

“The War Within”

Romans 7:14–8:2

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We will start by reading one verse from Romans 7 and then work our way through the passage. Romans 7:21 says *[21] So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.* The NAS says, *[21] I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.* This is God’s Word.

I don’t want to sound like an alarmist but we are at war. We are in the most difficult war, the most devastating of all kinds. It is a spiritual war and so it deals not only with matters of physical death but also with matters of eternal death. We have three very powerful enemies in this war – the world, the flesh and the devil. We talk a lot about defending faith and our enemy, the devil. Pastor Reeder has reminded us that spiritual warfare is not a subset of the Christian life but it’s part of the normal daily Christian life that we face. Our third enemy is the one we usually focus least on but in many ways it should be the one we focus the most on.

In one of my favorite Andy Griffith shows the bumbling deputy, Barney Fife and his goofy friend, Gomer, have fallen asleep in church. There is a guest preacher that particular Sunday, like me today. The pastor is talking about how busy everybody is, they need to slow down, take it easy and not be in such a hurry. Barney and Gomer have no clue that is what he is talking about because they are falling asleep. After the service they go out to shake the preacher’s hand and Barney says “Preacher that was a fine sermon and that’s a subject you cannot talk too much about – sin.” Everyone looked at him like he was an idiot. I don’t know if Barney was correct that sin is a subject we can’t talk too much about but I do know it’s a subject that we Christians talk and think way too little about and it’s to our detriment.

The third enemy we face, as the cartoon character Pogo once said, ‘is we have met the enemy and he is us.’ More pointedly our worst enemy is within and it’s the sin that lies deep within the hearts of every Christian. There is great news that we have been set free from the penalty of sin in justification and we just confessed together that we are being freed and delivered from the practice of sin through sanctification but at the same time we know that we have in us this terrible conflict of continual and irreconcilable war. R.C. Sproul said it like this; ‘in one sense life doesn’t get complicated until one becomes a Christian. When we are born of the Spirit we are born anew unto a fierce struggle between the old man and the new man.’

This is a particularly personal sermon for me for I have been reading a book titled Overcoming Sin and Temptation and I discuss it three different times with three different people – my brother, my son and a good friend of mine. That is a lot of talk about sin by the way. It is actually a book that has three books in it. The author, John Owen, works on sin and temptation and he wrote in the 1600s. Some might think this would be boring but it has been fascinating and unbelievable for me to get a better handle on this idea of sin that dwells in us in general but also how it deals and works in my life, continually warring against me and the challenge I have to fight back with it. I hope to bring some of those thoughts out in this study today from Owen.

In the forward of this book John Piper says a few things. He says, “As I look across the Christian landscape I think it’s fair to say concerning sin they have healed the wound of my people slightly or superficially. I take this to refer to the leaders who should be helping the church know and feel the seriousness of indwelling sin and how to fight it and kill it. Instead the depth and complexity of the ugliness and danger of sin in professing Christians is either minimized or psychologized. This is a tragically light healing. I call it a tragedy because by making life easier for ourselves in minimizing the nature and seriousness of our sin we become greater victims to it. We are in fact not healing ourselves and those who say they already feel bad enough without being told about the corruptions of indwelling sin, misread the path to peace. What Owen says here about the Scriptures is not quick relief but long term deep growth and grace. I pray that thousands will choose the harder, long term path of growth and not the easier short term path of circumstantial relief.” I agree with that.

Let’s get started in our text by first looking at Romans 7:14–20 where we see two main points of the problem of indwelling sin and the conquering power of renewing grace. Romans 7:14 says *[14] For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.* In verse 14 the word law is referring to all of the commandments of God as summarized in the Ten Commandments and what we call the moral law because it deals with matters of right and wrong. Later in this chapter he will use this term as a principle, the way something works, like the law of gravity. In Romans 6 through 8 Paul is primarily explaining the relationship of the written law, the moral law to the life of the believer. So he is showing the law’s greatness and its weakness. The law has no power to save us or sanctify us and that’s its weakness but in verse 14 he says the law is spiritual where it reaches to the very recesses of our heart. It judges our attitudes, motives and affections. He also says it reflects God’s holy character so the law is always beautiful, glorious and good because of that.

