

**WILL THE REAL ME PLEASE STAND UP?
ROMANS 7:14-25**

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

M.I. JESUS SAID THE SPIRIT IS WILLING BUT THE FLESH IS WEAK. WE MUST UNDERSTAND THIS AND TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. SIN IS A POWERFUL THREAT TO OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST.

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WILL THE REAL ME PLEASE STAND UP? ROMANS 7:14-25

By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn

Before we start this morning's passage, I want to inform you and warn you that there is a lot of disagreement concerning the interpretation of this passage. I'm sure all the commentators and scholars are much smarter than I am and since I am a simple person, I am just going to read this passage from my experience concerning my Christian walk.

That was the informational part. Now here is the warning: I know that all of you in this congregation will find this hard to believe, but I do sin. In fact, defeating sin in my life comes with great struggle, a lot of perseverance, and a constant battle against discouragement.

I said I know that all of you see me as saintly, but it wasn't always that way. You remember the church I used to pastor, the one that was so tough. (How tough was it?) It was so tough that even the kids were brutal. Let me give you an example. One day, I walked out of my office and saw a group of young boys standing around a stray dog in the church parking lot. I said, "Hey guys, what are you doing?"

"Telling lies," said one of the boys. "The one who tells the biggest lie gets the dog."

Totally shocked, I said, "Why, when I was your age, I never thought of telling a lie."

The boys looked at one another, a little discouraged, when finally one boy shrugged and said, "I guess he wins the dog."

That would never happen here, right? I think that one of the ways we can defeat the power of sin in our life is to be able to own our own sinfulness.

Let me say this one more time; I think that theologians and scholars often try to overanalyze and sometimes miss the plain, simple message. In chapters 1-4, the Apostle Paul hammered home the truth that we are saved by grace through faith. We can never be holy enough, good enough, or righteous enough to be accepted by God. In fact, the only way to be reconciled with God is for us to place our faith and trust in Jesus. If we have given our lives to Jesus, then we can be sure that we are reconciled with God and enjoy eternal life. Our eternal destinies are now secure.

Then we said that in chapters 5-8, Paul would describe for us what life in Christ should look like now that we are saved, here is a summary of what he said so far; there is a part of our being that we received from our ancestors, Adam and Eve. We called this the Adamic nature. This part of us has a propensity to sin, to rebel against God, towards selfishness and self-interest this part of our nature has a bent towards evil. Paul refers to this part of us as the flesh.

However, when we received Christ, we were born again and we received new natures this is the Christ nature that lives in us. This part of us has a deep desire to love and serve God; this part of us has a natural bent towards God and doing good deeds. Paul refers to this part of us as spirit so his conclusion so far, is that there is a fleshly part to our existence and there is a spiritual side to our being.

Now Paul hinted at this previously, but today I think he graphically points out that these two natures are at constant war with each other and he will use military language in this passage. Let me quickly recap for you Paul's description of what it means that we

have given our lives to Christ. We have been given a new citizenship. However, we carry along all the baggage of the old country that even though we are now citizens of God's Heavenly Kingdom, we still carry over sinful thought patterns, speech patterns, and behavior patterns. The picture is one of us learning to grow into our new citizenship. Second, we have chosen to serve a new master, Jesus Christ as Lord and righteousness as our assignment. However, our old master, Satan, personified by sin, is not willing to let us go so easily. Finally, we have taken on a new lover, God Himself, however, our old lover, sin, continues to stalk us.

This morning we will see that the battle between good and evil takes place in our individual lives. In spirit, Christ always wins but, in the flesh, it seems as if sin has the upper hand. I think to misunderstand this, can set us up for failure, discouragement, or self-righteousness. **JESUS PUT IT THIS WAY. THE SPIRIT IS WILLING BUT THE FLESH IS WEAK. WE MUST UNDERSTAND THIS AND TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. SIN IS A POWERFUL THREAT TO OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST.**

Please look at your outlines and notice that each section will end with a description concerning the power of sin. To not understand this power and to prepare for it sets us up for failure.

I. I'M CONFUSED (Vs. 14-17)
WHEN I RECEIVED CHRIST AS LORD AND SAVIOR, MY SPIRIT CAME ALIVE. NOW I NOTICE THAT THE FLESHLY PART OF ME IS NOW AT WAR WITH MY SPIRIT.

