

# Paul The Sinner?

Updated 13 May 09

In an attempt to justify their sin, many people say, "Well, if Paul the great Apostle was a sinner then what chance have I got?" This attitude comes from verses such as Rom. 7:14-15, 19 which say, "... *I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. <sup>15</sup>I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do ... <sup>19</sup>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.*" Rom 8:7 adds fuel to the argument where it says, "*the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.*" Rom. 7:14-23, Gal. 5:17 and other verses also give the impression that a Christian is absolutely powerless against sin.

If Paul was such a sinner then how could he say, "*Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ*"? (1 Cor. 11:1). Was he following Christ's example by continuing in sin? And in Phil 4:9 he said, "*Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice.*" Did he set a sinful example and ask people to do likewise? The answer to both these questions is obviously no. Therefore, there is something seriously wrong with the belief that Paul was a struggling sinner. God would not give us a poor example to follow.

Claiming that Paul was a struggling sinner comes from the failure to read the end of Romans 7 and continuing on into Romans 8. If we continue past Rom. 7:23 we find that, through the Holy Spirit, Paul was delivered from his sinful nature. In Rom. 7:24-25 he said, "... *Who will rescue me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" The words 'rescue me' can be translated 'set me free', 'release me' or 'deliver me' so Paul is clearly declaring that Jesus delivers believers from their sinful nature. In the next chapter, he continues on to tell us that through the Spirit a person can fully meet the righteous requirements of the law. Rom. 8:1-4 say, "... *through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death ... <sup>4</sup>in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.*" Through the Holy Spirit a believer can meet God's righteous requirements which certainly do not include habitual sin. To those who say "We are only human after all and can't help sinning", the question is, "What sin do you cling to that is too big for God to overcome?" In our own strength we cannot stop sinning but, through repentance, the Spirit's promise is to deliver us.

Paul is not an example of a sinner we can use to justify our sin. He was a deeply sanctified man who wrote half the New Testament. If we are to imitate him then we must not simply accept our sin because it is too hard for us to overcome but we are to humbly submit to God in confession and repentance and allow Him to cleanse us, as it says in 1 John 1:9. Rom. 8:12-13 tell us quite clearly that we have an obligation to live according to the Spirit, and not according to our sinful nature, otherwise we will end up in hell. Gal. 5:16 tells us, "*live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature*". We are without excuse as the full power of our Almighty God is available for us to overcome our wicked nature and this fact is clearly expressed in 2 Pet. 1:3-4 where it says that we have divine power [the Holy Spirit] to share in the divine nature and escape the corruption of the world. The Bible makes it very clear that, alone, we are unable to cleanse ourselves of sin and meet God's righteous requirements BUT through His Spirit we can ... and *must* if we are to be saved from His wrath. Carefully note Col. 3:5-10.

Not all sin is external for the world to see. When we struggle with our thoughts, Paul tells us to "*take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*" (2 Cor. 10:4-5). If we fail to do this, our thoughts will lead to sin and even death as James 1:14-15 tell us ... "*each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. <sup>15</sup>Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.*" Regarding the matter of our internal struggles, Paul gives us further encouragement in saying, "*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things*" (Phil. 4:8). In Matt. 5:48, Jesus tells us to "*be perfect*" and the context of this perfection is love. If we are to love even our enemies then we have to repent of and cast off bad thoughts and moods.

Who among us would dare to say, "*follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ*"? I think that the answer, "Not me!", will lead us to realise that Paul was a well sanctified man. Scripture says that we should imitate Paul so we can be sure that God is not encouraging us to follow a struggling sinner but someone totally transformed by the Spirit. Paul was not sinlessly perfect (see Phil. 3:12-14) but he pressed on toward perfection and that is why God tells us to follow his example. He was not a weak sinner but a powerful Apostle, full of the Spirit, and cannot be used as an excuse for our sin. Rather, God has greatly honoured the man, declaring him to be an example for us to follow.

For a discussion on Paul's 'thorn in the flesh' please go to:

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Mick Alexander  
leeandmick@gmail.com  
Skype: mickandlee  
[www.ChristianIssues.biz](http://www.ChristianIssues.biz)