

The Anatomy of a Church (16)

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[Acts 20:28](#)

(Continuation from 03/23/14)

PERSONAL HOLINESS

STRUGGLE AND CONFESSION: THE BELIEVER IS TO BE FREE FROM THE LAW, [Romans 7:1-25](#)

The Confessions of a Man's Struggling Soul, [Romans 7:14-25](#)

In [Romans 6](#), Paul began his discussion of sanctification by focusing on the believer as a new creation, a completely new person in Christ. The emphasis is therefore on the holiness and righteousness of the believer, both imputed and imparted. For the reasons given in the previous paragraph, as well as for other reasons that will be mentioned later, it seems certain that in [chapter 7](#) the apostle is still talking about the believer. Here, however, the focus is on the conflict a believer continues to have with sin. Even in [chapter 6](#), Paul indicates that believers still must continually do battle with sin in their lives. He therefore admonishes them: **“Do not let sin reign in your mortal body that you should obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness”** ([Romans 6:12-13](#)).

Some interpreters believe that [chapter 7](#) describes the carnal, or fleshly, Christian, one who is living on a very low level of spirituality. Many suggest that this person is a frustrated, legalistic Christian who attempts in his own power to please God by trying to live up to the Mosaic Law.

But the attitude expressed in [chapter 7](#) is not typical of legalists, who tend to be self-satisfied with their fulfillment of the law. Most people are attracted to legalism in the first place because it offers the prospect of living up to God's standards by one's own power.

It seems rather that Paul is here describing the most spiritual and mature of Christians, who, the more they honestly measure themselves against God's standards of righteousness the more they realize how much they fall short. The closer we get to God, the more we see our own sin. Thus it is immature, fleshly, and legalistic persons who tend to live under the illusion that they are spiritual and that they measure up well by God's standards. The level of spiritual insight, brokenness, contrition, and humility that characterize the person depicted in [Romans 7](#) are marks of a spiritual and mature believer, who before God has no trust in his own goodness and achievements.

It also seems, as one would naturally suppose from the use of the first person singular (**which appears forty-six times in [Romans 7:7-25](#)**), that Paul is speaking of himself. Not only is he the subject of this passage, but it is the mature and spiritually seasoned apostle that

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is portrayed. Only a Christian at the height of spiritual maturity would either experience or be concerned about such deep struggles of heart, mind, and conscience. The more clearly and completely he saw God's holiness and goodness, the more Paul recognized and grieved over his own sinfulness.

Paul reflects the same humility many places in his writings. In his first letter to the church at Corinth, he confessed, **"I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God"** ([1 Corinthians 15:9](#)). Although he refers there to his attitude and actions before his conversion, he speaks of his apostleship in the present tense, considering himself still to be unworthy of that high calling. To the Ephesian believers he spoke of himself as **"the very least of all saints"** ([Ephesians 3:8](#)), and to Timothy he marveled that the Lord **"considered me faithful, putting me into service"** and refers to himself as the foremost of sinners ([1 Timothy 1:12, 15](#)). He knew and confessed that whatever he was in Christ was fully due to the grace of God ([1 Corinthians 15:10](#)).

Only a new creation in Christ lives with such tension of sin against righteousness, because only a Christian has the divine nature of God within him. Because he is no longer in Adam but now in Christ, he possesses the Spirit-given desire to be conformed to Christ's own image and be made perfect in righteousness. But sin still clings to his humanness, although in his inner being he hates and despises it. He has passed from darkness to light and now shares in Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and eternal life, but as he grows in Christlikeness, he also becomes more and more aware of the continued presence and power of indwelling sin, which he loathes and longs to be rid of. It is such sensitivity that caused the fourth-century church **Father John Chrysostom** to say in his *Second Homily on Eutropius* that he feared nothing but sin. The person depicted in [Romans 7](#) has a deep awareness of his own sin and an equally deep desire to please the Lord in all things. Only a mature Christian could be so characterized.

The Puritan writer **Thomas Watson** observed that one of the certain signs of "sanctification is an antipathy against sin... A hypocrite may leave sin, yet love it; as a serpent casts its coat, but keeps its sting; but a sanctified person can say he not only leaves sin, but loathes it." He goes on to say to the Christian, "God... has not only chained up sin, but changed thy nature, and made thee as a king's daughter, all glorious within. He has put upon thee the breastplate of holiness, which, though it may be shot at, can never be shot through" (*A Body of Divinity* (London: Banner of Truth, rev ed., 1965), pp. 246, 250).

The spiritual believer is sensitive to sin because he knows it grieves the Holy Spirit ([Ephesians 4:30](#)), because it dishonors God ([1 Corinthians 6:19-20](#)), because sin keeps his prayers from being answered ([1 Peter 3:12](#)), and because sin makes his life spiritually powerless ([1 Corinthians 9:27](#)).