

# "An Honest Admission" Romans 7:13–25

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[ 0 : 00 ] The reading is from Romans 7, verses 13-25. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with Allah that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 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. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inner being, 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.

Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? 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.

[ 1 : 39 ] One of Christopher Nolan's earliest movies, I looked it up, I think it was his fifth movie. I don't know if that constitutes earliest or not, but I think this movie is a bit of, it's a bit slept on.

I love this movie. It's called The Prestige. It's with Hugh Jackman and Christian Bale and Scarlett Johansson. Anyways, it follows a rivalry turned war between two illusionists in Victorian London. And the triumph and the tragedy of the plot is the illusionist, played by Christian Bale. He appears to be two different people throughout the film.

One committed to family, the other a braggart. I won't say more about the plot. I think it came out in 06. That's 20 years ago, but it's such a good movie.

I'd hate to spoil it if you haven't watched it yet, okay? So I will refrain. I won't say much more about the plot, except that having a rift in one's behavior and character, acting one way and feeling frustrated about it, feeling like you are two separate peoples at various times, is a terrible way to live.

[ 2 : 50 ] Desiring change, being unable to have it, what a human problem. Something that seems to fly in the face of what it means to be a committed, mature Christian.

We're going to wrap up Romans for the summer. We almost certainly won't get back to it until January of 2027. So this feels like a bit of a wrap-up.

But as we conclude chapter 7, I'll ask this question and see if we can answer it this morning. If the Christian life promises a deep and lasting change, why do so many of us Christians persist in sin? If it promises a consistent, deep, lasting change, why do Christians persist in sin?

If you have a scripture journal, read with me. We're on page 32, starting in verse 13 of Romans chapter 7. And we're going to read all the way to the end of the chapter.

[ 4 : 00 ] I've broken down the text under these three headings. The conflict described, the battlefield located, and then finally just an honest admission.

The conflict described, the battlefield located, and then an honest admission. Let's jump right into it. Verses 13 and 14.

I'll stop there. And then I'll bring some stuff to your attention. Did that which is good then bring death to me? Paul's talking about the law. 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. For we know that the law is spiritual.

But I am of the flesh sold under sin. Now I'll pause there. Because this is a, there's an interesting struggle with commentators and theologians throughout the centuries.

[ 5 : 07 ] And the question is this. Who is Paul talking about? Is it himself? Is this a bit of an autobiography? Or is Paul kind of personifying an unregenerate, somebody who is not yet a Christian?

Or is Paul describing again in kind of a personified way, a Christian who is deeply immature? We call this Christian a carnal Christian.

Who is Paul talking about here? Paul, verse 14, seems to use language that he has previously associated with somebody who's actually not in the faith.

Look with me at verse 14 again. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh. Now Paul has used flesh language to describe sinful, unregenerated, people that are not yet a part of the Christian faith.

They're non-Christians. He continues on. But I am of the flesh, sold under sin. Now if you remember a couple weeks ago, maybe a bit more than just a couple weeks ago, we talked about how we would be slaves, all of us are slaves to something.

[ 6 : 20 ] And if it's not slaves to Christ, then it's slaves to sin. It seems that maybe Paul's talking about a non-Christian here. But this could also be someone that is maybe wrestling with the faith.

Maybe they love the idea of Jesus saving them. They love the whole concept of grace, but they haven't crossed the Rubicon, so to speak.

Or maybe they have, but they are just deeply, deeply, deeply immature. That would then maybe make this idea of being a slave to sin.

It's like this kind of in-between period where they're not yet a slave to Christ. But there's problems with that because I don't know if the scriptures really talk about it in-between time.

So how about the other view, that this describes a regular Christian experience? I think that, I think this is where we're going to land.

[ 7 : 23 ] St. Augustine, the Reformers, they would all say that this is most certainly an autobiography of Paul. And if Paul himself is, can we call him a super-Christian?

I mean, he's a very, very mature Christian, at the very least. And this applies to him. It would seem, then, that this is indicative of the Christian life. This is seen throughout.

We see that Paul, he will repeatedly, in verses 14 to 20 especially, talk about how the law is good. Okay? His disposition to the law is that it is good.

His desire is to please God. These are things that we have seen over the weeks in Romans. This is not characteristic of somebody who does not walk with Jesus. Paul, in Romans and in other places, he'll describe us, before we come to faith, as being enemies of God.

Delighting in disobedience. Delighting in selfishness. Paul, the way he describes it here, is not that. Nevertheless, we find that sin is very persistent.

[ 8 : 35 ] So, answering the question. Is this indicative of the regular Christian experience?