We know that the word flesh in verse 14 doesn’t mean our physical bodies. It is that old man, the sinful man, our remaining nature. It is that part deep within the heart where the soul of man is. There is this problem within us that is always tempting and inclining the true child of God towards sin. That principle is what wreaks havoc upon us all the days of our life on this earth. Let’s continue in the text.

Romans 7:15–20 says *[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.*

All these statements that Paul is making are to highlight the corrupting problem of sin in the heart of the believer, the nature of sin. He is not saying that he is not responsible for sinning but he is saying the problem of sin in the heart is totally contrary to the new nature of the believer, to the principle of new life in Christ. So while he does what he doesn’t want to do, (I don’t want to sin), nevertheless sin still lives in me. I don’t want to live in sin but sin lives in me.

We see in Romans 7:21–24 the principle stated. Romans 7:21–24 says *[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?*

Notice how Paul says when I want to do right, evil is close at hand. Have you ever tried to restart having your personal time with the Lord that you know you need to do but you just can't get out of bed? Or maybe while you're trying to read the Word or pray that's when you have distracting thoughts. I have had people say that is when they have had the most wicked thoughts in their life, why? It is because when you want to do right evil is right there opposing you. It is explained this way in Galatians. Galatians 5:17 says [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.* Sin is always lurking, lying in the background, waiting for an opportune time. If it had its way fully it would totally destroy us but it doesn't.

In Romans 7:22–24 it shows the hope for the Christian. As it says in verse 22 only a Christian can delight in the law of God in their inner most being and only a Christian will cry out 'wretched man that I am!' which we see in verse 24. Only a Christian will see the bitterness of his sin in relation to God's holiness. A great Puritan Thomas Watson once said 'till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.' Until my sin is bitter to me, my Savior will not be sweet. Is your sin bitter to you today? Has it called you to cry out 'Wretched man that I am!?' If you have then rejoice that you cry that way and that you mourn over your sin because Jesus said in Matthew 5, "Blessed are they that mourn for they will be comforted." There is in the heart of every believer, sin that is ready to break out because of indwelling sin.

It goes on to say in Galatians 5:19–21, [19] *Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, [20] idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, [21] envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.* All of us have these capabilities. Think about David who was a man after God's own heart, yet he committed adultery and murder. Think about Peter the rock. Jesus said upon his profession He will build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it yet Peter denied his Savior with blasphemous rantings. We should not think that we're beyond those sins in our lives.

Perhaps some of you are thinking you don't feel that way. Everything is alright. I will offer three reasons why you might feel this way. One is that you may not be a Christian and sin doesn't bother you. Secondly, you may be a Christian but you're not aware of what sin is doing in your life. You're not dealing with it. Maybe you're deflecting it or minimizing it. If that is the case you're hurting yourself and you're probably hurting others or thirdly, maybe you're just blessed. Maybe at this moment you don't have that major war going on. If so, then rejoice in God and help someone else who is struggling and be aware and know that it will come again to you. Too often we don't want to deal with our sin and we just want to ignore it, when we should be fighting it.

Kris Lundgaard in his book [The Enemy Within](#), which I recommend, helps us with an illustration. He says the heart in some ways is like the haunted house. The thing we don't like about haunted houses and the thing that scares us is that there is something unknown and deadly inside. So when you see a movie where someone is about to go into

a haunted house you hear people saying ‘don’t go, don’t go because it’s dangerous in there.’ Lundgaard says that in a sense we have a haunted heart with hidden horrors in it and we’re tempted not to go in but actually we need to go in because unlike the victims in the movies where it doesn’t usually bode well for them, we can go in with confidence and be assured of ultimate victory over the sins which easily entangle us. So we need to actually enter into the deepest recesses of our heart, see the blackness of our sin there but find the grace of God there and then begin to be able to put those sins to death.

