Chapter 2

Why You Are Stuck

God's Laws At Work

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 (Romans 7:15).

These words haunt all of us. This is the common experience of all those who are trying to please the Lord, who want to walk in His ways.

God knows that you continually fail, and He wants it to be different. He wants so much to set you free from this bondage that He sent Jesus to make it possible.

There is a clear and profound reason why we are all stuck doing what we don't want to do, and I will now go on to explain why.

The Reality God Created

When God created the universe, He created it to operate in an orderly way in accordance with unchangeable laws. There are three aspects, or realms, to the reality we experience:

- 1. The physical
- 2. The spiritual
- 3. The psychological¹

Some would call this the realm of the "soul." However, I have avoided using the word "soul" because it is loaded with meaning to many Christians. It is usually perceived as referring to something negative or sinful. But in the Bible "soul" has many meanings, some referring to something sinful, but often not. What I am referring to here is not "bad," but rather is simply an aspect of life which is based upon our own strengths and abilities and natural tendencies. As with the physical world, in and of itself, the psychological realm carries no moral significance. It just exists.

The Physical Realm

We can all see the orderliness of the physical realm. The physical laws, such as those of physics, chemistry, and mathematics, are unchangeable. We may not fully understand them, and we may misapply them, but they still operate. Since the New York Trade Center Towers fell in the terrorist attack, there are studies going on to understand what was wrong with their design that allowed them to fall. These studies are being done in order to see if we can learn something that will prevent such collapses in buildings of the future. We can learn how to prevent it because the laws of physics are constant. There are no exceptions. Nobody thinks the Towers fell because something went wrong with the laws of physics.

If I were to go onto the roof of my house, convinced that I can fly, flap my arms really hard and step off the roof, I would make a discovery. I would then discover myself lying on the ground with a broken leg. It wouldn't matter whether I knew about the law of gravity or not. It wouldn't matter if I understood it, or whether I agreed with it, or whether I believed in it. It wouldn't matter how much faith I had that gravity didn't apply to me. My broken leg wouldn't mean God was angry with me. I didn't break God's law, all I did was demonstrate it. The law of gravity is constant. There are no exceptions.

The Spiritual Realm

The spiritual realm (another aspect of reality) is just as orderly as is the physical realm, and it always operates according to unchangeable laws and principles. God told us about these laws in the Bible. His commandments are simply a description of how the spiritual realm operates. When He said not to lie, He was saying, "Please don't lie; because if you do, something bad will happen to you." It is the same as God saying, "Please don't step off the roof, because something bad will happen if you do." In the physical realm, nobody ever defied the law of gravity. The spiritual realm is just as sure, and so nobody ever gets away with anything. There is always a consequence. The law of God always operates. Disobeying God's warning is what we call sin. When we sin, we will always reap harmful consequences. The consequences are often

What I am referring to as "God's laws" are the true ways that God set up the spiritual realm to operate. Man's additions do not have the same power. We may or may not accurately understand God's laws; but since they are true, they operate whether or not we know them or understand them.

less immediate and less easy to connect to our specific misdeed than when we are reaping from physical laws, but they are just as sure.

The Psychological Realm

The third aspect of reality is the psychological realm. The psychological realm operates in accordance with our own powers and abilities. Habit patterns, our intellect, and our own willpower are aspects of the psychological realm. Our willpower has been given to us as a tool to

manage this psychological realm, and it has authority there. If I have a habit of brushing my teeth without flossing, and I

Disobeying God's warning is what we call "sin."

decide to start flossing, I can generally succeed in doing so. I may forget from time to time, but eventually the new habit pattern will be established. I experience victory.

We Have Made A Huge Mistake

But we have made a huge mistake, because we have believed that our willpower also has authority in the spiritual realm. However, our willpower <u>only</u> has authority in the psychological realm. We cannot overcome or defy the physical laws or spiritual laws with our willpower.