And I think the answer is yes. And I think it's very important that we answer in the affirmative.

Because it is the key to unlocking the rest of this passage. And really, and I know we don't do this as Christians.

We want to be people of the word and not put our experiences over God's word and the truth that it says. But does this not ring true? Okay? Those that have walked with the Lord for some time.

Do you struggle with sin? And a consistent sin that has plagued you, not just for a few weeks or a few months, but has followed you for decades.

Okay? Has this been your experience? It has been mine. It certainly has been mine. It rings true.

And I think if we understand this text in light of that affirmation, namely that this is indicative of the Christian faith, then I think this is very, very, very good news for us.

[ 9 : 49 ] Now, we'll just pause there. Stick a pin in this, why it is good news. But let's get back to the text. So, we have the key to understanding the rest of the passage. A cipher, if you want to call it that.

And let's continue on. We'll read verses 14 again and then continue on in 15 all the way down to 20. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Again, language not used by somebody who's outside of the Christian faith.

Now, if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. 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. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep doing.

[10:52] Now, if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. Paul has defended the law earlier in chapter 7 against accusations that the law of God has become the source of sin and evil.

In fact, the law is crucial, Paul has said to us before, in understanding what sin is and who we are in light of our sinfulness and why then that we need the gift of grace from God himself.

We are utterly, utterly hopeless without it. But the law brings us to grace. And yet, here we see that, again, sin continues on.

It continues on. It continues on. It persists. In fact, it persists to such a degree in our lives that even as our desire to do good and true good, not just the appearance of good, but really do good and to obey God's law, as that desire grows, our sinful desires don't necessarily shrink, at least not as fast as we'd want them to.

They persist. And therefore, we have this constant conflict within us. We are more aware of both the goodness and holiness of God on one hand and the sinfulness of sin on the other.

[12:18] It can be confusing and perplexing. And notice how Paul is incredibly honest as he describes this frustration. He describes it in a number of different places.

Again, verse 15, this is what he says. For I do not understand my own actions. He doesn't understand his own actions. The second part of verse 18, what does Paul say here?

For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. Verse 19, for I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Paul is honest. He is perplexed. He is struggling. You know, a common experience among new converts is an incredible joy and zeal that accompanies newfound faith.

Everything Jesus I want. Two scoops of Christianity? Make it three, okay? Give it to me. I want it all. Zealousness.

[13:22] It's like sin is in my rear view. I am pumped for Jesus. I am walking this Christian life. And then, after a few months or maybe a year, there's some kind of cooling off period.

And it's a bit confusing. I mean, I thought I was all for Christ. Some of our worship songs that we sing, I mean, if you turn them into prayers, I think it's wonderful.

But it's potentially dangerous when we sing things like, I will never let you go. Yeah, maybe this afternoon you're going to let him go, right? We risk being overly zealous all of our days.

I shouldn't say we risk it, but we think we're going to be overly zealous all of our days. And we find that we fall into the same pattern of sin. And all of our excitement and fervor starts to wane.

Being a Christian no longer feels effortless, but feels very difficult. It is hard to consistently walk as a Christian. We become a walking civil war, so to speak, right?

[14:31] We have these excellent desires to follow the Lord. And then we are tempted. And temptations can be anything, but we're tempted with our eyes, with our ears, with our appetites.

And all of a sudden, the desire to follow God and to obey him seems to get dwarfed. Our inner self wants to obey, but our desires and our appetites want what is forbidden and ruinous.

This is what Paul is communicating when he says, it is no longer I who do it. He is describing this inner conflict within him. We are free from sin, yet sin still has power over us.

What Paul isn't saying, though, and I think this is important. What Paul isn't saying is that he is somehow no longer responsible for his sinful actions.

As if to say, there's this other force, there's this, excuse me, this Paul, this other Paul within me that is sinning.

[15:41] But not the real Paul. No, no, no, Paul's not saying that. Paul is a sinner. It is really he who sins. It is his will that gives into the power of sin that still indwells within him.

Still, the conflict is real. The civil war continues to rage. And Paul is drawing our attention to this reality. So Paul is certainly not trying to skirt responsibility here, but just to really highlight the fact that this conflict is real.

I think this is very important for us to consider this morning. It is so important for us to remember that Paul is essentially saying the same thing twice.

If you read verses 14 to 17, then verses 18 to 20, he repeats himself almost verbatim. Maybe a couple changes here and there, but it's like he just says it and then rewinds the tape and says it again.

And Paul's not saying this twice because he is unorganized, that he just kind of blabbers on. That's kind of Paul's style. But I think he is saying it twice.

