

This passage in Romans is something of a tongue twister and if you are like me I find myself confused about half way through as to what Paul is trying to say. Paul goes around and round with what he does and what he doesn't want to do. It can make your head spin and is confusing. Pastor Ben Squires, did a translation of verses 15-19 that helps. He writes, *"I don't understand myself at all, for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, but I agree that God's standards are good. So, I am no longer the one who is doing the things I hate, but sin that lives in me is doing them. I know I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. I don't do the good I want to do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want."* (pause)

Paul is describing the inner conflict that Christians have. On the one hand, because we know Christ, we have a desire to serve Christ, to

follow His ways. That's what Paul says he'd like to do. On the other hand, we still have a sinful nature that wants to go against God, that is selfish, wants to do its own thing. That's where Paul admits that he's rotten through and through. The struggle between the Christ-like nature and the sinful nature, that's the struggle we all face as believers in Christ. (Pause)

I think one of the best ways of describing this struggle comes from an artist named Jenny Holzer. Holzer wrote a bunch of statements, what she calls "truisms." Pointed thoughts directed towards our true motives and values. In 1986, she was able to place these truisms on the electronic sign at Times Square in New York and Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. Holzer's phrase, "Protect me from what I want," flashed at night on the Las Vegas strip. As people went to casinos to gamble and indulge in other vices, there was Holzer's phrase to get people to stop and think—Are these things I want, really the best for me?

Holzer's truisms aren't necessarily Christian, but the statement, "Protect me from what I want," comes awfully close to putting this passage from Romans 7 into one sentence. It's the prayer of a Christian

struggling with sin. Lord, protect me from what I want. Protect me from the sin I want to do. Protect me from my sinful desires—my lusts, my addictions, my need for revenge. Protect me from the things that my sinful nature wants to do. (pause)

London based alternative rock band, Placebo sing “protect me from what I want.” The chorus of a song is about the end of a relationship, where the speaker knows that it is better that the relationship is over but there’s still this desire to get back together. The speaker knows that the relationship is leading no place good, but still he thinks about continuing to be with this person.

In that same way, we know that our relationship with sin is leading no place good, but still we think about continuing to follow sin. So, I can imagine Paul being on the Las Vegas strip, looking up at the Caesar’s Palace signboard, seeing Holzer’s truism, and thinking, “Yes, that’s it exactly.”

I don’t know what sins Paul struggled with, but he’s extremely honest here in saying that there’s a constant battle going on in him between good and evil, between God’s will and sin. Paul is admitting

that he needs protection from those sinful desires, and that protection is only going to come from Christ. Remember, even as Paul admits his struggle with sin, this passage leads to Paul declaring that Christ has saved him and all of us from this struggle, this wretched body of death. Christ has not promised to one day give us victory over sin, to give us life forever where there will not be the sinful nature anymore. So even as Paul talks about these sins that fight for his attention, his action, his life, he also knows that Christ forgives and conquers all sin.

As Paul describes this inner conflict between God and sin, he's also saying that his actions sometimes contradict his beliefs or his words. I love the honesty Paul is sharing here. Paul says that he believes in Jesus, but he doesn't always live like it. Paul preaches about following Christ, but he doesn't always follow Christ with his actions, his words, or his thoughts. Paul contradicts himself; he acts contrary to what he believes and says. Who among us hasn't suffered from this type of behavior? (pause) Paul says, "*I am doing the very things I hate. I am rotten. I don't do the good I want to do.*" Paul is talking about himself.

