

*Romans 7, Pt. 2*

I said last week that things get tough in Romans 7, and we need to be careful. The first issue that we have wrestled with is **the meaning of the law** as Paul presents it in this passage. I advocated the idea that the law is here understood as the law of the second chapter of Romans. This is the law apart from the living faith that follows in the footsteps of Abraham. It is a law that is manipulated and abused. It is a powerless law. It is a law that leads to condemnation. In talking about the law, we are not really talking about the law of Moses properly speaking. Instead, we are talking about a way of life, a way of life that can also be experienced by Gentiles who have a sense of right and wrong through conscience. One is under the law if one is trying to barter with God through good works or narrowly focusing on certain external behaviors that set you apart from other people.

Being under the law in this sense is **the same as being unregenerate**. What I mean by unregenerate is being spiritually dead. Jesus told Nicodemus that people needed to be born from above or born again. This is the new birth. For a sinful person to find freedom and forgiveness, God must give them a new heart. The message of the evangelical movement of which I am happily apart has always been **“You must be born again.”** The kind of freedom from the law Paul is discussing is freedom from the condemning power of a law which is manipulated and abused. This is a law which makes people miserable. Last week, I talked about Psalm 119. The Psalmist there speaks of God’s law in terms of thankfulness and living faith. The Psalmist spoke in that context as one who had spiritual life and therefore understood God’s law well. But the bondage of the law which Paul experienced was **a bondage rooted in spiritual death**. To get us into the place of freedom, God had to give life to our dead hearts, so that we could pursue him in faith and repentance.

Paul testifies to **our transformation in 7:5-6** - “For while we were in the flesh [this is one of Paul’s ways of saying we were unregenerate], the sinful passions which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death [remember that the wages of sin are death]. But

now we have been released from the Law [or the spiritually dead experience of the law], having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”

And how have we decisively died to this old way of life? The answer is in the fourth verse: “Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.” This is a repetition of the sixth chapter in which Paul teaches that **we are united to Jesus and shaped by his story**. He took the condemnation of the law upon himself and opened the way to have a new relationship with God.

But remember that as we discussed last week, **everything in chapter seven is being written to Christians**. This is part of Paul’s teaching on sanctification. His interest at this point is not primarily to talk about what happened when we became Christians but how we should be living in the here and now. **He is still answering the question of 6:15**, “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” He wants his readers to know that the freedom from the law herein envisioned is not a freedom to do whatever we want. The answer to this problem is certainly not to try and resurrect the perspective of Romans 2, in which we barter with God on the basis of a few external behaviors. The answer is to live in step with the Spirit and keep battling the sin that yet remains in us. And that leads us to think of the lengthy section that takes up the second half of the chapter. **Here Paul writes as a person who follows Jesus and yet wrestles with the reality of indwelling sin**. But if we have been raised with Christ, then how could the words of chapter seven possibly describe us? Let me tell you a story.

Ted and Rex were young men fresh out of college when they decided to enter business together. They shared a dream of starting an auto parts supply company. So, they filled out the forms, found the capital, and entered business together. In the first couple of years, they found success. But in the third year, things began to get difficult. There were problems with suppliers, problems with employees, and problems with the bank. Rex began to make the shocking discovery that **Ted just wasn’t a very good businessperson**. He did not make very good decisions, and those bad decisions affected the business and Rex because of the partnership. And Rex began to do some

things to compensate for Ted. He took out some loans that he shouldn't have taken out. He overlooked some issues with employees that should have been dealt with. He became so focused on putting out fires that he stopped trying to grow the business. By the fifth year, it was clear what needed to happen. The partnership between Ted and Rex needed to be dissolved. Lawyers were contacted. Arrangements were made. And Rex ended his business relationship with Ted. He was free. But there was a problem. For many years, Rex had been forming some **bad habits** because of the nature of his relationship with Ted. Now on his own, with Ted out of the picture, he kept doing the kind of things he did when Ted was around. He pursued some bad loans, avoided conflict with employees, and kept putting out fires. **He was free, but he was still living in unhelpful ways.** The only way that Rex was going to succeed was if he stopped doing what he did when he was in his partnership with Ted.

The external situation changed, but another change was yet necessary. **Bad habits had settled into Rex's life like a kind of muscle memory.** It was too easy to slip back into patterns of business cultivated during the years with Ted. This story will help us understand the seventh chapter. Paul is writing to Christians who have believed and yet are tempted to slip back into old habits. Their situation has changed, and they have been liberated from the way of Adam, from enslavement to unrighteousness. Yet they had learned some bad habits, and those bad habits need to be addressed for sanctification to happen.

We could also think of this through **the lens of growing up in our families.** Much of how we learn to respond in life is developed while we live with our families of origin. This includes things like how we express our emotions, how we handle conflict, and how we speak to those we live with. Most of these behaviors persist after we move out of home. Our address can change, but often enough **our way of doing things stays remarkably the same.** We have to learn how to live according to our new kind of life.

It is the same with Christians. We are **constantly pressured to live in ways inconsistent with who we are and what we have received in Christ.** Paul's audience is most certainly followers of Christ. As Paul says in 7:22, "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man." In this case, the law means not the Romans 2 experience of the law but the Psalm 119 experience.

Paul sees God's moral instruction as good news. To see the goodness of God's instructions in the inner person is a mark of being born again. But he still doesn't follow these instructions completely. He doesn't do what he wants to do. He does what he doesn't want to do. Something has changed in the heart - **he has been born again and set free from the "law of sin" (v. 25)** - but the bad habits of unrighteous behavior keep dogging him. And as we will see in the twelfth chapter, the world continually tries to conform the Christian to new bad habits. What are we to do if we are ever going to escape this situation? How can we remember that the old relationship to sin has been severed and the new relationship to God has begun?

The answer at the end of the seventh chapter is not a "how-to" but instead a **cry of desperation followed by good news of mercy**. Following his deep dive into his inner turmoil, Paul cries out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" What if these two simple lines became our prayer of confession on Sunday mornings? And the good news which answers this cry is just as simple, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" **Herein lies one of our greatest tools on the road to sanctification: sincere confession based on honest reflection followed by joy-inspiring assurance of pardon**. We must confess our sin. We must hear God's word of reconciling grace. This is why we do these things every Sunday morning. But we must also learn how to live our confession and pardon in the course of our day-to-day lives. As this seems to be one of the means that God has given us to battle sin, I believe sincerely that using these tools will break the power of bad habits in our lives and help us to be more like Jesus. Living like this keeps us from falling back into the law trap. For confession forces us to acknowledge the seriousness of our sins - no cover ups or pretending things are alright is allowed - and the assurance of pardon reminds us that Jesus is our only Savior - that doing things our way leads to death but trusting Jesus leads to life. **We are then free to walk in the way of the Spirit**. But there will be more to say on that topic next week. But as we end today, I am reminded of the old quote by Jack Miller, a quote which I think has the Pauline stamp of approval: **"Cheer up! You are far worse than you think. Cheer up! God's grace is greater than you've ever dared hope."**