“Feet that are quick to rush into evil” can be viewed as “the enthusiastic and complete involvement” in things that dishonor God. This happens when we know what to do and we choose not to do it.

Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside. | Paul Young

Have you ever been rescued? If so, you understand the significance of this word. The dictionary defines rescue as to set free, as from danger or imprisonment. Rescue, therefore, can take on a variety of forms. We can be rescued from a bad relationship, a storm, or a challenging job. We can be rescued from house cleaning, yard work, or cooking as long as we perceive those activities to be restricting. The most significant force from which we must be rescued, however, is sin. That is the main point of this lesson.

Struggling with sin. It is easy to put biblical writers on a pedestal by believing that they had an advantage in dealing with sin. This passage suggests that Paul was much like us. He wanted to do what was right, but his sinful nature seemed to interfere.

When I read that statement, I feel a sense of relief. After all, if Paul had to struggle with sin, it’s no wonder I struggle with it, too. But, Paul didn’t give us a free pass. He didn’t say that we should ignore sin or give into it. He offered a strategy for living a spiritually productive life in spite of our sinful natures.

The tendency is to evaluate our lives in comparison to someone who is more affected by sin than we are. Today, we don’t have to look very hard to find people who are worse than us.

But that wasn’t Paul’s point. God doesn’t grade on a curve. We are evaluated individually against God’s standard which is perfection. It is for that reason that Paul said in Romans 3:23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

☐ In what areas of life do you have your greatest struggle with sin?

☐ What is the role of your faith in overcoming sin?

Satan wants to rob us of our spiritual vitality by tempting us to sin. Sin comes wrapped in personal desires, ambitions, and passions that can seem good on the surface. But when any of those things distract us from God’s real purpose for our lives, we fall prey to Satan’s scheme. We know that sin separates us from God and leaves us spiritually lethargic and powerless. The only way to deal with sin is to continually focus on God’s desires for us.

We Have a Problem

Right defined (Romans 7:7-12). How do we know right from wrong? That is the issue Paul addresses in this portion of the passage. Simply stated, without a definition of “right” we would not understand what is wrong.

Paul identified the Old Testament Law as being God’s definition of right and wrong. Through the law, we get a clear picture that right is anything that pleases God. In verse 7, Paul said that without the law, he could not have known what sin was. In The Message, verse 7 says:

I can hear you say, “If the law code was as bad as all that, it’s no better than sin itself.” That’s certainly not true. The law code had a perfectly legitimate function. Without its clear guidelines for right and wrong, moral behavior would be mostly guesswork. Apart from the succinct, surgical command, “You shall not covet,” I could have dressed covetousness up to look like a virtue and ruined my life with it.
Take a look at the last part of that verse. Paul said that it is possible for believers to dress sin as a virtue and then to ruin their lives with it. Isn’t that a problem we all face everyday?

☐ What are some sins we dress up as virtues? Why are these things so attractive to us?

☐ How can we overcome the tendency to rationalize sin?

Paul was speaking to Jews who had been a product of a law-based religious culture. Judaism had become so burdensome that those who practiced it were living in bondage rather than in freedom. This was never God’s plan.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve lived with more freedoms than restrictions. Had they accepted God’s definition of right and wrong, they would have avoided the forbidden tree and enjoyed all the freedom God allowed.

Think about it for a moment. How many things do we know as “right” because “wrong” has been defined? From the spiritual perspective, we know what is right because God has defined what is wrong.

I know it sounds like we’re talking in circles, but our understanding of right and wrong is critical to our spiritual maturity. Without a clear definitive word, we would be left to establish morality on our own and that would be disastrous.

Maybe you remember learning to drive or teaching a child to drive. Most of us spent more time on the rules of driving than we did on describing the mechanics of the car. It would be chaotic to put a driver on the road who believed that the rules were arbitrary.

Likewise, it would be impossible to live in a right relationship with God without a clear understanding of the rules that regulate that relationship. So, Paul concluded that the law was not sin; it is holy and good. It established the boundaries of our spiritual lives.

Paul had been very religious. He was zealous but separated from God. Before his conversion, he began to see God’s law differently. He understood that he was a sinner and that all of his religious activity was worthless.

☐ How has your understanding of right and wrong changed as you have matured in your faith?

☐ Are there things you think are right that God says are wrong? If so, do you expect God to change His mind?

The Battle Rages

**Battle lines defined** (Romans 7:13-20). The problem is not God’s law; the problem is sin. Our battle is not against God but against our desire to live our way with no regard for God’s definition of right and wrong. That was Paul’s struggle and it is our struggle today.

Have you ever tried to rationalize sin? I can easily justify my bad attitude toward someone because he or she made me mad. I can behave unkindly based on the fact that others were unkind to me. While that makes sense to us, it doesn’t fly with God.

Satan has a way of making sin look right. Think of some of the ways this has happened in our lifetime. Today, we seldom notice things on television that would have been offensive to our parents. It has become more difficult to identify right from wrong because the cultural standards are so vague.

