WHY DO CHRISTIANS SIN?

Romans 7:14-25

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. If you are a Christian, then you have run into this problem: You continue to sin after salvation. Sometimes voluntarily, sometimes involuntarily. But always regretfully.
2. In Romans 6 Paul said that the Christian is dead to sin and set free from sin (Rm 6:11, 22).
3. So, why do Christians sin?
4. There are three possible answers:
    i. True Christians don't sin. If you sin, then you aren't a Christian.
    ii. Mature Christians don't sin. If you sin, then you aren't a mature Christian.
    iii. All Christians will struggle with sin until they die.
5. Today I want to show you that the third answer is the correct answer.
6. If you don't get this right, then when you sin,
    i. you will be tempted to doubt your salvation (because true Christians aren't supposed to sin);
    ii. or you will tempted to doubt scripture, because it says (you assumed) that you were supposed to have victory over sin;
    iii. or you will get frustrated with the process of spiritual growth, because after years of striving for growth you still struggle with sin.
7. In Romans 7:14-25, a very famous passage, Paul explains why Christians still sin.

II. TEXT: Romans 7:14-25

14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold as a slave
under sin. 15 For I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not
practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not
want to do, I agree with the law that it is good. 17 So now I am no longer
the one doing it, but it is sin living in me. 18 For I know that nothing good
lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me,
but there is no ability to do it. 19 For I do not do the good that I want to do,

but I practice the evil that I do not want to do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, I am no longer the one that does it, but it is the sin that lives in me. 21 So I discover this law: When I want to do what is good, evil is present with me. 22 For in my inner self I delight in God's law, 23 but I see a different law in the parts of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body. 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I myself am serving the law of God, but with my flesh, the law of sin.

III. KEY QUESTION

1. The key question in this passage is whether Paul is speaking about himself before or after salvation. Is this is the experience of a nonbeliever, or of a believer? Better yet, is this the experience of the apostle Paul as he was writing Romans, which means this is the experience of a very mature Christian – probably more mature than most Christians will ever be?
2. I believe Paul is speaking about his experience as a mature Christian. Why? For several reasons.
    i. He is speaking in the present tense. In Rm 7:7-13, Paul was speaking in the first person, but in the past tense. For this reason most commentators believe that he was speaking about himself before salvation. But in verses 14-25 Paul makes a transition. He begins speaking of himself in the present tense, as a mature Christian.
    ii. Paul says things about himself that are only true of a born-again (regenerated) Christian.
        1. He hates sin (7:15).
        2. He desires to do good (7:18-29).
        3. He delights in God's law (7:22).
        4. He serves the law of God (7:25).
    iii. Paul's description of his experience as a Christian is clearly what all Christians, no matter how mature, experience.
3. Therefore, this is what all Christians, regardless of your level of maturity, can expect.

4. In the previous passage, Paul explained that the law is holy and just and good (Rm 7:12). But if that is the case, then why do Christians break the law? That's what Paul is going to answer in this passage.

IV. WHY DO CHRISTIANS SIN?

1. So why do Christians sin? The answer is found in 7:14.
2. **Romans 7:14** For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold as a slave under sin.
3. The answer to why Christians sin is that they are of the flesh, or fleshly. In other words, Christians sin because they still have a sinful nature.
4. This verse has caused many commentators to conclude that Paul is talking about his pre-conversion experience:
    i. Rm 8:9 says that Christians are not in the flesh.
    ii. Rm 6:11, 22 says that Christians are no longer slaves of sin.
5. But remember three things:
    i. Paul is speaking in the present tense.
    ii. Paul says several things about himself that can only be true of a Christian (he hates sin, desires to do good, delights in the law, and serves the law of God).
    iii. Paul said he is "of the flesh," not "in the flesh." It's true that Rm 8:9 says that Christians are not in the flesh, but Paul didn't say he was in the flesh. He said he was of the flesh, or fleshly. And that's not the same thing.
        1. In fact, Paul said that the believers in Corinth were of the flesh.
        2. **1 Corinthians 3:1** For my part, brothers and sisters, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as babies in Christ.
        3. So on the one hand they were Christians – babies in Christ, but on the other hand they were of the flesh because they were quite sinful. So it's possible to be a Christian and "of the flesh," or fleshly, or, as some put it, carnal.
6. What about the phrase "sold as a slave under sin"?
    i. While it is true that Paul has said that Christians have died to sin and have been set free from sin, in Rm 5:19 Paul has also said that