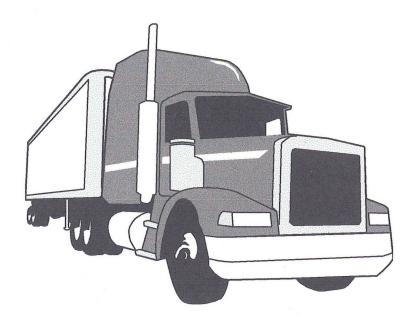
Our willpower is impotent in defying the laws of the physical realm, and it was never given to us for this purpose. We cannot fly by flapping our arms. We cannot lift a 500 pound weight. We discover that no matter how much we want to lift it, we can't. We can will it, but we cannot perform it.

What is perhaps harder to understand is that our willpower is as impotent in the spiritual realm as it is in the physical realm. It was never given to us for the purpose of managing the spiritual realm. We discover this impotence when we try to do a spiritually impossible task, like obeying the laws of God. We discover that no matter how hard we want to do the good that we ought to, we cannot. We can "will" it, but we cannot perform it. *O wretched man that I am* (Romans 7:24). Our failure to do the good that we want to do is not due to a lack of willpower, it is due to our misunderstanding about reality. We are under the illusion that we ought to be able to "will" it and thus do it.

To imagine the relative power of our willpower and the operation of God's laws (the spiritual realm), picture an ant standing on a highway. A huge truck is coming his way at full speed, and the ant thinks he can stop the truck by

When we try to use our willpower to control the physical or spiritual realms, we fail.

standing up and blocking its movement with his body.





The ant's degree of failure is at the same level as our failure to stop the operation of God's laws with our own willpower! Yet we have been

under the delusion that we can do so. And much worse, we think that God has <u>expected</u> us to be able to do so!

Unfortunately, we have often been led into striving by teachings that

imply that we are supposed to be able to live up to the higher standards, as delineated in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Chapter 5. However, this is not what Jesus is telling us to do. Rather, He is telling us

Jesus did <u>not</u> say that you should "act" like Him, but that you should "be" like Him.

that we cannot possibly do it with our own willpower.

"For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20).

What was the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees? It was their willpower! And we need a righteousness that exceeds willpower. Jesus goes on to say that the only way we can truly keep the laws of God is to be changed into His image:

"Therefore you shall **be** perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48 I added the bold).

Jesus did <u>not</u> say, "You shall <u>behave</u> perfectly," but rather He said, "You shall be perfect" (be like Me). We will have a new existence, a new nature. We will <u>be</u> like Him! "Being" like Jesus leads to, and results in, "behavior" like Jesus.³

The Illusion Of Our Willpower

One of the great tragedies in our Western culture is the elevation of our willpower and our intellect to the throne of our life. We think that the only things we can trust are these two faculties. The heart, and anything that we cannot consciously understand or control (such as our emotions)

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are seen as untrustworthy, or even perhaps as bad. We are stuck in this delusion. Our trust is so firmly entrenched in our willpower and intellect that whenever we are in need, without thinking we automatically rely on our willpower and intellect.

The bumper sticker that says "Just Say No" is a perfect example

of this. If people who were hooked on drugs could "Just Say No," many would. Many try - and fail, over and over again. Their failure is the result of "trying hard" to quit - making a decision with their intellect and relying on their willpower to bring it to pass. They are doomed to failure because of

Our trust is so firmly entrenched in our willpower and intellect that whenever we are in need, without thinking we automatically grab those "tools."

what we have just seen about God's laws. This misunderstanding is a big problem, and it is rampant in the Church.⁴ The Bible makes very powerful statements regarding the illusion of our will.⁵ It is a universal flaw in mankind to think we can manage our own life in our own strength. It is so automatic, insidious, and covert that we don't even realize what we are doing.⁶

We may now be tempted to say, "What's the use? If I can't stop the operation of God's laws which are impelling me to do what I don't want to do, I might as well give up." But there is a way to obey the Lord. We

In <u>The Bondage of the Will</u>, Martin Luther makes the point that our willpower has no authority in the spiritual realm. He says, "That is to say, man should realize that in regard to his money and possessions he has a right to use them, to do or to leave undone, according to his own 'free-will' - though that very 'free-will' is overruled by the free-will of God alone, according to His own pleasure. However, with regard to God and in all that bears on salvation or damnation, he has no 'free-will,' but is a captive, prisoner and bondslave, either to the will of God, or to the will of Satan" (p.107).

