

The Long Road to Freedom (Part 1)

Romans 7:1-13

As Americans, we are addicted to the “Quick Fix.” What is your problem? Let me give you my quick and easy solution. Solutions have to be simple. They have to be relatively easy. And they have to not make too many demands upon me.

Let me tell you something about growing in holiness: God does not provide a quick fix. God is all about the long haul. And his solutions are rarely simple. And they are never easy. But, when God does anything, you can trust that he will do it right. And when it comes to giving his children freedom from their sin, he will do it right.

Romans 6 is such an encouraging chapter. Jesus straps us to himself, crucifies our sinful self, and then, lifts up our new self with himself into the heavenlies. The Christian, as a free gift, grows in sanctification throughout this life until he reaches his final destination: eternal life.

Positive, encouraging, uplifting...That is how I would describe Romans 6.

When you come to Romans 7 it is like hitting a brick wall. This brick wall is the reality of life-long struggle and the difficulty of making genuine progress in true holiness.

If all you had was Romans 6, you might think that the Christian life was like boarding a plane. You have your ticket. You find your seat. And off you go. Maybe you experience a bit of anxiety at take-off and landing. But other than a little bit of turbulence here and there, you enjoy a smooth ride.

But Romans 7 gives another picture entirely. In Romans 7, the picture is one of struggle and frustration and sometimes failure. It reminds me of when I was a kid and our family would visit the outer banks for vacation. Some days the waves were relatively calm and swimming was relatively uneventful. But some days, usually before a storm, the waves were rough. And they were coming one after another in quick succession. On those days, it was all you could do to get beyond the breakers. There was no such thing as wading into the water calmly. If you did so, you would never make it out. Instead, you would charge in. You would dive right into the curling wave. As soon as the wave passed you, you would pop up and look for the next wave. Often you were not quick enough. The next wave would hit you and pummel you into the sand. It would push you back up on the shore. And you would get up and start the process all over again. Struggling to get beyond the breakers so that you could have some bit of rest and relief from the struggle.

That is closer to the picture of the process of sanctification in Romans 7. Only, as a child I thought fighting the waves was fun. Getting pummeled into the sand in your battle against sin is not fun. It can be excruciating. My mom would wait for the calm days before she would even get into the water.

But when it comes to your sanctification, you do not get to choose whether or not you get into the water. You are strapped to Jesus. And he is taking you beyond the breakers. Out into the deep you must go.

Even though I sometimes wish that there were a “quick fix” to sanctification, because I know that there is no such thing, I am really glad that Romans 7 exists. Paul has given words to our struggle. He has kept us from thinking that in our struggle we are entirely alone. Our struggle is not abnormal. The journey to sanctification is not pretty, but it is in God’s good and sovereign plan.

Truth is a ridge line. It is easy to fall off on either side. In the struggle to be holy, you can fall off the side that holiness should be perfect in this life. Any failure in the battle against sin is hypocrisy and the Christian should really only experience one victory after another. On the other side of the ridge line is thinking that the Christian life is only one of defeat. There is no true victory, only struggle and failure. This is not the picture that we have in the Bible either. Defeats do happen, but they are temporal, and are often turned into victories. Sanctification may not ever be perfect in this life, but progress is possible.

When you are experiencing victory, enjoy those times, but also remind yourself that there are more waves coming.

And when your face has been planted in the sand, and you no longer believe that getting beyond the breakers is really possible, remember Jesus, he is ultimately the one taking you out. He will not fail.

I am dividing Romans 7 into two sermons. But I wish we could do the entire chapter in one sitting. In the first half of the chapter Paul is laying the foundation for a proper understanding of the intense struggle expressed in the second half.

So, even though today we are going to focus on the first 13 verses of Romans 7, I want you to have the words of the struggle in your mind. Look at vv. 15, 19, and 24.

Romans 7:15 ¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

Romans 7:19 ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Romans 7:24 ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Paul knows what it means to be pummeled by the waves of sin. He knows struggle. Growing in holiness was not a quick fix to Paul.

Read Romans 7:1-4.

In verse 1 we join Paul's thinking in mid-stream.

Or do you not know, brothers-

for I am speaking to those who know the law-

that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives?

Without some context of Paul's thinking in chapter 6, it is difficult to make sense of Paul here in Romans 7. Paul connects being free from sin with no longer being bound to the law.

"the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives."

No longer being bound by the law results in no longer being bound by sin.

Paul said this very thing in Romans 6:14.

Romans 6:14 ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

And in verse 22, Paul writes:

Romans 6:22 ²² But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.

