

# Sermon Growth Guide

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## Inner Peace | Romans 7:15-25

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**Key Verse:** Romans 7:24-25 “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord”

**Big Idea:** The fact that there is a war waging within us is not a counsel for despair but an encouragement that the law of God is at war with the law of the flesh within us.

### Foundations

Paul has just said that we are dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ (Rom 6:8-9). If this is the case, then why do we still struggle with enslavement to sin? Wouldn't one think that dead to sin means that we no longer deal with sin in our lives? Many have urged us to believe that when we accept Jesus as Lord and Savior we die to sin and are alive to Christ; our old sin nature is gone and we are free to grow into the sanctity of new life. Some in the holiness tradition even believe that we can progress into full perfection this side of our physical death and resurrection.

Paul in Romans 7 puts this perfectionism doctrine to rest when he describes what he calls a war (Rom 7:23). His conclusion is that the new believer is both “a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to sin.” With these two forces waging war within us we have a choice to fight it out on our own or throw ourselves onto the mercy of Jesus Christ (Rom 7:25).

### Understanding God's Word

Quite a few believers wonder why they still struggle, go to war, with sin if they are now dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ. Many in fact interpret Romans 7 as the “pre-Christian” Paul. Others in our Reformed tradition see Romans 7 as the normal Christian life. The latter is I believe the proper interpretation of these verses.

### Applying God's Word

We know that the Spirit of Jesus Christ is alive in us by the very fact that there is a war going on inside of us. If we were still in our sins, there would be no war. Sin would have won. Now, though, we have the Spirit of Christ within us that battles against our sinful nature. Many call this sinful nature our “false self.” That false self is not the true image of Jesus Christ within us. Martin Luther would say to the Devil when he approached him, “Get away from me, I have been baptized!” Luther witnesses that although he has died with Jesus and has been raised with him in baptism, he must choose to live in the new self, the new image of Jesus Christ.

### Witnessing God's Word

We witness that in some ways there is no full inner peace this side of our bodily resurrection. We now have the down-payment, the seed, the new image of Jesus in our sinful bodies. This can be our inner peace, that Jesus will win the inner battle as he has already won the outer battle over sin and death.

What Are You Praying For? Inner Peace. How many in the room are praying for inner peace? I don't want to weird you out, but at the end of the sermon I am going to give you a few minutes of silence and prayer. We need not only to talk about prayer during this series, but experience prayer and practice prayer. This will be a quieting and listening prayer. Why? This is one of the few props I bring into a pulpit. The soul is like this jar of water. As it gets knocked around and shaken up, things just get unclear, confusing, disturbed. What is needed is a moment to just stop, a moment to be still before the Lord. "He says, 'Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth.'" (Psalms 46:10) I don't need to do much work to convince you of a need here. Anxiety is pervasive. Kids and Young Adults are called the Anxious Generation. We know way too much and absorb far too many problems we can't possibly fix. General Anxiety Disorder is the most common mental health diagnosis affecting 20% of our population. We need peace.

Rudyard Kipling, the British poet, wrote a poem called "If" in the voice of a father inspiring his son to be a man. "If you can keep your head when all about you; Are losing theirs and blaming it on you; If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you; But make allowance for their doubting too; If you can wait and not be tired by waiting; Or being lied about, don't deal in lies; Or being hated, don't give way to hating; And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise..." On it goes. If you can not take money too seriously, not get discouraged in failure or triumphant in success, keep company with Kings and commoners, keep going, do your best, etc., then, he says, "Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it; And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!" There is a little bit of stoicism in it—don't let anything get to you. But the hunger is to know peace. Inner peace.

If I can just keep peace within myself, it doesn't much matter what's going on all around me. We need peace.

Does this passage sound like a man who knows peace? "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (Romans 7:15) It is so honest, so real, scholars through the ages debated whether Paul was referring to himself or creating a first-person illustration. Could St. Paul have struggled so deeply? I believe so. And I thank God he did. Which is more difficult for you? To understand other people's actions or to understand your own? I can usually figure other people out! My own actions. Those are what surprise me. If I want to do it, why can't I do it? If I know it is the good and right thing to do, I should do it. "And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good." (Romans 7:16) This is an important point. He's saying, I'm not going to change what is good and bad just because of what I am inclined to do. My actions and my choices don't fundamentally alter the nature of the universe and what is right and wrong. I agree God's law is good. I just don't seem to keep it. This was the conundrum Socrates carried to his grave. He thought knowing the good would lead to doing the good. But it didn't. It didn't for his students who still misbehaved. It didn't for himself.

