

Paul's admission of his continuing struggle with his sins is fundamental to one's understanding of the nature of the Christian life and, as so, is one of the most consoling texts in all the Bible.

“A Jarring Admission”

Romans 7:14-25

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We are in the seventh chapter and Paul is elaborating on the question of the relationship between the law of God and the Christian. He said some things earlier in the letter, in chapter 6 in particular, that almost invariably would lead to some confusion and misunderstanding. For example, he said that the Christian is no longer under the law. He is explaining what he meant by that and has done so now in two paragraphs and will continue in a third paragraph, vv. 14-25.

We come this morning to what is unquestionably the most controversial text in the entire letter. It is more controversial even than Romans 9 where Calvinists and Arminians square off to do battle. For here in the second half of Romans 7 even Calvinists and Arminians argue among themselves over the proper interpretation of Paul's remarks. This text is what scholars call a *crux interpretum*, that is, it is *the* passage around which the discussion of a particular issue of theology or the Christian life revolves. Its importance is such that, in a very real way, your view of this text, your understanding of what Paul is saying, will shape profoundly your understanding of your own life and what it means to be a Christian in the world. Let me read two short citations by two representative Christian thinkers.

First is the Methodist scholar and Oxford professor, R. Newton Flew, in his book *The Idea of Perfection* [54]:

“St. Paul does not speak of himself as sinless after conversion. ... But it is a striking fact that in [Paul's] epistles we meet no heartfelt utterances of deep contrition for present sin such as are common in evangelical piety, under the influence of the Reformation.”

In Flew's view, the Christian life is described by Paul and elsewhere in the New Testament as a generally successful affair. Remaining sin, according to Paul, at least in Prof. Flew's judgment, is not the problem some Christians have imagined it to be. Some years ago a Wesleyan speaker in Covenant College's chapel told the students that it had been many months since he last sinned.

Much more typical of Protestant and Reformed spiritual writing, here is Samuel Rutherford writing to one of his favorite correspondents, Lady Kenmure. [*Letters*, CVI, 219]

“I find you complaining of yourself, and it becometh a sinner so to do. I am not against you in that. The more sense the more life; the more sense of sin the less sin.”

You will see easily enough that these two men see Christian experience in very different ways. One sees it in terms of an intense inner struggle with temptation, a record of spiritual failure frequent enough and grievous enough that mourning over one's sin and longing for release from one's sinfulness are characteristic features of the godly Christian life. The other doesn't see such

features as part of the New Testament's profile of the Christian life. That is, quite obviously, a very significant difference in outlook with immense implications for what it means to be a Christian and how Christians are to think about their lives.

But, what is very important to understand, is that the reason R.N. Flew can say that the New Testament does not contain "utterances of deep contrition for present sin such as are common in evangelical piety" is precisely because *and only because* he does not find such an utterance in Romans 7:14-25. And the reason Samuel Rutherford wrote as he did of the importance, even the virtue, of a Christian woman carrying about with her a sense of her own sin was, in some significant part, due to the fact that he found Paul giving expression precisely and powerfully to that same sense of his own sin as a Christian in Romans 7:14-25.

Read the Text

As you are aware, the question that determines the interpretation of the text we have read is simply this: who is the "I" who is speaking in these verses. Who is it who says that he is "unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin." The great biblical theologian of the previous generation, Herman Ridderbos, maintained that Paul was not speaking autobiographically at all, but meant his readers to understand that the personal pronoun "I" throughout referred to Old Testament Israel and its experience with the Law of God. In another case, the Keswick or higher life interpretation of the 19th century, had Paul here describing, not his own state, but the state of a Christian who was still living at the lower level of spiritual achievement, a carnal Christian, a very unhealthy Christian, who had not yet discovered the secret of the "higher Christian life." [This man is in misery over his sins precisely because he is still attempting "to conquer the old nature by self-effort." Paul is describing what happens to a Christian who loses sight of the grace of God as the principle of his daily life.] Quite apart from other objections that may be raised against interpretations of this type, they suffer from what we said last time is the failure to take seriously the likely understanding of Paul's first readers and listeners. Would anyone in the congregation that first received Paul's letter and first heard it read have thought that Paul was not describing himself when he told them of what was true of him, "I think this, I do this, I suffer this?" Is it at all reasonable to suppose that Paul's first readers would have realized that he was not talking about himself at all, but of the nation of Israel? Biblical interpretations that sound plausible in a university or seminary seminar must sooner or later pass this test: would any ordinary reader of the letter have imagined that this is what Paul meant? In the same way, who – apart from folk who had developed a paradigm of the Christian life such as that once popular in higher life circles – would ever have gathered that Paul was talking not about himself but about a class of sub-standard Christians?