[16:53] He is reiterating it because he wants us to be under no illusion about the conflict that is this Christian life. So if the Christian life is a civil war that rages within us, right?

On one hand, our spirit against our flesh on the other hand. How do we fight this battle? How do we do it? It would be important to understand first, if we are to fight it, where the battle is being fought. And this leads us to our second point, the battlefield located. Look with me at verses 21 to 23. And we'll be on page 34 of the scripture journal.

Pause here.

Just helpful for our reading. Paul uses the law three different ways here. When he talks about, in verse 21, a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

[18:08] He is talking about, maybe it would be a better way to talk about it as a principle. This is just something that happens consistently. That when I want to do right, sin is lurking close by.

But then he talks about, in verse 22, the law of God, which is the way we'd understand it. God's law, God's revealed will, things, especially as it is in the Ten Commandments.

But then there's this other aspect of law, of his usage of the law in verse 23. When he's talking about another law waging war, it's almost as if he's talking about that law in a way to describe a power, a force.

That's at work here, okay? So on one hand, there's a principle. On the other hand, there is, like, God's law, the way we've been reading it. The other way, there's, like, this power or this force that is at work against us.

So that's just a helpful way to read the scripture. Why don't we get back into our point and ask the question, where is this battlefield located? Paul wants to do right.

[19:12] And I think if you are a Christian, if you have confessed faith in Christ, if you have been baptized, you want to do right as well. You want to obey God. You want to walk in his ways.

You want to bring him pleasure in your obedience. You want to desire and honor and please him. But this other law, this law or power at work, is constantly trying to trip you up.

What is important to notice is that even though sin persists, Paul is still delighting in the law of God, in his inner being. It's not as though when sin comes and is lurking and is tempting him to not follow God but follow his temptations.

It's not as though he, in that moment, hates God. No, he still loves God. He still desires God. He delights in the law of God, in his inner being, which is to say, in his heart of hearts.

He has been transformed by the grace found in the gospel of Christ. That's what happens when you become a Christian. God gives you grace and favor.

[20:24] Our sins are forgiven. He gives us his Holy Spirit. We are transformed. And yet, still, sin lurks within us.

And Paul here is making it very clear that this sin that lurks within him, and the sin that lurks within us, it pops up maybe on a regular basis.

It is always present. But what we see in Paul here is that it is not shaking his confidence that the Father loves him, that Christ has died for him, that the Holy Spirit is inside of him.

But how easy it is for us to forget this truth. Christians can often, and I put myself just squarely in this camp, we functionally affirm the gospel, but functionally we deny it.

What do I mean? We often think that our standing before Christ is contingent upon our obedience to the law. When we are doing super well, we are kind, we are showing genuine love, you know, it is not uncommon to think, in potentially a smug way, I did well today.

[21:47] God loves me. God is pleased with me. God delights in me. And yet, when we've messed up, when we've constantly engaged in temptation, when we have been short, when we have cheated, when we have stolen, my guess is, if you're like me, you go to bed, or you wrap up your day, and you think, man, I am distant from God.

I have blown it. Hellfire might be licking at my toes. And I think this is why a chapter like chapter 7, but really all of chapter 6, and all of chapter 7, and we won't get to chapter 8 until 2027, but chapter 6 and chapter 7, especially chapter 7, is so vital for us, especially verses 21 and 23.

We must understand that there are these two conflicting powers at war, and they're fighting on the battlefield of our mind. And even though we know Christ, and we are saved by him, and we have his Holy Spirit, and we maybe have been walking for decades with the Lord, that this battle persists and

continues on.

It's still, sin, it still lurks. It still says to us, whispering these lies in our ears, that we are under its dominion and power, that we have no hope, that the temptation that we have isn't really temptation, because you can't be tempted with something you deserve, something that will benefit you.

Listen, taste, touch, look, defend yourself, have a backbone. You are, you are greater than this person in front of you.

[ 23 : 45 ] Don't let them walk all over you. And so the lies continue to get whispered. The battle continues to rage in our hearts. When Paul's talking about the battle of our mind, he's really talking about our being, or what makes us us.

The law of sin, the power of sin, it continues to wage war upon our very being. So although sin still resides within, with great strength, we need to be reminded time and time again, that it no longer has to be obeyed.

It says to us, okay, it says to us, I own you. But the gospel speaks a different word. There's this, whoo, an unbelievably powerful scene at the end of 12 Years a Slave, where the main character, he is working a field, and his friends from the North come, and essentially rescue him from the plantation.

