

# The Spiritual Law for the Carnal Christian

By Prof. D. Engelsma

sermonaudio.com

**Bible Text:** Romans 7:14-16  
**Preached on:** Sunday, December 8, 2019

**Byron Center Protestant Reformed Church**  
1945 84th Street SW  
Byron Center, MI 49315

**Website:** [www.byronprc.org](http://www.byronprc.org)  
**Online Sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/byroncenterprc](http://www.sermonaudio.com/byroncenterprc)

We read sacred Scripture in the 7<sup>th</sup> chapter of the epistle to the Romans, Romans 7.

1 Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? 2 For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. 3 So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. 4 Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God. 5 For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. 6 But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter. 7 What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. 8 But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead. 9 For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. 10 And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. 11 For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. 12 Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. 13 Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful. 14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. 15 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. 16 If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. 17 Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. 19 For

the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. 20 Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. 21 I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. 22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: 23 But 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. 24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? 25 I 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.

We read God's word this far. Consider with me tonight verses 14-16 of the chapter.

14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.  
15 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. 16 If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good.

The text, beloved, is a defense of the fundamental truth that the law of God is good. It rescues, the law of God, from the notion that the church may have that there is something faulty about the law of God inasmuch as the law of God saves no one. The apostle is aware of the fact that he has said some things about the law in the preceding verses that might be the occasion for such a misunderstanding about the law. He has said that the law is made a servant of sin so that by means of the law sin becomes exceedingly sinful in us. He has said that we are dead to the law. He has said that we are delivered from the law. Some might conclude from this that there is something wrong with the law and that the law is bad. In addition, the main part of the epistle to the Romans, chapters 3 through 5, have loudly proclaimed that we are justified by faith without the works of the law and that means that we are justified without any help from the law and without any good works of our obedience to the law.

He has emphasized that without the works of the law someone, someone even in the church may raise the question, then: is there something wrong with the law? Is the law faulty? Is the law to blame? That it does not contribute to our justification with God, and that the law does not save us? Against this serious misunderstanding, the apostle guards in our text, he declares so that everyone can understand, including the children here tonight, that the law of God, that is the 10 Commandments, are spiritual and good. There may be no criticism of the law. The explanation why the law does not save us is not anything faulty in the law for the law is spiritual, but the explanation is in you and me there is something wrong with us, and what is wrong with us is that we are carnal.

The law is spiritual but we are carnal. I call your attention, therefore, to the spiritual law for a carnal Christian and mark that. I do not say a carnal human but I say, as the apostle teaches in the text, a carnal Christian. Notice with me the reality of this, the evidence of this, and finally the conclusions drawn from this. The spiritual law for a carnal Christian: the reality, the explanation or evidence, and the conclusions.

One truth is certainly evident in the text and that is that there is nothing wrong with the law of God. If the law is spiritual and good, the law may not be and cannot be criticized. No one may say anything in criticism of the law of God. The reason why some might think they should say something critical of the law of God is the apostle's statement and teaching as to what the law cannot do and what the law, in fact, does. The law cannot justify and cannot save, and what the law does is to become a servant of sin so that sin becomes increasingly sinful in us by means of the law, and furthermore the apostle has stated that we are dead to the law and delivered from the law. Some might think, therefore, that they are authorized to criticize the law. The apostle destroys that notion when he describes the law as spiritual and good.

The law is spiritual. What the apostle has in mind by spiritual is evident from the contrast in the text with carnal, obviously those are contrary and the apostle wants to emphasize that contrariness, that contrast between spiritual and carnal. The law is spiritual in that it is pure and holy. In contrast to carnality, the law is pure and the law is holy. It is pure and holy in all of its commandments. It is pure and holy in the use that God intends to make of the law.

Every commandment in the law is pure and holy, besides the law is the expression of the spiritual God, a making known of God's spirituality, of his own holiness and goodness, and the law is holy also with regard to the use that God intends to make of the law. That use is not that God uses the law to justify us and save us. The apostle has made that abundantly clear in the verses that precede our text, but the law is spiritual in that when we are compared with that law, our own unspirituality is made known. That's the use God makes of the law and, in fact, the use that God makes of the law is that when the law comes into contact with us, a reaction to that law is that we become more determined in our rebellion against the will of God than we were before.

As spiritual, the law is good. That's another praise that the apostle gives to the law in our text against any notion that there is anything faulty or bad about the law whatsoever. The law is good. It is good as the will of God. It is good in its demand for perfect obedience. No one may chafe under that, that the law does not only regard obedience but that the law demands perfect obedience, the law is good in that demand. The law is good also in its threat of condemnation and damnation upon anyone and everyone who fails to meet the requirement of the law for perfection in the slightest respect. Don't overlook that. The law is good in its requirements but the law is good also in its threat of curse and damnation upon the disobedient sinner.

