Do you think people are basically good or evil?

In Romans 7 Paul basically says; “I have a confession to make; I am a slave to sin; I am under sin’s influence; I am subject to sin; capable of sinning; guilty of sinning; and cannot bring myself to a place of personal acceptance before God (apart from Christ and the gospel). I cannot keep from sinning--at least not perfectly; I cannot erase sin’s presence--at least not completely; I cannot cast out sin from life--at least not totally--I cannot get rid of sin--at least not permanently!”

In Mark 10:17-22 Jesus is approached by a young man with a penetrating question: “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life”. So Jesus said to him, “Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is God.”

Many people are desperate to affirm their basic goodness even in the midst of overwhelming evidence that they are bad. I once read a statistic where a group of California prisoners where asked the question; “Do you think you are basically a good person?” Remarkably 100% said yes--even when they were committing crimes!

I once heard someone say, a man is as good as he has to be, and a woman as bad as she dares. There’s so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it’s hardly fit for any of us to talk about the rest of us. But Paul will talk about himself.

In Romans 7 Paul speaks of two husbands; one in illustration and one in application. When a woman is married to a man she is bound to that man by the law. If she unlawfully leaves her husband and marries another the law pronounces guilt and finds that woman an adulteress. If the former husband dies she is free from that law. Paul describes the believer as having died to the law and is now free to pursue a committed life-long relationship with Christ as our new husband. Paul speaks of two discoveries; (1) the law is spiritual, but (2) the believer is carnal, sold under sin. The law reveals sin (v.7); energizes sin (v.8) and inflames our human nature. The law deceives and then slays the sinner (vv.9-11). The law reveals the sinfulness of sin--not just our outward actions but our inward attitudes. Can the believer make himself or herself holy by the law? Paul argues that our sinful nature is so sinful that it cannot be changed or controlled by the law. Warren Wiersbe writes; “It is a wonderful day in the life of the Christian when he or she discovers that “the old nature knows no law and the new nature needs no law” (p.386; Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines of the New Testament).

Paul did not believe he was basically a good person. Paul’s debate does not focus on the essential goodness or badness of humanity. Paul’s debate centers on whether fallen, carnal, sinful human beings are ever capable of any goodness whatsoever!
Scholars argue about who is Paul describing in this passage? Does Paul have the non-Christian in view? The early Greek Church fathers thought Paul was describing the unregenerate Pharisee under the Law. The second view is that this is the normal Christian. This was the view of Augustine, Luther and Calvin. The third view—is this is a carnal Christian, born again but somehow controlled by sin. In Romans (chapters 5-7) sin is understood as an alien power that brings human beings into subjection.

I believe Paul is not so much describing his carnality but rather the reality of living the life of Christ. Remember Paul has been describing the great theme of the book; “the just shall live by faith”. If we are saved by faith we cannot be saved apart from faith; or apart from grace; or apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul demonstrates, using himself as an example, the Law cannot change you (v.14). Why? It didn’t change Paul. The Law cannot enable you to do good. The Law did not make Paul a good person (vv.15-21). The Law cannot set you free (vv.21-25). It did not set Paul free. Who is Paul describing? Paul is describing the person who still believes you can live the Christian life, obey God in your own strength, your own power and your own ability. Paul is not trying to duck responsibility for his own bad behavior. Paul is reminding the Romans (and us) that there was a time when sin obtained a foothold, a mastery in his life that he could not break. Not by keeping the law, not by will-power, or won’t power. But isn’t that your experience too? As a Christian, have you ever lost sight of Jesus and found yourself looking in a different direction and become enslaved to sin again? When you try to keep the rules--and lose sight of the Ruler--you run the risk of enslavement to sin.

Can The Law Change You Into A Good Person? (v.14)

Romans 7:14 (NKJV)14For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

Paul defines the problem for every struggling Christian. I want to be a good person. There is nothing wrong with the rules--the law. The reason why the law can’t change us into good people--is because we are carnal, sold under sin.

What does it mean that the law is spiritual? It means that it deals with the inner, invisible, you. It’s focus is on the inner and not the outer man (Wiersbe; TBEC; pp.536-537).

What is the law? It is God’s revelation of rightness and wrongness. Warren Wiersbe describes the character of the law in four words; holy, just, good and spiritual. The law is holy and just because it comes from a holy God who is just. the law is good because it reveals to us God’s character and our character. The law helps us see that we need a Savior.

The law is spiritual in nature.
In what way is it spiritual? Spiritual in origin. The law was given to man by God’s Holy Spirit.
True Confessions  
Romans 7:14-25

The law is an expression of the will of God and the nature of God. This is why it reveals both the mind of God and the character of God. The law is spiritual in its purposes:

Remember the law is holy, just, righteous, fair, impartial; it treats everyone exactly as they should be treated; it reveals how we are to conduct ourselves amongst ourselves.

