

Honesty is a rare thing. Most of us don't want to be that honest with ourselves, much less in front of anyone else, because honesty means acknowledging the gap between the person we aspire to be and the person we are. Yet, Romans 7 is nothing *but* honesty. This is Paul, stripped of pretense, without excuses, without spin doctors or self-protection. Paul writes, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). These are not excuses, this is Paul telling it like it is.

We live in the golden age of self-improvement. Podcasts vow to fix your bad habits. Books guarantee a "new you" in 30 days. Apps claim they can reshape your mindset. Gyms promise physical transformation. Social media influencers swear if you'll just follow *their* morning routine, you will achieve the "good life." Some of these tools can be helpful. There is nothing wrong with wanting to grow, mature, or live wisely. But beneath it all is the quiet, unspoken assumption that with just a little effort, the right strategy, or one more life hack, you can conquer yourself.

Paul puts it plainly: "I do not understand my own actions...I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (Romans 7:15). Few verses in the Bible are as universally relatable as this one. Like Paul, we want to live godly lives. We know the difference between right and wrong. We understand what God's law requires, yet we cannot restrain himself from doing stupid, sinful things. *We know better, but we don't do better.* We all live with that inner frustration, the gap between who we want to be and who we really are.

It's easy to think we might get some sense as we age. But there's an old Pennsylvania Dutch proverb that feels especially true the older we get: "We get too soon old and too late smart." In other words, by the time we figure out how to handle ourselves, we've already spent decades proving we can't. Paul says the same thing, but with better theology. But better theology, knowledge, or willpower isn't enough. This isn't Paul saying, "I'm failing." This is Paul saying, "I cannot fix myself." Romans 7 is the woeful confession of someone who has stopped pretending. Paul has hit the wall, the limits of self-help.

Paul realized that we cannot defy human nature by sheer willpower alone, and this leads him to a surprising truth. "I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind" (Romans 7:23). There is another force at work in him. It's not just sin out there. It's sin in *here*. No wonder he cries, "Who will rescue me?" (Romans 7:24). Notice Paul does not ask, "*What* will deliver me?" Paul knows his problems cannot be solved by *things*: no program, book, app, TV show, exercise routine, or clever hack will deliver him. Only a *Who* can save him, and Paul confesses that the *Who* is not him.

One of the gifts of Romans 7 is that Paul refuses to clean himself up before speaking. He doesn't present himself as the perfectly polished apostle who founded churches, endured shipwrecks, and wrote half the New Testament. Paul gives us the version of himself he'd probably prefer to hide. This is Paul who struggles, contradicts himself, wants what is right and somehow still does what is wrong. Paul isn't being dramatic; he is being truthful; and his truthfulness is the very place where grace begins to appear. Honesty is the doorway to God's grace.

We fool ourselves when we think that God is impressed with our strength, discipline, competence, or ability to get our act together. Paul suggests that what moves God toward us is not our perfect performance but our abject honesty. Pretending does not attract God; sincerity does. The person who admits, "I can't do this on my own," discovers that God's grace was waiting for that admission all along. Paul is out of explanations and strategies. No self-improvement schemes, not his own willpower, knowledge, resolve, or even the law, could not save him. Now, Paul confesses his need for someone outside himself to step in, someone who is stronger and wiser. "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:24).

The answer arrives in the very breath after the question. Paul exclaims, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:25). The shift is subtle but profound. Paul isn't rescued because he finally figures himself out, but because he finally stops pretending he can. Grace is not God congratulating us for having it all together, but rather God meeting us at the place where we finally admit we can't go it alone. Paul discovers that surrender is not the end of effort but the beginning of healing. When we stop managing our image, trying to outrun our flaws, or curating a version of ourselves we think God prefers, we experience a flood of mercy and grace. "Thanks be to God!"

Romans 7 ends on a complicated note. Paul says, essentially, "I have two selves. One delights in God's law. The other pulls me toward sin. The battle continues." Being an earnest, committed believer does not mean we aren't going to face inner struggles and near-fatal doubts. When you read the histories of spiritual luminaries, you find very human struggles. Augustine of Hippo struggled with sex and food. Martin Luther described an overwhelming spiritual crisis filled with temptation, terror, and despair. John of the Cross coined the phrase "dark night of the soul" to name a profound spiritual and existential crisis characterized by a deep sense of meaninglessness, loss of purpose, and the collapse of his old identity and belief system so that new ones could emerge. C.S. Lewis, after his wife Joy succumbed to cancer, admitted that his faith "was a house of cards." For Christians, the inner struggle continues, but the battle itself is already won!

