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**13 Did that which is good,** *then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. 14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. 15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. 17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

**21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right,** *evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.*

**24 Wretched man that I am!** *Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.*

Kellyn was cooking breakfast this past week and I heard her ask Karen, "Is sausage really that bad for you?" Of course Karen gave the correct mom answer which is, "No, it's not." I was listening to this conversation in the other room and I decided I could not tolerate good breakfast meat being profaned. It's sausage, after all, second only to king bacon, so I had to rush to sausage's defense. I jumped in with this powerful logic and said to Kellyn. "Sausage makes you happy, right? And being happy is good for you. Therefore, sausage is good for you." Quick

witted as she is, Kellyn immediately parried back and said, "Well sin makes you happy and that's not good for you." Not to be outdone by my own daughter, I said, "I don't know about you, but my sin makes me miserable."

Truth is, Kellyn was right, wasn't she? Our sin often does make us happy. We simply would not choose to sin if there was not some perceived benefit to us. When we choose to sin, we push away all of the negative consequences and potential problems and we do it anyway. But in our little breakfast discussion, I was also right. Sin also makes us miserable. We feel guilty. We promise ourselves, and often other people, that we'll get better; that we'll never do it again; that we have the problem under control. This is one of the reasons that we relate so well with the seventh chapter of Romans where Paul famously wrote: *For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. 17 So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

Yeah, we can relate to that, can't we? That feels like my life, how 'bout you? The big controversy in this chapter is whether Paul is describing his pre-conversion life or his post-conversion experience. Do you want to know what side of the fence I stand on? I toyed with the idea of not telling you or waiting until the end of the sermon to tell you, but I'll lead with it. Are you ready? I don't know. I honestly can't decide which is more true. I have always tended to fall into the post-conversion camp because as we all know, this feels so real. And it kind of helps to think about the great apostle Paul having the same struggle with sin and you and me. Maybe he really did put his pants on one leg at a time--or at least his robe one sleeve at a time.

But the more I studied this chapter, the less convinced I became. For a short while I was actually in the pre-conversion camp--that Paul was actually describing what his life was like before he was miraculously converted on the road to Damascus. If you just look at a few verses where Paul struggles with not being able to do the right thing, it really appears that it is a post-conversion experience, but if you take the chapter as a whole, the evidence points to a pre-conversion explanation. However, here is my personal conclusion: I don't know which is true and ultimately it doesn't really matter. Let me explain what I mean.

### **Two dangers**

There are two dangers from holding fast to either viewpoint. If you take the position that Paul is describing his experience before he was saved, then you run the danger of downplaying the struggle against sin and perhaps leaning too much toward sinful perfection. For example, when Paul says, *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord*, one could take the position that all or most of one's struggle with sin is now in the past. In other words, I used to have this inner battle, the duel within, but now that Jesus delivered me from that body of death, I am free from it. This is always a dangerous place to be because such people either take sin too lightly or else they have deceived themselves into thinking they are sinless or approaching sinless perfection. I like what Charles Spurgeon had to say about people in this category.

I have heard of some professors who dream that sin is utterly destroyed in them and that they have no more evil tendencies and desires. I shall not controvert their notion. If it is so,

I congratulate them and greatly wish it were so with me. I have, however, had some little experience of perfect people and I have generally found them the most disagreeable, touchy and sensitive persons in the world! And some of them have turned out to be such detestable hypocrites that I am rather afraid of a person who has no imperfections. As soon as I learn that a Brother states that he has lived for months without sin, I wonder whether his secret vice is lewdness, or theft, or drink—and I feel sure that somewhere or other there is a leak in the ship!<sup>1</sup>

So that is the danger if you take a pre-conversion position. But there is an equal but opposite danger if you take the position that this is a post-conversion experience. Think about it like this. If we all have this inner nature with a continual inner duel, flesh against Spirit, sin against victory, then what's the use of trying? Everyone sins all of the time and they are lying if they say otherwise, so why even put up a fight? Right? I mean if the apostle Paul was not doing the good he wanted to do but kept doing the evil he didn't want to do, what hope do I have? If I am going to lose so often, is it even worth trying? They aren't really blaming Paul for their sin but they do tend to use him as an excuse. These people give up and give in to the battle. But others in this camp get so overwhelmed with the battle, and especially the guilt, that they are miserable all of the time. They feel defeated. They feel as if God has given up on them and they will never change.

These are the two dangers of living in the extremes but I think it helps us to gain a better balance of the passage. Obviously, not everyone in the first category turn into sinless perfectionists and not everyone in the second category ends up absolutely defeated. Even though I lean toward the second position--where Paul was writing about his Christian experience, I am not sure we can be certain. I want to give you three reasons why I am not fully convinced by either position and more importantly, why I think it doesn't matter which side of the fence you land on.

