

A Sermon by
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Chinese Christian Church
of New Jersey

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Nature and Function of the Law

ROMANS 7:1-25

My first exposure to ROMANS 7 came while I was in college, after I had heard the gospel and put my faith in Jesus Christ. At that time well-intentioned people told me that there are two kinds of Christians. First of all, there are spiritual Christians. They said that spiritual Christians are people who are controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. With spiritual Christians, everything is in order. Interests and priorities are all balanced, and everything looks good. But then there are carnal Christians. They are people who have been saved by grace; but, at the same time, they are being controlled by their own egos. With carnal Christians, things are out of order. Interests and priorities are not balanced, and things do not look good.

The Apostle Paul's testimony recorded in ROMANS 7:15-25 was then used to illustrate the condition of a carnal Christian. "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do (ROMANS 7:15)." People would read those words to me and tell me that this kind of thinking was the thinking of a Christian who is not walking in the Spirit.

But, over the years I have come to see things from a different light. I no longer believe that Christians fit into two neat categories. I do not believe that anyone who has been saved by grace and who is still living is 100% controlled and empowered by the Holy Spirit. No one has the interests and priorities of his life completely in order. All of us struggle with pride, at least to some extent. All of us sin, and that is why all of us need the gospel. ROMANS 3:12 says, "There is no one who does good, not even one."

The gospel tells us that there is a solution to the sin problem, and the solution is a Savior. Salvation is not a one-time fix. It is not like a vaccination that will make us immune from the disease of sin for the rest of our lives. Our sin problem requires that we seek Jesus every day of our lives for the help that we need.

Just recently I watched a program where a married man admitted to another man that he felt attraction towards—and even had the desire to kiss—a beautiful woman who worked at the same place where he worked. The man who was listening to this admission said, "I guess that's why we need a little divine help from time to time." I was glad to hear him say that, but I wished he had said, "We are constantly in need of God's help."

The main message of Romans is that all men are sinners who experience God's wrath; therefore, all men need the gospel. The need never ends. The thing that distinguishes a Christian from a non-Christian is not that the non-Christian has a need to be saved by God's grace and the Christian no longer has such a need. Nothing could be further from the truth. The main thing that distinguishes a Christian from a non-Christian is that the Christian recognizes he does have a need and turns to God every day for the grace

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needed to overcome his sin problem. We are all carnal to some degree, and that is why we need the gospel.

The main reason why the Apostle Paul wrote what he did in the seventh chapter of Romans was not to describe how Christians sometimes need a Savior because they occasionally slip away from being spiritual and become carnal. The main reason why these words were written is because people were misusing the holy commands of God. They were turning to God's law as a solution to their sin problem. The Apostle Paul, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote the words recorded in ROMANS 7 to convince people who were misusing the law that they were wrong. The law provided no solution to their sin problem. There is only one solution to the sin problem, and that is a Savior.

The Apostle Paul began the chapter by stating clearly that he was speaking to people who know the law. You can read that in verse one. The relationship that the Jews had with the law went beyond the kind of delight in the law expressed in PSALM 119. In that Psalm author said, "I delight in your decrees (PSALM 119:16)." He delighted in obeying God's commands. And it is good to delight in obeying God's commands if you are doing it for the right reason.

However, the average Jew who lived during the time Romans was written was trying to obey God's commands for the wrong reason. He was committed to obeying so that he could earn his salvation. A commitment to obeying God's decrees is an essential part of what it means to be a child of God. In JOHN 14:23 Jesus said, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching." But when the motive behind our pledge to obey the law is to earn our way to heaven, then we are making a serious mistake, because the law cannot save.

It was this wrong motive that the Apostle Paul was attacking in ROMANS 7. He desperately wanted his fellow countrymen to turn to Jesus as their Savior instead of relying upon the law. Their theology was wrong, and they had become slaves to their wrong theology. Just like a woman united to a cruel husband in marriage, these Jews had become united with the law in a way that they were never meant to be.

The main point of Paul's discussion about marriage, recorded in ROMANS 7:2-3, was not meant to be a teaching about marriage. During the time it was written, husbands had complete authority over their wives, and the only way wives with cruel husbands could be released from their marriage was the death of the husband. Dead husbands no longer have control over their living wives. The wives are free to become united with someone else.