So we are left with two possibilities in the interpretation of Romans 7:14-25 and Paul's emotional outburst about his disgust and frustration with himself and his still great sinfulness. The one is that Paul is still speaking of how he thought and felt *before he became a Christian*. That is, Paul in these verses is recollecting his experience *as an unbeliever*. The second is that Paul is speaking *as a Christian* and not only as a Christian, but as an experienced, mature, practiced Christian, an apostle of Jesus Christ no less, much closer to the end of his remarkably fruitful and important Christian life than he was to its beginning.

It is not at all difficult to understand or, indeed, to feel the force of the argument on behalf of the first interpretation: viz. that Paul is describing his experience while still an unbeliever. He was a slave to his sins because Christ had not yet set him free. Did he not say in chapter 6 verse 7 that the man who has died to sin in Jesus Christ has been set free from sin? Did he not say in v. 14 that sin is no longer the master of a Christian? How could Paul possibly then say that now and still after many years a Christian he remains a slave to sin? As I said, no one should have any difficulty feeling the force of that argument. Many good men have compared Romans 6:7 and 6:14 to Romans 7:14 and concluded that Paul could not possibly be talking about himself as a Christian. He must be describing his futile struggle with sin while still an unbeliever, not yet set free by the grace of God and the victory of Christ. Not always, but often they go further to say that what Paul is describing is his experience *before* he became a Christian but *after* he began to experience the conviction of the sin brought upon by the Holy Spirit's application of the Law of God to Paul's conscience, the experience Paul described in the previous paragraph vv.7-13. So then Romans 7:14-25 describes the spiritual agony of a man under conviction of his sin but not yet delivered from it through faith in Jesus Christ. This was the view, for example, of the great preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones and one of my seminary professors, Robert Reymond. That is certainly an interpretation that makes eminent sense. So why is it that through the ages it has not been accepted as a right reading of these verses?

Why did Augustine and Luther, Calvin and the English Puritans, the American Presbyterians, modern theologians such as Benjamin Warfield and Herman Bavinck, and the majority of the most authoritative modern biblical commentators on the letter to the Romans, reject the suggestion that Paul is speaking as still an unbeliever and conclude instead that Paul is describing his *Christian* life? There are several arguments. But before I begin to list them, let me say clearly where we are going so there will be no confusion in your mind. I regard it as a virtual certainty that Paul is speaking as a Christian, as a mature and practiced Christian in 7:14-25 and that in so speaking he is describing not only his own experience but, in the nature of the case, the experience of every Christian boy or girl, man or woman. I feel about this text as Alexander Whyte, the great Scottish preacher did. He once said in a sermon:

“As often as my attentive bookseller sends me ‘on approval’ another new commentary on Romans, I immediately turn to the seventh chapter. And if the commentator sets up a man of straw in the seventh chapter, I immediately shut the book. I at once send back the book and say, ‘No thank you. That is not the man for my hard-earned money.’ [*Bunyan Characters*, ii, 257]

And by “man of straw” Whyte meant anything other than Paul as a Christian describing his experience as a Christian and giving vent to his frustration with himself and disappointment in himself *as a Christian*. And here is why Whyte and so many others have been so sure of that.

- I. *The first reason to conclude that Paul, in this melancholy admission of his still great struggle with his sins, is speaking of himself and as himself in the full maturity of his Christian life is that he says of himself what no unbeliever can say.*

We said that those who favor the view that Paul is speaking of himself as an unbeliever, before he became a Christian, build their case primarily, indeed almost exclusively, on the argument that some of the statements Paul makes here are simply incompatible with the doctrine of the Christian life found earlier in chapter 6. In other words, they argue that Paul says of himself in vv. 14-25 *what no believer can say*. I'm saying, on the contrary that Paul is saying of himself what no *unbeliever* can say.