Paul confeses he is carnal, sold under sin.

We are carnal in our nature. The word carnal means ‘fleshly’ (sarkinos). Is Paul describing our physical muscles and bones, sinews and synapse, nerves and nostrils? No! The flesh is everything that you are apart from Christ. Even the things that you think might be good or pleasant! The flesh is our total being; body, mind, soul, emotions.

Romans 8:7 NLT; “For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God’s laws, and it never will.”

What is Paul’s explanation for the flesh being hostile to God and disobedient? We are carnal. The Law is spiritual.

Proverbs 5:22; “His own iniquities entrap the wicked man, and he is caught in the cords of his sin.”

When Moses received the Law from God in the book of Exodus, the emphasis was on what the people did. But when Moses restated the Law in the book of Deuteronomy, Moses emphasized the quality of the Law as it relates to the heart of human beings.

Deut.10:12-13 (NLT); “And now Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you? He requires you to fear him, to live according to His will, to love and worship Him with all your heart and soul, (13) and to obey the Lord’s commands and laws that I am giving you today for your own good.”

Someone has well said, “The old nature knows no Law, the new nature needs no Law.”

“The Law cannot transform the old nature; it can only reveal how sinful that old nature is. The believer who tries to live under the Law will only activate the old nature; he will not eradicate it” (Wiersbe p.537).

“The reason the believer cannot make himself holy by means of law is not because God’s law is not holy or good, but because our nature is so sinful that it cannot be changed or controlled by law” (Wiersbe).

If obeying the rules won’t make me holy, what will?
True Confessions  
Romans 7:14-25  
Can The Law Empower You To Be A Good Person? (vv.15-21)

15 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.

Please listen to Paul’s struggle in a different translation;

The NLT translates this; (15) “I don’t understand myself at all, for I really want to do what is right, but I don’t do it. Instead, I do the very thing I hate.”

(16) I know perfectly well that what I am doing is wrong, and my bad conscience shows that I agree that the law is good. (17) But I can’t help myself, because it is sin inside me that makes me do these evil things. (18) I know that I am rotten through and through so far as my old sinful nature is concerned. No matter which way I turn, I can’t make myself do right. I want to, but I can’t. (19) When I want to do good, I don’t. And when I try not to do wrong, I do it anyway. (20) But If I am doing what I don’t want to do, I am not really the one doing it; the sin within me is doing it. (21) It seems to be a fact of life that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. ”

Paul is a genuine believer. Paul does not want to sin. Yet he continues to sin.

Why?

Did Paul fail to exercise his will? No.  
Did Paul refuse to focus on Christ? No.  
Has Paul neglected God’s will? No.  
Is Paul undisciplined and undeserving? No.  

Paul speaks of sin within.  
Three times Paul writes sin dwells in us; “I am carnal, sold under sin (v.14); “For I know that in me (that is in my flesh) nothing good dwells” (v.18); “but sin that dwells in me” (v.20).  

The old nature remains. The Holy Spirit also dwells in us (see chapter 8). In chapter 8 Paul will explain how the Holy Spirit of God helps us, enables us, empowers us to live in victory!

Does this mean the Christian is kind of schizoid?  
Paul reveals his struggle. Self is the ultimate Christian four letter word. I don’t understand myself. I can’t help myself.

Paul reveals two principles (vv.15-25)  
(1) The Principle of the law of sin and death  
(2) The Principle of the Law of the Spirit of Life in Christ (see Rom.8:2)
True Confessions
Romans 7:14-25

Does the born again, blood bought, Christian have one nature or two? I believe the Bible teaches when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and experience regeneration we acquire a new nature.

2 Cor. 5:17 (NKJV) “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new Creation; old things have passed away, behold all things have become new.”

Does salvation mean the old nature goes away? No! Paul repeats that sin dwells in him! Paul has discovered several things: the Law is spiritual. Paul is carnal. Can you imagine how humiliating it was to be a proud Rabbi, a Jewish scholar, a keeper and instructor of the Law; and then discover your very nature is unspiritual and unable to obey the Law of God! When a person becomes a Christian--God gives us a new nature and crucifies the old one. “The dynamic for sin is still there, but not the desire.” The law of sin and death is simply the operation of the old nature, so that when the believer wants to do good, evil is present. Even the good things we do are tainted with evil (see v.21).

“The law of sin and death is counteracted by the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. It is not by submitting to outward laws that we grow in holiness and serve God acceptably, but by surrendering to the indwelling Spirit of God. This law (or principle) is elaborated in chapter 8” (Wiersbe).

Can The Law Set You Free From Sin In Order To Be A Good Person? (vv.21-25)

21I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.