I think that as we read verses 14-17, we finish by scratching our heads and say, "I'm confused." I don't know about you, the confusion is not because I don't understand

the words or the experience that Paul is describing; I'm confused that I can exhibit such behavior. Here is what is being described: **WHEN I RECEIVED CHRIST AS LORD AND SAVIOR, MY SPIRIT CAME ALIVE. NOW I NOTICE THAT THE FLESHLY PART OF ME IS AT WAR WITH MY SPIRIT.**

A. FLESH VERSUS SPIRIT (V. 14)

In verse 14 Paul sets up the description of this battle of flesh versus spirit; here is where all the debate of interpretation takes place and how we interpret this verse will determine how we interpret the rest of the passage. The problem is not with the words or the sentence structure since the meaning is perfectly clear. The question is when Paul says, "but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin," is he referring to himself before he became a Christian, right after he became a Christian, or as a mature believer in Jesus Christ? Augustine, Calvin, Luther, and most of the reformers said that this is Paul's description of himself as a mature believer, and this passage describes our normal experience in our battle against sin.

However, the Pietists, the holiness movement people such as Wesley said this could not refer to Paul as a mature Christian because mature believers live by the spirit and could never refer to themselves as unspiritual, and sold as slaves to sin. This describes Paul's life as a Jew trying to be righteous by keeping the Mosaic Law. Mature Christians should not experience this kind of struggle with sin; they say chapter 8 describes Paul's post-conversion experience.

There is kind of a middle position out there that says this is Paul's experience right after he became saved, he is not mature yet. Like the Pietists, they say that in

chapter 8 he talks about living in the Spirit, and that this describes him as a mature believer.

Let me tell you where I am regarding this passage: I'm interpreting from my own personal experience with sin and my own personal journey towards holiness. I think if we read this plainly and simply, Paul is describing his present spiritual situation as a mature believer, writing to the church in Rome as an Apostle appointed by Jesus Christ. In II Corinthians 11, Paul summarizes that he had done much, suffered much, and given up everything to serve Jesus. He almost died several times in the ministry. Yet here it seems that he continues to struggle with this fleshly part of his existence. This passage is not written in the past tense it is written in the present and present continuous tense.

For those of you out there who don't sin, or don't have a struggle to defeat sin in your life, you will no doubt be disappointed in me as a pastor because this passage graphically describes my struggle against sin.

Paul starts out, "We know that the law is spiritual." Paul has just described in the first half of chapter 7 that the law, the Mosaic Law is not the cause of sin it is the sin that lives in us that takes advantage of our fleshly, Adamic nature that causes sin. In fact, Paul went on to say, the law is good and perfect, it is holy and good because it was given by God.

Now here is where I want us to think. In Philippians 3, Paul described his life under the Mosaic Law as faultless. Concerning the legalistic religious rules, Paul considered himself perfect. I think that for the most part, I can say that most of us can safely say, "I keep the 10 Commandments; I don't kill, I don't steal and I don't lie." We could even go on to say, "I tithe 10% of all my money and I volunteer at church, etc."

My point is this, maybe I couldn't claim to be as perfect as Paul, but I could claim to be pretty good and pretty religious.

But as we said last week, when we become believers, we find ourselves under a much higher law. When I examine my feelings, my thoughts and behaviors, I find that I am far away from living the way my Lord and Savior Jesus lived. I know that the way Jesus lived His life is the model for the way I should live mine. I would call the law of love spiritual and that is what I should live up to.

However, look at the last phrase in verse 14, "but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin." The NIV has really caught the contrast here, spiritual versus unspiritual, but the word in Greek is literally flesh. In other words, Paul is saying, "The nature of the law is spiritual and it appeals to the spiritual side of my being. On the other hand, I am flesh and sin appeals to the fleshly side of my existence.

This is the dichotomy he is setting up but, he has done that from chapter 5 until now. I am related to Adam, in my flesh, I am related to Christ in my spirit. Through conversion, my spirit was made alive. It will only be after I have physically died and resurrected that my flesh will be redeemed.