In the midst of this cultural confusion stands God’s timeless standard—His Word. As Paul said in verse 14, “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.” A slave has no choice regarding his or her owner. Likewise, we have no choice in the matter. We are naturally slaves to sin. Without God’s intervention, we will live and die as slaves to the very thing that separates us from Him.

☐ Sin is a constant force that never loses its appeal. Why is sin so appealing?

☐ What is your personal strategy for dealing with sin’s attacks?

Beginning in verse 14, Paul describes his battle as being characteristic of the battle faced by everyone who is a believer.
in Jesus Christ. He points out that even those who are committed to Christ struggle to do what God expects. Matter of fact, he says that it is easier to disappoint God than to please Him.

None of us would argue with that statement. We don’t have to be reminded of how easy it is to do what we shouldn’t do and how hard it is to do what we should. The fact that it is a common struggle doesn’t diminish its significance.

Here’s where Paul’s words are not so encouraging. He identifies some characteristics that we all must recognize as true in our lives.

- Nothing good lives in me (v. 18).
- I have the desire to do good, but I can’t do it (v. 18).
- What I do is not what I want to do (v. 19).
- Even though I know Christ, sin is alive and at work in me (v. 20).

\[ \square \] Review the four statements above and think about how true they are in your life. Considering these truths, what is the role of the Holy Spirit in your daily life?

\[ \square \] How can you yield to God’s desires instead of your personal desires?

Sometimes the truth hurts, doesn’t it? Again, Paul isn’t rationalizing sin. He is simply letting us know that we aren’t immune to sin’s power. Considering what he said earlier in this passage, understanding God’s expectations makes us even more aware of the sinfulness that lives within us.

This isn’t a great encouragement. No one needed to remind me that sin is alive and well in me. I deal with it on a moment-by-moment basis. As Paul put it, we have the “want to” but we lack the “how to.” I can relate, can you?

The good news is that we will get a clearer picture of the “how to” as we move into Romans 8. This portion of Scripture sets the stage for the rest of the study.

The basic principle here is that believers are not exempt from battling with the sin nature that is universal throughout all humanity. Satan uses our propensity to sin to distract us and render us useless for God. How many times have you seen a spiritual leader shipwrecked because he or she let sin win the battle?

As leaders, we must be extra careful to guard not only our reputations but the collective reputation of God as seen in His followers. People get their ideas about God from their experiences with you and me. There are serious warnings regarding our being a stumbling block to those who need to know God.

Take a look at the following Scriptures and consider what they say about our responsibility in the battle against the tendency to sin.

- Luke 17:1-3a
- 1 Corinthians 8:9
- 1 Corinthians 10:31-33
- 2 Corinthians 6:3

Jesus’ words in Luke 17 are strong. He said it would be better to have a stone tied around your neck and for you to be thrown into the sea than for your actions to cause someone to misunderstand God and His expectations. Paul echoed Jesus by saying that we as believers are not entitled to do anything that might cause someone else to stumble. This is a principle that many “believers” argue against because they value their freedom more than their spiritual effectiveness.

Paul suggested that believers should be sensitive to the way in which their actions affect other people. Think about it this way. Let’s suppose that your entire life was captured in a series of photographs. Each photograph represents only a fraction of your life. Are there any photographs of you that might lead someone to misunderstand God and His expectations?

We’re talking about everything you do and every thought you have. If even one of those thousands of photographs would cause someone to stumble, you need to reconsider that activity or that thought. Our freedom ends where our influence begins and our influence begins when we look in the mirror.
In what ways are you excusing sin as acceptable because you are the only one affected? How might someone view a snapshot of a moment of your life? What might God say about that snapshot?

Strategy defined (Romans 7:21-25). Winning requires strategy. It is true in sports, in politics, and in our spiritual lives. How can we be spiritually victorious? Paul offered the following steps.

- Recognize the presence of evil (vv. 21-23).
- Rely on the power of God (vv. 24-25).
- Recommit to God’s ways (v. 25).

We shouldn’t be surprised when we are influenced by evil. That is Satan’s strategy. The very fact that we are being affected by evil is evidence that God has a plan for our lives. Satan wouldn’t bother you if you weren’t a threat to him. I’d be concerned if Satan left me alone because that simply proves that I am spiritually powerless.

Paul said there is a battle between what we think and what we do. Have you been there? Do you ever look back on something you’ve done and wonder how you let yourself do that? Life is a series of “ah-ha” and “uh-oh” moments. God can teach us something that is so amazing and then we follow it up by doing something contrary to what we just learned. We can say it won’t happen again, but it does.

Is there any hope? That was Paul’s question in verse 24. His answer is no surprise—our only hope rests in Jesus Christ.

On the surface, the strategy seems simple. But it requires a continual awareness of the danger of letting down our guard for even one brief moment. Our source of rescue is Jesus Christ. The initial rescue is our salvation, but we are continually rescued as we allow the Holy Spirit to work through our lives.

What is the role of Scripture memory and Bible study in your daily life?