Paul says that to try to keep the Law in our own power sets in motion a curse in the spiritual realm, and Jesus is the only one who can end that curse: For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "The just shall live by faith." Yet the law is not of faith, but "The man who does them shall live by them." Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.)" (Galatians 3:10-13).

Romans 7:7-25 makes an especially potent and clear statement regarding the futility of trying to use your willpower to keep the law.

Also See Endnote #2-3 for a detailed discussion of Romans, Chapter 7.

⁶ There is a popular teaching that God strengthens our will so that we can obey Him. There is no scriptural basis for this, and this view tends to set us into striving. The Lord wants us to be like Him, not to act like Him. See Endnote #2-2 for more on this erroneous teaching.

just need to understand the provision that Jesus has made for us and make use of it. Let me give another example.

Another huge truck is speeding down the highway. A traffic jam lies ahead, and the truck driver needs to stop the truck quickly. Does he open the door and drag his foot on the pavement to stop the truck? Of course not. He doesn't have within himself the power to stop the truck. What he does do is to decide to press the brake pedal, and then to act by actually pressing it. This activates a powerful brake system, which has been provided for just such a purpose, and the truck comes to a stop. The driver didn't stop the truck by his own power, but he did need to do the following:

- 1. Recognize the problem.
- 2. <u>Believe</u> in the brake system.
- 3. <u>Decide</u> to activate the system.
- 4. Act by physically pushing the brake pedal.

That was his job as the driver. If he didn't act, there would be a mess. In this same way, in spiritual matters, we have to:

- 1. <u>Recognize</u> the problem.
- 2. <u>Believe</u> in the powerful provision Jesus has given us to stop the operation of God's laws against us.
- 3. Use our willpower to <u>decide</u> to activate the provision.
- 4. <u>Act</u> by praying.

As you can see, our willpower does have a part to play in our being set free, but it is not the force or power that brings it about. I will elaborate on this process of being set free in the next few chapters.

God's Laws Bring "Good" or "Bad"

God has provided a system that has sufficient power to stop the operation of God's laws that are bringing destruction, frustration, and failure into our life. However, before we can activate it, we first need to understand more about how God's laws cause us to do the things that we hate.

When God created the spiritual realm, there were two possible ways for a person to exist. If we align our lives with what brings good things (we "obey the Law"), we receive good consequences (blessings). When Adam and Eve walked in the Garden of Eden in obedience to God, life was good.

On the other hand, if we align our lives with what brings bad things (we "disobey the Law"), we experience bad consequences (curses). When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, bad things resulted.

Blessings always flow when we are aligned with His laws. All of us are reaping blessings in certain areas of our life. For example, my son was having financial problems shortly after he graduated from college. He had recently made a decision to follow Jesus, and I spoke to him about tithing. He said, "Dad, how can I give ten percent off the top of my paycheck? I can't pay my bills as it is." But he believed what the Bible said and began to tithe. Immediately, and to my son's astonishment, his financial problems ended. He has continued to tithe, and the Lord has continued to bless his finances. A word of caution is in order. Having money is not always good, and not having money is not always bad. This will become clearer as you read more chapters.

We don't want the blessings to stop. We want more of them. As we align ourselves with the way the spiritual realm is constructed for blessings, we receive blessings. Therefore it is important for us to know how the spiritual realm works for blessing so that we can receive more good.

On the other hand, we also need to understand how the spiritual realm works against us when we sin, so that we can stop the bad things from continuing to happen in our lives.

When we sin, we set in motion God's laws against us. We will surely reap what we sow. We don't sow corn and reap cotton. We don't sow sin and reap blessings. We sow sin and reap bad consequences.

There are, of course, many ways that we can sin, and they all have consequences.⁷

The most destructive consequences are the sinful behaviors that we don't want to do. We are impelled to do them by the operation of God's

Galatians 5:19-21 gives a partial list of possible sins: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissentions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like.

¹ Corinthians 6:9-10 lists more sins: Neither...homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous...nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.