When we confess with the apostle that the law is good, we are agreeing with him in that respect of the law as well, and never more clearly does the goodness of the law in requiring curse and damnation appear than in the suffering of Jesus Christ. The law's curse and damnation upon you and me who believe in Jesus Christ came down fully and heavily upon Jesus Christ especially at the end of his ministry, and more particularly in his crucifixion. There the goodness of the law in punishing disobedience became evident and that's why in all his suffering at the end, Jesus did not utter one word of complaint upon the punishment that was inflicted upon him by God through the wicked men who

tormented him, sentenced him and nailed him to the cross. Oh, he cried out in the agony of the curse and damnation of the law upon guilty sinners but he never complained. He was silent and his silence amazed his adversaries. He spoke not a word even when as far as they were concerned, he was unjustly condemned for he received all of his suffering as the goodness of the law in punishing the disobedient.

And the law is good also in the purpose that God has with that law with regard to his chosen people. That purpose with the law is not that the law is the power and means of our righteousness, of our sanctification, and of all of our salvation. Earlier in this epistle, the apostle has denied that. Sin by the law became exceedingly sinful. Apart from the law we would not have known sin. The law exposes our sin and sinfulness to us. That's the purpose of God with the law, and when we come into contact with that law by means of the law sin becomes exceedingly sinful in us. We know sin, therefore, in ourselves by the law as we would never otherwise have known it, and besides our sinful reaction to the law is to increase in our rebellion and disobedience to that law. The law does not have the purpose to save us. The law's purpose is to drive us to Jesus Christ for salvation, and with respect to that purpose, the law is good.

There's nothing faulty about the law therefore, and there may be no complaint on our part that when we come into contact with the law, the law does not save us but rather that the law is the means of sin to show us our sinfulness. The failure of the law to save is not due to any weakness or fault in the law but the explanation of the failure of the law to save us is our own carnality. We know that the law is spiritual but I am carnal, the apostle says with the voice of every believing child of God. The fault is in me and the fault is in you.

We are carnal. Whereas the law is spiritual, we are carnal. Carnality is not our humanity, our flesh and blood humanity. God made us flesh and blood humans and about that in itself, there is nothing to be condemned or criticized. Carnality in the language of especially the Apostle Paul is our fleshly sinfulness. It is our sinful thoughts, the sinfulness of our desires and the sinfulness of our emotions, and then we must not make the mistake of limiting carnality only to our grossly wicked thoughts, desires and feelings. As far as Scripture is concerned, every thought that is not wrapped up in God and his glory is carnal. Every desire that does not aim at God and his glory and aim at God and his glory perfectly is carnal. Every vagrant emotion that is not a reaction to the greatness and glory and goodness of God is carnal.

We are carnal through and through, sinful through and through as human beings, not as originally created with our human nature but as we have fallen in Adam. We are carnal with regard to our soul, our thoughts, our desires and our feeling are carnal or wicked. We may take an example of this in regard to the seventh commandment of the law of God. Any thought of sex outside of marriage with another than one's wife or one's husband is a carnal sexual thought. Any desire, even though not planned and dwelt upon, of a sexual relationship with another than one's husband or wife is a carnal desire. The sexual desire in itself is not sinful, is not carnal, but the corrupted sexual desire, the desire that is contrary to the commandment of the seventh commandment of the law of God, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," including the titillation of that desire by pornography

is carnal. That carnality extends to the members of our body as well: our tongues, our hands, our feet, and all of the members of our body, all according to the text are carnal not only because sometimes they are deliberately devoted to some gross transgression of the law of God but because they are not employed perfectly in the service and the worship of God.

The law is spiritual and good. I am carnal, says the apostle and say you and I with the apostle. Such is that carnality that you and I are sold under sin. Remember the issue here, the thought is the inability of the law to save us, the inability of the law to deliver us from our sinful condition, but on the contrary the function of the law to expose us as sinners, the explanation is here we are sold under sin. To be sold under sin is to be a slave of sin. To be sold under sin is so completely to be under the power of the mastery of sin that all that we can do, and all that we desire to do, is to sin against the law of God. And remember once more, sinning against the law of God does not refer only to gross sins, taking a revolver and ending the life of another person, but refers to actions that do not aim perfectly at the love of God and the love of the neighbor for his sake. With regard to the commandment forbidding killing, it is any hateful thought, any thought that wishes difficulties and troubles to a neighbor.

We are slaves to sin. All that we can do is sin and, therefore, the law of God is not and cannot be a remedy for our misery of sin. We find ourselves in this condition of total depravity and the law of God can't help us. It can forbid this sinfulness in us but it cannot deliver us from this sinfulness. It can demand perfect righteousness but it cannot deliver us from our unrighteousness. It can only condemn. It can only expose as sinners sold under sin.

