

21. Learning Why Christians Have “I” Trouble

In our last topics, we have seen that we want to help our physical and spiritual children understand that the law is good and holy. We have also seen that the law cannot make a person either good or holy. All that the law does is show people when they are guilty of sin. That is why Paul pointed out the fact in Galatians 3:24-25 that we are no longer under the law when we come to Christ. However, there are many Christians who think that they will grow in their spiritual lives by trying to keep the law in their own strength. Instead of experiencing spiritual growth, they experience a life of frustration and failure instead. We will see that explained in more detail in our topic today.

In Romans 7:15-17, we read, “For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that *it is* good. But now, *it is* no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.” As Paul wrote this section of Scripture about his own life, he explained something that is common for all Christians when we depend on our own strength. When we are depending on our own strength, we cannot understand why we do the things that we do. We determine that we are going to make a change in our lives and begin to do a certain thing that we know is right. However, we fail to carry out that thing and continue to practice the thing that we determined not to do. Perhaps, we determine to pray more each day. We do pray more for a few days and then we go back to our old pattern of life and neglect to pray as much as we had determined that we would.

In contrast, there are some things that we determine we will not do again, because we know they are wrong due to the fact that they are sin. Perhaps, we decide that we are going to stop worrying and start turning our problems over to the Lord. That works fine for a few hours and then we suddenly find ourselves worrying again even though we had determined that we were going to start turning our problems over to the Lord. We forget that Christ said in John 15:5, “I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” Whether we fail to do what we had determined to practice, or fail to start doing something new and different in our lives, we feel like a failure. Here, we see that Paul also experienced these feelings in his own life as he was growing in the Lord.

When we do what we had determined not to do, we realize that we are not in control because we do not have the strength in ourselves to keep the law fully. We realize that sin is still present in our lives because we are still in our physical bodies (the flesh). That is why Romans 7:18-20 says, “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.” Here, we see that there will be a great difference between what we will to do and what we actually practice when we try to change in our own strength.

That is why 1 John 2:15-17 says, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that *is* in the world--the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life--is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.” Even though we

are dead to the control of sin over our lives, we see that we can still be tempted by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. In the previous verses, 1 John 2:12-14, we read about three levels of spiritual maturity: little children, young men and fathers. The child knows that his sins are forgiven and knows the Father. However, by the time a person becomes a spiritual young man we read that he is strong, the Word of God abides in him and he has overcome the wicked one. It takes time for spiritual children to grow and become spiritual young men, because we only learn slowly to yield our bodies as instruments of righteousness.

Romans 7:18 said that we will to do what is good. However, we have not been shown how to carry out the things that are good. The fact that we will to do good shows that we have placed our faith in Christ because we did not have that desire before we placed our faith in Christ. We will see in Romans 8 that as we yield our human spirit to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is the One who gives us the power to do what is good. Before we are shown how to walk in the Spirit, verse 19 says that the evil we will not to do will be the very thing that we practice. Romans 12:2 says, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” In this verse, we see that we need to renew our minds and then be shown how to carry out the things that are good and acceptable.

Only as we are transforming our minds are we learning to think Biblically instead of thinking the way that the world thinks. Our minds will not be perfectly transformed until we get to heaven; but, as they are being transformed, we are learning how to become more like Christ. The fact that we do what we will not to do is a reminder to us that we need to continue to grow in the area of yielding our human spirit to the Holy Spirit. That is why Romans 7:21 says, “I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.” Our new nature that we receive at the moment of salvation gives us the desire to do what is good and pleasing to the Lord. We are not happy when we see that evil is still present in our lives. In fact, as Christians, we have a great desire to see our lives completely changed. However, we learn best how to make changes in our lives as we are able to see the example of godly Christians who are usually yielding their human spirit to the Holy Spirit.

As we grow as Christians, we grow first in our knowledge of the Word of God. As a result, Romans 7:22-23 says, “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.” Here, we see that this growth in knowledge causes us to be filled with delight as we learn what is good and pleasing to God. In fact, Psalm 119:97-100 says, “Oh, how I love Your law! It *is* my meditation all the day. You, through Your commandments, make me wiser than my enemies; for they *are* ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, For Your testimonies *are* my meditation. I understand more than the ancients, because I keep Your precepts.” At the same time that we delight in what we are learning from the Word of God, we begin to realize that there is another law at work in our bodies. We are still tempted by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life and these things cause a war in our mind. We know that we want to do what the Word of God says but we have no idea how to practice what we are learning from the Word.

That is due to the fact that knowledge is just the beginning of the learning process. 1 Corinthians 8:1 says, “Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.” The Bible certainly helps us to learn what things are right and what things are sin as we read the Word. However, knowledge by itself only causes a person to become puffed up and proud. Once we have knowledge, then we need both understanding and application. In Psalm 119:100, quoted in the previous paragraph, we see that the thing that gives us more understanding than those much older is learning how to obey the precepts of the Word of God. Then, we are able to both understand the love of God in our own lives and share that love with others.

That is why if we are immature Christians, there is a conflict going on inside our lives. We love what we are learning from the Word of God. At the same time, in our own strength, we fail to obey what we are learning from the Word of God. We may be dealing with this struggle in our own lives at the same time that we are trying to help our physical and spiritual children learn what it means to be free in Christ. Instead of setting us free, this new knowledge only causes us to experience the same things that Adam experienced when he sinned. In Genesis 3:10, Adam said, “I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself.” In this verse, we see that Adam was controlled by fear, guilt and shame. As Christians, we now know what is right; but, in our own strength, we still continue to practice the things that we know are sin. This causes us to experience that fear, guilt and shame. We want to help our children understand from Scripture how to reverse these things

Romans 7:24-25 says, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.” Paul experienced times of misery in his new life in Christ, just as each of us have experienced in our own lives. That misery and conflict in our hearts is what we experience when we depend on our own strength. Our physical and spiritual children also experience these same things. That is why it is so important to help them learn to yield their human spirit to the Holy Spirit moment by moment so that they can enjoy the liberty that we have in Christ. That will be covered in more detail in our next several topics.

Our children also have times in their Christian lives when they want to serve God and be obedient to Him but at the same time feel like they are serving the law of sin. That is why it is so important for every Christian to gain a real understanding of Romans 6:1-8:39. We have just seen what happens when we depend on ourselves. Before the next topic, you may want to reread Romans 7:15-25 and see how many times the words, “I”, “me”, “my” and “myself” are used. Then, you will be prepared to help your children notice that a different group of words are used in Romans 8. May the Lord richly bless you as you explain to your children why Christians have “I” trouble.