My purpose is not to try to give an exhaustive list of sins, but to give common examples.

law, and as a result, our willpower is completely unable to free us from this bondage. Paul reveals the answer to our bondage to these consequences when he writes:

O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24-25).9

The System That Has Enough Power

For us to have victory over the destruction, frustration, pain, and failure in our life, God had to provide a system that had sufficient power. In fact, for us to be set free requires a miracle! ¹⁰

Jesus was sent by the Father to provide a way out for us. He came to take away our sins. His blood is the only cure for sin, and sin is what is causing our problem. When we pray, as we repent 11 and are forgiven, Jesus pays off our debt and takes it upon Himself. The negative consequences resulting from the sin will continue into eternity, but Jesus will take over bearing the weight of that, and we are set free. For us, in regard to this particular sin, it is as though we had never committed it. The bad behavior going on in our life as a consequence of our sin ceases to happen.

The "Blood" And The "Cross"

In fact, trying to stop the operation of God's laws in our life is not just foolish and ineffective, it is sin. **Read Chapter 13 "The Bad Part"** and **See Endnote #3-2** for more on the fact that our own striving effort to keep the Law is sin.

See Endnote #2-3 for more discussion of the illusion of our willpower and Romans, Chapter 7.

Then the question is, <u>how</u> do we <u>become</u> like Jesus? The answer is, it takes a *miracle*. "It means that free, ethical obedience can have its origin only in miracle, quite in keeping with the view that from the fetters of flesh and sin man must be freed to obedience by the deed of God" (Bultmann, <u>Theology of the New Testament</u>, Part II, p.337). We need a legal transaction to take place in the spiritual realm if we are to <u>be</u> like Jesus. So being saved into God's kingdom and being changed into His image are miracles. They are both things that no man can accomplish through his or her own strength and ability. Read Chapter 6, "God Is On Your Side," for more on this miracle.

See Endnote #2-4 regarding God's eternal plan and the Law

¹¹ To repent means, in part, "implying pious sorrow for unbelief and sin and a turning from them unto God and the gospel of Christ . . . Jesus draws a picture of the true penitent person. Such is assured of the forgiveness of the Father" (Zodhiates, <u>The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary, New Testament</u>, p.969). See Glossary for more.

I will often refer to Jesus' "blood" and His "cross." Some writers admonish us to "take it to the cross," or to "apply the blood." References to "blood" and "cross", either in combination or separately, are short-hand ways of referring to the whole provision that God made for us, through the sacrifice of Jesus, to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). The provision is God's way of setting us free from our own sin and its consequences which resulted from our following in the footsteps of Adam and Eve. This entire book is an attempt to make clear what this provision is, and to help make the "blood" and the "cross" effectual in your daily life. Also see "Blood of Jesus" and "Cross of Christ" in the Glossary.

Even though Jesus paid the penalty for our sin when He died on the cross 2000 years ago, we need to do something to bring the benefits of

that provision into our lives. 12 He has offered to pay our debt for us, but we need to accept it in a specific circumstance. We need to apply this provision purposefully to a particular sin for it to have an effect. Only when we take specific action (we pray

Since the thing causing our ongoing problem is sin, there is only one cure, and that is the blood and the cross of Jesus.

to repent and are forgiven), do we benefit from the provision He has already made for forgiveness of our sins. In my previous example, the truck driver had to press the brake pedal to engage the powerful brake system built into the truck. I will write more about how to pray in the next few chapters.

Suppose some generous person placed \$1,000 in my checking account. When I write a check, I benefit from the money. As long as I don't know about the money being there, or as long as I don't believe it is there, or as long as I don't decide to make a withdrawal and act by writing a check on that account, this money is of no benefit to me. It could remain unused in my account until the day I die. So it is with the gift God gave us in the sacrifice of Jesus. We need to know that the provision is there. We also need to know how to apply it to our real life struggles, and we need to act.

Please note that when I sin, this does not mean I am then going to hell. If that were the case, heaven would be empty, as we all sin and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). Our sin does have negative consequences, but we will still be saved (1 Corinthians 3:15). Also see **Endnote #4-6**.

There Are <u>Two</u> Ways To Stop Bad Behavior

When we recognize undesirable behavior, we have probably thought there was only one way of stopping it. But it should now be clear that there are two ways, because there are two possible sources of the bad behavior, the psychological realm and the spiritual realm. To stop the undesirable behavior we need to use the "tool" that is effectual in that particular realm.