Many who have defended the view that Paul is here speaking of his life before he became a Christian have done so because they felt that to describe the experience of a Christian as negatively as Paul describes it here – slavery to sin; a failure to do what he knows is right, etc. – would be to debase the grace of God and to make into a little thing the great and glorious change that the Holy Spirit effects in the lives of those who are saved; a change described variously as a new birth, a new creation, a new heart, the death of the old man, all things becoming new and the old things passing away, and so on. These men are seeking to do justice to what Scripture says about those in Christ being new men and living new lives.

And in that desire they are certainly correct and we should be no less concerned to do justice to what Paul describes in Romans as the revolution in life and the deliverance from sin which occurs in any life when he or she is united to Jesus Christ. *But that hardly settles the question*. And one simple demonstration of that fact is furnished by the historical fact that alongside the good and wise men who have favored the unbeliever view of Romans 7:14-25 that Paul cannot be speaking as a Christian in these verses have been a great many in the history of the church who have done most to undermine the Christian's sole reliance on the grace of God and to reintroduce a theology of salvation by works into the thinking of the church. Pelagius, against whose attacks on salvation by God's grace Augustine rose in defense; Erasmus, against whom Luther wrote his great defense of salvation by grace alone, *The Bondage of the Will*; Socinius, the father of the Unitarians, who denatured Christianity altogether and made it nothing more than moral pieties for do-it-yourselfers, against whom the whole body of Protestant Reformers rose *en masse*; and Arminius and his followers – all of those men held that Paul in Rom.7:14-25 must be speaking as an unbeliever. And they held that view precisely because they wanted to believe that Paul was speaking as an *unbeliever*, an unconverted man; a non-Christian could and would say such things as Paul says here:

“I agree that the law is good...”
 “I know that nothing good lives in me...”
 “...in my inner being I delight in God's law...”

And so on. They were, in other words, altogether unwilling to believe that man, in his fallen nature, is nearly as lost as the Bible says he is, nearly as intractable an enemy of God, nearly the lover of sin and the defiant rebel against God's law that the Bible describes him to be. They had a much more positive, optimistic view of man's nature and very much wanted to believe that Paul would be describing an unbeliever here as an unwilling sinner, who loves the good and wants to do it, agrees in his heart with God's will and wants to be the Lord's servant, but will need a little help from God or Christ to climb up into the kingdom of God. [As an aside, let me say that this interpretation of Rom. 7:14-25 is gathering strength again in evangelical circles in our time precisely because people do not like its negative portrayal of the Christian, still so great

a sinner and moral failure. We need to be positive, we need to build up the believer, stoke his confidence. Negative vibes like these are not helpful. Hence the preference on the part of many for the view that Paul must be speaking as an unbeliever. Christians would not say such things about themselves.]

But that is not how Paul describes the unbeliever, even here in Romans. In 8:6 he says that the mind of the unsaved man is hostile to God and that such a man does not love God nor will he submit to God's law. He says elsewhere that the unbeliever does not seek God and does not and cannot accept the truth or grace of God because his mind is blinded by sin to these things. How could Paul then be describing an unbeliever when he has him say in these verses that he knows God's law is spiritual and agrees with it, that he delights in God's law in his inner being, that he desires to do the good and does not want to sin, that in his mind he is a slave to God, and so on? Take Paul as a whole and it is impossible to reconcile this description with what he everywhere teaches to be the real spiritual condition of an unbeliever. *This is my first argument, then, for taking Romans 7:14-25 to be Paul's description of his life as a Christian.* Much of what he says about himself cannot be put in an unbeliever's mouth.