I’ll give you two examples of sin working in the lives of believers. I have a good friend who I talk with regularly that I’ve known for about 11 years and he struggles with a besetting sin, a recurring sin in his life. Pastor Reeder calls these entangling and embedded sins. My friend’s besetting sin is with his assurance of salvation. He struggles with this because he believes years ago he committed the unpardonable sin which is blaspheming the Holy Spirit. It really devastates him. He is a Christian. He has not committed that sin but it weighs him down and brings great discouragement upon him but he has made great progress. It is a blessing for me to walk with him through that and to reassure him of God’s promises that are sure and true.

Another deceitful trick of indwelling sin is that it masquerades as something other than sin. Those of you who know me, know that I’m an introvert. I don’t do well in crowds so I did what most introverts do and that is I went into the ministry to preach to crowds. I’m not a particularly smart introvert either. In college I developed a phobia where I had anxiety and panic attacks of reading in front of people. It kind of carried over when I joined staff at Briarwood but it wasn’t about reading. It was about praying out loud in certain situations. If I had prepared a talk or a sermon and I have to pray I’m okay but if I were to be asked on the spot to pray and it was in a group where I felt insecure or maybe inferior to the people in the group, then I’d start panicking again. I remember in session meetings at Briarwood I would sit in the back row behind the biggest guy I could find, praying “Lord, don’t let Harry call on me to close in prayer tonight.” That’s a terrible place to be when you’re a minister and you’re to be about prayer and the Word.

It really began to bother me and I knew I had to deal with this. I concluded that the problem was that I was an introvert. I don’t like attention drawn to myself and I viewed that as one of my strong suits of humility. So I thought I just need more courage but then the Holy Spirit lovingly convicted me and clearly showed me what the real problem was. It didn’t stem from an introverted virtuous humility from a man who didn’t like attention drawn to himself but it actually came from a proud, arrogant center, absorbed with himself, who was too worried about what other people thought and afraid to think what he had hoped they would about him. That was the problem and that was a rude awakening. However, once I diagnosed my problem properly being pride the mother of all sins and others included like worry, fear and anxiety, I actually began to make progress in the area. I began to grow and do better. I don’t need you all to help me for I’m comfortable with the progress I’ve made so don’t go tell Pastor Reeder to ask me to pray every time at the end of our meetings. He does that anyway but when we incorrectly diagnosis problems in our life then we struggle even more.

I would have never admitted this back then and I would have tried to hide it but it’s not as scary any more. It’s easier and that’s what God does. A good friend of mine, Jason Dollar, wrote a book titled Drowning Swine; How Christ Defeats Darkness,

Demons and Death and it's about the demoniac from Mark 5. In this Jesus asks the demon, "What is your name?" and the answer is "it is legion for we are many." Jason makes the application to us as Christians that we have to name our sins. We have to know what they are and what we are dealing with. Then we can bring them to the cross and find deliverance and hope through Christ as we do that.

How do we fight the corrupting power of sin? We do that through the conquering power of renewing grace, the principle of new life in the believer. John Owen calls these two laws contrary principles – indwelling sin and the renewing grace of the Holy Spirit. He brings out a brilliant point when he says 'contrary principles cannot be sovereign at the same time in the same person.' What does he mean? Grace ultimately and always wins. It is much more powerful than indwelling sin. It will have the victory.

After Paul has just said 'O the wretched man that I am' he says in Romans 7:25–8:2, [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. [8:1] There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.* How does God conquer? It is the power of God in us and to us. At the beginning I said we have three powerful enemies – the world, the flesh and the devil. What is God's answer to those enemies? It is astounding and unbelievable for He gives us Himself. We see this in verse 25 and 8:2 for God gives us Himself. John Owens says we have the faithfulness of the Father, the grace of the Son and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The two contrary principles also produce in every Christian two contrary cries at the same time. You need to let those have their good grace in your life. Wretched man that I am, wonderful Savior that I have – your Heavenly Father wants you in your most painful and darkest moments of your life, feeling the weight of your sin, feeling as though your Father has forsaken you, to draw near to Him. He wants you to come to Him, to look to Him and move toward Him not away from Him. The only way you'll see the wonderful grace of the Lord Jesus, the wonderful Savior, is when you see it in the context of your wretchedness.