If we have "tried" to change our behavior by using our willpower (psychological realm), but the bad behavior (bad fruit) has continued, we have simply been using the wrong "tool." Since our willpower was ineffective, we now know we are dealing with a spiritual problem and we need to use the appropriate tool - the blood of Jesus. In the past we may have thought the only option available was our willpower.

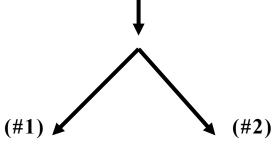
Our willpower is not trash, nor is it useless. It has a job to do, but its' area of authority is in the psychological realm, not the spiritual realm. Both a watchmaker's screwdriver and a sledgehammer have a purpose. One would not be very successful in splitting wood with a watchmaker's screwdriver, nor be very successful in repairing a watch with a sledgehammer. We need to use the right tool for the job at hand.

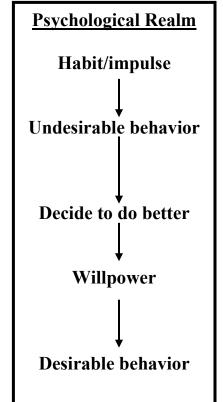
See the adjoining page for an illustration of the two alternatives you have at your disposal to stop undesirable behavior.

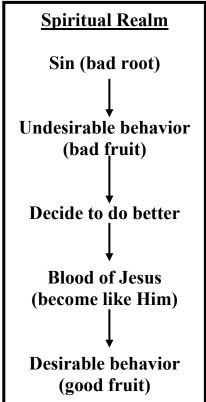
Two Alternatives For Changing Bad Behavior

Recognize undesirable behavior

Consider two possible sources:







Undesirable behaviors that have their source in the spiritual realm are rigid, compelling, and powerful; and they resist our efforts to overcome them. We are stuck, are at their mercy, and feel defeated. ¹³ These behaviors that are destructive (what I will call bad behavior, or bad fruit) can either be acts that hurt others, or they can be codependent behaviors that hurt us. See examples of these behaviors in the following footnote ¹⁴ and in Appendix B, "Codependence."

Bad Roots and Bad Fruit

When we sin and plant an area of wounding in our heart, the sin dwelling in that area can be called a "bad root." By their very nature, bad roots produce "bad fruit," whereas "good roots" produce "good fruit."

"Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. . . Therefore by their fruits you will know them." (Matthew 7:17-18, 20).

The bad things happening in our lives, including bad behavior, are "bad fruit" from a "bad root." There is no bad fruit without a bad root being present. A bad root <u>always</u> produces bad fruit, and a good root <u>always</u> produces good fruit. The root produces fruit after its own kind. There are no exceptions. Bad behavior <u>never</u> comes from a good root, and good behavior <u>never</u> springs from a bad root.

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John 8:34-36, Most assuredly, I am saying to you, Everyone who habitually commits sin is a slave of sin. But the slave does not abide in the house forever. The Son abides forever. If therefore the Son make you free, you shall be free individuals in reality. (Wuest). The verb "commit" is the Greek present participle form, which expresses continuous or repeated action. So when we are reaping from a bad root over and over, we are a slave to it - a slave has no choice but to obey his master. But Jesus can set us free from this bondage.

These rigid behaviors come in many forms, and I will list some to illustrate. Perhaps as you scan this list, you will find at least one that applies to you. Addictions are common examples of bad fruit, such as workaholism, gambling, television, computer games, overeating, alcohol, drugs, pornography, promiscuity, adultery. Some bad fruit is relational, such as compulsion to control or manipulate, verbal abuse, blaming others, always being the one that is at fault, lack of intimacy, romance problems, sexual problems, not being thoughtful, not spending time with loved ones, lack of empathy, lack of emotion, hard heartedness, people pleasing, being compelled to be "nice," anger or being passive, being obsessed with one's appearance or what other people will think, fear of meeting new people, lying. Other examples are compulsive behaviors, being greedy or miserly, financial problems or being overly thrifty, being driven by anxiety or fear, occult involvement. Bad fruit is compulsive, rigid, extreme, and beyond our conscious control.

Bad fruit is compulsive, rigid, extreme, and beyond our conscious control.