And as he's walking, to this cart, to go back to the North, to see his family after 12 years of being a slave, his slave owner, just follows him, just yelling, and tearing him down, such obscenities, I own you, I own you, I own you.

I mean, he says different words. But that, all of that were just lies. And it's such a wonderful, beautiful image, of, of, of how evil sin is.

[ 25 : 18 ] Because the gospel tells us, that we are Christ's. We are slaves to him, which is perfect freedom. We are no longer slaves to sin, but sin will, will tell us otherwise.

And will follow us, all of our living days, saying, I own you, follow me. But the gospel says, that we no longer have to obey it.

And yet, we constantly forget, that we are freemen. We are no longer slaves. Our trajectory, is towards holiness, and selflessness, and love, and joy, and, and to be in the presence of God.

And yet, we find ourselves, again, this is the battlefield of our minds. This is what is happening. We find ourselves, going back, if we're going to use a slavery imagery, we're, we're going back to Egypt.

Okay, we're going back to our evil taskmasters. To the whips, and the bricks that we are to make. Friends, we have been given a new heart, that desires godly things, even though our flesh, is still susceptible, to the wooing of sin.

[ 26 : 32 ] The battle will never end, in your life. And, that might seem, very discouraging. Okay, it might. But, it is very helpful, to know that, that there is a battle waging.

So, the, the, the question then is, how then, are we to win, at, on, on this battle, on this battlefield? How, how are we to, to make sure, to, to ensure that, that the battle of our mind, against, the, the law of God, and the law of sin, that the, the law of, the sin is, is destroyed forever?

Well, it is certainly not, by sheer will. It's not a matter, of self-improvement. Listen, self-improvement's great, but if self-improvement, is the, the way, to holiness, it's not going to happen.

Self-improvement, will help you, not snack, after 8pm. Maybe. Okay, maybe. But, will it help you, to do away, with sin forever? The answer is no.

So, does that leave us, to be helpless people? We find the answer, to that, in verse 24. This brings us, to our third, and final point. An honest admission.

[ 27 : 53 ] This is what Paul says, in verse 24. It's almost such a scandal, he says this, but let's read it. Wretched man, that I am. Who will deliver me, from this body, of death?

Let me read that again. Wretched man, that I am. The apostle Paul, is speaking this, okay? If there's a super Christian, that has existed, it might, it might very well be, the apostle Paul.

What is he saying? Wretched man, that I am. Who will deliver me, from this body, of flesh? This body, of death? That's a very, honest, admission, right there, is it not?

Paul says, I'm a wretch. I have been given, a new heart, and a new mind, and yet, I still have, a body, of death. For those, that have jumped, all the way, into our tradition, the Anglican tradition, and have, really dug, into the book, of common prayer.

Now we use it, on Sundays, and we use it, for like, almost, without edit, at our early service, we had this morning, which was wonderful. But if you, are familiar at all, with the book, of common prayer, and specifically, the 1662, book of common prayer, there's been edits, over the centuries.

[ 29 : 15 ] Morning prayer, opens with the general, confession. Every morning, there's a general confession, and, it captures, verse 24, so unbelievably, well.

It describes, us, as we confess to God, our sins, in the morning, in two ways. First, that there is no health, in us. And second, that we are, miserable offenders.

And what's interesting, is that over, this is like, geek a little bit, okay, over the, the various edits, especially in the modern era, editors have taken out, miserable offenders, completely.

Like if you go into, the 2019, prayer book, that, that, a lot of the churches, in our diocese, use, miserable offenders, isn't there at all.

And when they say, there's no health in us, it says, apart from your grace, there is no health in us. Which is true, to an extent. But let me tell you, one thing.

[ 30 : 21 ] If you know the depth of sin, okay, in your life, when you confess, your sins to God, that is not the time, to hedge your bets, and, and, and to smooth over, the sharp edges, or, or to gloss over, the reality of your condition.

I mean, the apostle Paul, himself, calls himself, a wretched man, that I am. when you confess your sins, friends, to God, call it like it is.

Be honest about who you are. And if you feel like, listen, I'm a power, positive thinking type of person, I don't like this. Be somebody who embraces reality.

Be honest with yourself. The apostle Paul is honest. Take his example. And then to say that there's no health in us. It is true. It is true.

Truly, apart from, from Christ, our trajectory is not towards holiness, but it is towards, towards sin and death. And I think this is the time to confess it.

[ 31 : 28 ] God, I need you. I need your help. Help me to obey. Paul, here, in verse 24, with this honest admission, cries out to God.

But there's a second cry. Verse 24, I'll read again, and see if you can, can catch the second cry of his heart. Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?