You recognize yourself here, do you not? You take this devastating judgment to heart upon yourself, do you not? It's important that you do and that I do, for unless we do that we will be prone to look for salvation elsewhere than in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to look for a Savior somewhere else besides Jesus Christ crucified and risen and him alone. You must confess this with the apostle tonight and you do as a believer, and I must. I am carnal, sold under sin.

Before we move to the evidence of this devastating judgment upon us in the text, it is important, it is extraordinarily important that you and I understand that this judgment applies to the born again, believing, sanctified child of God. The text is not describing some reprobate out there in the world, some heathen out there in the jungles who has never heard the Gospel, and who therefore lives like the devil, but the text is describing you and me, you and me who belong to Jesus Christ, you and I who believe in Jesus Christ, you and I who are saved by Jesus Christ. That may be difficult to take to heart at first. The language of the text may seem to teach otherwise, after all, the one who is speaking there says sold under sin, identifies himself as carnal, says about himself that the good that he would do or wills to do, he doesn't do, but what he hates, namely sin, that's what he does.

In reading that, someone may say, "How can that apply to me as a saved child of God? How can the apostle be describing here a Christian?" But he is describing a Christian and what he says is applicable to a Christian and only applicable to a Christian. The stakes are high here. The stakes are high here not only practically but also doctrinally. The entire controversy of the Reformed faith with Arminianism had its origin in a wrong understanding and explanation of exactly this point in Romans 7. The great heretic Arminius, about whose doctrine the Canons of Dort were written in condemnation and whose theology was opposed by the Synod of Dort, first showed his hand, his heretical hand in his explanation of Romans 7. His heresy did not first come to light in his explanation of Romans 9 concerning predestination as you might suppose, but in a sermon that he preached in the big church in Amsterdam on Romans 7, and his error was that he taught that the one who is speaking in Romans 7, particularly in my text, is an unsaved person, a person who has not been born again by the Spirit of Christ and a person who does not believe in Jesus Christ. That would mean that the one who is speaking, an unbeliever, is able to say that he wills to do the good but finds it impossible to do the good, and the one who is speaking hates sin but commits sin anyway. That would mean that an unsaved person has a good will, a will that is able to choose for God and for the good, and in that case Arminius would be right, that salvation depends upon the free will of the sinner. According to Arminius, Romans 7 teaches the free will of the sinner, a will that's good, a will that's able to choose the good, and a will upon which God's salvation depends. The whole controversy between the Reformed faith and Arminianism then and now hangs on the right understanding who is speaking and about whom is the description valid in Romans 7.

This controversy becomes contemporary. Popular Christian teachers and preachers are still explaining Romans 7, and my text in particular, as the confession of unsaved human beings, and I refer to N. T. Wright, the darling of Reformed conservatives in the United States today, and to Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a very popular minister in Great Britain and popular with many today. Both of them taught and teach that the one speaking in Romans 7 is an unsaved person and not a saved child of God, the one who is speaking these words, "that which I do I allow not: for what I would," or will to do, "that do I not; but what I hate, that do I." That's the doctrine of free will and the enemy of the Gospel of salvation by grace.

The truth is that the one who is speaking in the text is the born again saved child of God. First of all, it was the Apostle Paul himself, very likely the holiest man who ever lived. Paul said about himself at the time that he was writing the book of Romans, "I am carnal, sold under sin, that which I want to do, I don't do, and what I hate, that I do." And he wasn't describing the truth about himself before he was converted on the Damascus Road, but he was confessing the truth about himself at the time that he wrote the letter to the Romans, and that would be true of him until the day he died. The explanation is that although the elect child of God is born again by the Holy Spirit and given the gift of faith, he retains the old totally depraved sinful nature with which he was born, and according to that nature with which he was born, it is true of him that he is carnal, and it is true of him that he is a slave of sin with respect to that corrupt nature that he was born with and that he continues to have as long as he lives.

Now that's not the entire truth about the Apostle Paul or the whole truth about you and me. Not only do we have a corrupt totally depraved nature that's a slave to sin, but by the grace of God we also now have a new nature, a holy nature, a nature that loves God and that loves his law. But even then with respect to that new nature that is ours by virtue of God's saving of us, so prevalent and infectious and powerful is our sinful nature that we retain, that although we want to do the good, our sinful nature spoils everything we do, everything we say, everything we think, everything we desire, every feeling we have, every work we do, so that by the time we express ourselves even in the worship service of the church, what comes out is tainted with sin, is imperfect, is sinful.

