

Romans 7:7-25
2 Kings 17
Psalm 130

“The Wretched Body of Death”

September 7, 2008

Introduction: What then?

1. The Law Results in Death (7:7-12)

2. But the Problem Is Not the Law – the Problem Is Me – or Rather, My Flesh (7:13-20)

3. Two Laws: the Law of God and the Law of Sin (7:21-25)

Conclusion: One Solution – Jesus Christ Our Lord

Introduction: What then?

Perhaps no other passage in all of Scripture has perplexed the church more than Romans 7.

The early Fathers could not bring themselves to believe
that Paul was talking about his current experience –
and struggled to resolve the apparent contradiction between
what Paul described as the normative Christian identity of Romans 6
and the experience of Romans 7 –
because they recognized the struggle of Romans 7 as their own struggle!

Some have said that Paul is describing his own Christian experience.

Others have said that Paul is describing the experience of new believers,
who have not yet come to full maturity as Christians.

Others have said that he is describing himself before coming to Christ.

Others have said that Paul is describing the Jewish pre-Christian experience.

And that’s only a few of the options!

I don’t think that you’ll be surprised when I say
that I’m not entirely satisfied with any of them.

I think that there is a sense in which Paul is describing his own Christian experience,
but I’m not sure that I would agree with those who make this
the *normative* Christian experience.

Paul is not describing the way things should be.

Paul has just said that 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.

What then shall we say?

You may have noticed that Paul uses the phrase “what then?” an awful lot in Romans.

In fact, it provides a structure for chapters 3-11.

Each of these “what then?” questions signals a new topic –

or at least shows the trajectory that Paul will be heading.

And if you follow the “what thens?” of Romans
you come to the clear conviction that one of the central themes of Romans
is the law – and especially the relationship of the law to the Christian.

Look back at the “what thens” of Romans?

3:1 “What then the advantage of the Jew?”

God entrusted them with his oracles (his law)
so that his judgment might come through them to the world.

3:9 “What then? Are we Jews any better off?”

No – and through the rest of chapter 3 Paul explained our justification by faith,
apart from works of the law.

But the last thing he says in chapter 3 is that he is not trying to overthrow the law:
“On the contrary, we uphold the law.”

How?

4:1 “What then shall we say was gained by Abraham?”

All of chapters 4-5 are rooted in this question.
Abraham was not justified by works of the law, but by faith.
And the reason for that is because since Adam
all men were under condemnation and death.

The purpose of the law was not to bring justification but to increase trespass.

6:1 “What then shall we say? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?”

We have seen that Paul answers this with a resounding NO!

Sin is utterly inconsistent with the Christian life.

You are not under law, but under grace.

(once again – the last thing Paul says before launching another question
has to do with the law.)

6:15 “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?”

Of course not – we have died to the law through the body of Christ.

And so now we see in

7:7 “What then shall we say? That the law is sin?”

And in chapters 7-8 Paul will explain for us how the “law of the Spirit of life”
is different from the “law of sin and death.”

8:31 “What then shall we say to these things?”

At the end of chapter 8 Paul will, in one sense,
come to a resounding climax of his argument.

But in another sense, the end of chapter 8 connects back to chapter 3.

What about the Jews?

How do Jews and Gentiles figure into God’s purposes – a major theme of chs 9-11

9:14 “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part?”

9:30 “What shall we say then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have
attained it”

11:7 “What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.”

In other words,

the whole of Romans 3-11 is seamlessly woven together by these “what then” questions.

And our “what then” for today asks,
What then shall we say? That the law is sin?

After all, Paul has just said that the law aroused our sinful passions
to bear fruit for death.
Paul has said that we have died to the law through the body of Christ.

So is the law sin?

1. The Law Results in Death (7:7-12)

Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.
Notice that Paul does not say, “I would not have sinned.”
Rather, he says, “I would not have *known* sin.”