Being a person of faith does not cause our struggles to disappear; it just reframes them. Romans 7 says, “I cannot fix myself,” but Romans 8 says, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (8:1). Romans 7 says, “There is another law waging war within me,” but Romans 8 says, “The Spirit sets you free” (8:1). Romans 7 says, “Who will rescue me?” Romans 8 says, “God already has.” Romans 7 tells us that God is not surprised by our base humanity or scandalized by our individual weakness. God does not turn away from our struggle; instead, God meets us precisely where we are and offers grace.

So, we might say that the set continues, but the match is won! After that devastating loss at Wimbledon, Amanda Anisimova had every reason to hide herself away, deflect the blame, and withdraw from tennis altogether. She didn’t. She chose honesty, vulnerability, and truth-telling. What happened next is a story of recovery and growth. Anisimova returned to the court with real humility and true grit. Within 60 days, she was back on the court, playing against the adversary who humiliated her in front of an astonished world. This time, she handily defeated Swiatek 6-4, 6-3, reaching her first U.S. Open semifinal and avenging the Wimbledon loss.

Failure was not the end. It was the beginning of something new. Anisimova lost, but she learned and she launched! This is the gospel truth of Romans 7: Our failures are not final; our shortcomings do not have the last word; our inner battles do not define us. Our regrets do not disqualify us because grace means we can be honest without being destroyed. We must learn and accept that we cannot fix what only grace can repair. This is why the God of grace meets us in our weakness and rescues us with mercy that does not let us go. Thanks be to God through Christ Jesus our Lord!

Prayer: God of Grace, how accurately your Word reads my heart. I see the good I want to do, yet I so often find myself doing the very things I hate. I confess the frustration of this daily battle. In my inner being, I delight in Your law, but I feel the pull of my human nature waging war against my mind. I admit I cannot overcome this on my own strength; for in me, apart from Your grace, there is no good thing. Thank You, Lord, that I do not have to live in condemnation. Thank You for the ultimate victory found through Jesus Christ my Lord! I pray that Your Holy Spirit continues to grow deep within me, empowering me to serve in the new way of the Spirit rather than the old way of the flesh. Deliver me from this body of death and let Your grace be my strength when I fall. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Sources:

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Losing, Learning and Launching

Sunday, July 5, 2026
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Romans 7:15-25a

Last year’s Wimbledon was one few tennis enthusiasts will forget. When Amanda Anisimova (uh·nee·suh·mow·vuh), the young, immensely talented player, walked onto the court for the women’s final, expectations were high. Commentators envisioned her name on the trophy. The buildup was perfect; the match was not. What unfolded was startling and painful to watch. Anisimova didn’t just lose: *She didn’t win a single game*, dropping the final 6-0, 6-0 to Iga Swiatek (SHFEE-ahn-tek). This was the first time in over a century that a Wimbledon singles final ended with one player not winning a game, and only the second time in the Open Era that a women’s major final finished with a “double bagel” scoreline. The match took just 57 minutes. For Anisimova, it was a total failure to launch. Anisimova lost in front of the entire world! Conventional wisdom said her career was over. Then came the post-game interview.

With tears in her eyes, voice shaking, the magnitude of the loss hanging visibly on her shoulders, Anisimova didn’t hide behind clichés or defensiveness. She didn’t blame the crowd, the pressure, the weather, or her nerves. She didn’t minimize what happened. Instead, she was honest. “I’m devastated,” she said. “I’m disappointed in myself. I wanted to do better. And I’ll learn from this.” She talked about her mistakes without trying to spin them into excuses. She acknowledged her heartbreak without collapsing into self-pity. She was vulnerable without being defeated; and in that vulnerability, she showed strength. Few people remember what Swiatek said in accepting the Wimbledon trophy; but we will remember Anisimova’s words for a long time. Observers across the sports world called it one of the most emotionally intelligent post-match interviews in years.

Amy Edmondson is an academic who studies failure. In her book, *Right Kind of Wrong: The Science of Failing Well*, Edmondson argues that thriving individuals and flourishing organizations are not the ones who never fail; they are the ones who *learn to fail well*. Edmondson watched Anisimova’s interview and recognized what most people miss: *the courage it takes to face your own shortcomings without excuses*. The courage to name your mistakes honestly, to acknowledge what went wrong, and choose to grow from it. “It was courageous,” Edmondson said. “It was honest, and then you realize how compelling it is and how few people truly take that opportunity to be honest and vulnerable after a devastating failure.”