In that regard and in that way, we are carnal, sold under sin and from this now we gain the explanation of the apostle's strong statement that he is carnal, sold under sin, whereas the law is spiritual. That spiritual law makes demands upon us which are good and holy. The demand of that spiritual law is not only that we say good words and think good thoughts and do good deeds, but that spiritual law requires that we only speak such words and do such deeds in that those words and deeds be perfect. That's the spirituality of the law. That spiritual law comes now into contact with us carnal men and women and the reaction of us to that spiritual law is that we cannot keep it, on the contrary, that spiritual law exposes to us ourselves, our corrupt depraved nature, our carnal nature, and that spiritual law is unable to rescue us from our carnality and wickedness.

From this the apostle draws several conclusions. That he does that is evident in verse 16. The text begins, "If then. If this is true what I have been saying about the spiritual law and the carnal Christian, then certain truths follow from that, certain conclusions must be drawn from that." The words "If then" introduce conclusions. Those conclusions are not only logical but they are also immensely practical spiritually. There are two conclusions that are expressed or clearly implied in the text itself and there is a third conclusion that can be drawn in the light of everything the apostle has been saying in this part of the seventh chapter of the Romans.

The first conclusion to be drawn is the conclusion that is the main thought of the apostle in the passage and that is that the law of God is good. The inability of the law to rescue and save us is not due to any fault on the part of the law but is due to our carnality. Our dreadful spiritual condition, therefore, in our contact with the law that we cannot obey it and do not obey it is not to be attributed to the law of God. The law is good. The law is spiritual. The law is holy. The fault is ours. We are carnal.

In the second place, the conclusion to be drawn from this passage is the main thought of the apostle, one of the main thoughts of the apostle in the entire epistle to the Romans and that is that the law of God cannot save us. If we are carnal, the spiritual law cannot save us. That's not an evil or a fault of the law for the law was never designed by God to save us. If I would say to you my hammer is no good because it can't cut trees down, you would respond how foolish of you to say such a thing, hammers were not designed to cut trees down. Or if I should say to you my car is no good because it will not float me across Lake Michigan, you will say how foolish of you to say so, cars were not designed to float

across Lake Michigan. So it would be if we were to criticize the law for its failure to save us. It wasn't designed to save us. It was designed by God to show us our misery. It was designed by God to show us that we need a Savior. It was designed by God to show us the extent of our misery, how sinful we really are, and therefore the law was designed by God to lead us to Jesus Christ, to shut up every other way but the way to Jesus Christ alone for all our salvation. He is designed by God, God in the flesh, God in the flesh crucified and risen to justify us by faith alone in him and to sanctify us also by faith alone in him. Not upon the law and not upon your works of obedience to the law, not even those that you do by the power of the Holy Spirit, just you depend for your salvation but you must put all of your trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation. That's the conclusion to be drawn from the truth that the law is spiritual but we are carnal.

Then in the third place this conclusion must be drawn from the passage, in the light of everything that has been taught previously and that will be taught subsequently in Romans 7, and that's this: if you find in yourself in the language of the text that you allow not or do not tolerate the wickedness that you do, and if you find in yourself that you do will to do the good even though you cannot accomplish it, and if you hate the wickedness that you perform, if in the language of verse 16 you consent unto the law of God that it is good even though it doesn't save you, even though it exposes to you that you are a sinner, even though painfully it makes known to you what a great sinner you are, nevertheless you consent unto the law that it is good, you are a saved man, you are a saved woman, you've been born again by the Spirit of Christ. No unregenerated unsaved person consents unto the law that it is good, especially not when the law exposes his sinfulness to him. No unsaved person hates the wickedness that he does. He loves it. No unsaved person wills to do the good, wants to do the good. Every unsaved person wants to do the evil. Consenting unto the law that it is spiritual and that it is good in its exposure of you to yourself as carnal, you may know yourself and I may know myself as a saved child of God. Amen.

*Our Father, open up to us these great mysteries and truths of thy word above all so that we put our trust alone in Jesus Christ for all our salvation and are not so foolish and so arrogant and so sinful as to look for our salvation in our own obedience to thy law. For Jesus' sake. Amen.*

Let's close again by singing from 140, all four stanzas, the second tune, 140.

"God, be merciful to me,  
On thy grace I rest my plea;  
Plenteous in compassion thou,  
Blot out my transgressions now;  
Wash me, make me pure within,  
Cleanse, O cleanse me from my sin.

My transgressions I confess,  
Grief and guilt my soul oppress;  
I have sinned against thy grace

And provoked thee to thy face;  
I confess thy judgment just,  
Speechless, I thy mercy trust.

I am evil, born in sin;  
Thou desirest truth within.  
Thou alone my Savior art,  
Teach thy wisdom to my heart;  
Make me pure, thy grace bestow,  
Wash me whiter than the snow.

Broken, humbled to the dust  
By thy wrath and judgment just,  
Let my contrite heart rejoice  
And in gladness hear thy voice;  
From my sins O hide thy face,  
Blot them out in boundless grace."

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the communion of the Holy  
Ghost abide with you. Amen.