I know for me, that the battle of my spirit and flesh rages on. There is a constant battle I fight between good and evil. For me, I have learned to accept the fact that conquering sin is a constant fight. I know that the battle is ultimately winnable, but it will not be easy. You see, if I accept that, then I will prepare for it. If there are those of you out there who don't sin, or find it easy to defeat sin in your life, I am more than a little envious of that. What is your experience with sin? Do you, like me, find your flesh at war with your spirit?

B. A MATTER OF WILLPOWER? (Vs. 15-16)

In verses 15-16, I can hear Paul asking, “Do you really think it’s a matter of willpower?” Look, sin brings confusion. Paul is basically saying here that as he takes a deep look at what his spirit wants to do, and then observes what he is doing, he’s totally confused. The verb “to do” in this section is actually three different words. Let me try to read these two verses as literally as possible: The first word for “to do” is practicing or working. “For my working, I don’t understand it.” I don’t understand what I am producing in my life. The next word for “to do” is practice. He says, “For that which I desire, I don’t practice I’m doing what I hate.” In other words, I want to do something, but I just can’t manage to put it into practice, I do just the opposite. And the last word for “to do” is simply doing. “So if I’m doing what I am wishing against, then I agree with the law, confessing it is good.” Here is what Paul is saying; I see the good I’m supposed to do, I understand clearly how God wants me to live. I agree with that but the problem is that instead of practicing the good stuff, I find myself working against my own wishes by doing stupid stuff.

Isn’t that the way it is in our lives? We know what we should do, and we even want to do the right thing but unfortunately, we all have to learn the hard way. Even in the ancient world, the author and philosopher Ovid wrote in his “metamorphosis”, “I see and approve the better course, but I follow the worse.” It’s not just a simple matter of willpower; there is something in me that works against my will. It’s sin working in my flesh.

C. THE POWER OF SIN (V. 17)

If we haven't gotten it yet, look at verse 17 where Paul describes the power of sin. He reasons, "As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me." He is not passing the buck or saying the devil made me do it. What he is saying is, "It's not the spiritual side of me that is sinning. That part of me desperately wants to imitate Jesus so it is not my desire to produce this evil in my life, it is the sin that dwells in and feeds off my fleshly, worldly existence. Jesus sets up house in our spirits. Sin sets up house in our flesh. Please don't underestimate the power of sin, Paul doesn't. There is a real battle going on here: **WHEN I RECEIVED CHRIST AS LORD AND SAVIOR, MY SPIRIT CAME ALIVE. NOW I NOTICE THAT THE FLESHLY PART OF ME IS AT WAR WITH MY SPIRIT.**

II. I KNOW I'M CONFUSED (Vs. 18-20)
NOW THAT I AM A BELIEVER, I WANT TO LIVE A RIGHTEOUS AND HOLY LIFE. HOWEVER, IT SEEMS AS IF SIN IS THERE TO TRY AND HOLD ME BACK EVERY TIME.

In case we haven't really heard the Apostle Paul he wants us to re-examine our lives yet one more time. As I read through verses 18-20 and examine my life, I know I'm really confused now. Here is what I find: **NOW THAT I AM A BELIEVER, I WANT TO LIVE A RIGHTEOUS AND HOLY LIFE. HOWEVER, IT SEEMS AS IF SIN IS THERE TO TRY AND HOLD ME BACK EVERY TIME.** I don't know what your experience is, but mine goes something like this; I see qualities in Jesus that I want to put into practice in my life but every time I try to make it happen, it seems as if sin is right there to slap me and put me back in my place.

A. MY DESIRE VERSUS MY BEHAVIOR (V. 18)

Verse 18 paints the picture of the battle going on inside of me, namely my desire versus my behavior. If there are those of you out there who have tried to lose weight,

quit smoking, or exercise regularly, you will readily get the picture here; I make up my mind to lose weight, quit smoking, or exercise regularly and no matter how good my intentions are, and how good I know these things will be for me, I just can't follow through. There is always something that derails me. Again, Paul describes the struggle he wants to do good in the worst way, but the problem is that sin working in him won't let him accomplish it. His spirit is willing, and wants to become more and more Christ-like however, his flesh is weak and actually produces evil in his life.