all people have inherited a sinful nature through Adam, and just about all Christians agree that salvation does not eradicate the sinful nature. So, when Paul says that he is "sold as a slave under sin," he could simply be saying that he has inherited a "sinful nature."

7. So in 7:14, Paul is stating the reason Christians still sin. We are of the flesh, or fleshly, sold as slaves under sin.
8. What does it mean to be "of the flesh"? In the Bible, the flesh is synonymous with the sinful nature. In fact, the NIV sometimes translates the Greek word for "flesh" as "sinful nature" (Rm 7:18, 25).
9. So, Paul is saying that the reason that he sins and that Christians sin is because they are fleshly, or because they have a sinful nature.
10. In the rest of the passage, Paul explains what it means to be a Christian and yet have a sinful nature.

V. FOUR FACTS ABOUT THE SINFUL NATURE

1. You want to obey God, but you don't.

i. **Romans 7:15** For I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate.
ii. Some commentators translate the word "understand" as "approve." So it would say, "For I do not approve of what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but what I hate."
iii. Paul is saying that there is the thing he wants to do, and there is the thing he hates. As we continue to read on, it is clear that the thing wants to do is obey God's law, and the thing he hates is sin.
iv. **Romans 7:19** For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do.
v. Yet, he continues to do the thing he hates.
vi. Paul doesn't mean that he never obeys God, because surely if your deepest desire is to obey God, then sometimes you will. He is saying that even though his deepest desire is to obey God, he still sins.
vii. This the experience of every Christian. Your deepest desire is to obey God, and you hate sin, but sometimes you still sin.

2. You are stuck with indwelling sin.

i. **Romans 7:16-17** 16 Now if I do what I do not want to do, I agree with the law that it is good. 17 So now I am no longer the one doing it, but it is sin living in me.
ii. Paul is saying that he sometimes breaks the law even though he doesn't want to. And that proves that there is something other than Paul that is causing him to sin.
iii. Don't misunderstand. You can't blame your sin on something else, or someone else. You are still the one sinning. What Paul is saying is that if you sin even though you hate it, then that is proof that there is another force at work in you that you can't fully control.
iv. Paul calls this the sin living in you (v. 17), or indwelling sin. This is synonymous with the flesh, or the sinful nature. Because of Adam and Eve's sin, all their offspring inherit it from birth.
v. What is indwelling sin, or the flesh, or the sinful nature?
    1. **J. Robertson McQuilkin** defines it as the natural disposition to sin (*Five Views of Sanctification*, 157.)
    2. **Anthony Hoekema** defines it as "the tendency within human beings to disobey God in every area of life (*Five Views of Sanctification*, 157)."
    3. **John Walvoord** defines it as the "inclination and disposition to sin (*Five Views of Sanctification*, 209)."
    4. **J.I. Packer** calls it "the anti-God urge (*Keep in Step With the Spirit*, 128)."
vi. So what Paul is saying is this. If you hate sin but still commit it, then there is another force at work in you that you can't fully control. This is the flesh, or the sinful nature, or indwelling sin.
vii. And since Paul is struggling with it even as a mature Christian, then we can conclude that the sinful nature is something you are stuck with. You will have to live with it for the rest of your life.
viii. Many theologians like to describe it like this: As a Christian, you have two natures. You have the old sinful nature, which is your natural disposition to sin. And you have a new nature in Christ, which is the natural disposition to love and obey God. These two natures are not equal in power. Clearly in this passages Paul says

that the believer's deepest desire is to obey God. But there is still this struggle with sin. You have a new nature that dominates and that loves God, but you will have the old sinful nature that loves sin.

