

Paul the Sinner

The identity of the “wretched man” in Romans 7 is not hard to figure out. But the implications of that identity should spark some soul searching in ourselves.

“For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members” (Rom. 7:18-23).



Paul’s description of the struggle with sin in Romans 7 is one of the thorniest problems in New Testament exegesis. Who exactly is Paul talking about in this chapter?

Some insist this is an abstract description of the unregenerate man, the one who has no regard for the things of God. But that explanation falls flat, because Paul says of this man, “I delight in the law of God” (v. 22). The unconverted man would not say that. This is a person who, at least on some level, truly desires to serve God.

Others argue that Paul is describing the Jew who seeks a right relationship with God through his own efforts to keep the Law of

Moses, rather than through Christ. It’s a plausible interpretation that would fit Paul’s past personal experience, but it limits the usefulness of this passage to those from a Jewish background. The wording would have little relevance to modern readers.

Why not approach this passage the same way we would any other text? If we simply let the words speak for themselves, we find some strong clues that help us identify this “wretched man” (v. 24) who struggles with sin in his life.

Notice that Paul uses the first person throughout this passage: “I, me, my” etc. This is personal for Paul, not speculation about some hypothetical human. He also uses the present tense to describe his condition: “dwells, do, practice,” rather than past tense (dwelt, did, practiced). He is describing his current condition, even as he writes these words, not prior to his conversion.

Taken at face value, Paul’s language points to only one likely candidate: Paul the Christian. Even as a follower of Jesus, he desires to please God, to do what is right, but struggles to execute on his good intentions. Paul wasn’t struggling with sin because he was such a sinner; he was struggling because he was such a saint. His desire to do right made him sensitive to the presence of mistakes in his life, and that ongoing battle with temptation and sin drove him into the arms of a Savior who alone could save him.

What we have in these verses is an expanded version of the confession of the tax collector in Jesus’ parable: “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Lk. 18:13). Paul did not see himself as a holy man who had conquered sin and lived on a higher plane than other mortals. He was a fallen human, engaged daily in a war against sin that he could not win on his own. The victory was in Jesus Christ, not his own performance (v. 25; see also Phil. 3:9; Tit. 3:5).

And therein lies the value of these verses for the rest of us. Whatever progress we might make in our fight against sin, we all must admit that we can’t win this conflict on our own. None of us will ever be good enough for God by our own effort. Our confidence is in the sinless Son of God who died in our behalf.

If Paul was a “wretched man” who openly acknowledged his identity as a sinner in need of God’s grace, can any of us do any better? Not likely. The message that screams from this chapter is the need for *humility* in our relationship with God and with others.

— David King