B. GOOD VERSUS EVIL (V. 19)

Verse 19 makes it very clear that the battle of good versus evil takes place in our lives. If you are a believer, then you really want to pursue holiness and you want to become more like Jesus every day, you want to do and be good. But since we are children of Adam, the world and worldly things attract us and pull us in the wrong directions, we want to do good but we are attracted by worldly thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

C. THE POWER OF SIN (V. 20)

Verse 20 again describes the power of sin. Let's stop and think about this. Do you know you should treat your wife better? Do you know you should talk nicer to your husband? Do you know you should forgive someone and let go of a grudge? Do you know you should keep your mouth shut and let only good things come out of it? Do you know you should be more sexually pure in thought and in action? Do you know you should give more of your time and money away for the Lord? Do you know you should be more humble and kind and gentle? My guess is that we all know we should and further, deep down we want to be all of these things. But, the problem is, even though

it's in here, we just can't seem to make it reality. In fact, oftentimes we find ourselves angrier, more vindictive, more stubborn, and more proud; we have all kinds of good thoughts and intentions in our spirits because the Holy Spirit of God puts them there but sin is a powerful enemy living in me as well. This battle for good and evil is located in you and me. We are in a war, you see, **NOW THAT I AM A BELIEVER, I WANT TO LIVE A RIGHTEOUS AND HOLY LIFE. HOWEVER, IT SEEMS THAT SIN IS THERE TRYING TO HOLD ME BACK EVERY TIME.**

III. WHO CAN HELP ME? (Vs. 21-25)
IF I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF GRACE AND THE NATURE OF LIFE, I MAY FIND MYSELF FIGHTING THE WRONG BATTLE.

Sometimes I get really worried because I talk to a lot of my colleagues and friends, and they don't seem to struggle with sin like I do. I know my wife always says, "I don't think your friends' wives want them hanging around with you, you're a bad influence." But, I do think it's when I get to the place where I cry out with Paul in verses 21-25, "Who can help me?" that I start to gain victory over sin. I think I have a healthy view of life; I live simultaneously in chapter 7, realizing what a hopeless sinner I am, and in chapter 8 where I find grace, comfort and strength in the Spirit. You see, **IF I DON'T UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF GRACE AND THE NATURE OF LIFE, I MAY FIND MYSELF FIGHTING THE WRONG BATTLE.** I need to let the notion that I am saved by grace through faith sink deep inside my soul. I will never be able to keep the law of love that Jesus set the standard for. Oh sure, I can keep the commandments, but I'm not always loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, gentle, faithful, or self-controlled. I will never in this lifetime be able to live like Jesus I will always fall short. That's the meaning of sin. Jesus' death on the cross took care of that.

But now that I am saved and have God's Holy Spirit living in me, I want to be like Him in the worst way but the problem is that I'm still stuck with a fleshly body that I inherited from Adam which has a natural attraction and bent towards worldliness and sinfulness.

A. THE BATTLE (Vs. 21-23)

Verses 21-23 describe the battle yet one more time. In my spirit, that part of me that came alive when I received Jesus, I want to be just like Him, He is my Lord, my master, my lover, and friend and I want to be all that God the Father created me to be.

The problem is, that my earthly existence is attracted to worldly ideas and things. Please don't miss the language in verse 23, it's military language. Sin is at war with my spirit. Sin takes the members of my body prisoner and enslaves me. I want to do good, but sin is right there to oppose me. I am my own worst enemy. My flesh works against my spirit. God and His law, His way of life is a source of joy to my life but for some reason, I can't seem to live up to what I know He wants me to be.

I don't want you to miss the significance of what Paul is saying. Sin, working in the members of my body, the flesh part of me, the Adam side of me wars against the spirit side of me, my renewed mind in Christ, the Jesus side of me. In this world, it appears that my flesh is much more powerful than my spirit.

Please take a moment to think about this; close your eyes and try to get a picture of how God wants you to be, He wants you to be pure, filled with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. (Pause) Can you see that?

Now try to pick one or two situations where you have tried to be that, but just couldn't be. Or perhaps pick situations where you continually tried, but failed. (Pause)

Can you see the struggle? Can you see the war? What you want to accomplish, you can never seem to attain. The sins you want to stop committing seem to jump up and bite you over and over again? (Pause)

You see, if you don't know there is a war, you will either become extremely depressed because the task seems insurmountable, or you may become self-righteous. Before Paul was converted to Christianity, he was self-righteous but here he almost pictures himself as desperate and depressed.

