

Know Your Enemy by Jeff Strite

Romans 7:14-8:2

OPEN: In October of 1974 there was a heavy-weight boxing match held in Zaire, a country in Africa. It was called the "Rumble In The Jungle" and it featured two of the best heavy-weight boxers of the day.

Does anybody know who those two boxers were? (George Foreman and Muhammad Ali) Foreman was heavily favored to win, principally because he was considered the hardest puncher in heavyweight history.

Ali was good, but Foreman was better.

But Muhammad Ali did something in that fight that no other fighter had ever dared to try before. He called it his "rope-a-dope" strategy. Essentially, when Foreman closed in on him, he'd lean back against the ropes, hold his arms against his face and allow Foreman to pummel away on his body. Every once in a while, Ali would strike out with a quick blow to Foreman's face, but other than that, he simply went 8 rounds absorbing Foreman's best blows.

For 8 solid rounds, Foreman beat and beat on Ali becoming more and more tired out and weary. And then, towards the end of the 8th round, Ali let go with a flurry of blows that dropped Foreman to mat – knocking him out and sending him into retirement.

Ali won the fight, but Foreman actually was the one who beat himself.

He kept hitting and hitting his opponent, flailing away until he was too tired to fight.

He was so worn out by the 8th round all Ali had to do was come off the ropes and land the decisive blow.

Foreman lost, because he was his own worst enemy.

And that's what Romans 7 is telling us.

We are our own worst enemy.

We're not supposed to sin... but we do sin, and we beat ourselves up because of it.

Notice how Paul describes the battle:

"I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.

As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

I know that nothing good lives 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 what I do is not the good I want to do;

no, 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.

So I find this law at work: When 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 the members of my body,

waging war against the law of my mind and making me ...

...a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members."
Romans 7:15-23

Now there are a lot of theologians who really don't like this passage. To them it almost sounds like Paul – one of the greatest Christians who ever lived – it sounds like Paul is still struggling with sin. That doesn't go down real well with many folks.

Many theologians will try to tell us that Paul was describing his situation BEFORE he became a Christian.

But, why would they teach that?

They teach that because Paul was a great Christian and great Christians don't struggle with sin.

In fact there's a whole theology dedicated to this concept: saying that Christians can reach a point where they don't sin anymore.

It's called the "sinless perfection" doctrine. People who endorse this teaching believe that a person can reach a point of perfection in their walk with Christ where they literally become sinless.

One of the popular teachings of people who believe this... is to ask a person:

"Do you think you could go a minute without sinning?"

"If that's possible... do you think you could go 30 minutes without sinning?"

"If you could go ½ hour... How about an hour?"

"Do you think you could go without sinning for several hours?"

"How about an entire day."

And they basically reason you into believing you could eventually go without sinning EVER.

Now, that sounds reasonable... it just never quite works out that way.

ILLUS: Some years back a friend of mine (a fellow preacher who believed this doctrine) invited me out to eat with him. We went down to one of the popular restaurants in town and I settled into eating. I half suspected what he wanted to talk about, and sure enough he eventually got to his question:

"Do you believe it's possible to get to the point where you won't sin?"

I could see this turning into a long drawn-out theological discussion and I'm not really a guy who enjoys that type of thing. And I really just wanted to eat. I believe God took mercy on me and gave a way to cut to the quick on this:

I looked up from my meal and asked my friend "Have you reached that point in your life when you don't sin anymore?"

He was honest enough to admit he hadn't.

"Well, do you know anyone else who has reached that point in their lives?"

Again, he honestly said he didn't.

"Well, I tell you what – when you find someone who has reached that point where they don't sin anymore, you get back with me and we'll talk about it."

Have any of you reached that point in your lives? (Ask for a show of hands).

That's good, because if you had I'd go sit down and let you come up here preach for awhile, because you'd obviously be a better person than I am.

Now, I understand the appeal of this false doctrine.

God hates sin.

God has saved me from my sin.

Therefore, it seems logical that I'll reach a point where I just don't do sin anymore.

But here is Paul writing: "I do not understand what I DO. For what I want to DO I do not DO, but what I hate I DO."

