

LIVING BY GRACE

STUDY FIVE

We've Met the Wretch: He Is Us!

Romans 7:1–25

You need to know that, even though you are saved, in the core of your being is an old nature that wants you to live like you used to live.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

WET paint. Do not touch!” “Keep off the grass.” “No U-turn.” “Stay on the trail.”

We've all seen signs like these. The sign-makers posted them for good reasons—to caution, to safeguard, to preserve. And yet, even though people see the good in the rules, they tend to break them anyway. Despite the warnings, they still touch, tromp, turn, and take shortcuts. Why?

All people—Christians included—have a propensity to do the opposite of what they know is right. In fact, just seeing a “Do not touch” sign tempts us to touch. If the sign wasn't there, we might have walked right by, but the sign triggers our curiosity. Now we touch just to see whether the paint is still wet!

Paul taught in Romans 6 that, under grace, we “are free from the power of sin,” and now, we can “do those things that lead to holiness” (Romans 6:22). And yet, as we'll learn in Romans 7, we have what Paul termed, the “flesh,” the degeneracy of our nature that inclines us to do the opposite. Our longing to do right struggles with our impulse to do wrong in a back-and-forth battle of good and bad desires.

We can try to keep God's laws by sheer willpower, but we won't progress very far down the road of right living. Just as we needed God's grace for salvation, we also need God's grace for holy living—which is the point Paul emphatically illustrates in Romans 7.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Paul confessed his frustration to keep God's law by exclaiming, "Wretched man that I am!" and expressed his desperate need for Christ (Romans 7:24 NASB). Voice your same need at the outset of your study.

Father, I depend completely on Christ and His mercy today. I lean on Him alone as my true and faithful Friend. May Your Spirit help me comprehend Your Word and empower me to follow Your will. In Jesus' name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Who doesn't see the good in God's laws? Imagine a world in which everyone obeyed the Ten Commandments. Killing, cheating, stealing, lying, and coveting would cease, and people would love one another and worship God in unity. Under God's law, humanity could experience real peace and goodwill.

And yet, no one except Christ can keep the law without failing. We know God's law is good, but we have no power to obey it. So, instead of signposts guiding us to blessing, God's laws are glaring spotlights exposing our sin and guilt.

Thankfully, according to Paul, Christ released us from the law's condemning hold—which Paul elaborates in the first half of Romans 7. In the second half, Paul paints a grim self-portrait of his failed attempts to keep the law in his own strength. Let's take a closer look at this intriguing passage.



Observation: Here's Where We Stand, Here's Why We Struggle

Observation opens Scripture to our senses so we can not only see what the author says but also feel the author's heartbeat. Paul expresses deep emotions in Romans 7, and so, as you read, imagine being with Paul, seeing his tears and sensing the ache in his soul.



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Here's Where We Stand—Romans 7:1–13

Romans 7 adds to the list of benefits of our union with Christ from Romans 6. Just as, in Christ, we died to the power of sin (Romans 6:2), so also, in Christ, we “died to the power of the law” (Romans 7:4).

Paul used a slave metaphor in Romans 6 to teach our death to sin's mastery. What metaphor did Paul use to illustrate our death to the law in 7:1–3?

Trace Paul's explanation of this metaphor in 7:4–6 by filling in the following blanks.

1. When you died with Christ, you died to _____ (7:4).
2. By being raised with Christ, you can _____ (7:4).
3. Before Christ, you were controlled by _____ (7:5).
4. The law aroused sinful desires to produce _____ (7:5).
5. Released from the law, you can now _____ (7:6).

In 7:7–13, we learn that sin is the reason for our trouble, not the law. What good does the law accomplish, according to 7:7?



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List the negative effects of sin in *Romans 7:8–13*.

When the law appears with its rules and regulations, we're made aware of sin because the law defines sin. That's the role of the law. When I became acquainted with it, I learned all the things I shouldn't do. Suddenly, aroused within me was the old sin nature.

—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Here's Why We Struggle

Paul diagnosed the source of our ailment in *Romans 7:14*:

The trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin.

In the next verses, Paul labels our sin problem as the “flesh”—which the New Living Translation translates, “old nature” and “sinful nature” (*Romans 7:5, 18*). We'll look closer at this concept in the interpretation section, but for now, read [7:14–23](#) and feel the intense emotion Paul expresses as he describes his inner conflict.

