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The Frustration of Trying to be Good

Romans 7:7–25

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series: Romans: Unashamed • Undeserved • Unstoppable

Last Sunday at the North Campus I shared with them at the end of my message that I've gone through two conversions. My first came when I was just 17 and I discovered Jesus had died for me, that he loved me with an everlasting love, and that he'd never leave me. That set me free. I'd never experienced the joy and freedom of that kind of love, and I was a new person. I wanted nothing more than to please him and to live my life for him. It was like I was brand new.

But before long that desire to please him and serve him and live for him became a huge burden. I wanted desperately to change but the only way I knew how was to live by a rigid set of rules. It crushed me. It brought me to the edge of despair because I couldn't conquer my sinful desires.

But then something happened. It was like another conversion. This time I understood not only had Jesus died for me, not only did he love me forever, but he also freed me from the crushing weight of having to keep God's law. His Spirit lived within me, and he was working in me to reproduce his character. It happened often when I wasn't even aware of it, when I wasn't even trying to be like Jesus. It's like I'd "catch" myself doing good. Or someone would come up to me and say, "You know, what you said that day really impacted me," and I couldn't remember saying it! Or it would dawn on me out of the blue one day I'd been set free from an area where sin had a grip on me, and I hadn't even really tried. I recall I used to just fret constantly about other people's opinion of me, but one day I woke up and it was gone. Not that I'd never have to deal with it again, but something had changed and I hadn't even been trying.

That's what Paul is talking about in Romans 6-8—the issue of how we change. In the first five chapters of Romans, Paul focused on how sinful, rebellious people can become right with God. But once he established it was only by grace through faith in Christ, and not through good works or keeping God's law, he went on to another topic: How do we change?

You see, some folks reasoned if we're saved by grace and not by keeping God's law, then what motivation do we have to be good? Paul even said we're no longer under the law but under grace. Does that mean we can just go out and break all his laws and still be okay? Paul dealt with that issue back in chapter 6. He said it's impossible for someone who died to sin to still live in it. Not only did Jesus die for us, but we died with him. That means the old, sinful person we were is dead and buried. We died to sin. And

when Jesus rose from the dead, we were raised with him to new life. So there's no way a person who's been united with Christ in death and resurrection can have that kind of careless attitude towards sin.

But there were still questions. Paul's critics felt like he was disparaging God's law. We all know and respect the Ten Commandments, right? But if we're not under that law, what do we do with it? That's the issue Paul deals with in Romans 7—How does the law function in our lives? Do we throw it out? Do we embrace it? And that's the issue I was dealing with as a young believer. I knew I was free from having to keep the law perfectly as far as my right standing before God was concerned, but I pretty much thought I was on my own from there. I lived as if I was under the law and it was my job to keep it. It wasn't just the Ten Commandments; it was the law of attending church, having a daily quiet time, tithing, witnessing and all the rest of the things Christians were supposed to do.

In chapter 7 Paul offers four truths which are like four legs of a chair. Each one of these four legs is important to maintain our balance.

The first leg: We are no longer bound to the law

The first leg of the chair we looked at last week, so I'm not going to read it. It's found in 7:1-6 where Paul says since we've died with Christ we're no longer bound or married to the law. Instead of being married to the law we're married to Christ. This means the law's curse or condemnation on us has been broken. That's what the law did—it condemned us, constantly reminding us of how short we fall and how unacceptable we are to God. We've been set free from that. But it also means we no longer rely on the law to keep us in line. That's also one of the things the law did: it was a taskmaster trying to get us to do the right thing. But it didn't work. The law could only tell us what to do, it couldn't give us the power to do it. So when it comes to our growth in holiness and becoming more like Jesus in our character, we're released from the law. Paul even hinted at the solution to this problem in v. 6 when he said we now "*serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.*" But we have to wait until Romans 8 for more about what that means. Meanwhile, starting in v. 7 Paul explains his contention in v. 5 that the law doesn't curb sin but actually stirs it up and produces death.

The second leg: The law is good but it reveals, arouses, condemns sin

The second leg is found in verses 7-13.

What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

One of the things to notice here is Paul uses the first person. That little word "I" is used here over and over again, so it seems like he's talking about his own personal experience. Not only that, he uses the past tense, so it seems he's talking about his life prior to becoming a Christian. Specifically, he's explaining how the law functioned in his life. Based on what Paul has already said someone might conclude the law is bad because it causes us to sin and produces death. Paul strongly objects to that idea. In fact, down in v. 12 he says the law is holy, righteous and good. He wants us to know the problem isn't the law, but it's our sin.