Notice, he's not writing this in the past tense.

If he were, he'd be writing "I do not understand what I DID."

But he's saying it in the present tense... right now:

"I do not understand what I DO!!!"

Here in Romans 7, Paul is stating that he still struggles with sin. He still fights against it. And once in a while he loses. He's saying that HE (one of the greatest Christians) occasionally slips up and falls.

The Apostle John agrees on this. John wrote:

"If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." 1 John 1:8

As Romans 3:23 says: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Paul did it.

John did it.

I've done it.

You've done it.

Everybody's done it.

But now, we have a quandary.

How could a Christian ever accept the fact that Christians struggle with sin in their lives?

As Paul wrote earlier in Romans 6:2

"We died to sin, how can we live in it any longer?"

Well, let's focus on that verse for just a moment:

We've DIED TO SIN.

What does that mean?

It means we've decided not to live in sin any longer.

When we were buried in water of baptism, we turned our back on that kind of lifestyle. We don't want our lives to be "controlled" by sin.

Now the Apostle Peter said exactly the same thing:

"(Jesus) himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." 1 Peter 2:24

Paul wrote that when we were baptized into Christ, we determined not to live IN sin anymore. And here Peter writes Jesus bore our sins on the cross so that we might LIVE FOR righteousness.

Essentially, the goal is not to live IN sin... but to live FOR righteousness.

One of my favorite quotes comes from a man named John Smithson. He said:
"Before I came to Christ, I practiced sin and committed acts of righteousness. Now, I practice righteousness and commit acts of sin."

What he's saying is this:

BEFORE he became a Christian he lived IN sin. But he did righteous things now and again, and I imagine that made him feel pretty good about himself.

But once he became a Christian he lived FOR righteousness. But he did sinful things now and again, and I imagine that made him feel fairly bad about himself.

Let me repeat – our goal is not to LIVE IN sin but to LIVE FOR righteousness. It's a matter of HOW we decide to live.

ILLUS: Over the years I've gone to jail many times. No, not as an inmate, but to visit those who were there behind bars and wanted to have me come and talk with them about Christ. These guys are behind bars because they're sinners.

They know they're sinners and the legal system knows they're sinners.

That's why they're in jail.

Now, the people in charge of the jail are often cynical about these inmates. They've seen these guys come and go and often presume they'll will never change. Once a sinner, always a sinner. And this kind of cynicism filters down to the inmates. There are some there who really want to change. There are some there who'd like to become Christians... but they're afraid of making the commitment because... well, they'll mess up again and they'll be right back where they started. Losers.

I gave this problem thought and came up with what I call my "skating" theology.

How many you have ever skated?

When you first started skating, did you fall down a lot?

If you went skating today, would you fall down as much as you did at first?

Have you ever watched professional ice skaters?

Do they ever fall down?

Of course, they do, but they usually fall down things that would kill you and I.

For the most part they are graceful and athletic and when they fall down, it's very rare.

Why do these professionals fall down so rarely?

Because they've been on skates so long that it's almost like walking to them. Doing their acrobatic acts is like walking in the park. It's natural and easy...because they've spent so much time living on their skates.

And that's the genius of Jesus did for us. He didn't just die to save us - He died to create the church. The church is a gathering of believers where spend our time together, learning

to walk with God. We learn during the sermons, and in the Sunday School classes, and in mid-week Bible studies, and here at the communion table, and as we sing songs of praise to God. The more time we spend together doing these things, the more natural it is to want to be in God's presence and to please Him. And the more we do that, the less often we fall down and take spills.

Last week, we talked about Paul's comment that Timothy should FIGHT the good fight. And we as I preached, I pointed out that we all have that fight to fight. But now, in every fight, there is an opponent. An adversary in the ring with us. Who is that opponent... who is our adversary in the ring?

(SATAN)

In fact, the word "Satan" literally mean "adversary".

Satan is our opponent.

He intends to hurt us and damage us... and knock us out.

Satan has several strategies to bring us down, but one of Satan's key tools in the fight is to whisper in our ears. Revelation 12:10 says that Satan is "the accuser of the brethren".