First, folks have been debating this issue for centuries and a consensus is nowhere close to being reached. John Wesley held to the first position. He thought that Paul was describing his life as an unbeliever. Martin Luther held to the second position. He was convinced that Paul was describing his Christian experience, not his struggle as an unbeliever. They disagreed and so have countless other brilliant men and women.

Second, the reason it has been and is still debated to this day is because Paul is not all that clear on the matter. Now, generally speaking, Paul's arguments are air tight. He is trained in logic and debate and we see this clarity all through his letters. For example, look at how clearly Paul argues in this chapter.

**7 *What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!***

**13 *Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means!***

All throughout our series in Romans we have seen again and again that Paul seems to repeat himself. Many times and in many different ways, he taught us how we were dead in our sins. He has taught us that a person cannot justify themselves but can only be justified by faith in the work of Christ. He has taught us that we have died to sin but are alive to Christ. And now here in chapter seven he is arguing persuasively and very clearly that the law is not sinful. The law shows us our sin but is itself holy, righteous and good. My point is that of any Biblical writer,

Paul likes to be crystal clear. This is not to say that there are not great challenges in Paul's letters, because there are. But had Paul had wanted to be crystal clear about whether the experience he wrote about in Romans 7 occurred before or after his conversion, he was the man for the job. Now one thing is very clear, which makes the final interpretation more difficult. For much of the chapter Paul was telling about his life before he met Jesus. Listen to verses 8-11 again.

*8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.*

"I died." "Sin...killed me." For certain that is a description of Paul prior to his conversion. I think Paul is clearly describing his pre-conversion state at least through verse 14 where he wrote, *For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.* The phrase "sold under sin" has to mean a slave to sin. So if Paul is describing his life as an unbeliever at least through verse 14, at what point does he make the transition to describing his life as a believer? It's not an easy call. If I had to land somewhere, it would be in the post-conversion camp. But let me give you the third and final reason why it doesn't matter either way.

It doesn't matter because the experience and the solution is the same. You want to avoid the two opposite dangers of either falling into type of sinless perfectionism--or something close to that where you feel like you have 'arrived,' or else a defeatist attitude where victory over sin seems absolutely impossible. If you can avoid these two extremes, the problem and the solution are the same for each of us. I am a sinner and only Jesus can save me. That is the essence of what Paul is saying in this chapter. This is also what Martin Luther taught: *simul iustus et peccator* = simultaneously justified and a sinner. The penalty of sin is taken care of but the power and presence of sin are still with us.

If you want more steps in the process, here are six from this chapter that we will break down in just a bit.

1. God has changed my heart.
2. But I still sin every day.
3. Why does this happen?
4. What can be done?
5. Jesus alone can deliver me.
6. I will fight and grow until I die.

But first, let me read you this helpful illustration from John Piper.

There are three men...and each of the three stands beside a pit of lewdness and sin. Three ropes extend out of the pit, one bound around each man's waist. The strength of this narrow cord is one-hundred-pound test.

The first man begins to be pulled into the pit that looks exciting, but that he knows is deadly. Five pounds of pressure, ten pounds, fifteen pounds. He resists and fights back.

Twenty pounds, twenty-five. He digs in his heels with all his might. Thirty pounds, thirty-five pounds, and the rope starts to squeeze and he stops resisting and jumps in. Click goes the mouse button.

The second man begins to be pulled into the pit. Five pounds of pressure, ten pounds, fifteen pounds. He resists and fights back. Twenty pounds, twenty-five pounds. He digs in his heels. Thirty pounds, thirty-five pounds, and the rope starts to squeeze. He says, No! and fights back. Forty pounds, forty-five pounds, fifty pounds, fifty-five pounds. It's harder to breathe as the rope tightens around his stomach and it begins to hurt. Sixty pounds, and he stops resisting and jumps into the pit. Click.

The third man begins to be pulled into the pit. Five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five pounds of pressure. He resists and fights back. Thirty, thirty-five, forty, and the rope starts to squeeze. He says, No! and fights back. Fifty pounds, sixty. It's harder to breathe as the rope tightens around his stomach and begins to hurt. Seventy pounds and his feet start to slip toward the pit. He cries out for help, and reaches out to grab a branch – shaped like a cross. In the distance he sees his wife going about her business, trusting him; he sees his children playing, and in their hearts admiring him. And beyond them all, he sees Jesus Christ with a gash in his side standing, with both hands lifted and fists clenched and smiling. And filled with passion, the third man holds fast. Seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five pounds, and the rope cuts into his sides and the pain stabs. Ninety, ninety-five and the tears flow unbidden down his cheeks. One hundred and the rope snaps. No click.