Paul wants to make sure that the believers at Rome think rightly about their ongoing struggle with sin.

And in order to think rightly about the ongoing struggle with sin, the believer needs to have some assurance that the law no longer binds him. But what law is Paul talking about?

That is not an easy question to answer. Paul says that he is speaking "to those who know the law."

Some theologians think that Paul is simply referring to the Mosaic Law – the 10 Commandments. I am not convinced of this.

We know the church at Rome at this time was made up primarily of Gentiles. There were some Jewish converts in the congregation as well. But the majority of members were Gentiles. That does not mean that they had no understanding of Jewish law, but it seems unlikely that if Paul were thinking of the Mosaic Law that he would assume that they all "knew it". It would have been more likely that Paul would have said, "Some of you know the law..." I am not convinced, at this point, that Paul has the Mosaic Law foremost in his mind. Not as a constitution given to the Jewish people anyway. Here, in the first few verses, Paul is using the general concept of law in a way that would have been commonly accepted by both Jew and Gentile believers.

Law as a law. Law generally speaking. The Romans were familiar with rule by law just like the Jews. Their specific laws were not always the same, but they had some things in common. One such thing was that a person was bound to a law only so long as he was alive.

Paul uses the example of marriage. Both Jewish and Roman law accepted the fact that if one spouse died, the other spouse was no longer bound by the vows of marriage.

So, Paul wants the Romans to think about some law to which they were previously bound, as no longer applying to them, because they have died. Their death has freed them from “this” law. The Christian is as free from being “under the law” as a woman whose husband has died is free from her marriage vows.

2 Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives,
but
if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage.

3 Accordingly,
she will be called an adulteress
if she lives with another man while her husband is alive.
But
if her husband dies,
she is free from that law,
and
if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

Paul is not here making a moral point about not committing adultery. He is simply illustrating how “death” clearly releases a woman from the law of marriage. She no longer has any ongoing obligations to her husband.

In the same way, the Christian is released from being “under the law”, because the Christian, through his union with Jesus Christ, has died with Christ at the cross.

4 Likewise, my brothers,
you also have died to the law
through the body of Christ,
so that you may belong to another,
to him who has been raised from the dead,
in order that we may bear fruit for God.

The Christian has died to the law, therefore the law no longer binds him.

Again, Paul does not explicitly state what law he is talking about. But we do know that Paul is continuing to work out the theology of chapters 5 and 6.

In Romans 5 we saw the importance of Covenant Theology. We are enslaved to sin, because we are joined to Adam as our covenant head. And the Christian is made righteous through his union with Jesus, his new covenant head.

Romans 5:18-19 ¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass¹ led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness² leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹ For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

So, being under the law is joined to being under Adam as our Covenant head. And being under grace is connected with our being under Jesus as our New Covenant Head. In Romans 6, Paul continues to work out what it means to be united to Jesus and no longer united to Adam. But this transfer of covenant heads was like the changing of spouses.

In a sense, we were married to Adam, or at least we were married to the law that bound Adam. And as long as we still lived, we had to remain married to Adam, and the law that bound him also binds us. We could not simply change spouses and become married to Jesus.

Someone had to die for there to be freedom from the law of our marriage to Adam. That is exactly what Jesus accomplished for us through his death. We are joined with Jesus in his death.

Romans 6:6-7 ⁶ We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free¹ from sin.

This freedom from sin is not immediate experiential freedom from sin. It is something that occurs in the spiritual realm. It most certainly will eventually lead to experiential victory over sin, but it will most certainly not be a "quick fix."

To be bound to the law, is to be bound to Adam, and the slavery to sin and death that he earned. Through faith in Jesus Christ, this marriage to sin and death has been severed. It has been severed because we have died. In the illustration, the husband dies and the woman is released. But in reality, it is we who have died. We have died with Christ in his death on the cross. Our relationship with Adam and to the law of sin and death has been severed. We are now bound to a new law, a new husband, which Paul calls "under grace." And the result of being bound to our new husband is that we "bear fruit to God." If the law only leads to death, it is easy to then conclude that there is something actually wrong with the law itself.

Was it wrong for God to give Adam the command to not eat the forbidden fruit?
If God knew Adam would fail, why did he put him in that situation?
Is the law at fault? Paul considers these important questions to answer.

Read Romans 7:5-13.

⁵ For while we were living in the flesh,
our sinful passions,

aroused by the law,
were at work in our members
to bear fruit for death.