He says the law does several things. He says it reveals sin. Without the law, we wouldn't even know what sin is. Notice he uses the tenth commandment against coveting as an example of a sin he wouldn't have really come to grips with apart from the law. To covet is a strong desire; it's to want something badly. It's really a form of idolatry because it puts the object of our desire in the place of God who alone can satisfy us. It's interesting he chooses this commandment. He does so because it's the only one that's internal and deals with the heart. Coveting isn't something we can manage by following an outward code of behavior. So you go out into the parking lot and you see a really cool car you'd love to have. It's not enough to refrain from stealing that car; the law against coveting says you can't even want it. Have you ever tried not to covet? Good luck! But his point is apart from the law, he wouldn't have come to grips with those idolatrous desires.

But that's not all the law does. It also arouses or activates sin. It's like the law provides sin a base of operations where sin could produce in him every kind of coveting. There's something in us

that loves forbidden fruit. When Paul says, "For apart from the law, sin is dead" he doesn't mean it's not present, but it's not active. By the way, the idea that the law arouses sin would have shocked any Jewish person because they believed the law curbed sin and kept it under control. We often make the same assumption. How do you stop your kids from misbehaving? You make a rule (law). We assume without a rule they'll run wild; the rules will constrain them. And that always works perfectly, right?

There's one more thing he says the law does: it condemns us. He says, "Once I was alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came sin sprang to life and I died." There was a time in Paul's life when according to his own self perception he thought he was spiritually alive, but then the commandment came, which means it came home to him. He then saw the law's unreachable demands, especially in the law against coveting. He couldn't manage that one. And when he realized that, he died; he understood he was under condemnation. Perhaps this happened to Paul at age 13 when he had his Bar Mitzvah. Bar Mitzvah means "a son of the law." Perhaps this is when he began to reflect seriously on the commandments and saw how short he fell, and how his inward desires were fueled even more by the prohibition. Again, all this happens not because the law is bad but because sin uses it to put us to death.

The third leg: The law is good, but when we try to obey it, we fail

So that's how the law functioned in Paul's pre-Christian past. But he goes on and starting in verse 14 continues to share something of his own experience. He stays with the first person "I" but now he switches to the present tense. In some ways, he's still trying to show the problem isn't with the law, it's with us.

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it (verses 14-20).

What Paul describes here is struggle and defeat. He says the law is spiritual, the law is good, but I'm unspiritual. I'm a slave to sin. I don't do the things I want to do, and I do the very things I don't want to do. It's almost like there are two "me's." There's the "me" who wants to keep God's law, and there's the "me" who wants to sin. And I always seem to come out on the wrong side.

You should know this passage is the center of a big debate. Some believe this is still Paul's pre-Christian experience. They

say what he describes here is **not** the struggle of a believer, but the struggle of an unbeliever living under the law. They point to several things: How can Paul say he's a slave of sin in v. 14 when back in chapter 6 he said believers are no longer slaves of sin? In fact this whole section describes defeat at the hands of sin. But didn't Paul just get done saying we died to sin and have been raised up with Christ to live a new life? It doesn't make sense! Not only that, in these verses Paul never mentions once the ministry of God's Spirit who indwells us as believers. But if you go over to chapter 8 the ministry of the Spirit is described in great detail. He says things like, "*Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live*" (Rom. 8:12-13). That sounds very different from saying we're sold into slavery and a prisoner to sin!

But then there are others who believe Paul is describing the normal Christian life. The fact that Paul now switches to the present tense proves he's talking about his own present experience as a believer. And isn't it true this is exactly what we as believers experience every day? We all struggle with sin and we all fall short of God's perfect standard all the time. All of us know what it feels like to "not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate." I feel like that every time I go golfing! But that's our experience, isn't it? Besides that, many of the things Paul says in these verses are hard to imagine coming from an unbeliever. In v. 22 he says, "*In my inner man I delight in God's law.*" Now I'm sure as a young Pharisee Paul would have said he delighted in God's law, but here he says, "I don't mean this hypothetically or superficially or pharisaically. I mean that I really do, in the depths of my heart, love and rejoice in the law of God." How can an unbeliever say that? Contrast that with what Paul says in Romans 8:7 about the unbelieving person, "*The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.*" That's quite different from what Paul says here.

So, which is it? I have to tell you I've struggled with this question for a long time. There are good arguments on both sides of the debate. There are people I respect who'll disagree with me on this. And I might even change my mind someday. But here's where I've come out. First of all, I don't believe this passage is meant to differentiate between the experience of Christians and non-Christians. I think we've imposed this question on the text. Instead, the focus is on the weakness of the law to change us and transform us into godly people in light of our sinful nature. That could be true of a non-Christian who God is beginning to enlighten. One of the things God's Spirit does is convict the world of sin. He did this to me before I came to Christ. There was a preparation period in which I was convicted of my sin; I wanted to do good, but was unable. That led me to seek forgiveness and salvation in Christ.

I wonder if Paul had the same experience? When Jesus met him on the Damascus road, he asked him, "*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads*" (Acts 26:14). A goad was a stick with a pointed piece of iron on its tip used to prod oxen when plowing. Sometimes the animal would rebel by kicking at the goad. I wonder if some of that goading came in his discovery that all his self-righteousness was a sham. He was filled with all kinds of coveting. He needed a Savior. So this could well be the experience of a pre-Christian coming under conviction and striving but failing to keep the law.