Paul is saying that he is no different than anyone else. He shares in this common struggle that all Christians face. (Pause)

Romans 7 isn't meant to be used by us to condemn others, to point to people and say, "Your actions contradict your faith. You were in church on Sunday and now you're making racist jokes at work." This passage is about each of us admitting ourselves, that sometimes we are like this, that we don't do what our new nature tells us to do, that we do the evil that we hate, that we struggle against sin even though we believe in Jesus. This passage is about all of us looking at that Caesar's Palace signboard and realizing that Jenny Holzer's phrase applies to us, **"Protect me from what I want."** (pause)

This passage is designed to be a look in the mirror. Paul talks about this inner conflict, because he wanted his readers to understand that their struggle isn't unique. Maybe that's why we're quick to see the contradictions in other, but not always so quick to see it in ourselves. Maybe we don't like to see that contradiction in ourselves, because we're afraid that we're the only ones, we're the only Christian in the room who still has some big struggles with sin. (Pause)

This passage is a look in the mirror. It's a way for each of us to see that "*I am doing the very things I hate. I am rotten. I don't do the good I want to do.*" Yet, Paul talks about his own struggle with this, so that we can know that we're not alone. If we're afraid of being the only one, this passage in Romans helps us to know that arguably the greatest Christian missionary, the writer of 13 books of the New Testament, Paul himself had this same struggle. We might still be afraid to admit it, but there's not a Christian around who doesn't have to say, "Lord, protect me from what I want." (pause)

Let's be clear as well that this isn't a **crisis of faith** we are talking about. Perhaps it would seem like if we admit that we struggle back and forth between God and sin, if we admit that sinful desires still are raging in our mind and body, perhaps it would seem like if we admit this that we're somehow admitting that we've lost faith in Christ. To that I say a resounding, **No!** This isn't a **crisis of faith**. In fact, it's a **crisis for sin**. Sure, we're admitting that we still have sinful desires, after all we are human, but we're also saying that because of Christ, there's victory over sin. It's a **crisis for sin**, because sin will be defeated. We're admitting

that we don't always do what God wants us to do, and we're also saying that because of Christ. We know God's will, and in that we have a desire to serve God, we have a new life. It's a **crisis for sin**, because we have a new nature that recognizes sin, we have a new nature that wants to do away with the old, do away with the sinful nature. It's a **crisis for sin**, because sin's days are numbered. Christ will give us victory over sin.

Since Christ has conquered sin, since Christ forgives us instead of condemning us, since we are not alone in this struggle, since this isn't a **crisis of faith**, then when we hear Paul talk about this inner conflict between God and sin, when we see Jenny Holzer's truism, "Protect me from what I want," it's not a **panic** situation. It's not a time when we must **panic** and try to rid ourselves of all this sin in order to still be a Christian. Paul brought this up so that we could know that we can bring these things before God, bring our sins and struggles before God, and ask for God's strength, guidance, and support as we learn to choose good over evil. It's a process and it takes time to get it right, maybe a lifetime. (pause)

(Slow down) So, then, without panicking, we can list before God the things our sinful nature wants, the things that we have trouble ignoring or getting rid of. Holzer says, “Protect me from what I want.”

(Slow) What do you need God to protect you from? What needs to be fenced off? What sinful desires do you need God’s help with?

Take some time to think about that. (pause) Each of us have different addictions, vices, habits, sins we’re lazy about, sins that are easier to keep around. Those are the things that we need protection from. We need God’s help sometimes to put our sin into perspective. We need the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts, in our lives, to keep us from those sins. Sometimes, by the grace and power of God, we’ll be able to leave those sins alone. Sometimes we won’t. Either way, remember this is a **crisis for sin** not a **crisis of faith**. It is a **crisis for sin**, because Christ has given us the eyes to see sin. We are starting to recognize sin for what it is. Sin is a dead-end road, a road that leads to nowhere. We want some sins so bad, but they won’t do us any good. We now know that those sins belong on the other side of the fence, away from us. (pause)

This is a **crisis for sin** not a **crisis of faith**. You haven't **lost faith** when you struggle against your sinful desires, and your salvation isn't defeated when you climb over that fence to be with your sins. The victory of Christ, conquers all our sins—our actions, words, thoughts, and even the times when we sin by *not* doing something when we should. Forgiveness for our sins applies to all our sins. Thanks, be to God. Amen.