THE CHAINS WE CANNOT SEE
To Know the Sin in Me, Part 2

Romans 7:14–25
Key Verse: 7:24–25a

> "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Do you work on your image? Honestly, many of us are too focused on our appearance, or maybe on our own carefully curated social media presence. Wherever we're from, our cultures urge us to live up to family honor, professional success, or trying to look like we've got it all together. We bring this even into church. We say the right words, do the right things, and try to hide our failures behind a good exterior. Church easily can become a place of quiet pretense.

But in today's passage we see Apostle Paul: a spiritual giant, an intellectual powerhouse, a foundational leader of the early church. If anyone could project a pristine, bulletproof Christian image, we would think he would. But instead of bragging of constant spiritual victories, Paul does something so unexpected here. He strips away pretense entirely and confesses he's captive to the law of sin (7:23b), meaning that even he has got hidden chains. He's inviting us into a radical, unvarnished honesty that, in our world of super-careful image management, is jarring. His honesty doesn't push us away; it draws us in. It tells us that sanctification is not about hiding, but about having the courage to stop pretending, and the courage to struggle—not just a bit, but until we hit rock bottom, until all we can do is turn to Jesus. As we accept these truths, let's make Paul's confession our own. May God speak to us through his word today.

Chapter 2 was where Paul first exposed the exhausting machinery of self-righteousness. He wrote to people who knew God's law, inside and out—who used their religious knowledge as a platform to look down on others, judge their neighbors, and elevate themselves. Paul's words exposed a staggering hypocrisy they weren't even aware they had, because they were so busy managing their outward image. They thought their knowledge and faithfulness to religious activities shielded them. But God could see through it all. God could see their inner selves, their self-seeking, image-protecting motives. And what God saw incurred his wrath. In his earthly ministry Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for putting on a show of righteousness while harboring unclean things in their hearts. God is still not pleased with self-righteous hypocrisy. We may dismiss self-righteous people as ludicrous religious nuts, but the truth is, we're all tempted to live this way, comparing ourselves with others, using our performance to justify ourselves, and hiding what's really inside.

In contrast, in 7:1–6 Paul explained that we have died to the law and now belong to our Risen Lord Jesus. Jesus is our holy yet most patient husband. And the reality is, we bring into our marriage with him all our deep-seated baggage and self-reliance. If our union with him is going to go deep, we've got to lay aside the wedding veil of perfection. We can't keep up an act with the One who already knows us completely.

It's why Paul took us in verses 7–13 to the diagnosis of the law of God. God's law acts like an advanced medical imaging scan for us. It doesn't create our disease; it simply reveals the objective reality of our spiritual sickness. It shows us the tumor of our self-centeredness. But as any doctor knows, a diagnosis is not the same as getting cured. And knowing we're sick is not the same as letting go of our lifelong habit of trying to be our own doctor. We get the test results back, we see the problem, and our default reaction is to roll up our sleeves and say, "Okay, give me the prescription, I can manage this recovery myself." We try to treat our own soul with a regimen of better discipline, stricter rules, and sheer willpower. So how do we get out of this self-reliance?

In Romans, Paul has been discussing what sin does to us; in chapter 6 he put it bluntly: sin enslaves us. Most of us would like to comfort ourselves with grace and not get too serious about our sin. But Paul doesn't let us off the hook. He challenges us to present ourselves to God as instruments for righteousness (6:13). We might react cynically, thinking, "That's impossible; why even try?" But we can't grow in sanctifying grace if we sit on the sidelines as cynics. If we do, we'll never realize how sick with sin we are. Only as we obey the gospel wholeheartedly do we start wrestling with the law of God and our sin.

Let's read verse 14. This introduces the final section, and in a sense, Paul is still defending the law of God. But he also gets into what he sees about himself. Up to now, he's been writing in the past tense, how God's law showed him his sin. But from verses 14 to 25, everything is in the present tense. Paul is mature in Christ, but he knows sin is still a dangerous reality within him. In fact, he states it painfully: he is "sold under sin." Legally, he's a child of God, a slave of Christ, and the war is over. But experientially, there are pockets of sin still within him that his willpower cannot overcome. So it is with us. We can get up in the morning and pray alone, asking God to help us live by his grace and his Spirit throughout the day, but by 8:30 AM, find ourselves snapping at a family member over something trivial. We end up doing what we hate.

Notice how in verses 15–20 alone, Paul repeats the words "I, my, me" 23 times. It's so unusual, and makes him sound so self-centered. But he intentionally writes this way to illustrate that self is no match for the power of sin

within us. The verb “to do” is also repeated ten times. Paul uses three different Greek verbs for “doing,” covering every angle: the specific wrong things we do, the ongoing habits we fall into, and the ultimate outcome of our lives.[1] He’s saying that on every level, on his own, the result is the same: sin. Why is that?