The apostle Paul had to die to his old way of thinking about the law before he could give his loyalty to Christ. Relying on the law to save you and relying on Christ to save you is like being married to two husbands at the same time. It doesn't work.

Paul had discovered in his own experience that a person married to the law obeys the law, because he fears punishment if he disobeys. But a person married to Christ is motivated by love. He gives his entire self—mind and emotions and will—to the One he loves. The difference is huge. When Paul stood as a witness to the stoning execution of a man named Steven, he believed with all of his heart that Pharisaic Judaism was the only answer to the world's problems as well as to man's deepest religious longings. He was married to the law, and few were more zealous than him at keeping the law. He had received all the religious respect and honor that men could possibly heap on other men. Religiously speaking, he had everything but peace and joy, because being married to the law cannot produce peace and joy. In contrast, the man who was being stoned to death was full of peace and joy, because He knew he was about to meet the One he loved.

When Paul wrote the seventh chapter of Romans, he himself had come to understand that same glorious peace and joy that he had seen on Stephen's face. He had died to the law that once bound him, and he was now able to look back on his old relationship with the law and describe it for what it was—a bondage that produced guilt instead of joy.

I can only think of four possible ways for a person to relate to the God's moral decrees.

One way is to avoid them altogether—behave as if there were no moral laws in the first place. The first chapter of Romans exposes those who take that option as people whose thinking has become futile and whose foolish hearts have become darkened (ROMANS 1:21). Although some people in this auditorium may presently be taking the option of forsaking the law, I feel rather certain that most of us have decided to take seriously the moral laws of God. And, for those who have decided to relate seriously to the moral laws of God, there are three options.

One option is to pretend that you are keeping the law or, at least, that you keep the law most of the time. The way I was once told to view Christianity actually encouraged me to pretend in this way. I was told that, as a Christian, I was either spiritual or carnal—either filled with the Holy Spirit, or not filled with the Holy Spirit. And, of course, I wanted to be a spiritual Christian. But to convince myself that I was a spiritual Christian, I had to reach a state where I felt that I was obeying (at least for a period of time) all the commands of God. But a person has to pretend to do that. You either have to overlook some of the laws or interpret them in a way that will water down their original meaning. Another word for pretending is hypocrisy, and some of the harshest language used by our Lord during His earthly ministry was directed toward people who pretended they were good when they were anything but good. I personally believe that there are many professing Christians who are pretending. It is perhaps the biggest problem faced by evangelical Christians in our country.

But, for the person who does take the moral decrees of God seriously and who does not pretend, there are two other possible ways of relating to the law. One is to view the law as a savior, and then honestly try to obtain salvation by keeping all the laws without watering down their meaning. An honest person taking this approach will eventually suffer tremendous inner turmoil, because any person who is both serious and honest will know that he doesn't even come close to obeying all of the laws. We can say what we want to say about Governor McGreevey. But are we any better? Perhaps we have never had a sexual relationship with someone of the same gender as ourselves, but aren't there many other things we are guilty of. If we deny the fact that we are guilty of many serious sins, then we reveal one of two things: We are either not a serious students of the law, or we are not honest.

Paul was both serious and honest. As a result, his attempts at using the law as a means of salvation resulted in tremendous inner turmoil, and he recorded his personal testimony in the seventh chapter of Romans.

They way (and also the correct way) for the serious and honest person to relate to God's moral decrees is for that person to allow the law to drive him to God for salvation, a salvation that God has provided through His Son Jesus Christ. The law will not drive us to our Savior each and every day of our lives unless we are serious students of the law who are seriously committed to obeying the law. Only a serious commitment to the law will allow the law to do its work in our lives. And when the law does its work in our lives, two things happen. We become extremely aware of how wretched we are, and we become increasingly enticed to disobey the law. The very words "thou shalt not" arouse our curiosities and our desires. We think about what it would be like to do the things we are not supposed to do, and our thoughts give us some degree of pleasure. This kind of arousal, along with an honest admittance of failure in keeping the law should drive us to the loving arms of our Savior every single day of our lives.

From all the Biblical information on the life of the Apostle Paul of which I am aware, I conclude that he never related to the law as a pretender. Nor did he ever try to live as if the law did not exist. Paul's attitude toward the law was both serious and honest. At first he tried to use it as his savior. Then he died to that false way of thinking and he embraced Jesus Christ, the only One who could truly save him. ROMANS 7 is his testimony.

