

Romans 7, Pt. 1

To be honest with you, Romans gets more difficult as we press forward. The seventh chapter is particularly challenging, and different views have been put forward to address various pieces of the text. With God's help, we will try to keep our heads here and move slowly, while all the while praying that God will keep our hearts warm with gospel light. In order to get us ready for this passage, I want to review again where we have been in Romans.

Romans is the good news of God's righteousness. This righteousness of God is demonstrated through both the way of judgment and the way of mercy. Paul begins by introducing himself and his mission to his audience. He and his co-workers have "received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name" (1:5). His message is the gospel of Christ - "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith'" (1:17). This message is what Paul wants to preach in Rome, even as he plans a trip to Spain (15:24). The gospel reveals righteousness through mercy. Yet the full news is that God's righteousness is also revealed in judgment - "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (1:18). Beginning with this verse and continuing on until the mid-point of chapter three, Paul tells us of the background of his ministry. Here is the true story of the world. **Humanity has fallen**, trading knowledge of God for the worship of idols. Now a situation exists in which no one does the right thing, and all violate the standards of God. Some people have the law of Moses and will be judged by this law. Others have their own conscience, and they will be judged according to the dictates of their own consciences (or at least with the help of their consciences). But **all will be judged by their works**, and nothing will be able to atone for actual acts of wrong-doing against a holy God. In the second chapter, we saw that there are many attempts to make up for wrong-doing but they all fail in the end.

But something decisive is announced in 3:21 - “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.” Christ has died as an atoning sacrifice (3:25). His blood can atone for sin. This is the way of mercy in Christ, and the way we enter this mercy is through faith. This faith is not alien to the teaching of the Old Testament but was in fact a central theme all along, for as chapter four makes clear, Abraham is the great Old Testament example of faith. He was justified by faith. Indeed, we might say that **the overarching theme of 3:21-4:25 is justification**, or our right standing with God through faith.

When we are justified, **God is not through with us**. This is because we are now united with Christ. He begins working to plant his righteousness into us and bring it out into the world around us and through us. This process is known as **sanctification**. It is important to emphasize that sanctification - righteousness in us and through us - **is the theme of 5:1-8:17**. These chapters are for those who have clearly made commitment to Christ and now need to know the pathway to transformation. Chapter five reminds us of what we lost in Adam and what we gained in Christ. What we have gained in Christ is peace with God, the presence of the Holy Spirit, joy in suffering, and the hope of eternal life. Chapter six hinges on two questions - both of which are variants of the idea that maybe sin is not such a big deal for us because of what Christ has done. Paul refutes these ideas and teaches that we are joined to Jesus - shaped by his story - and enslaved to the liberating power of God.

And now we arrive at the seventh chapter. Remember that **Paul is talking to those who have found freedom in Christ**, people who are walking in the way of Jesus. If we hold this summary clearly in mind, we will have much help in understanding this chapter. It is especially important to remember the question of 6:15 because it is clear from the rhetorical question that begins chapter seven that Paul is still running down this line of thought. **The question of 6:15 reads, “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?”** Paul was prompted to ask this question because he had just explained how Christians are united to Jesus and shaped by his story. He rose from the dead and now lives to God, and Christians live with him. We are not under law because the law could only bring condemnation to those who violated it. But Christ experienced condemnation for us. Now, **we are saved by Christ and certainly not by law-keeping**.

Paul makes this point again in chapter seven by sharing **an analogy from marriage**. A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if he dies, then she is free to remarry. She can enter a new relationship. Likewise the Christian died to the law with Jesus and rose with Jesus into a new relationship with God. But Paul has to stress a point very carefully - just because we are free from the law in a certain sense does in no way mean that we are free from the demands of a righteous life. **Freedom from the law can only mean freedom for holiness.**

And here is where things get a bit tricky. **Was the law of God as revealed in the Old Testament a good thing?** Did God tell his people in the Old Testament to try and save themselves by keeping the law? Many church folk have stumbled over these words and made an assumption like this. But watch out. **The law that the Christian has been freed from has a narrow meaning.** Specifically, I take it to be the law of chapter two. In chapter two, Paul made it clear that knowing the law does not make up for breaking the law. Instead God's people in both Old and New Testaments have been told to live by faith - a faith like the faith of Abraham, who believed God and was justified. The law as Paul has explained it in chapter two is a law that brings condemnation. It is a law that people try to use as a bargaining chip with God. As if circumcision and ritual purity could make up for acts of greed or lust. It is a law without faith. It is **a dead letter without power.**

Does that mean the law was anything other than God's will? Of course not. **The law, instead, is spiritual (7:14).** The law, however, apart from faith only had the power to condemn and restrain some societal evil. The law detached from living faith was abused and misused, as it was in the case of many Pharisees. But our problem was not the law. Our problem was sin distorting the meaning of the law. And sin did its terrible work when the law was heard. In 7:5, Paul says that sinful passions were aroused by the law. In 7:7, the law tells us what is sin but does not give us the power to overcome it. Paul's example is covetousness. The law tells us that coveting is a sin. But what happens apart from faith is that the commandment awakens the desire to sin - "For sin, seizing the opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me" (7:11). Did the law bring death and captivity? No. **Sin used the law to bring death and captivity.** Remember that the

wages of sin are death. So what we are freed from is not God's righteous standard but instead this ineffective law of chapter two, a law made ineffective through spiritual deadness. This law gives us condemnation but no escape from sin. This is **law apart from faith**. This is the kind of law which humans try to manipulate in order to curry favor with God.

We are free from that law. But according to 7:6, we are now free from the written code so that we can serve in the new way of the Spirit. All true saints of the Old Testament who lived by faith tasted something of this Spirit-filled life. They had the law and the commandments, but they also had the Spirit giving them life and mercy from God. The Psalmist could read the law of God and say in **Psalm 119** - "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path." This strikes me as reading the law through spiritually renewed eyes. But we know from reading the Old Testament that this condition was not always true of God's people. And we know that the Pharisees of the first century had created a spirituality focused on external behaviors and scrupulous attention to man-made traditions and yet often lacked the faith of Abraham. **Being free from the law through Christ should not be taken to mean freedom from the kind of faithfulness exhibited in Psalm 119.**

But remember that all of this is being written to Christians. The point is that God wants to transform us. Freedom from the law, as Paul here describes it, is freedom to follow the Spirit now. We will learn more about the present struggle with sin next week as we look at Paul's depiction of his inner struggle with sin. But we can conclude this week with a reminder of something that is implicit in Paul's words. **Believers should be vigilant to avoid the Romans-2-practice of law-keeping.** We can fall into the pattern of focusing on a narrow set of external behaviors and trying to use our supposedly good works to barter with God. We can slip into attempts to follow the written code apart from a living faith. We can try to measure our hope of heaven by counting up our good works. But this way of doing things is not the way of faith. It is not life lived in union with Jesus. It is not the kind of peace with God that Paul tells us about in the fifth chapter. Never forget that the kind of obedience God desires is obedience from the heart. God wants us to be full of the Spirit, transformed into the image of Jesus. More on the Spirit-filled life will emerge when we get to the eighth chapter.