On the one hand, Paul declared, “I love God's law with all my heart” (*7:22*). Out of his love for the law, Paul expressed his heart's longing with the phrase, “I want.” Observe each time Paul uses the word, *want*, and write down what Paul wants ([7:15, 18–21](#)).



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On the other hand, Paul's sinful passions opposed his heart's longing. He used the words, *do* or *don't*, to describe the results. Write down what Paul *did* that fought against what he wanted, according to *Romans 7:15–21*.

Paul summed up the conflict between his wanting and his doing: “the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not” (7:18 NASB). He described his inner conflict as a “war” (7:23). What did Paul exclaim in desperation in *7:22–24*?

What was Paul's hope in *7:25*?

We have within us that old nature. Even though we've been liberated, there it is ready to pounce. Paul had been lost but found. He had been justified. He had been liberated. But he confessed in all honesty to the dark reality that sin is ever there. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Interpretation: The Sin That Dwells Within

In his commentary on Romans, Pastor Chuck Swindoll defines the flesh.

Paul used the term “flesh” symbolically to represent humanity in its fallen state. The flesh is programmed to think like the world system, which is a perverted version of God’s original created order, and it continues to oppose His will.¹

How does Paul describe in *Romans 7:5* our fallen state before we believed in Jesus as our Savior?

Before Christ, we were “in the flesh” (7:5 NASB), enslaved to the sinful desires that the law aroused. God commanded, “Do not,” but, in rebellion, our flesh urged us, “Do,” and we had no power to resist.

Write your definition of the flesh as Paul used the term. The online *Encyclopedia of the Bible* has a helpful explanation of the three ways “*flesh*” is used in the New Testament, including Paul’s particular usage.

Obedying the law *in the flesh* is as futile as trying to fly by flapping our arms. Thankfully, as believers, we are no longer in the flesh but *in Christ*, and we can live in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, not in the flesh.



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Explain how “the new way of living in the Spirit” is better than “the old way of obeying the letter of the law” in *Romans 7:6*.

Our new nature allows us to live in the power of the Spirit and “produce a harvest of good deeds for God” (7:4). We’re not in the flesh; however, we still have the flesh, and it wages war against the Spirit. Our flesh wants to pull us back to the way we lived before Christ. We saw how Paul described this conflict in himself. Let’s examine this conflict in the life of another believer, Peter.



Correlation: Peter’s Failure of the Flesh

No doubt, Peter would have agreed with Paul that “the willing is present in me but the doing of the good is not” (Romans 7:18 NASB). What did Peter say when Jesus foretold Peter’s denial, according to *Matthew 26:33–35*?

How did Peter’s flesh show itself in *26:69–75*? What feelings followed?



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To whom did Peter turn in his wretchedness? To the same Savior as Paul turned, Jesus Christ.

Now don't think you have to work harder to live cleaner. You're missing the grace of God. God, by His grace, comes to our rescue and says, "Trust Me." You don't have to yield to sin. You can choose not to. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Amazing Grace That Saved a Wretch Like Me

Our Savior's arms are open wide to receive us when we struggle with sin. Two reminders conclude our study.

First, *refuse to live in defeat*. We need not dwell in our shame, nor should we consider ourselves victims. We can turn to Christ to take over our lives so our inclination to sin won't dominate us.

Second, *rely on the Holy Spirit moment by moment to give victory*. This is what Romans 8 is all about. In the next chapter, Paul moved from portraying himself as a wretched man to casting a vision of victory over sin through the power of the Spirit.

Can you identify with Paul's struggle with sin in Romans 7? How so?

What hope do you find in Paul's answer to his struggle? What words of hope might Christ be saying to you today through the Spirit and His Word?



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Close with the lyrics of “Amazing Grace.” Let the sweet sound of grace bring you hope today and set your heart to singing.

Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!²



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, I love You and I love Your commands. Like Paul and Peter, I want to stay true to the way You have marked out in Your Word, but my wandering nature leads me off Your good path. I would be lost were it not for Christ. Thank You for Your grace that guides me back and restores my soul. In Jesus' name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary, vol. 6 (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2015), 162.
2. John Newton, “Amazing Grace,” *The Celebration Hymnal: Songs and Hymns for Worship* (n.p.: Word Music/Integrity Music, 1997), hymn 343.

