

Licensed to Kill: Strategies for Killing the Sin Within (Part 2 of 5)

“The Battle on the Inside”

Romans 7:14-25

Mark Vroegop

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 (Romans 7:14–25, ESV).

Our theme for the month of August is the old term called the mortification of sin. This term is based upon the concept that is found in Colossians 3:5 and Romans 8:13, where the Bible calls believers in Jesus to “put to death what is earthly in you” and “put to death the deeds of the body.” The King James Version translated the phrase “put to death” as “mortify,” and that is how we got the term “mortification.”

While the concept of the mortification may sound a bit dated or even unfamiliar, we are all very aware of the problem of the power of sin. The issue is very basic and common: how do we stop doing the things we know we shouldn’t do? This is a foundational question for every believer in Jesus and a vital part of the church’s mission. In other words, in order to ignite a passion to follow Jesus, you must simultaneously extinguish a passion to practice sin. John Owen said “be killing sin or it will be killing you.” What does sin kill? It kills many things, but it especially kills our passion for Jesus.

This is very basic and very important. And that is why we are hoping that you’ll take additional steps to grow in this area through what we are offering this month via LIVE|12. We have small group video series, a study guide, family devotionals, a scripture memory magnet, additional resources for further reading, and we’ll be doing some follow-up counseling training in September so that you can become better equipped to help other people follow Jesus. We want you to know how to kill sin so you can help others kill sin.

Justification, Glorification, and Sanctification

Last week I introduced the context for the battle with sin through a study of Colossians 3 and some important theological terms. These words set the beginning, end, and present battle of the Christian's struggle with sin. Let's review them quickly:

- **Justification** – the beginning of a relationship with God whereby a person who has trusted Christ as Savior is declared forgiven and righteous by God.
- **Glorification** – the completion of God's redemptive plan through Jesus' second coming, the defeat of Satan and his followers, and the resurrection of the dead, where believers are given new, glorified, and sinless bodies.
- **Sanctification** – the present and progressive work of God and man where sin's control is lessened and a person grows more and more like Jesus in specific and practical ways.

The mortification of sin is linked to progressive sanctification in that it is the process by which our personal sin issues (externally and internally) are gradually weakened. Putting sin to death is more like atrophy than amputation. Until glorification, sin is not fully "cut off." It remains with us, and every day we must fight it. However, for the follower of Jesus, sin doesn't have to control us.

The battle is within;
Daily I must fight;
Death comes from sin,
Killed only by Christ's might.

Sin, Even After Conversion, is the Problem

Romans 7:14-25 gives us a very helpful dissection of Paul's honest struggle with sin. It is a very famous passage because it is so relevant to where every single follower of Jesus lives. It serves like an x-ray, showing us what is happening under the surface and behind the scenes. Romans 7 dissects the internal battle with sin.

You need to know that some people view this text as describing an unbeliever's struggle, but it seems pretty clear to me that Paul is talking about his wrestling with sin after his conversion. Brian Hedges has a great appendix in his book on this issue. He lists five reasons why Romans 7 should be viewed as Paul's struggle with sin after his conversion:

1. Paul writes in the present tense
2. He expresses his approval of and delight in God's law
3. He expresses antagonism against sin
4. He expresses Christian hope
5. It harmonizes with Paul's theology elsewhere¹

¹ Brian Hedges, Licensed to Kill – A Field Manual for Mortifying Sin, (Adelphi, Maryland: Cruciform Press, 2011), 105-106.

Today we are going to take another step as we look at what is going on inside of a person as he battles with sin. This is important for three reasons. First, to be a Christian and to be human is to understand this battle. There are things that you know are wrong, and even though you know what is right, there is still a temptation to do what is wrong. And unfortunately, sometimes we act on those temptations, even though we know they are not right. This is what the followers of Jesus face every single day.