6 But now
we are released from the law,
having died to that which held us captive,
so that we serve
not under the old written code
but
in the new life of the Spirit.

Paul envisions a time when he, and the Romans Christians, were living “in the flesh.” This has to be the time before their “faith in Jesus Christ.” Before they became Christians and were baptized into the death of Jesus Christ. The “flesh” does not merely refer to the physical body. “Flesh” consists of our whole nature, body and soul, which we receive from Adam. Paul will later call it the “body of sin.”

Before being united to Jesus through faith alone, every person lives “in the flesh.” At this time, when any moral law is given, instead of people willingly following the law, their nature of sin is aroused by the law and they willingly follow the sinful passions of their nature. Paul speaks of that which produces sinful desires as “members”. But again, this is not simply arms and legs. It includes the inner desires of the heart. And the final fruit of our sinfulness is eternal death.

In a person who does not have faith in Jesus, the mere statement that something is wrong does not automatically result in the person wanting to obey the law from the heart. Some may keep the law out of a slavish fear of punishment, but not out of a true desire for righteousness. But faith in Jesus results in the beginning of a new process of change.

From this slavery to sin and death, the Christian has been released. But the means by which we have been released is important. In order to be free, we had to die.

It is the crucifixion of our “old self”, everything that is sinful in you, that occurred in the death of Jesus Christ some 2,000 years ago. Before this death, you were held captive to sin. The “old written code” held you in chains. This code very simply taught: Do this and you will live. Do that and you will die. But because of the nature that is ours in Adam, the “do this and you will live option” no longer existed. Only the “do that and you will die.”

Jesus, through his death, releases us from the “you will die”, so that we can serve our new master, a new life in the Spirit. The life of the Holy Spirit will be explored in chapter 8.

Right now, Paul simply introduces this “new life in the Spirit” to give a contrast with the “old ‘very unhelpful’ written code.”

Many good theologians believe that “being released from the law” is being released from the Law of Moses – the 10 Commandments. But if that were the case, then only those who were formerly circumcised Jews were in need of release. The truth is that every person who has ever lived needs to be released from the law. It is best to continue seeing “law” in a general way. God’s moral obligation that he places on all people to be perfect. This is sometimes called the “Covenant of Works”.

The Mosaic Law sets up the same moral standard as written on the hearts of Adam and Eve. But one’s relationship to the Mosaic Law depended entirely upon whether or not they had faith. If one had faith in the promise of God, then they were, even in the OT, united with Jesus Christ. They were not technically “under the law”. But if one did not have faith in the promise of God, the commands of the Mosaic Law could only be seen as a means by which to achieve righteousness and salvation. It was a constant reminder that they were “under the law” and still bound to Adam.

If this confuses you, just know that you are in good company. Remember this, it is not simply from the OT that Jesus frees you. He frees you from the law of works in Adam – and from the slavery to sin and death connected to it. So, Paul’s question is not simply whether the 10 Commandments were bad. He is raising the question of whether it is wrong of God to give any moral command whatsoever.

7 What then shall we say?
 That the law is sin?
 By no means!

Fundamental truth: When God gives a command, a law, it is good. To try to blame our sin on God’s command is absolutely wrong!

Paul is going to defend the law. He will use the 10th Commandment. But this is only an example of the broader sense of God giving a clear command.

Yet if it had not been for the law,
I would not have known sin.
I would not have known what it is to covet
if the law had not said,
"You shall not covet."

The statement of a command, any command, draws a line in the sand. This line makes it very clear the nature of sin. And you know when you have crossed the line. Without the line, it becomes very hazy in our minds what is right and what is wrong.

One of the problems Christians face today is that our culture is constantly erasing the lines in the sand. Without these lines, people become confused.

Another problem is that the culture can draw new lines that are different from the ones that God draws. This can be an equally damaging problem. It is what the Pharisees did. They drew their own lines in the sand and in doing so heaped guilt upon the people that God did not intend for them to bear.

God's law is a great gift. It makes clear what is sin. When we know clearly what is sin, then we are able to repent of sin and turn to God. So, one good function of law is that we know clearly when we have broken the law. Paul uses the example of coveting: The 10th Commandment.

Exodus 20:17 ¹⁷ "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's."

But, what the law does not do, is help you to obey the command. Actually, the law has the very opposite effect in those who are chained to Adam and sin.

8 But sin,
 seizing an opportunity through the commandment,
 produced in me all kinds of covetousness.
 Apart from the law,
 sin lies dead.

