



St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
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# The Epistle of Romans

The Justification of the Ungodly

Chapter 7 Verses 14-25

Romans 7:13–25 is one of the most disputed and controversial passages in the Bible. Does Romans 7:13–25 describe the mind and life of a believer or an unbeliever? Does Romans 7:13–25 describe Paul 'before' he was a Christian, or does it describe Paul 'as' a Christian? Is Romans 7:13–25 a 'pre-Christian experience' or a 'Christian experience?'

Many ancient Christian theologians like Augustine (early church), Thomas Aquinas (Roman Catholic), and Martin Luther (Lutheran) all agreed that this text referred to the Christian Paul.

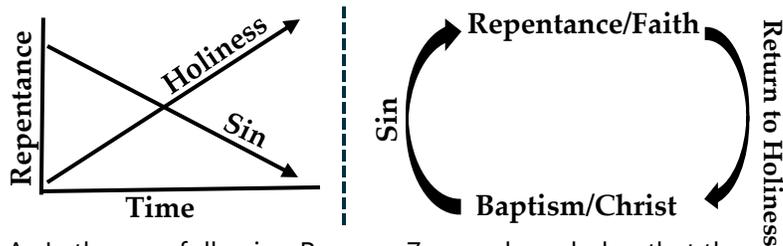
Others, like John Wesley (Methodist Church), believed that Paul goes into character to speak about the struggle of sin as a nonbeliever.

In the twenty-first century, this is one of the main dividing lines between us Lutherans and many American Evangelical Churches. We Lutherans believe that there is no better description of the Christian life in the entire Bible than Romans 7. On the other hand, many American Evangelical Churches, inspired by John Wesley, see Romans 7 as a pre-conversion experience. But why does this matter?

If Romans 7 describes the life of a Christian, it shows that we are simultaneously justified and sinful. And it means that we will remain in this tension until we die.

Now, many American Evangelicals do believe that we Christians have sin. However, they speak of 'growth' in the Christian life. (*This is very different than us Lutherans speaking of our faith being strengthened and growth in good works.*) In other words, they don't believe we are 100% sinner and 100% saint at the same time. Instead, they think in terms of partiality. They think that we are partially sinner and partially saint. Perhaps we are 58% saint and 42% sinner and are progressing in increasing our saintly holiness and decreasing our sin. 65% Saint/35% sinner?

As a result of thinking in the realm of partiality, many American Evangelical Pastors will preach in a way to encourage their congregations to grow in holiness and decrease sins. Their sermons and teachings will be geared at *progressing* their congregations to greater and greater holiness. Consider the diagram on the back page – the left side.



As Lutherans, following Romans 7, we acknowledge that the Christian life is one where we are always sinning – moving away from our holy baptisms – resulting in us needing to be returned to our baptisms in repentance on faith (see the right diagram above). Our sanctification is imperfect (see: Phil. 3:12-14; Ep. 4:15-16; Col. 2:19; Gal. 5). While we may decrease sinful deeds on the outside, we never extinguish the sinful heart on the inside. While our faith can be strengthened, we will only see the sly ways of our sinful nature more in light of the strengthened new man.

But how do we know that Paul is describing the life of a Christian in Romans 7? Frankly, it is self-evident – unless a Christian is lying to themselves and hiding their sin. Keep in mind that ‘both’ legalists and libertines reject the idea that we are simultaneous sinner and saint. Furthermore, in verses 14-23, the Apostle Paul changes from the past tense to the present tense. And there is no reason to believe that Paul is going into character to speak. In fact, he even says in 1 Timothy – some 30 years after his conversion – that Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom Paul is the foremost (present tense).

So, what does the reality of being a simultaneous sinner and saint mean? It means that we battle the old Adam daily. Every day, every circumstance and every moment is a battle with the old Adam, which is why we never outgrow the need of Jesus. We always need Jesus, for He is our justification, sanctification, wisdom – our everything! Our problem as Christians is ‘not’ that we have not attained holiness but that we run away from the holiness we already have in Jesus via our baptisms. Like a dog that returns to its own vomit, we return to uncleanness. Like a fool who recycles silliness, we are prone to wander and leave the God that we love. It is like this: we are holy because of Jesus’ death and our baptisms into that death. And this holiness in Jesus continues, as we live each day within the Holy Christian Church, where the Lord daily and richly forgives us of all of our sins. And so, it makes sense why the Lord calls us to abide. The Lord calls us to stay put so that His forgiveness, life, salvation, and holiness may always shine upon us.

See Hebrews 5:11-6:2 for further class discussion. We need to be returned to Jesus by our churches and Pastors, not progress away from Him in our holiness.