Three men. Two succumbed to temptation and one was victorious. Let's look at these six steps and see how they apply to them and to us.

### **1. God has changed my heart.**

*18-For I have the desire to do what is right*

*22-I delight in the law of God*

These two phrases help me lean toward the second option we have been discussing. Could an unbeliever say these things and really have them be true? Regardless, it is clear from all of Romans up to this point that God has changed our heart. He has changed us so that we have a desire to do what is right? Would that describe you right this moment? Regardless of your level of victory over sin, do you desire to do what is right? If God has changed your heart, if you are born again, you will have an increasing desire to do what is right. It doesn't mean you will always choose to do what is right, but your desire will be there.

### **2. But I still sin every day.**

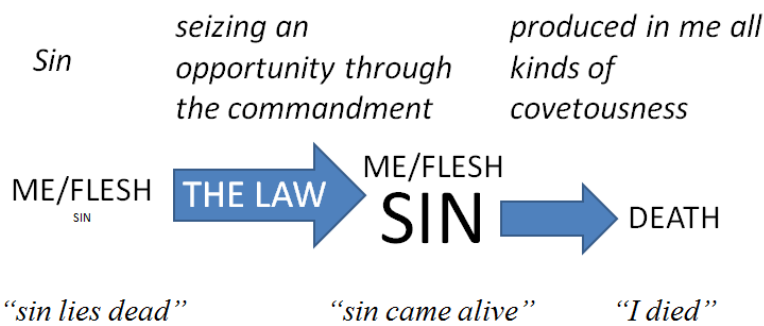
*19-For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*

I was sharing the gospel with a guy at the fitness center this week. I was telling him how my faith in Christ was as solid as my faith in the cement floor we were standing on. My faith is that certain, not because my faith is strong but because the object of my faith is so strong. But lest I sound overly confident, I told him, "Listen, I sin every day. Just because God has given me this faith doesn't change my daily struggle."

We must be brutally honest in our battle against sin. We must ask the Lord to continue to reveal it to us. And that is the wonderful purpose of the law.

*7 What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead.*

Visually, it looks like this.



We still have a sinful nature, what the Bible calls the flesh. Our flesh likes to hide our sin and tell us there isn't much there, like in this picture where sin is very tiny. But the law has the effect of magnifying our sin so that we can see it. This is clear from verse 13-in order that sin might be shown to be

*sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.*

Do you see conviction of sin as a gift? If sin did not become "sinful beyond measure," or as the NIV puts it, "utterly sinful," you and I would not see it clearly. If we do not see it clearly--both before and after it happens, we cannot deal with it rightly. We are thankful for all kinds of good things that God sends our way. I doubt there is one person among us that is not thankful for 30 and almost 40 degree weather, am I right? But are you thankful when the Holy Spirit says to you "SIN!" Now he doesn't always scream it, does he? Sometime she whispers. Sometimes he taps us lightly on the shoulder and says, "Look over there. have you noticed that?" But there are times when he needs to whack us up side the head. And each time he does, it is a gift. It is a gift just as surely as warm weather, wonderful friends and family, a good church, a free country are all good gifts.

This is why Paul had to go out of his way to make sure his readers understood that the law itself was not sin. *11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*

How many of you have ever looked through a microscope? In my former life, I used a microscope every day. I still remember my days as a student in the lab. My internship was forty hours per week. I worked part time in a shoe store and I still had to study and take quizzes and tests all of the time. It was the most difficult year of my life. One day I was looking at slides of various red cell diseases and I was about to fall asleep right on top of the microscope. in order to keep my mind awake, I scanned the red cells until I could see little puppies and lambs. Did you know that red cells smashed together could look like puppies? I digress. Here's something I used to look at during my student days. This is a slide of tuberculosis. Like all bacteria, tuberculosis is really small. Obvious, right? That's why you need a microscope. Let me ask you a simple question. Did the microscope turn this into infectious tuberculosis? The power of the microscope is to enlarge and enlighten that which we could not see otherwise. In the same way, the law does

not create sin, it merely enlarges and sheds light on sin so that you and I can see it. But unlike a microscope which is neutral, the law is holy, righteous and good because it flows from the character of God and it is doing a good, but often painful, work in our life.

Can we put this into practice this week? Can you practice being thankful when the Spirit convicts of sin of any kind? Can you simply say, "Thank you, Lord."

Rich Maurer  
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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols25-27/chs1459B.pdf>