9 I was once alive apart from the law,
 but
 when the commandment came,
 sin came alive
 and I died.

10 The very commandment that promised life
 proved to be death to me.

11 For sin,
 seizing an opportunity through the commandment,
 deceived me
 and through it killed me.

Laws do not in themselves have power and influence. But the combination of a law with the sinful heart has terrible strength. A very permissive parent may come to the conclusion that their child is better than is really merited. The child has not really learned obedience, they just haven't been told "No" very often. That is not a reason to be harsh or strict as a parent. Punishing a child for breaking clear rules is both biblical and important. Spare the rod – spoil the child. But the fear of punishment will not change the heart of the child.

Neither will the fear of punishment change the heart of an adult. When God laid down the 10 Commandments, and even enacted some very clear punishments, a very interesting thing occurred in the hearts of God's people. They did not become better. They became worse.

And what was true of the nation of Israel, was also true in Paul's own heart. And it is true in each one of us. This is why childhood is thought of as a time of innocence. It is not that kids are really innocent, but as they grow up and face the world, the commands of Scripture become more relevant to them. And as they hear the command, there very often arises a desire to break the command that they had not known was there.

Sin lies dormant in our hearts, waiting for the opportunity to rear its ugly head.

Jeremiah 17:9 ⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

It is the command of the law that helps us to see just how deep goes the sinfulness within us. It is easy to blame it on the law, but the fault always lies with us.

"Sin lies, as it were, dead, as the torpid serpent, until the operation of the law rouses it from its slumbers, and reveals its character." Hodge

12 So the law is holy,
 and
 the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

But Paul anticipates another problem with the law. Its final result was that it produced death in him.

And why would God give something that produced death.

People ask this same sort of question when they talk about the problem of evil. If God set up the world so that people would fail, maybe God was the one at fault.

13 Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?
 By no means!

It was sin,

producing death in me
through what is good,
in order that sin might be shown to be sin,
and
through the commandment
might become sinful beyond measure.

Even though we might want to blame God, or the law he gives, for the evil of our hearts, it is wrong to do so.

In our world, we love to play the victim. Something you have done has made me to sin. It is not my fault, it is the fault of my parents or the society or whatever. And it is certainly true that we can trace many of the wrongs that we commit back to wrongs that have been done to us. But the bottom line is this: Nothing that we have experienced excuses us from sin. Least of all, God's sovereign commands.

We are BOTH victims who are unable to free ourselves from the clutches of sin AND responsible for every sin we commit. We may be a victim of Adam's first sin, but we are a responsible victim. If you feel like you are right in the middle of Paul's argument, you are. I really hate to end here. But end we must.

What Conclusions and applications can we make at this point:

1. Jesus provides a real solution to your problem of sin. But it is not a "quick fix."
2. Through faith in Jesus Christ, your connection to Adam, and to the law that governed Adam, has been severed forever.
3. Laws (commands) apart from faith, do not have any power to make people righteous.
4. God's Laws do reveal sin for what it is: a desire to live independent of God's authority.
5. God's Laws often function to increase one's desire to sin.

This does not mean that we should get rid of the law or that laws are bad.

It simply means that we should not expect that repeating the law over and over to someone will actually have the effect of making them truly obedient from the heart.

6. Freedom to obey God from the heart, to become truly righteous, can only occur as a result of faith in Jesus Christ.

Faith in Jesus Christ releases you from the law.

Being released from the law is not being released from the standard of righteousness.

Being released from the law is being released from the bondage of sin to forever hold us in unrighteousness.

This release from the law was accomplished at the cross. But its effect of actually freeing us from our sin occurs throughout our life. What Jesus has already done secures that the job will be finished. But the road to sanctification is long and difficult.

Sanctification will often feel like running into those crashing waves.

But whereas, apart from Christ, you will be content to simply stay on the shore. United to Christ, you have within you an unquenchable hunger to get beyond the breakers.

Is there an unquenchable hunger for righteousness within your heart? Have you ever cried out to Jesus to rescue you from yourself?

If you have never felt the misery of being unable to free yourself from your sin and in desperation sought release from it through Jesus – the One and Only Savior – then do not wait any longer. Cry out to Jesus today: Jesus, rescue me from myself! I don't want to be chained to sin and death. I want to be released to be made righteous. Jesus promises to you freedom.

But, if you are expecting a "quick fix" to your struggle with sin, don't expect to find it in Jesus. If you want the job done right, Jesus is your man! He will lead you beyond the breakers. He who began a good work in you will carry it to completion, on the day of Christ Jesus.

Amen!