Track Backward From-Fruit-To-Root

Once you realize that your willpower is impotent to stop the bad behavior, you can recognize that you are dealing with a spiritual problem in your life (bad fruit). Then you must find the source (the bad root). You must track backward from the bad fruit to the bad root (from the behavior to the cause).

The following story illustrates how a person's bad behavior is connected to sin. Mike had an angry father. When Mike was a little boy, his father

Bad fruit <u>always</u> comes from a bad root.

sinned against Mike by abusing him verbally and physically. Mike hated the abuse and judged his father for it. Mike's father used to lose his temper and beat Mike, and much to his dismay, as an adult he found himself losing his temper and beating his own son, just like his father did to him. Mike hates the sinful behavior he is impelled to do, but he can't stop it, no matter how hard he tries. In truth, he is being impelled to do

these sinful things by the operation of God's law. He has a bad root (the Bitter Root Judgment he made as a little boy) that is producing the bad fruit 15 (the present sinful behavior that he hates).

Steps for applying Jesus' provision

- 1. Find the root
- 2. Pray

In **Hebrews 12:15** the Bible uses the term 'the root of bitterness' for something that can spring up and cause problems and affect many: *looking diligently lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled;*

Once You Identify The Bad Root, Then Pray

Once you identify the bad root, you need to pray about it. There is no other cure. Without prayer, (repenting and being forgiven) there is no forgiveness of sin. I will talk more about how to appropriate Jesus' provision in Chapter 5 ("Forgiving Ends These Problems").

When the bad root is gone, a bad tree no longer is present to produce the bad fruit. An apple tree can illustrate this principle. An apple tree bears apples. If we pick the fruit off an apple tree, apples will grow back. The tree will not replace the apples we picked with peaches, but with more apples. When we see an apple, we know that it came from an apple tree, not a peach tree. When the apple tree is removed, there are no more apples produced.

When the bad root is gone, a bad tree no longer exists to produce the bad fruit.

Isn't Bad Fruit Sin?

I have been emphasizing healing bad roots (which are sin), but bad fruit is also sin. Mike's bad root (judging his father) was sin. In addition, his bad fruit (abusing his own son) was also sin, and it needed to be forgiven by Jesus. We need to hate our bad fruit and want it to change. But it is important to understand the difference between the fruit and the root so that the bad behavior stops recurring. In my example, Mike does need to repent of his current abusive behavior (pick off the fruit); but if he stops there, it will simply happen again (grow back). The only way to stop this cycle he hates is to deal with his childhood judgment against his father (dig up the bad root). I will address this whole process in more detail in Chapters 4, "Judging Causes Problems," and Chapter 5, "Forgiving Ends These Problems."

Since bad fruit <u>always</u> comes from a bad root, and good fruit <u>always</u> comes from a good root, the only way to stop the tree from bearing bad fruit is to remove the bad root and substitute the "good root" (Jesus).

To stop the bad cycle, the blood of Jesus needs to be applied, but to the <u>root</u> rather than just to the fruit.

In the Church we have primarily been fruit inspectors, and we have focused on picking off the bad fruit. This is important, since the bad fruit is sin. But we have failed to understand the necessity of removing the bad root, and so we have failed in our Christian walk, over and over again: what I hate, that I do (Romans 7:15). The provision that Jesus made for removing our sin must be applied to the <u>root</u> and not just to the fruit to be effectual in setting us free.

Please be aware that once our heart has been cleansed by Jesus, and the reaping in the spiritual realm has been stopped, there may still be some residual consequences in the world around us from our previous sins. For instance, Mike's own children will likely still be angry with him and will have judged him for his past abusive behavior towards them. They are therefore wounded and will need to be healed by Jesus. In addition, his past abusive behavior may have led his wife to divorce him. Then, even though he has been healed, his family may remain broken.

Summary

God created an orderly universe that operates in accordance with unchangeable laws. He originally intended for these laws to apply to humanity for our blessing. If we would live as God intended, and thus in accordance with the way the spiritual realm works, we would be blessed. But when Adam and Eve fell, the cursing side of His laws also began to apply to us. When we sin, we set in motion God's laws working against us. We do not have within ourselves the ability to stop the operation of God's laws, and so we have to pay the consequences of our sins. God knew how helpless we were, so Jesus came to rescue us from this impossible situation.