Hebrews 4:16 says [16] *Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.* What time of need could be ever greater than when we feel the weight of our own sin, when we crumble and fall under the deceptive nature of it? What greater need do we have than grace and mercy in times like those? Wretched man, wretched woman move to your wonderful Savior.

We not only have the promise of God to us but in us. Romans 8:1–2 says [1] *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. [2] For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.* This is my favorite verse in the whole Bible. The late pastor Donald Gray Barnhouse of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia who dies in the 1950s said of Romans 8, 'The beginnings of Romans 8 starts with no condemnation, it ends with no separation and all in between no defeat.' You probably say 'that's my problem for I do feel defeated, condemned.' That is the power of the promise and that is you aren't defeated and condemned no matter how much you feel that way. Your feelings lie. Even now in the midst of our failures and frustrations, we are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us. He has already won. We are going to face many battles and we'll lose too

many to sin than we want to but the fact remains that we are victorious because our Victor has won the victory over sin.

Here is a final note about the pains and struggles of sin. Those pains and struggles should cause us to long for our true home, to long for heaven, to groan for glory for this world is not our home. One day when we stand before our Savior the Bible says that Jesus will present to Himself the Church in all of her splendor without any spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy without any blemish. That should be our hope.

Our theme this year is Thy Word is Truth. John Owen in the 1600 wrote three books on sin and temptation. They are essentially expositions of three verses of Scripture. He wrote of mortification of sin, killing sin and that's an exposition of Romans 8:13. Then he wrote of sin and temptation which is an exposition of Matthew 26:41. His largest work he wrote on was indwelling sin which came from Romans 7:21. Three different books on three different verses is unbelievable and that should call all of us to study God's Word which is inexhaustible in its beauty, glory, richness and its profitability to us. Thy Word is Truth.

I want you to think of three words for practical application – fight, flee and focus. The first thing we must do is fight. John Owen says you must be killing sin daily or sin will be killing you. His whole quote is “Do you mortify (kill)? Do you make it your daily work? Be always at it while you live. Cease not a day from the work. Be killing sin daily or it will be killing you.” It's our only real path to peace. We need to claim God's promises from His Word. We stand on those and then we apply the truth of His Word to whatever problems we face. When we do that then we can go out and assassinate sin but you say ‘I just don't want to deal with it. I'm just trying to make it through the week. I'm just trying to enjoy my life the best I can and not even think about that.’ Could you imagine a soldier in active duty on the front line saying that? No! You are the soldier. It's a spiritual war and we don't have that option. So we come and deal with the sin.

How do we begin to kill sin? We do it first by surrendering. We don't surrender to sin we surrender to Christ. We put our trust in Him again, surrender to Him, die to ourselves and live to God. A friend of mine said dying plus killing equals living free in Christ. That is what we are to do and then we don't do that alone. We have to have people helping us in this. Proverbs 18:1 says *[1] Whoever isolates himself seeks his own desire; he breaks out against all sound judgment.* We were not designed to do this alone. You need to find a band of brothers or a strand of sisters, someone in your life to help you go through this.

Sometimes we flee. John Owen says we must daily direct our thoughts to the dangers of temptation. Consider the end and purpose of every temptation. It is to cause us to sin. Consider the end and purpose of every sin and what sin would do to us. It would destroy our souls. One way we fight sin is we flee temptation. We run like a chicken from the very first hints of anything that would be opposed to God and he says to do that you have to know yourself. You have to study yourself. You have to know Satan's temptations are strong in your life and where grace is weak and you have to bring people along to help you with that. Someone in your life has to know your propensities to fall, the darkest places of your life, to hold you accountable and to help you with that.