He just loves to whisper in your ear and remind you of your past sins.

ILLUS: That's kind of what Muhammad Ali did to George Foreman. All through that "Rumble In the Jungle" Ali taunted Foreman

- He mocked him and told him to throw more punches.
- He laughed as he told Foreman his best blows could not hurt him.
- He made fun of him "They told me you could punch, George!"
- And he scornfully said: "That all you got, George?"

Why did Ali do that?

He did it because he wanted to goad Foreman. Make him angry. Throw him off his game.

And Satan mocks us the same way!

- You mean to tell me that you sinned AGAIN!!\
- You're not going to win against sin anyway... so why bother?
- You're a loser! Why don't you just throw in the towel and give up?

And some Christians listen. They hear Satan's mocking voice in the background, and they just give up. And then they live in a sort of self-hatred of themselves. They live a life of despair and defeat because they messed up... again.

You see, that's what Paul is talking about here in Romans 7.

He's talking about the times when we mess up.

We try so hard to live consistent - righteous lives. Lives that honor God. Lives that don't shame us. But then we say something, or do something, or think something. Maybe it's just a "little thing". Or maybe it's something that - if everybody knew what we'd said or thought or done we'd never be able to show our face in public EVER again.

But whatever that sin is, we know it's wrong.

And we feel guilt, shame, frustration, self-hatred.

ILLUS: Some years back I listened to a song by Don Francisco that dealt with this:

"Sittin' by my window on a rainy afternoon
Everything inside my head was playin' outta tune
I was thinkin' of the fool I'd made of me the night before
In front of God and everyone, I'd sinned and sinned some more
Well, I thought of all the things I'd done, I winced at things I'd said
I wallowed in self-pity, I hung my worried head
And right when I was so far down that even up looked wrong
That's when Jesus gave to me the chorus of this song

He said, Satan, the accuser has been whisperin' in your ear
You just tell him you're forgiven - He's got no business here
Cause it doesn't matter what you've done - it matters what you'll be
There is no condemnation when the Son has set you free
(*"There Is No Condemnation"* - Don Francisco)

You see... that's Paul's point.
He understands the disappointment when we stumble. When we fail. When we fall short.
He writes: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"
Romans 7:24

Who will rescue me from this body of death?
Well, WHO will an rescue me?
That's right - the answer is Jesus.

"Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Romans 7:25
And again: "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" Romans 8:1

You see, that's the whole point
You and I ARE going to mess up somewhere along the line.
We are going to say/do/think something that will us cry out in frustration:
"What a wretched person I am! Who will save me from all this?"
And the answer is: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

John puts it this way: "I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." I John 2:1

John's point was the same as Paul's and Peter's: Our goal is live Godly and sin free lives. So John said "I'm writing these things to you so you may not sin", so you can attain your objective.

But if you DO sin you have an advocate with the Father... Jesus Christ.

And John promises us: If we confess our sins, (Jesus) is faithful and just to forgive us our

sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9

CLOSE: You see, Jesus isn't looking for "sinless perfection". He's looking for someone who wants to sin less and less. Someone who's committed to the fight. Someone who is committed to fight sin, to stand against sin, to do whatever they have to do to control sin in their lives.

But who – if they get knocked down, if they fall down, if they get tripped up... they REFUSE to stay down. They'll jump right back up. They'll confess their sin, trust Jesus for forgiveness... and get back in the fight.

Because they realize they will take blows. They will fall down once in a while. But they will refuse to give in or give up, because they realize (in the battle against sin) it isn't whether or not you fall down... it's whether you stay down that counts.

Back in the late 1800's into there was a great baseball player who became an evangelist.

His name was Billy Sunday. Speaking on sin, Sunday said:

"I'm against sin. I'll kick it as long as I've a foot,

I'll fight it as long as I have a fist,

I'll butt it as long as I have a head,

I'll bite it as long as I have a tooth.

And when I'm old, and footless and fistless and toothless...

I'll gum it until I go home to Glory and it goes home to perdition!"