B. THE RESCUE (Vs. 24-25a)

Verse 24 and the first half of verse 25 describe the rescue; I know the more I mature as a believer and the more I fall in love with Jesus, the more unholy and sinful I see I really am. It would be easy for me to say, "I'm a pretty good guy. I'm religious and I don't break any religious laws. I tithe 10% of my money and do a lot of good deeds." I could say that if I was religious, but when I come into the presence of God, I realize first of all how sinful I am and how I have no right to be there. Second, I feel overwhelmed by grace. Yes, I don't belong here, but because God loved me enough to send Jesus, He invites me into His presence. And third, not out of some religious thing, but because of my love for Him, I cry out, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" You see, it is important that I understand the salvation by grace through faith issue. This is not a war for my soul; that war has been won for me by Jesus on the cross He settled the matter by saying, "It is finished."

This is a battle for holiness. This is a battle for me to demonstrate my love. It is a battle for me to act out who I really am now. I am a child of God, I no longer belong to this world I belong to heaven. Over and over I come to Paul's conclusion, "Thanks be to

God through Jesus Christ our LORD!” Jesus is my deliverer. I have been saved by grace through faith. It is relatively easy to be set free in Christ. Those of us who have been privileged to see people set free from demons, know getting free is relatively easy but it is another thing to remain free. Life in this world, life in Christ is a battle to live and remain free. Jesus has rescued me. My physical body will have to die because that’s where sin resides. However, at the end of time, Jesus will raise that body from the dead and give it new life just like He gave my spirit new life then my renewed spirit will be reunited with my renewed body, and I will live in eternity with Him where sin can no longer touch or affect me. We have to keep this in mind: The battle ultimately will be won.

C. THE POWER OF SIN (Vs. 25b)

However, the second half of verse 25 again reminds us of the power of sin. Paul said, “The spirit side of me is a slave to God’s law.” The real me, the spirit side of me longs to be just like Jesus, however, my sinful nature is a slave to the law of sin. The nature of life in Christ seems to be a battle to remain free and further, in my worldly existence, sin will seem much stronger than good. However, this sets the stage for the rest of the story in chapter 8. Yes, we will always be tormented in our battle against sin, but the battle is winnable. You see it is important to know that there is a battle and where it is: **IF I DON’T UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF GRACE AND THE NATURE OF LIFE, I MAY FIND MYSELF FIGHTING THE WRONG BATTLE.**

Let us never forget that there is a battle, the battle is not for our salvation, that battle has been won by Christ. The battle is now to continue to live free in Christ, and to never surrender to sin: **JESUS PUT IT THIS WAY; THE SPIRIT IS WILLING**

BUT THE FLESH IS WEAK. WE MUST UNDERSTAND THIS AND TAKE IT SERIOUSLY. SIN IS A POWERFUL THREAT TO OUR FREEDOM IN CHRIST.

I don't know who wrote this illustration, but it was taken over by Kenneth Hughes from the December 1977 issue of Pulpit Helps.

He describes sin like this: A man lying on the grass noticed a little plant of sundew. When suddenly a tiny fly alighted upon the sleeve and tasted one of the tempting glands which grow there. All at once, three crimson tipped fingers like hairs bent over and touched the fly's wing, holding it fast in the sticky grasp. The fly struggled in vain to get free, but the more it struggle, the more hopelessly it became ensnared. It's still however, protruded its tang (or tong, ting, tug, stung) feasting as it was being more and more firmly held by additional tentacles. When the captive was entirely at the mercy of the plant, the edges of the leaf folded inward and formed a close fist. Two hours later, the fly was an empty sucked skin and the leaf was opening up for another unwary visitor. So often we don't realize the deadly sweetness of sin, until it holds us bound.

I want you to know that even though we're redeemed, even though our spirit desperately want to be good and be like Christ, there is a battle that rages on in us and the fleshly site of our existence doesn't want to give up. It comes with great dedication, great perseverance, and a great struggle not to give up or to become depress.