As we go through this passage, it is important to remember that Paul is not saying
that the law is at fault for our sinning.
Rather, the law teaches us what sin is.
As he has said previously, “through the law comes the knowledge of sin.”
(Romans 3:20)
And here, in verse 7, he gives an example:

I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “you shall not covet.”
Paul does not say “I would not have coveted” –
but “I would not have known what it is to covet.”

This is part of the problem with the law.
The law gives us knowledge – but no power.
Through the law, I know what is right.
The problem is that (v8):

*But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment,
produced in me all kinds of covetousness.*

Sin is portrayed again as an active power.
Sin, my old master, seized opportunity through the commandment.
The commandment had taught me what it means to covet.
But the commandment (by itself) did not give me the power
to stop coveting.

And so Sin seized the opportunity.
Think of Sin as a person – think of Sin as something that can act.
That will help you understand verse 9:

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

Apart from the law, Sin is powerless.
Apart from the law, Sin is dead.

Also apart from the law, I was alive.
I was happily living my life apart from the law –
but when the commandment came
sin came back to life and I died.

Is Paul talking about his own experience here?
I don't know.
And I don't think that it matters.
Paul is using the preacher's "I"
to describe a universal human experience.

Ever since Adam this has been the experience of humanity.
In my experience Sin was dead.
I didn't notice it.
It's not that it wasn't there – it wasn't that I didn't sin.
Rather, I was oblivious to the existence of sin.

And so
*The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.
For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me
and through it killed me.*

Certainly this was Adam's experience.
The commandment that promised life proved to be death.
And in Genesis 3 we hear about how Sin,
seizing an opportunity through the commandment
(has God really said....),
deceived Adam and Eve
and through the commandment killed them.

And this was true for Israel as well.
God commanded Israel to walk in his ways.
And when God had given his law to Israel,
Sin seized its opportunity once again
and killed Israel.

That's the way Sin works.
You know that!
What happens when you tell your child: "don't go in that room"?

Where is the next place you will find your child?
In that room!

There is nothing wrong with the law.

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

The problem is that the law has no power.

And this is our second point:

2. But the Problem Is Not the Law – the Problem Is Me – or Rather, My Flesh (7:13-20)

If the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good,
Paul asks:

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

It was not the *law* that brought death.
The law did not become death to me.

Rather,

It was sin

[and remember that this Sin with a capital S – Sin is personified here]
*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.*

The point of the law was not to make you righteous.
The point of the law was to make sin exceedingly sinful.

The problem is not the law –
the problem is that the law does not give the power (the ability) to obey the law.

Think about it:
the law says that you should not drive faster than 45 MPH on Cleveland Road.

Okay.
How does knowing that help you do it?
The knowledge that driving 55 MPH on Cleveland Road is illegal
does not convey any ability to do it.

What do you struggle with?
What temptation lures you in?

Do you know that it is wrong?
How does that knowledge help you?
Does that knowledge actually give you strength to resist?

No.

You know that it is sin.
You know that sin leads to death.

But the law cannot deliver you from sin.
Because the point of the law is merely to show sin for what it is!

For we know that the law is spiritual but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.
The law teaches me how bad Sin is.
But the law cannot free me from my bondage to sin.

So Paul is still talking here about humanity's helpless condition.
I will not say that he is talking about the unregenerate.
Neither will I say that he is talking about Israel prior to the coming of Christ.
But neither is he talking *simply* about his own Christian experience.

Rather, Paul is talking about any human being (regenerate or unregenerate)
as they encounter the law.

The law communicates what is right.
The law reveals sin as sin – and shows forth its exceedingly sinfulness.
And the law does this to all who hear it.
“You shall not covet” comes to all men.

I do not understand my own actions.
For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.
Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.
So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

Again, this is the universal human condition.
If all you have is the law – then as far as you can get is to say,
“Yup, the law is good and I am bad.”