Verse 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.

Did you catch the second cry? Verse 25. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Listen, they threw the exclamation mark on, but can you hear the excitement of Paul?

Understanding that, that I am walking with the Lord, trying to obey him, and I'm constantly failing. I want to follow him, and, and I end up doing things I don't want to do. There's things that I do want to do, and I don't do them.

[ 32 : 27 ] There's this giant war, civil war that's happening in my, in my head, in my, in my heart. I can't follow him. I'm a wretched man. Even though he has saved me, I'm still persisting in sin.

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. He, he boldly, boldly cries out in thanksgiving.

It's almost as if Paul can't contain himself, and, and rightfully so. We have no hope without Christ.

We can trust Christ, with our lack of health, with, with this ongoing propensity to sin.

You betcha. With our miserable offenses, big time. With our constant struggle, with sins of omission, and commission, with our, our temptations, with the desire, to, to, to use our eyes, these unbelievable orbs of vision, to look at things we ought not to.

This, this, this incredible, uh, sense of, of taste, in, in, where we can enjoy food, and yet, we, over it, indulge.

[ 33 : 43 ] We use our bodies, that can walk, and, and go into, all sorts of different places, and to discover, and to, to explore. And what do we do? We use it, to fulfill our own, lusts, and gratify our flesh.

And yet, we can trust Christ with it all. And why can we? Because he was tempted, but he did not fall into sin. Uh, in Mark's gospel, we read that at the very beginning of, of Jesus's ministry, he was baptized by John the Baptist, and then it says, the spirit immediately, Mark is kind of funny with always saying immediately, but, he says, uh, Mark says, and immediately, the spirit drove him into the desert, that he would be tempted by Satan.

And he was. He, just, the scene before, the divine voice, declared upon him, you are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased, and then the next thing we know, Jesus is being tempted.

And he's being tempted to forsake that voice, to forsake that father. And yet, he didn't sin. Christ certainly, strove against sin, just like us.

Uh, however, unlike us, he didn't give in, not once. There was no compromise with Christ. The words and sentiment of Paul from 14, verses 14 to 20, were not something that Christ experienced personally.

[ 35 : 14 ] In all his temptations, he did not give in. And yet, Paul's words, in verse 24, the words, where he calls himself a wretch, our words, were the very reality of Christ, when he was hung upon the cross.

You see, Psalm 22, written by King David, Isaiah 53, prophesied by the prophet Isaiah, they both capture the sentiment of Christ as a wretched man.

Psalm 22, says that, that Christ, upon the cross, he was like a worm. Okay? Isaiah 53, says he was despised.

Upon the cross, Christ was abandoned. Upon the cross, he was treated with the utmost prejudice. Upon the cross, he was forsaken by his father. He was a wretched man upon the cross.

But he did not sin. He did not give in to temptation. So why should he be called a wretch? Why did he have to experience wretchedness?

[ 36 : 23 ] Well, for two reasons. This is where we're going to wrap things up. The first is that he suffered all there was to suffer as a wretched man, but not because of his own wretchedness, but because of ours. He was truly wretched, so that even though we should be wretches without hope, we now have hope of being delivered from this body of sin and evil.

And then secondly, so that we, as deeply conflicted people, could look to someone who not only perfectly understands our predicament, but has also overcome it.

So when we give our trust to Christ in our sinful state, and we say, do with me what I can do to myself. Save me. We can be sure he'll do it because he experienced all there is to experience of temptation, and yet was not overcome.

Hebrews chapter 4 sums this up perfectly in verses 14 to 16, and the author writes this, Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin.

[ 37 : 48 ] Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need.

You know, we're going to suffer temptation because Christ suffered temptation, and we are not, as servants of Christ, greater than our Master. But make no mistake, because he was victorious, we now have hope.

not in our own self-improvement, not in our own sheer will, our grit, but rather in the victory of Christ upon the cross.

We have hope in him. He has delivered us. He has transformed us, and is transforming us by his Holy Spirit, so that we can learn to grow in obedience, to say yes to the things of God, and to say no to evil and sin, and to do so with great joy, okay?

To do so with great joy, knowing that when we sin, even when we sin, when, not if, when we sin, we have a great high priest to whom we can go with confidence and joy to receive grace and mercy in our time of need.

[ 39 : 00 ] What a deeply comforting passage. Friends, a passage that ought to be returned to, maybe on a daily basis, at least on a weekly one. Do not fight this battle by yourself.

You don't have to. But look to Christ. Cry out to him, I am a wretch, but also cry out to him, thanks be to God, for Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thank you.