“The believer has an old nature that wants to keep him in bondage; “I will get free from these old sins!” the Christian says to himself. “I determine here and now that I will not do this any longer.” What happens? He exerts all his will power and energy, and for a time succeeds; but when he least expects it, he falls again. Why? Because he tried to overcome his old nature with Law, and the Law cannot deliver us from the old nature. When you move under the Law, you are only making the old nature stronger, because the strength of sin is the law (1 Cor. 15:56)”(Wiersbe p. 537).

22For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.
23But 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.

24O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Paul confesses that he is carnal, sold under sin (vv.14-17). Paul confesses he is void--empty of any personal goodness (vv.18-20). Paul confesses that there are two forces or principles at work
within him (vv.21-23). Paul confesses he is a wretch--and still a man in need of a Savior (v.24). Paul confesses the need for a deliverer (v.24). And that Jesus is that Deliverer (v.25).

Several Bible scholars believe Paul is drawing an analogy from certain practices of capital punishment in the Roman Empire. We are all familiar with the pain of crucifixion. When certain heinous crimes were committed, or if a man committed murder against a child or dignitary, the murderer would be bound hand to hand, face to face, with the corpse of his victim. The person would be exposed to the hot Mediterranean sun and the corpse would begin to decompose, face to face and hand to hand. The flesh would bloat and the stench would become unbearable. Can you imagine? The rotting corpse of your victim becomes the instrument of your own execution!

The believer--bound to the old nature--is truly a wretched human being. The term ‘wretched’ in the Greek language indicates a person who is exhausted after fighting a battle. It can also mean ‘a miserable distressed condition’ (R. Kent Hughes p.144). What is more exhausting that trying to live a good life, being a good person only to discover that the best you can do is never going to be good enough to get you into heaven?

“Who will deliver me?” Paul says “who” not “what”!

25I 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.

“Just as eternal life is “through Jesus Christ our Lord,” so escape from the flesh is through Him. On the cross the Lord Jesus dealt effectively not only with the problem of sin and the problem of Satan, but the problem of self as well. In the next chapter Paul shows how this victory, explained at such length in chapters 6 and 7, can be experienced” (John Phillips p. 120).

Conclusion

How can I use this information in the real world? If we are dead to the Law, we cannot be expected to obey God in our own strength. If we are to obey God at all, God will have to strengthen us by His Holy Spirit and the empowering presence of Jesus Christ in our lives. The Holy Spirit enables us to fulfill the demands of God’s holiness. Christians can have the victory of chapter 6 (know, reckon and yield). We are no longer chained to the rotting corpse of our old nature.

Don’t we have to produce fruit for God? Yes--but the moment we attempt to produce fruit in our own ability, our own strength--we produce rotten fruit. We discover we are failures. Many Christians stop here and become spiritual casualties or prisoners of war. What can we do? “Accept the truths of Romans 7--we are failures in ourselves--the Law is good--we are carnal--and then allow the Holy Spirit to work out God’s will in our lives. We are dead to sin (chapter 6) and dead to the Law (chapter 7) that we might through the Holy Spirit, enjoy the blessed liberty
True Confessions
Romans 7:14-25


Ray Stedman writes;

“There are teachers who teach that this passage in Romans 7 is something a Christian goes through but once. Then he gets out of it and moves into Romans 8, never to return to Romans 7 again. Nothing could be further from the truth! Even as mighty a man as Paul went through it again and again. This is a description of what every believer will go through many times in his experience because sin has the power to deceive us and to cause us to trust in ourselves, even when we are not aware we are doing so. The law is what will expose that evil force and drive us to this place of wretchedness that we might then, in devotion of spirit, cry out, Lord Jesus, it is your problem; you take it” (quoted in Hughes--taken from “Guilt to Glory p. 195).

What will we discover in chapter 8? There is no condemnation for sin, no control by sin, no more continuance in sin. We have a new Lord--the Holy Spirit controls our minds, our motives and our members. With a new Lord comes a new life--we are sons and daughters of God, adopted into His family. Then Paul reminds us of the future, we are predestined for glory, we are preserved for glory, we have a foundation for hope. Our adversary is defeated and our advocate is in heaven arguing our case. No foe can overcome us, no fear need haunt us. We are secure in Christ and God’s love.

What are we going to find in chapter 8? How to put chapter 7 (our past) behind us. We will find hope for life’s deepest hurts. We will find pardon--for what seems unpardonable. We will find courage and resources to face fatal addictions, the hurts and receive healing for abuses. We will learn about the healing power of forgiveness, how to end empty obsessions and find you way back to God! But you don’t have to wait until next week! You can have the assurance of God’s forgiveness today. Stop trusting your goodness. Start trusting Christ’s goodness.