew to object to Paul in verse 13,

¹¹ PreachingToday.com search under Romans 7:13-8:2.

“Did that which is good, God’s law, become death to me? How is that?” To which Paul answers, “No way. Nothing’s wrong with law; it’s perfect and works as designed. The problem lies in you. All the law did was reveal what a rebel you are and how far your heart is bent away from God’s best, and it’s worse than you think. You’ve committed treason against the Living God, and there is no place to hide! You are now exposed and guilty!”

And this is what God’s law does best; the Holy Spirit uses it to deliver an accurate diagnosis of our deepest malady, the one thing we want to avoid, that we are accountable to our Maker for all that we think and desire and all that we do and don’t do and that one day the truth will be told about us, not in private but in a universal public, and the world will know.

It is here, after answering a pressing objection in verse 13, that Paul pulls a sleight of hand we moderns often miss. In two loaded paragraphs he shifts into character and makes a prepared speech as if he was an actor, and he is, only his scripts are not produced on a stage but in a letter.

He starts with a universal confession, “I do not understand my own actions. I’m a mystery to myself.” I agree. I don’t understand the gap between what I intend and how I behave. I imagine the good with my best self, but I can’t reach it; something is always resisting and holding me back, and that something is inside. Something dark and alien and allergic to God has set up base camp in my heart, the source of my thoughts and feelings. I’ve been hacked; malware is now on my hard drive.

The best example of this is someone with a debilitating addiction, say to alcohol or cocaine or heroin or gambling or porn, something that’s slowly distorting the whole person. They hate it and do it anyway. They agree with God that it’s wrong and destructive and shameful and do it anyway. They promise to quit and don’t. They hate what’s happening, but some deep circuit in the self, some trigger for a cycle of automatic behavior, has taken them hostage. It’s in them, but it’s not them because part of them still yearns to be free and obey God from the heart. The self is deeply divided and doesn’t have the necessary resources to repair itself. The situation is desperate, and this is—

in a real sense, the natural situation of every person before God. Compromised, impotent, torn between competing forces, stuck and sinking. The pain and severity differ in degree, but the underlying structure is the same. This is us! And there is no hope or answer given in verses 14 through 21. It's all diagnosis, and the prognosis is terminal. The self is in bondage and living in a prison camp with two cruel, sadistic guards, one named *Sin*, the other *Evil*.

Not a complimentary picture, is it? Not a boost to self-esteem, except perhaps that God honors us enough to tell us the truth. But Jesus and Paul and the church claim it's both an accurate and universal picture. We are all in this together. This is what's wrong with our world and with us. We are cut off and out of sync with God, and no amount of alleged self-improvement from our side changes the root problem. We cannot save ourselves, and all our little pitiful projects are fruitless. I need a Savior to do at least three things for me: 1) Tell me the truth and win my trust, 2) Rescue me from the prison camp, and 3) Give me a new heart by coming to live inside me and clean me out!

Before it is discrete wrong action, Sin is an invasive power and a magnetic pull that wants to control more and more of the self until it destroys you. So Paul makes a strong argument for Sin's power from human experience. Premise 1: I don't want to do it. Premise 2: I mentally agree that God's law is good and good for me. Reality 1: I do it anyway. Reality 2: I am overwhelmed, so it is no longer *I* who do it, but this alien power within me. I am fully accountable, but I am also fully compromised. I cannot carry out what I choose, and whenever I seek to do good, a dark power is waiting on me. "Evil," says Paul, "always lies close at hand." God's law is from above, and it is true and good, but I am neither good or true. I cannot change on my own; I live in bondage to forces and powers I do not understand.

In the second paragraph of his elaboration, Paul first reviews what's he just said, thus verses 22 and 23: "For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of Sin which dwells in my members." Paul is a battlefield, and the war is within. He's a POW, a captive unable to escape, and it hurts as he agonizes out loud, "Wretched man that I am!"

If you could hear how many people think and sometimes say this to themselves, it would be a low rumble across all of time that never goes away. And it's true. They are miserable, the pain high, and it is a tipping point. Illusions are gone; the truth about my life is staring me down. But for Paul the agony leads immediately to a question, "Is there a way out?" which he asks this way, "Who will deliver me from this body of death, this awful thing that has engulfed the whole of me?" And then Paul, in good dramatic fashion, answers his own question, and here we must be careful.

The God who showed up at ground level in Jesus is the answer, but sometimes it takes people a long time to get to the right question which is, "*Who shall deliver me?*" Not "*What shall deliver me?*" or "*How shall it happen?*" or "*When?*" but "*Who?*" Not a technique or program or a new philosophy from a TV guru or a demand for a quick fix, but a living person with the power and authority and love to extract me so that I belong to him forever. Then the cry of praise to more than match the groan of misery, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Paul met him in a flash of light on the road to Damascus, and people everywhere—in ways dramatic and subtle—have had him invade their darkness and lead them to his kind of freedom, which is never independent of him but always dependent on him in a bond of devotion and loyalty. There is no free or neutral space in the universe, no independent uncommitted place from which to view the alternatives; it's all occupied turf. We are born into bondage in a land called death, and unless we are delivered by the only one with credentials, that is where we stay and where we die.

We must be delivered, or else we are lost. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved *a wretch* like me," was John Newton's testimony. Precisely how that happens is up to God and as personalized as your finger print because no two conversions are clones, but it always involves a new allegiance to the person of Jesus as God the Son and to his Holy Spirit coming to indwell us as a source of light and life as God the Father reestablishes a communications link within each new disciple. This is how we change sides in the cosmic battle that rages around us and in us; we are rescued and rehabilitated, indwelt and redeployed. We live as new people in an old world. We still feel the tug of all the old powers and their loyalties, and that tug of war will not end as long as we

live here, and this is why Paul reminds that while we have been changed, the world remains as is with every square inch contested, “So then I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my fallen nature I serve the law of Sin.”

You will battle your fallen nature and its old habits as long as you live. You will feel its tug and lure and hear its lies at the most inopportune moments because our Foe is crafty and— as Paul reminded us— always *close at hand*. But we now resist not alone but out of the strength of a new and abiding relationship. We belong to Jesus our champion, and so there is no condemnation, no fear of being rejected and thrown away as a loser. When we fall or fail, he picks us up again and restores us. We’ve been set free from the old slavery, and his Holy Spirit is within us as a light house and homing beacon. We belong to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In a still dangerous neighborhood, we are God’s free children, and that is the message we offer the world. Life can change forever with Jesus and his people.

In his commentary on Romans, my professor Charles Talbert put it this way, and I think he is right in his realism and his hope:

“Before one becomes a Christian there is a struggle in the self between good and evil. This passage reflects the bondage to sin characteristic of those apart from Christ. After one becomes a Christian there is also a struggle in the self between good and evil. The difference is that in this struggle the power of sin has been broken and divine enablement assists the believer in the struggle.”¹²

We are the same person, and nothing has changed in the world around us. All the same forces are in play, but we are now different. Life is a battle, but I have traded up in who I now serve. It’s time to be honest about the battle. People are dying out there.

¹² Macon GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002, 188.