And Christians have this experience too!
If I consider myself merely in contrast with the law,
then the Law is spiritual and I am fleshly,
having been sold under sin.
Paul uses a phrase there “having been sold under sin”
that does not resolve the ambiguity!

As a Christian I am no longer under the dominion of sin –
but it is still true that Sin once was my master.
And while I am free from that dominion –
there are still residual effects in how I live.

And Paul's description of the universal human experience is one that all people recognize.

For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh

Here Paul uses literary style to make his point.

He says “I know that *it* does not dwell in me, that is in my flesh.”

And only at the very end of the sentence does he say what the “it” is:
“good.”

Why?

Think about it. **[use hands to show this]**

It does not dwell in me,
that is in my flesh,
good.

What comes in between “me” and the “good”?

My flesh.

My flesh separates me from the good.

Everybody wants to do good.

For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. (v18b)

Our problem is that while we want to do good,

there is no corresponding power in us to produce the good that we want to do.

I know that there are some who say that the unregenerate do not *really* want to do good.

I don’t think that Paul is trying to get involved in that argument.

He’s simply dealing with an experience that probably everyone has had:

I want to do what is right, but I don’t seem to be able to do it!

The desire is there – but not the ability.

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

Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. (v19-20)

This is the universal experience of humanity apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

You might say, “But Paul is in Christ, so how could he speak this way?”

Don’t you recognize yourself here?

It’s true – we should never think of ourselves apart from Christ.

We shouldn’t!

But we do –

and that is precisely what gets us in trouble.

Knowing God’s law – knowing what God requires of you –

will *never* (by itself) give you the ability to do what God requires of you.

3. Two Laws: the Law of God and the Law of Sin (7:21-25)

By the time you get to verse 21 you cannot think that Paul is not describing himself at all.
So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

What the Mosaic law does is teach me what is right.

And I want to do it.

But I also find that the law does not give me power to obey.

Indeed, the law becomes the occasion for Sin to attack.

*For I delight in the law of God in my inner being,
but I see in my members another law
waging war against the law of my mind
and making me captive to the law of sin
that dwells in my members.*

In your inner being you delight in God's law.

You've heard it.

You know it.

You know what to do.

But when you look at yourself this "other law"

wages war and makes us captive to the law of sin.

This is precisely what we experience in our warfare against sin.

But what is missing?

Indeed, what has been missing in this whole passage?

The gospel.

The death and resurrection of Jesus.

Romans 7:7-23 is describing the Christian life (and more broadly the human life)
apart from Christ.

Paul is describing how the law works without reference to the Gospel.

It condemns.

It reveals sin for what it is – sin.

Wretched man that I am!

Who will deliver me from this body of death?

The Romans 7 condition is a condition that afflicts everyone.

The law proclaims what God requires –

but the law will not lift its little finger to help you do it!

So who will deliver me from this body of death?

The answer is the same as in Romans 6:6

We know that our old man 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.*

Here Paul says,

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Conclusion: One Solution – Jesus Christ Our Lord

Paul's final words in chapter 7 may strike you as odd:

*So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind,
but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.*

Paul has insisted that the dominion of sin and death has been destroyed.

How can Paul now say that "with my flesh I serve the law of sin"?

Let me describe for you the way Paul thinks about who you are:

(three concentric circles – inner man, flesh, surface –
in Adam and in Christ)

We'll talk more about this next week!

But let me conclude simply by saying that Paul's solution is very simple:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

The law cannot save you.

The law cannot give you the power to obey.

This is something that God had taught his people throughout all generations.

Ever since the fall of man into sin
words alone don't matter much.

Just ask your wife!

If you tell your wife every day that you love her,
and yet by your actions you demonstrate that you really don't care,
what is your wife going to think of your words?

And Paul says here in Romans 7 that even God's law is powerless by itself.

The book of the covenant without the blood of the covenant is powerless.

It is only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
that we are enabled to put into practice what God requires of us.