- II. *My second reason to take Paul's autobiographical remarks here as a description of his inner inexperience of conflict and disappointment as a Christian is that this is, in fact, what the Scripture everywhere teaches to be the normal experience of believers in the world.*

We have not yet given an answer to the objection of the other side that what Paul says here in Rom. 7:14-25 is incompatible with what he himself says is true of Christians and their deliverance from the power of sin. What of Paul saying in Rom. 6 that a Christian is *not* a slave of sin and in Rom. 7 that he himself *is* a slave of sin? The simple fact is that the Bible in many places describes the Christian life in ways that seem to be just as contradictory. However strongly and rightly the Apostle in Rom. 6 affirms the liberation of the believer in Christ from the power of sin, it is unmistakably clear in the Scripture that this liberation is not experienced in its completeness and finality in this world. However perfect our justification – our forgiveness – may be, our sanctification remains deeply imperfect in this life. Sin's guilt may be utterly swept away when first we are united to Christ, but sin's corruption is the work of a lifetime, the Holy Spirit's work and our own work.

Think of the impassioned confessions of sin by the godly in the Psalms and the prophets. Consider the Lord Jesus' teaching that we should be a people who mourn and are poor in spirit because of our abiding unworthiness and how we must watch and pray always against temptation lest that temptation become our master. Remember John's teaching that we should be always confessing our sins to God so they might be forgiven. Then think of so much else in Paul: his teaching about pressing on because we haven't yet arrived; beating his body to bring it into submission; and our obligation to forgive one another all the sins they are constantly committing against us as we should ask forgiveness for the sins we commit against them. I say in all of this and much more we find nothing else but what we find in Rom 7:14-25, a Christian still struggling with his sins.

But we can be more specific still. “Flesh,” the Greek word σάρξ, is used by Paul to describe the spiritual nature of the unregenerate, unsaved, unbelieving, unchristian man. We have such a use in Romans 8:5-7 where we read that those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires, and that the mind of the flesh is death, and that the mind of the flesh is hostile to God. But the same term is also used to describe the principle of sin and unbelief that remains active and powerful in a Christian’s heart and life. For example, Paul in Galatians 5:16-17 – in what is surely a parallel text to Romans 7:14-25 – writes of Christians in general that “the flesh – that is σάρξ – desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with one another, so that you do not do what you want...” Paul is there unmistakably describing the inner conflict between old and new in terms very like what he uses in Romans 7 and the Scripture is *obviously* teaching us there in Galatians 5 that this is the continuing experience of believers. We *are* new creatures; but we remain far too much the old creatures we used to be. That is the witness of the entirety of Holy Scripture and of Paul himself. It is a striking juxtaposition in Romans 6 and Romans 7 but the Scripture is full of those. As G.K. Chesterton put it, “a paradox is truth standing on its head to get attention!”

Finally, the message of Rom 7:14-25 is only the same message which Paul repeats shortly thereafter in 8:22-25, where he speaks not of the individual believer but of the whole church in the world.

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so but *we ourselves*, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved.”

This is only what Paul has already given as a personal testimony in 7:14-25: he has received in his heart and life the first fruits of the liberation from sin, but yet much of its power remains to trouble and weary him and to make him groan under the burden of it. The groaning cannot stop until the sin is gone and that won’t be the case until either he goes to the Lord in death or the Lord comes again for his church. This then is my second argument: both the Apostle himself and the whole Scripture agree with the picture of the Christian life Paul describes as his own Christian experience in Rom 7:14-25.

III. My third argument that Paul must be taken as speaking as a Christian and as a mature Christian is that this has, in fact, been the experience of the very best Christians throughout the ages, who have lived with all of this same inner tension between sin and righteousness.

I must be brief. The one who insists that the man speaking in 7:14-25 cannot be a Christian, much less a deeply earnest and practiced Christian like Paul, has set himself a very great task. For he must explain why so many of the church’s finest sons and daughters have found their own Christian experience described precisely in these same verses if, in fact, Paul isn’t talking about a Christian at all. They found themselves still great sinners and thinking about their sin in exactly the same way as Paul describes his thinking here: they were slaves to it when they ought to be free. They were disgusted by their behavior as Paul was precisely because he knew Jesus Christ and the victory he achieved for him over sin on the cross. And the longer they lived the more sin

they found in themselves and the more frustrated they became. I could multiply quotations at length. I give you but one, one I've given you before from the saintly Bishop Beveridge, sharp-sighted as he was both to the high demands of God's holiness and his own heart, who confessed:

“I cannot pray, but I sin; I cannot hear or preach a sermon, but I sin; I cannot give an alms, or receive the sacrament, but I sin: nay, I cannot so much as confess my sins, but my confessions are still aggravations of them. My repentance needs to be repented of, my tears want washing, and the very washing of my tears needs still to be washed over again with the blood of my Redeemer.” [In Ryle, *Old Paths*, 130]

Is that not precisely what Paul is saying about himself in this text? *This is the third argument.* Augustine, Luther, Calvin, the Puritans rejected the view that Paul was describing an unbeliever's experience, at least in large part because his words conformed so precisely to their own experience as Christians.