He first gives a description of the law from the perspective of people like himself and others who used to think of the law as a means of salvation. He does this in verses 4 through 6 of ROMANS 7. Let me try to use his words to summarize this perspective on the law.

In verse 4 of chapter 7 he states that the believer, in effect has *died* to the law. In verse 5 he states that sinful passions are *aroused* by the law. In that same verse we see him say that the action of the law produced fruit unto *death*. In verse 6 we see that the law *bound* us, making liberation necessary. Again, in verse 6, it is stated that we believers have been *released* from the law. And finally, in the same verse, we see that the law is the “old way of the written code.”

This strong negative language about the law helps us to understand why respectable Jewish leaders had such hatred for this former militant Pharisee. To be loyal to the gospel, Paul had to take a stand concerning the law that sounded unreasonable, and even slanderous. In the same way a woman cannot be married to two husbands at the same time, Paul knew it was impossible for a person to turn to both Christ and the law for salvation. The unhealthy marriage people had with the law had to be put to death. The language he used did come across as slanderous for the average Jew living at that time. But, it was the only way for Paul to make his point.

But, Paul was not only a serious and honest person; he was also a smart person. He could anticipate the violent reaction he would receive. He had experienced it in the past. ACTS 24:5 records a seething reaction against Paul by a Jewish lawyer named Tertulian as Paul stood before Felix. Tertulian said, “We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect and even tried to desecrate the temple; so we seized him.”

Paul anticipated the questions that would be raised against him. And so, in the words recorded in the rest of this chapter, he raises the questions and gives the answers and uses his own testimony as an example.

The first question is raised in the first half of verse 7. Let me paraphrase for you. *“From the negative way I just talked about the law, should one conclude that I am calling the law sin?”*

The answer to the question is (and again I paraphrase), *“Such a conclusion is unthinkable! The law is a revealer of sin. For instance, in my own case it was the law that first showed me my covetousness.”* The illustration is recorded in verses 8-11.

So the conclusion emphasized in verse 12 is, *“No, the law is not sin. It is a revelation of God’s holy, just, and good purpose for man’s behavior.”*

The second question is raised in the first part of verse 13. *“Did that which is good cause death in me?”* And the answer recorded in the last half of verse 13 is: *“This is also a ridiculous conclusion! The real death-dealer is sin; the law serves to arouse the killer. For instance, in my own case, my high personal regard for the law did not provide for me the power to defeat sin. I remained weak.* The illustration is in two parts—first of all in verses 14-16 and once again in verses 18-20.

So the conclusion emphasized in verse 17 is, *“The law is not that which produced this death; it showed me that sin (which is the real killer) was alive in me.”*

So what are the basic facts about the nature and function of the law discovered by a man who once was married to the law as his savior but then died to that bond so he could embrace Jesus as his loving Savior? Paul lays the principles out in verses 21 through 25. They are:

Principle number one, recorded in verse 21: When a person really wants in himself to do the right thing, that person will discover that he has sin to contend with.

Principle number two, recorded in verse 22 and 23: Even when a person delights in God’s law—even that does not bring a solution to the sin problem, and Paul learned this principle first-hand.

Principle number three, recorded in verse 23: The power of sin in the members of

our bodies overwhelm and overpower all of our good intentions and all of our positive feelings toward God's law. Again, it was through first-hand experience that Paul learned this principle.

Principle number four (revealed in Paul's personal testimony recorded in verse 24): Even the most religious people will find themselves wretched and hopeless without outside help.

And then, principle number 5, found in verse the first half of verse 25: *"I have found Jesus Christ to be that Helper."* Jesus Christ is the One who can save.

So, in the last half of verse 25 and the first verse of chapter 8, we find that the conclusion to this whole matter of law is this: regardless how highly a person may regard the law of God, his body will show its allegiance to sin. Only in Christ can we find freedom from condemnation.

My problem, your problem, our problem is sin. And sinners need a Savior. If you are a person who has decided to ignore the law or if you are a person who pretends that you are actually able to obey the law, then Romans 7 is going to mean very little to you. But if you are a person who is both serious about understanding and obeying the law and honest enough to admit that you are a failure, then these timeless principles should bring you encouragement and hope.