The second reason is that understanding what is going on inside the soul helps us to fight more effectively. Understanding this battle guards us from falling into the trap of perfectionism or passivism. Perfectionism is deadly, because it creates either pride as you think you are better than everyone else or depression because you can never measure up. Passivism is deadly because it settles into a defeatist mentality, where a person first believes that he cannot change and then comes to believe that this is who he is. He believes he cannot stop, so he stops believing that he should try.

Third, there is a natural tendency, in our search for understanding as to why we sin, to blame things outside of ourselves. We might blame society, the devil, our family background, the people around us, or the rules. Certainly all of those things are relevant to our sinful actions, but they are not the ultimate cause of the struggle. At this point in the book of Romans, Paul is addressing the issue of those who would blame the Law. Some might say, "The Law is the problem. It makes me sin!"

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. 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. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. 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 (Romans 7:7–13 - ESV).

Sometimes we mistakenly think that the problem is all the rules or all the restrictions. Therefore, some people unwisely try to either change or downplay the rules that God has set. This reminds me of a young man that I worked with when I was an Admissions Counselor for a Christian college while in seminary. After working with him for a while, he decided that he didn't want to enroll because there were "just too many rules." But I was shocked and amused at his answer when I asked him what he was going to do instead. "I'm going to join the military!" I imagine that he learned – probably the hard way – that life is full of rules and that they are not the problem.

Paul tells us that the problem is not the Law; the real problem is sin. The Law only surfaces sin.

Sin, Even After Conversion, Remains Within

Paul then takes the issue further by identifying where the battle with sin actually takes place. He does this to show very clearly that the laws of God are not the problem and to point us to Christ as our ultimate answer. The Law of God highlights but doesn't create sin; the cross saves us from the power of sin but doesn't immediately remove its presence. There is a real and on-going battle with sin. Look at how Paul makes this clear in Romans 7.

1. Christians are still sinful (v 14)

In verse 14 Paul sets up a contrast between himself and the Law: ¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin (Romans 7:14 - ESV). The Law is spiritual, but he, as a human, is still "of the flesh." The contrast is between two realms, between what is spiritual and what is unspiritual.

But what does it mean to be "of the flesh" and "sold under sin"? Next week we will look at Romans 6, and I'll show you how the cross conquers the power of sin and liberates us to serve the new Master of Righteousness. We'll learn about positional righteousness that breaks the power of sin. In Romans 7, Paul is using these two phrases to describe the context of our practical lives, not our spiritual position in Christ. "The flesh" refers to a remaining aspect of every Christian that still objects to God and seeks to be independent of Him.² Paul is talking about a "flesh principle," not just the body. The physical realm is certainly involved and complicit, but so is the heart. That is why some translators refer to this as a "sin nature" or "earthly passions." Further, to be "sold under sin" simply means that Paul, like every believer, still lives in a world marked by evil. But the problem is not just external. He lives in, and is still part of, that realm.

Paul talks about this contrast between the flesh and the Spirit in Galatians 5:17 ⁻¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.

There is evil without, but here is evil within. Christians are still sinful.

2. There is a real struggle (v 15)

The second thing to note here is the reality of this struggle, which at times can be very confusing and even discouraging. Look at how Paul describes it in verse 15: 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 (Romans 7:15 – ESV). Paul is left scratching his head when it comes to this internal battle. He, like you, looks at his life and wonders, "Why do I do this stuff?" He wrestles with the question, "What is going on inside of me?"

Paul asks this question because he feels the war, and he sees a contrast between what he wants to do and what actually does. He does things that he really doesn't want to do. Worse, he does things that he actually doesn't like. "I hate this, and I do not want to do it, but here I am doing it. Why?"

² F.F. Bruce, *Romans – Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1983), 153.