There is another force at play, and Paul names it here for us. Sin. "As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me." (Romans 7:17) This doesn't mean he is off the hook. This isn't "The devil made me do it," or, "It's just my genetic code." He owns it. But there is a force we need to reckon with if we are to find peace. "For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to

do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.” (Romans 7:18-20) “Good itself does not dwell in me,” he means he can’t say he is purely good, fully good, 100% good. He can’t say that because even when he wants to do good, it doesn’t happen. Between intention and action there is sabotage. Eugene Peterson’s Message says it like this: “I need something more! For if I know the law but still can’t keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don’t have what it takes. I can will it, but I can’t do it. I decide to do good, but I don’t really do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway...Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time. It happens so regularly that it’s predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up.”

Sin. I like what Pastor Glenn Packiam wrote, “To put it another way, the problem of sin is that it is a contagion and a captivity, which involves our complicity.” Yes, sin is like a crime committed, a bad choice, a mistake. But it is so much more. It is a contagion, a sickness. It is a captivity. It is a force, or becomes a force, holding us down in chains. When we betray our true king, Jesus, we get trapped in our own betrayal. Imagine betraying your king. Now you want to hide. Now you want to cover your tracks. Lies become webs of deceit. The next lie is easier to tell than the last. Sin gets easier. There is a momentum now, all driving you away from where you belong. How can you escape? “So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.” (Romans 7:21-23) I admit, I love this passage. I’m glad for it. Not only for the psychological and spiritual insight, the

look into the soul, but I’m glad it’s there because I can relate. Sin is still at work in here. The war is still being waged.

Now, wait a minute, we say. “A prisoner of the law of sin?” How can you be a prisoner? You have been set free in Christ. You died to sin, and you rose again to new life in Jesus. Prisoner? You can take the man out of prison, but can you take the prison out of the man? The battle rages. Here is what’s happening. Let’s get down to theology here. Justification. “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1) When you put your faith in Christ, you are forgiven. Your sins are no longer counted against you. Christ died to pay for them on the cross. If you believe in him, that benefit is yours now by trusting in him. Justified. Then something else happens. You start changing. The body is a repository of habits. It learned disobedience. Literally, your neuropathways are set to respond in certain ways to certain stimuli. You are shaped, formed, habituated to a life that is, unfortunately, a life of rebellion against God. Sin. That doesn’t go away in a lightening flash. You are not a prisoner, but you still act like one.

Some ancient Christians taught that salvation happened like this. You were stuck in sin, unworthy of salvation, unworthy to be in the company of God. So, Jesus came and died to pay the debt for that sin. Now your debt is zero, but you are still fundamentally a sinful person. So, the Holy Spirit infuses righteousness into you, like an injection of goodness, and keeps injecting and injecting, until you change enough to be worthy of salvation, until you can say, “I am righteous. Now I deserve Heaven.” Paul, Romans, the Scriptures, they are wiser than that. Even after you meet Jesus and are saved, you are still going to struggle to get out of the patterns of sin, rebellion and

selfishness that have been set by years of misadventures. God doesn't wait for the injections, the infusions. No. The word we use is imputes. God imputes righteousness on you; he covers you with the righteousness of Christ like a cloak. You and I, we are, at one and the same time, justified and sinners, covered by the righteousness of Christ, covered by his blood. What does the Holy Spirit do now? Now the Holy Spirit starts injecting power to be free; to become who we truly are. And this is a battle. This is a struggle. What you read in this passage is a man in the fight. It's like a chick pushing and poking out of an eggshell, like a caterpillar pushing against a cocoon. It ain't easy, but it's good. The more you cooperate with it, the more you will know inner peace.

Oh, and wouldn't it be nice to have inner peace? What if I could just be totally Zen? What if nothing could phase me? That's what Stoics were after. No emotions. Like a stone. Quiet. Still. Immovable. Resting only on yourself. You can try. I'm with Paul in this painful, remarkable self-disclosure. In here is a jumble of warring factions. Desires. Intentions. Values. Hungers. Needs. Wounds. Worldviews. High thoughts and selfish tricks. And in here is the Holy Spirit shedding light on all of it and patiently untangling each sticky knot. Thank God. I wish he would hurry along. When his roots are in the soil, the fruit is Love, Joy, Peace. Paul knows things are rough. All this mess is in here. What should I conclude? The conclusion is, I think I'm just too much mess to function! "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" (Romans 7:24) The mess is real. So is the Savior. That's where we rest our disturbed souls. "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin." (Romans 7:25)

I'm grateful for this passage, as I'm grateful for Jesus' prayer in the Garden. Do you have a Zen picture of Jesus? Was Jesus stoic, untouchable, unflappable? There are scenes when he seems that way. Our human confusions don't bother his divine peace. What is the saying?

"Poor planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on mine."

But Jesus allowed himself to be troubled. "He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.' An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground." (Luke 22:41-44) Jesus took on our distress, so we could know peace. So, I am going to lead us in some silent prayers. Time to pray on these things. Time to ask the Holy Spirit to untangle some knots. Time to ground our inner peace on Christ.