Twice Paul uses the phrase: “sin that dwells within me” (17,20). He believes in Jesus. He died to sin by faith in Christ. But sin is still dwelling within him. It’s real. Pretending doesn’t make it go away. Living naturally will lead to more sin, but living legalistically won’t eradicate the sin, either. As we’ve seen, legalism only ends up changing the outward facade, not the inner person.

In verses 17–20 Paul uses his own story to help us see the truth of our humanity: In our inner being we long to do what is right and good. But then we face our flesh. To be clear: our flesh is not inherently evil; it’s the sin dwelling in our flesh—which has taken over our flesh—*that’s* what’s evil. Because sin dwells in our flesh, faith in Christ can’t magically make it disappear overnight. Instead, real faith in Christ plunges us into a lifelong reliance on his grace, a grace that’s outside ourselves. We experience this split in our inner lives every day. We long to love God, to walk in his light, and to be free. But suddenly, we get an impulse from our flesh, and everything is instantly hijacked.

In verses 21–23 Paul describes this inner battle, which on his own he is constantly losing. No matter how much he delights in God’s law, there’s another law within him, the law of sin, making him do what he does not want to do. He confesses that in his members he’s still captive to it. He’s not justifying the sin in him; he’s just admitting he can’t get rid of it on his own.

So, why is Paul telling us all this? He’s showing us that our efforts to battle our sin on our own, no matter how sincere, how well-intentioned, are doomed to fail. We just can’t do it. And honestly, that’s humiliating. But we need that experience, that failure, that awareness. Only as we face the truth, that our ability will never work, will we truly start living by faith in Jesus. And it’s faith in Jesus and his grace that gives us any daily victories, step by step, day by day.

When we fail, our first reaction isn’t usually to run *to* Jesus; it’s to run *from* him in shame, or to quietly try a little harder. We tell ourselves, “I’ll fix this. I’ll read my Bible more, I’ll pray longer, I’ll lock down my discipline. Then, when I’ve cleaned up the mess, I’ll come back to God.” But that’s secret self-repair. It’s the old legalistic treadmill starting back up again. It’s exhausting, and it keeps us trapped in a cycle of guilt and isolation. But Romans 7 tells us we don't have to

[1] *Katergazomai* as ultimate outcome (verses 15,17,18,20), *prasso* as habit (verses 15,19), and *poieo* as single acts (verses 15,16,19,20).

wait to be fixed to come to Jesus. In fact, we'll never be fixed on our own. Jesus wants us to come to him, even as we're covered in the mud of our inability.

Christian life is not about projecting the perfect image, doing and saying all the right things, acting as if we're in control. Instead, it's about getting honest with God, showing him our inner life, which matters most, admitting we're sick, helpless, and desperately in need of grace. It's about taking the sin that dwells within us seriously, and really crying out for his grace of deliverance in Jesus. So, what does it look like to stop trying to hide behind a mask? Instead of spiraling into shame, or trying really hard in secret, we just stop, right in the middle of our mess, and confess, "Lord, I've failed again. I am totally incapable. But I come to you for your grace again, and I can only cling to you today."

Throughout its pages the Bible warns us about sin. It says sin is living in our thoughts and in our hearts, making us incurably sick (Gen. 6:5; Jer. 17:9). Here it says sin is in the members of our bodies. Elsewhere the Bible says sin is in the world all around us, in the temptations of the flesh and the emotions, and in the vanities of this world. Sin is how the devil keeps us deceived, helpless and hopeless. We need to wake up to this ongoing battle in us and around us every day. We need to fight the good fight of the faith, crying out to our Lord Jesus and depending on him every day. We look soberly at the sin dwelling within, but we also look up in faith to our Lord Jesus, the only One who truly can deliver us.

If we misunderstand this, Christian life can feel so disorienting. We think once we're saved, the battle should get easier, our willpower should get stronger, failure should become rare. But Romans 7 shatters that illusion. We never stop needing rescue; in fact, we realize more and more how desperately we need rescue every day. When the pressure mounts, when our old familiar temptations reappear, when our best resolutions evaporate right after breakfast, we face a decisive moment. We can either retreat into the shadows and try a little harder. Or we can drop the performance, stop pretending we can fix ourselves, and run straight to the One who already knows our failure and loves us still.

Now let's look at how Paul concludes in verses 24–25. He doesn't offer a slick formula or moral pep talk. He lays bare his wretchedness—and in the same breath, looks straight to the Deliverer: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" He knows the One who rescues us right now, in our daily failures, and who will deliver us fully on that final day when he comes again.

So, are you chained to a perfect image? Or chained to a secret sin you're too ashamed to confess and bring to Jesus? Or are you ready to let go of your image polishing and protection? Ready to face the sin that's dwelling within? Ready to go through the humiliating process of hitting rock bottom? Ready to keep fighting every day to cry out to Jesus for deliverance? Let's read verse

24–25a once more. May God give us this honest struggle with sin each day that demolishes our self-reliance and drives us deeper and deeper to Jesus.