Though these arguments, I believe, are sufficient in themselves to make the case, I have, in fact, saved the two most conclusive arguments for last. They are each derived immediately from the text as Paul wrote it.

IV. *The first of these two, and thus my fourth argument, is simply that, following upon the past tense in verses. 7-13, verses 14-25 are in the present tense.*

This is a simple point, but obviously of great importance. Paul describes his life of conflict with sin and his shame over sin's still great control over him in the present tense. This is so about me now, he is saying, as he writes to the Christians in Rome.

Now it is true, as those who favor the other interpretation have long pointed out, that sometimes the present tense can be used for the sake of vividness, even when, in fact, it is the past which is being described. ‘Young George Washington picks up the axe and chops down the cherry tree!’ That sort of thing. But I must agree with many commentators who have pointed out that this is an explanation born of desperation. The present tense is sustained far too long and too consistently and contrasts too dramatically with the past tense of verses 7-13 – which certainly describe Paul before his salvation – to be explained as a use of the present tense for stylistic effect. Unless there is some compelling reason to suggest the contrary, we must read the present tense as a simple indication that Paul is describing *what is now the case*. He is now struggling with his sins in this way, even as the great Apostle to the Gentiles! He described his life before he became a Christian in vv. 7-13, hence the past tense, and his life as a Christian in vv. 14-25, hence the present tense.

V. *And, then finally, and just as decisively, the order of statements in vv. 24 and 25 demands that Paul is describing his own Christian experience in vv. 14-25.*

The fact is that Paul cries out for deliverance and then, in verse 25a, gives thanks to God for deliverance. Were that the end of the chapter, it would be easier to conclude that the Apostle was describing his situation before he became a Christian and then concluding with thanks that he has

been delivered from that former bondage to sin which before he became a Christian had characterized his inner life.

But, Paul does not finish there. He continues in the present tense: ‘So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature, a slave to the law of sin.’ Here is the conclusion of the matter; this is where he leaves us: he is a man composed of contrary principles and warring desires. As he says of the Christian life in Galatians 5, the flesh, the remnants of his old nature are warring against the new nature he has from Christ. Paul’s inner life is a battlefield strewn with the carnage of many bitter contests with his lusts and sins, some ending in victory, and many in defeat. That is where his life stands and where it will stand so long as he remains in this world. The full deliverance, for which he is already thanking God, does not come in this life, but in the next, as he will say again in 8:18-25.

So I conclude that here in vv. 14-25 Paul is describing his own Christian experience, and, by implication, the normal Christian experience of struggle, sorrow, and bitter frustration over the continuing power and influence of our sins and sinfulness upon our new life in Christ. The law of God still continues to show us what is right and we still, though Christians and followers of Christ, continue to break that law. The Christian desires a holy life but often finds himself thinking, speaking, and acting in very unholy ways. And it is the most exquisite and lasting pain and sorrow of a Christian’s life in this world that this is so.

If you are an unbeliever here this morning, not a Christian, learn this about Christians. They don’t think they are better than you. They think they are worse; for they have no excuse and yet they continue to sin. It tears them up to admit it, but they do. They are longing for nothing so much as the next world when finally they will no longer fail to honor the Lord Jesus and to love him and their neighbor as they so regularly fail to do now. The Christian life is many wonderful and happy things, but one thing it is also very definitely is a struggle and a disappointment!

And if you are a Christian take your comfort from what Alexander Whyte called a text of the profoundest comfort to Christians in their battle with sin. How is it comforting? You sometimes wonder if you could be a Christian at all failing as you do so often to love the Lord and your neighbor as you know you should and, indeed, as you want to do. But so did Paul. If he was a Christian, so are you!

“Hear, O Israel, a broken and a contrite heart God will not despise.”