What we have here is the simple acknowledgment that dealing with sin is a real battle and a recognition that there is perpetual conflict and tension. Now this statement is helpful and encouraging. It is helpful because it shows us that the normal Christian experience is one of perpetual battle, constant struggle, and life-long war. It helps us to keep fighting. It is encouraging because it reminds us that the goal is not perfection but rather to fight. It is a good sign when you are fighting. Don't be discouraged; keep fighting. Keep struggling. Remember that it is a great mercy that you are even fighting. Failure is when a person doesn't fight, stops fighting, or isn't even aware that he should fight. The fact that you are struggling and wrestling is actually hopeful. So keep fighting.

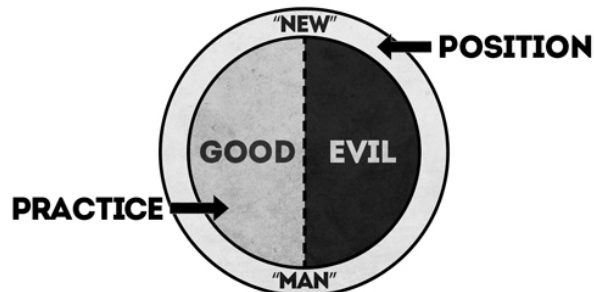
3. Indwelling sin creates a heart-based war zone (vv 16-20)

Having established that Christians are going to struggle with sin, Paul next addresses the source of the problem: indwelling sin. Even though from a positional standpoint, he is a new man in Christ, there is still a battle between good and evil within him. The reality of this battle is due to the remnant of sin that remains, and Paul talks about this indwelling sin almost as if it is a foreign power. It is almost as if he is a different person when sinning.

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 (Romans 7:16–20 - ESV).

He almost sounds frustrated, doesn't he? I'm sure that you've felt the same way: "I don't do the good that I want to do, and I keep doing to the evil things that I don't want to do!" This is where every believer in Jesus lives.

Describing this is a challenge. However, perhaps you could think of it like a war in which an army has defeated the old government (e.g. the invasion of Iraq). But total victory and peace is still illusive because of an ongoing insurrection and all the chaos that remains because of the war. That is what is happening here. The war has been won but there is an ongoing struggle for practical control. Visually you could think of it like this:



So there is a sense in which the believer in Jesus is a divided person. There is a battle within – a war-zone that resides on the inside.

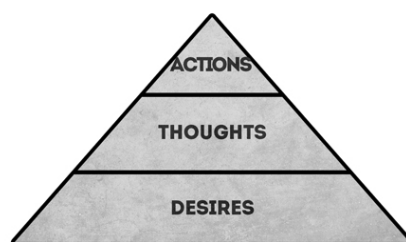
4. The Battle Involves Actions, Thoughts, and Desires (vv 21-23)

This struggle with sin is multi-layered. Sin is more complicated than the actions that a person does; it comes from a combination of desires, thoughts, and actions which play off of one another. It is as though Paul is moving us from outside actions to the internal war to deep-seated desires. Notice in verses 21-23 how central desires (“I want” – v 22, “I delight” – v 23) are to all of this.

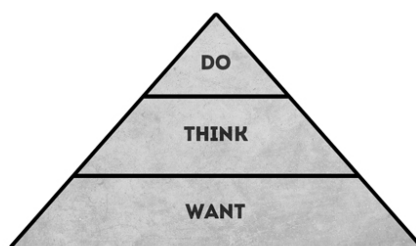
²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members (Romans 7:21–23 – ESV).

In verse 21 Paul lays down a principle: When he wants to do right, evil is always lurking. In verses 22-23 we see that there are contrasting and competing “laws” in his soul. On the one hand, he delights in the law of God, but on the other hand, there is another law which makes him captive. So when he looks at his soul, he sees actions, thoughts, and desires which constitute these two “laws” or “philosophies” or “principles.” In other words, the battle is within, and it is a struggle between two different paths.

Perhaps another illustration would be helpful to show you how it seems that all of this works.



“Wants” lead to “thoughts” which lead to “actions.” So the battle is not simply for right behaviors; the battle is for right actions, which come from right thoughts, which spring from right desires.



The book of James helps us see the same thing in James 1:14-15 – that desires or wants are the fundamental issue or the foundational problem with sin.