Then we do that through the power of the Holy Spirit. The promise of escape for us isn't an easy one and the Bible says we're to walk in the Spirit and we will not carry out the desires of the flesh. We kind of have this idea that we this kind of magical power but it's not like that. A few years ago when I was in San Francisco we rented power bikes to go over the Golden Gate Bridge. You push a button, start going up this hill, barely peddling and flying up this hill passing people who are struggling like crazy. We don't have a Holy Spirit button that we push and then all of sudden it makes conquering sin easy. No, it is realizing and recognizing that the Holy Spirit indwells us and enables us to fight and to flee. Next year our ministry theme is going to be on the Person and work of the Holy Spirit so we'll deal with this a lot more.

The third word is focus where we focus on the two principles every day, two cries – wretched man that I am and wonderful Savior that I have. The wretched man keeps us grateful for God's forgiveness. Our wonderful Savior gives us the courage to go and fight sin. My son reminded me last week that we fight from approval not for approval. We are totally accepted in Christ and so we focus our attention on Him. We focus our attention on the cross.

One of my favorite songs on this is titled 'Beautiful Terrible Cross' and one of my favorite lines in the song is; we gained the riches of heaven, Jesus You paid the horrible cost, we stand forgiven and praise You for the beautiful terrible cross. If we focus on the cross and put it into our heart, how can we ever treat sin lightly? It's when the cross becomes large in our life that we begin to detest sin because we delight in our Savior who defeated sin on the cross. We begin to see sin weaken and we despise the pleasures of sin that are only fun for a season because we know in our God's right hand are pleasures forever.

A little over a month ago, 4,000 miles away, there was an amazing act of courage. Three Americans who were longtime friends were on vacation on a high speed train from Amsterdam to Paris. They were just planning a fun reunion together and then all of a sudden a madman, a terrorist came out from the rest room and shot someone. He had an AK47 with over 300 rounds of ammunition and a box cutter. His gun got locked up for just a moment and one of the three friends was sound asleep, his friend hit him and said 'let's go.' They went and subdued the terrorist, tackled him, wrestled him to the ground and held him there until the French authorities could come get him. Just recently they received the highest honor bestowed on people for bravery by the French President.

In their interview there were several things they said that were incredible. They said "We were scared but we didn't hesitate to attack because it was either do something or die." Then they said of the terrorist, "He seemed like he was ready to fight to the end and so were we." They acted out of survival and for their friends and everyone on the train. One said "If my friends had not come to my assistance I'd be dead right now." To which that friend responded, "These are my friends, how could I let them go at it alone?" The vice chairman of the joint chief of staff called them three young men who did something about evil. The ambassador to France said "When most of us would run away they ran into the line of fire saying 'let's go' and those words changed the fate of many people." There are numerous parallels. One man almost had his thumb severed in the fight but was wounded and ultimately they won the victory.

We are going to lose some battles and be wounded because of sin but ultimately we win the victory. The other thing that struck me was when one of them said 'they are

my friends, I could not let them go alone.’ Christian, go find someone to help, who needs you or go find someone to help you. Fight, flee, focus, be killing sin daily or it will be killing you. Daily direct your thoughts to the dangers of temptation and daily focus your attention on the two contrary cries – wretched man, wonderful Savior. Go do something about evil. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Father, we pray that You would give us the assurance of Your love for us and that You would give us the courage to fight sin, focus on You. We pray You would allow us to be captivated by the beauty of Christ that His sweetness would cause sin’s power to be weakened in our life and we’d be strengthened in Him and that You would cause us to love You more and more every day and die unto sin every day. Father, I pray if there is anyone reading this who does not know You that maybe today they have been convicted of their sin and that You would cause them to come to Christ to say ‘Jesus forgive me. Come into my life and make me the kind of person You want me to be.’ We pray this in Jesus’ Name, Amen.

### Power Point

#### **I. THE CORRUPTING PROBLEM OF INDWELLING SIN**

**7:14-24**

A. The Problem Explained (14-20)

B. The Principle Stated (21-24)

#### **II. THE CONQUERING POWER OF RENEWING GRACE**

**7:25-8:2**

A. The Power of God in Us (7:25-8:2)

The Promise of God to Us (8:1-2)