Having said that, I believe this could also very much be the experience of a Christian. It's not the ideal experience of a Christian; it's a substandard Christian experience. It's the experience of a believer who wants to obey God but hasn't yet discovered his freedom in Christ and the resource provided for him in the Spirit. Again, Paul will get to that in Romans 8. But Romans 7 could be the experience of a Christian who sincerely wants to please God and keep his law but can't, and thus is defeated and crushed by its demands. He hasn't learned what it means to "Serve in the new way of the Spirit." This was my experience, and at times I fall back into this mindset of living by the law, and when I do the result is always frustration and defeat.

For too many people the Christian life is like being on a treadmill. Treadmills are great if you want to get a little exercise. Unfortunately, for many people, the Christian life feels like running on a treadmill: they're working hard but getting nowhere. Did you know in Victorian England treadmills weren't found in air-conditioned health clubs, but in prisons? They were used as a form of punishment. Some treadmills were productive, grinding wheat or transporting water, but others were purely punitive. Prisoners were punished by spending the bulk of their day walking uphill on a treadmill, knowing it was all for nothing. The only hope he had was to eventually pay his debt and be set free. That's living under the law, working hard and getting nowhere, and you can do that as a non-Christian or as a Christian.

Now let me say one more thing about this. While I don't think the struggle described here in Romans 7 is what a normal, healthy Christian life looks like, there's still a battle going on in every Christian. Paul describes this battle in Galatians 5 where he says, "*So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law*" (Galatians 5:16-18). Notice how Paul begins by saying if we walk by the Spirit we **won't** gratify our sinful nature. That sounds different from Romans 7. But then he describes the struggle going on in all of us between the flesh (sinful nature) and the Spirit who indwells us. That's a different struggle than the one described in Romans 7 where the Spirit isn't mentioned. But here in Galatians

5 he also wants us to know in the midst of that struggle, we're not under the law. We're under grace. As believers, when we fall and sin, there's still no condemnation.

But, once again, the point is Paul in Romans 7 is describing something different. It's not until chapter 8 we learn God has given us One who gives us the ability to put to death the deeds of the body.

The fourth leg: Failure to keep the law on our own prepares us to cry out for help

Paul continues to describe that struggle in verses 21-25, but now he gives us a glimmer of hope. He tells us where this struggle can lead us, and that will be the fourth leg of the chair.

So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Notice here the struggle to obey God's law continues, and the defeat continues. He says he's "a prisoner of the law of sin within me." And this leads him to cry out in desperation, "Wretched man that I am! Who will save me from this body that is subject to death." That's where living by the law leads us, and that's a good thing. That's the one good thing about trying to live by the law: we can come to see our own deep sinfulness, cry out to God, and find there's deliverance in our Lord Jesus. But until we learn about the ministry of the Spirit, the struggle continues, and Paul ends the chapter on that note.

So here's the bottom line: when you try to please God and live the Christian life on your own strength, the result will always be struggle and defeat. When you try to reduce the Christian life to keeping God's law or just keeping the rules of religion, sin will invade your rules, one way or another, and you'll experience death. For a while you might have some success. You can do

that by externalizing God's law into a list of rules you can keep, and that will allow you to judge others who can't keep up with you. But all the while you're harboring resentment, jealousy and hatred in your heart. Sooner or later you'll be kicking against the goads. You'll begin to feel whatever you do it's never enough. You'll think the whole world rests on your shoulders rather than on God's. You'll either become a perfectionist who's terrified of failure and obsessed with making the right decisions, or you'll just throw in the towel and give in to sin. When you try to please God and live the Christian life on your own strength, the result will always be struggle and defeat.

I noticed a disturbing tendency in myself one day when I was at the gym. A list of rules is posted for people who use the weight machines. One of the rules says you're not supposed to just sit there on your machine in-between sets but allow others to work in. I do that by going through a circuit three times, which means I move immediately to the next machine after each set of reps. But often when I go to the next machine I see some guy just sitting there on the machine, resting, and I must tell you, it really bugs me. I once asked a guy if I could work in and he looked at me like I was a criminal! Read the sign!

But here's the problem: The rules also say after you use a machine you should wipe the sweat off the machine before going onto the next one. I don't like that rule, because it slows me down. I practically grew up in a sweaty gym. What's the big deal about a little sweat? But it **is** a big deal to some people, and it is the law of the gym. So what I've found is while trying to keep the law of the gym, while thinking I was a law-abiding member of the gym, while judging others for not keeping the laws of the gym, eventually my hypocrisy was exposed, and my defeat at the hands of the law obvious to all.

When you try to please God and keep the rules in your own strength, the result will always be struggle and defeat. But God has shown us a better way. Up in v. 6 he gave us the first hint of it, calling it "serving in the new way of the Spirit." And to learn more about that, you have to come next week as we look at chapter 8.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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