During my time in the Navy, I had the opportunity to be involved in damage control training off the coast of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. When you are onboard a ship, you have to have an effective strategy for dealing with all kinds of potential disasters. The fact that the ship was nuclear-powered made the potential problems more significant.

Throughout the training period, we were challenged not only to know what the books said, but to put what we knew into action. Honestly, if there was a fire on the ship, I wanted everyone to know what to do without consulting the manual. After a while, responding to the threats became second nature. The alarm could sound and I could be at my station doing my job and never even remember waking up.

Most of the threats we face in life are like shipboard disasters—they are sudden and severe. We often have to respond instinctively. This is where Paul’s words hit home. Instinctively I am a sinner prone to sin. No one ever had to teach me to sin; it is a part of my DNA. If we don’t spend the time retraining our instincts, we will respond from the sinful nature and then be left with the consequences of that action.

So how do we retrain our instincts? Back to my life in the Navy. We learned to anticipate danger. We had to continually ask, “What if….” We reviewed the manuals and went through drills with assurance that our new instincts could limit damage and save lives.

As believers, we must study the manual—the Bible. We also must live with a “what if” focus. What if my coworkers invite me to join them for a few drinks after work? What if I have the opportunity to watch a movie I wouldn’t normally watch? What if I am tempted to lie in order to turn my weekend into a three-day weekend?

Again, maybe those situations seem harmless, but think back to the snapshot exercise. If a snapshot of you were taken while you were involved in any of these activities, how would your witness for God be affected? Could you possibly cause someone to stumble? If so, go back and reread Luke 17:1-3a. Is it worth the risk?
What are the three situations in which you need to retrain your instincts so that you respond in ways consistent with God’s character? What is your strategy for retraining your instincts?

Sometimes we are going through life and the wheels come off. We can’t prevent that from happening. But we can prepare ourselves to deal with it when it does happen. If we will make Bible study a daily priority we will slowly retrain our instincts so that our first response is God’s response. Every small group session is an opportunity for us to train people in damage control. The time is too valuable to waste and, because it’s God’s time, important enough to take seriously.

If God took a snapshot of your small group, would He be pleased with the way you coach others and teach His Word? Why or why not?

God has a history of using flawed people to do incredible things. He used Moses, David, Peter, and Paul. He uses you and me and countless others who all struggle with sin.

Satan wants to distract you by making sin appealing and rebellion against God enticing. He wants to make your Bible study time an afterthought. He wants you to believe that there is something more important for you to do than to study God’s Word. He wants you to dedicate your small group time to everything other than preparing God’s people to deal with life’s challenges. Satan wants you to think that people need something else other than the study of God’s Word.

God wants so much more. He wants our small groups to be the catalyst for people to go on mission around the world and around our city. He wants people to fall in love with Him and His Word. He wants us to be a part of the army, not the audience.

Paul said that life isn’t easy. We know that. He said that no matter how hard we try, we will always be dogged by our sinful natures. We can’t give up. We must keep retraining our instincts so that God’s ways become our ways.

Coaching Lesson Five

- Read Proverbs 6:16-19 and call attention to the fifth thing God detests—feet that are quick to rush into evil.

- Ask: What are some examples of intentional sin?

- Read and summarize Romans 7:7-25. Discuss the following questions:
  - In what areas of life do you have your greatest struggle with sin?
  - What is the role of your faith in overcoming sin?

We Have a Problem

- Read and discuss Romans 7:7-12. Use the following question in your discussion:
  - What are some sins we dress up as virtues? Why are these things so attractive to us?
  - How can we overcome the tendency to rationalize sin?
  - How has your understanding of right and wrong changed as you have matured in your faith?
  - Are there things you think are right that God says are wrong? If so, do you expect God to change His mind?

The Battle Rages

- Read and discuss Romans 7:13-20. Use some or all of the following questions in your discussion:
  - Sin is a constant force that never loses its appeal. Why is sin so appealing?
  - What is your personal strategy for dealing with sin’s attacks?
  - Review the four statements on page 3 and think about how true they are in your life. Considering these truths, what is the role of the Holy Spirit in your daily life?
How can you yield to God’s desires instead of your personal desires?

In what ways are you excusing sin as acceptable because you are the only one affected? How might someone view a snapshot of a moment of your life? What might God say about that snapshot?

A Winning Plan

• Read and discuss Romans 7:21-25. Use some or all of the following questions in your discussion:
  
  ➡ How does the Holy Spirit influence your life day by day and moment by moment?
  
  ➡ What is the role of Scripture memory and Bible study in your daily life?
  
  ➡ What are the three situations in which you need to retrain your instincts so that you respond in ways consistent with God’s character? What is your strategy for retraining your instincts?

Now what?

Paul said that life isn’t easy. We know that. He said that no matter how hard we try, we will always be dogged by our sinful natures. We can’t give up. We must keep retraining our instincts so that God’s ways become our ways.

➡ If God took a snapshot of your small group, would He be pleased with the way you coach others and teach His Word? Why or why not?

➡ How can your small group work together to support each other in growing spiritually?