3. **You can't be as good as you want.**
    i. **Romans 7:18** For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it.
    ii. Paul says that he wants to do good, but he doesn't have the ability to do it. He isn't saying that he can't do any good, because surely planting churches, and evangelizing the lost, and strengthening believers are good things. He means that he can't be as good as he wants.
    iii. Every Christian can relate to this. You can't carry out all of your good intentions. You can't be as good as you want.
    iv. Your new nature wants to please God fully and perfectly. But does that ever happen? Do you ever have a day where you look back with complete satisfaction and say, "Perfection"? No. At least, not if you are self-aware and honest.
    v. A quote from theologian J.I. Packer might help.
    vi. **J.I. Packer** (*Keep in Step With the Spirit*, 34-35) "Now because he [the believer] has in him these opposite motivational urgings, one holding back whenever the other draws him forward, the Christian finds that his heart is never absolutely pure, nor does he ever do anything that is absolutely right, even though his constant goal is perfect service of God… In this sense he is being prevented every moment from doing what he wants to do. He lives with the knowledge that everything he has done might and should have been better… He spends his life reaching after perfection and finding that his reach always exceeds his grasp."
4. **Your desire to do good will always be paired with the desire for evil.**
    i. **Romans 7:21-23** 21 So I discover this law: When I want to do what is good, evil is present with me. 22 For in my inner self I delight in God's law, 23 but I see a different law in the parts of my body,

waging war against the law of my mind and taking me prisoner to the law of sin in the parts of my body.

ii. When Paul says, "So I discover this law," he is talking about a principle. Paul notices a principle in his life: When he wants to do what is good, evil is present with him. This is what it is like to live with a sinful nature. Any time you want to do what is good, you are tempted to do the opposite. That's not to say that you always abandon the good for the evil, but that the temptation is always there.

iii. Paul says (22-23) that he delights in God's law, but there is a problem: The law in the parts of his body is waging war against the law of his mind.
    1. The law in the parts of his body is the sinful nature; it is the desire to do evil. It is waging war against the law of his mind.
    2. The law of his mind is God's law; it is the law his mind is set on keeping. Even though his mind is set on God's law, his sinful nature continues to tempt him to do evil.

iv. So, what does it mean to be fleshly, or to have a sinful nature? It means that as a Christian you will always carry around the flesh, or the sinful nature, or indwelling sin – the natural disposition to sin. No matter how mature you become as a Christian, you will always feel an internal urge to sin, to disobey God, to do the things you hate.

v. **William Hendriksen** says that there exists within the Christian a kind of dualism. "The Christian is living in an era in which two ages, the old and the new, overlap. There was a time when you were exclusively a sinner; and there will be a time when you will be exclusively a saint. Right now, you are a sinner-saint."

vi. **J.I. Packer** calls this "the split-self dimension of Christian experience… whereby those whose hearts delight in God's law nonetheless find in themselves allergically negative reactions and responses to it (*Keep in Step With The Spirit*, 223)."

vii. Now what about those verses in Romans 6?
    1. Rm 6:2 says the Christian has died to sin.

2. Rm 6:6 says that our old self was crucified with Christ so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless so that we may no longer be enslaved to sin.
3. Rm 6:17 says you are no longer a slave to sin.
4. Rm 6:18 says you were set free from sin.

viii. J.I. Packer explains that the sinful nature is dethroned, but not destroyed; doomed to die, but not dead yet (*Keep in Step With the Spirit*, 223).

ix. Theologian **Anthony Hoekema** "Most of us would indignantly resent the suggestion that we bear any resemblance to the notorious Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde of Stevenson's famous novel – the man who, though a respected and competent physician by day, committed fiendish crimes by night. However much we may dislike admitting this fact, however, there is a sense in which every converted person is a kind of Jekyll-Hyde combination. For the Scriptures clearly affirm that there is a continual struggle within every converted man between his old nature and his new. Though he may grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, there is no armistice in this war, there is no cessation of hostilities – until we die." (Quoted in *Five Views of Sanctification*, 200.)