¹⁴ But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. ¹⁵ Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death (James 1:14–15 – ESV).

James helps us understand what temptation is all about. He shows us the target is not initially our actions; temptations start with desires. The enemy targets what you want. This has always been

his strategy. Just think of the very first temptation in the Garden of Eden. Satan targeted Adam and Eve's desire to be like God:

⁴ But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. ⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." ⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate (Genesis 3:4-6 - ESV).

Notice how much "desire" is built into the temptation event. This is really important, because if you never address the "thoughts" or the "wants," then actions will never be changed. Further, it is really helpful in the battle with sin to see where it all begins – at the level of desire. And you need to know that your heart, even after conversion, has dangerous desires that are roaming around your soul. You need to be aware that these evil desires "lie close at hand" (Romans 7:21) and that they can surface so quickly that it is stunning and alarming.

You've seen this in your own life, haven't you? You are having a great day; things are going quite well. Suddenly a conflict occurs, an issue develops, a temptation comes across your path, and there is a part of your soul that is dangerously and quickly engaged. It is so common. We face it every single day. And it is scary.

"...evil lies close at hand.. I see in my members another law waging war ... making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members (Romans 7:21-23).

That is why we must be killing sin. But we must be killing it at the desire level.

5. Do not despair; fight by fleeing to Christ (vv 24-25)

When you put all of this together, it can be very overwhelming. Just think about what we've talked about so far. Every Christian wrestles with sin deeply in his or her soul. You will never achieve absolute perfection in this lifetime, and there is a constant enemy – a dark part of your soul – that is always there. Further, the most basic problem is your desire – what you want. And even when you want to do the right thing, there is no guarantee that you will actually do it! No wonder that Paul's tone here reaches a fevered pitch:

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? (Romans 7:24 - ESV)

The problem is so bad that we need deliverance! We need someone to rescue us. "How in the world will I ever be holy?" That is what Paul is asking, because when he looks at himself – like when you take an honest look at yourself – he knows that there is no hope there. You cannot be holy on your own. It just simply will not work.

So what is Paul's answer, and what is our hope regarding this battle within? Verse 25 is glorious!

²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:25a - ESV)

He looks to God alone for his help, and he looks for it through Jesus Christ. The solution is for Jesus Christ to live through him. Looking into the dark recesses of your soul will be alarming, but it

should drive you to embrace the life and help offered through Jesus. "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16). It means that you don't throw your hands up in despair; you run to Christ – every, single day.

The battle is within;
Daily I must fight;
Death comes from sin,
Killed only by Christ's might.

The result is a recognition that there is a battle within. Verse 25 concludes with that thought: So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin (Romans 7:25b). You understand that the battle is real, serious, difficult, and frustrating. But it is not impossible.

Listen! You can, with God helping you, win the daily battle with sin. Sure, you are not going to win every battle. Sure, it will be very difficult at times. It will be scary. But you do not fight it alone.

Our battle cry is "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27).

For some of you, that is something that you need to believe again. Seriously. You need to recommit yourself to this battle on the inside. You've given in. You've quit trying. I know you are discouraged, but you've got to fight. Ask Him to restore the joy of your salvation.

Others of you are fighting, but you are tired. It feels like sin wins more often than not, and today what you need is to be reminded that it is Christ in you the hope of glory. You have to keep fighting. Ask God to help you today to renew your passion to fight this battle on the inside.

Perhaps there are others who see and feel the battle in their souls differently today. You see the danger. You see the divided heart, and you want more of Jesus. Ask Him to fill you with greater passions and greater desires to love the right things.

Finally, there are some of you who need to flee to Christ for forgiveness for the first time. By this I mean that this x-ray of the soul has convinced you that you are sinner and that you need a Savior. Perhaps today God has brought conviction to your soul, and you know that He's calling you to repent of your sins, put your faith in Him, and become a follower of Jesus. Ask Him to be your savior and Lord.

"Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"