VI. IS THERE ANY HOPE AGAINST SIN?

1. This may sound depressing. If we are stuck with indwelling sin, then do we have any hope? Paul asks and answers the same question.
2. **Romans 7:24-25** 24 What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I myself am serving the law of God, but with my flesh, the law of sin.
3. Paul cries out, "What a wretched man I am!" **William Hendriksen** writes that Paul deplores the fact that due to his sinful nature he is unable to serve God as completely and wholeheartedly as he desires. This is a man in agony because he loves the Lord, but no matter how hard he tries he keeps failing. **J.I. Packer** says that Paul is voicing his grief at not being able to fully glorify God (*Keep in Step With The Spirit*, 128).

4. Then Paul asks, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" The body of death must represent the flesh, the sinful nature, indwelling sin. And he answers his own question. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"
5. Don't misunderstand. Paul isn't saying that what he just described was his pre-conversion experience, but now that he is a Christian the war with sin is over. Because in the next sentence he reiterates in the present tense all that he has said. "With my mind I am serving the law of God, but with my flesh, the law of sin." His deepest desire is to do God's will, but he still has to contend with the flesh.
6. Yet there must be a rescue available to Christians because of Paul's answer, "Thanks be to God." And we know from Scripture that there is. The rescue is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ rescues us from the problem of sin – in three ways.
    i. **Jesus rescues us from the penalty of sin.**
        1. This is what Romans 1-5 is all about.
        2. **Romans 3:21** The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe
        3. Right standing and right status with God is given freely to those who believe in Jesus Christ.
        4. Salvation from sin and hell is not based on your performance. It's not based on how much good you do, or how little bad you do. It's based solely on your relationship with Jesus. Do you trust in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? If you do, then God will save from His wrath poured out on unbelievers on the day of judgment.
    ii. **Jesus rescues us from the power of sin.**
        1. This is what Romans 6 is about (see Rm 6:2, 6, 17, 18).
        2. When you put your faith in Jesus Christ, you are united with Him in His death and resurrection. You died to sin. You are no longer a slave to sin.
        3. What does that mean?
        4. As we see in Romans 7, it doesn't mean that the sinful nature is eradicated. It will always be present. But it does mean that you now have power against the sinful nature.

5. At best, some theologians argue that it means that you no longer have to commit voluntary, deliberate sins. You have the power to say no to sin and yes to God.
6. In the least, while some theologians are a little less optimistic, they would say that while you will always struggle with sin as a believer, both voluntary and involuntary sins, you can make gradual progress toward holiness. This is why the Bible commands Christians to actively grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Pt 3:18).
7. As a Christian, you can become more like Jesus. Even if you can't reach perfection this side of heaven, you can sin less and less. You can become more and more obedient. You can become more and more useful to God.

iii. Jesus rescues us from the presence of sin.

1. The best news of all is that for the Christian, there will come a time when the battle with the sin nature will come to and end. As William Hendriksen said, there was a time when you were exclusively a sinner. In this life you are a sinner-saint. But there will be a day when you will be exclusively a saint, when sin longer has any hold over you. That time will come in two stages.
2. First, the moment you die your soul will go to heaven to be with Jesus in paradise where there is no sin.
3. Second, when Jesus comes back He will give you a new glorified body that will be immortal and morally perfect (Phil 3:20-21).

VII. CONCLUSION

1. So, as a Christian, you must strive for holiness. Strive to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.
2. But know what you are up against. You carry with you the flesh, the sinful nature, or indwelling sin. It will always be with you, urging you to sin.
3. What does this mean?

i. On the one hand you can grow. You must strive to grow. That is commanded (2 Peter 3:18). You can and must grow more like Jesus.
ii. On the other hand, the growth will be hard, and slow, and incomplete. You will never reach perfection this side of heaven.

4. But we need not despair for two reasons:
    i. You can rest assured when you sin that when you sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ. He has paid for our sins in full (1 Jn 2:2).
    ii. And you can look forward with absolute confidence to the day when you meet Jesus face to face and never again have to worry about sin (Phil 3:20-21).