

Mind over Body Romans 7:7-25

Adapted from "Romans—A Gospel Shaped Life." By Pastor Pat Damiani, Thornydale Family Church, Tucson AZ.

Well friends, today will be my last sermon from the book of Romans...for a while (*please, no applause*). We will return to Romans again this Fall, but for the rest of the Spring and Summer let's take a break from the heavy stuff and look into the life and adventures of the early church as recorded in the book of Acts. Then when I am gone in late Summer, Philip Parker will lead you through a study of all Jesus' parables; which I will look forward to reading upon my return.

But that means to come to a good stopping place today, we will have to unsnarl a mess here in the back stretch of Romans chapter seven where Paul seemingly has gotten himself entangled in an internal debate over whether we are truly freed from or still ensnared under the power of sin. This is one of the most complicated portions of Romans to understand, one over which many commentators disagree, and one which is often quoted in support of very opposite understandings of "the Christian life." So I will do my best to sort through these various arguments with you so that we may come away at least with some application for our life today. Let's begin.

Tommy Lasorda, the former Los Angeles Dodgers manager once described his battle with bad habits: "I took a pack of cigarettes from my pocket, stared at it and said, "Who's stronger, you or me?" The answer was me. I stopped smoking. Then I took a vodka martini and said to it, "Who's stronger, you or me?" Again the answer was me. I quit drinking. Then I went on a diet. I looked at a big plate of linguine with clam sauce and said, "Who's stronger, you or me?" And a little clam looked up at me and answered, "I am." I can't beat linguine.

How many of you here this morning can identify with Tommy Lasorda? How many of you, even after becoming a Christian, have done battle with some bad habit or some sin, only to find out that you couldn't beat it? I say that because I don't know of one single Christian, including myself, who has experienced complete victory over sin even though, as we have seen in our study of Romans, our union with Jesus in his death and resurrection has freed us from both the penalty and power of sin and enabled us to live righteous lives before God.

But, as we're going to learn this morning, our struggle with sin is not necessarily a bad thing. The fact that you and I continue to have this kind of battle in our lives is actually healthy--it means we have a Christian conscience. And while there will always be struggles in our lives--because genuine growth of any kind requires genuine effort--with God's help we can actually prevail in "presenting ourselves to God as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:13).

But first let's reset the stage that Paul has laid down for us so far in this letter:

In the first five chapters of Romans, Paul has shown that we are all guilty before a righteous God because we have violated both the internal and the written law that He has given us. God's law was given not only to restrain sin, but also to teach us that we could never save ourselves by keeping the law and so lead us into seeking a savior. In

another of his letters, Paul called the law "our disciplinarian," "our guardian," to lead us to Christ (Galatians 3:21-24).

since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now **justified by His grace as a gift**, through the **redemption that is in Christ Jesus**, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.
Romans 3:23-25

Next, we learned that out of love for us, God graciously sent us His son Jesus to pay the penalty for our sin so that, by having Jesus sinless death credited to our sinful account, we might be **justified**, declared righteous before God. And the only way we can accept this justification in Jesus is to receive it by faith as a gift from God.

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions... but **present yourselves to God ... as instruments of righteousness**.
Romans 6:12-13

Now having been justified before God, adopted into His family, and indwelt with His Holy Spirit, God next begins **sanctifying** us, making us into the righteous people He previously had declared us to be. So in chapter six, Paul explains this process of sanctification: that having been freed from both the penalty and power of sin—by our union with Jesus in his death and resurrection to a new life—we are now free (commanded) to live righteously, *in newness of life*, for God (6:4).

But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive **so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit** and not in the old way of the written code.
(Romans 7:4-6 E.S.V.)

Then at the start of Chapter seven, Paul continues explaining our sanctification by teaching that not only have we been freed from the power of sin, but we are also released from the dominion of the Law... "**so that may we serve God in the new way of the Spirit**" (out of love not out of requirement).

And yetlater on in chapter seven, verse 14, Paul seems to reverse himself and begins strangely talking about himself, (someone else?) "*delighting in the law*" and

"wanting to do good," but because we are still held *in slavery to sin*, unable to stop ourselves from doing wrong!!! (7:14, 21-23).

So which is true for the Christian?

Does *sin no longer have dominion over us?*

Or are we—being still in our flesh--*sold into slavery under sin?* (Romans 6: 14 vs. Romans 7:14). This is what we will attempt to untangle today.

Summary of Paul's teachings

while Christians are no longer slaves to sin's power, we will continue to struggle with and commit sins.

Let's begin by making it very clear that while the commentators are in disagreement about who, or what time of his own life, Paul may be referring to here in chapter seven, they all agree that Paul clearly teaches two things, throughout all his letters: **that while Christians are no longer slaves to sin's power, we will continue to struggle with and commit sins.** The big question here is whether or not this is what Paul is talking about in chapter 7:13-25

Although there are many different opinions about who or what part of his life Paul is now referring to with his reference to *being sold into slavery under sin*, all of them pretty much fit into one of...**THREE POSSIBLE VIEWPOINTS:**

1. **Paul may be continuing to write about the unbeliever's struggle to become holy under the law** (supported by early Church fathers, Moo, Wiersbe, me)

This interpretation of the passage points out that there is little doubt that chapter 7 opens with the assertion that believers have *died to the law* so that we might *belong to Jesus and now bear fruit to God*. (7:4-6). Then Paul shifts to answering objections he presumes his critics are raising: that the law neither causes us to sin, nor brings us to death—because *the law is holy, just, and good* (7:12), but rather that the law proves to us that it is the sin nature living in us that causes us to sin and die.

*For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, **sold into slavery under sin**.* (7:14).

For sin will have no dominion over you since you are not under law but under grace (6:14)

So when Paul says in verse 14, *For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, **sold into slavery under sin**,* he cannot be referring to himself as a believer

since he has already declared believers freed from sin's dominion and now owned by Christ! (6:14). And we can't be owned by two masters. Thus the conclusion from the surrounding context is that here Paul—even though speaking in the first person—is continuing his arguments on what the law, being holy, just and good can or cannot do: it does not cause sin, it does not bring death, but neither can it free us from spiritual death because we are held enslaved to sin until Jesus frees us.

So according to this viewpoint Paul is putting himself back into his hyper-religious but pre-Christian days: in his mind *delighting in the Law of Gad*, while (in reality) *finding another law in his members at war with his mind* (7:21).

This interpretation makes sense, because Paul has already described how he once thought he was so spiritual due to his adherence to the law, but when he truly understood the law fully, he became aware of his sin and his corresponding need for a Savior. And now having been freed from the bindings of the law—by his death with Christ—he can now *serve God in the new way of the Spirit.*" (So this section doesn't really apply to those who are now Christian).

2. Paul is writing about his **present struggles as a believer**

(This position supported by Augustine, Catholic theology, the Holiness movement, and Sproul) .

A second possibility is that Paul is writing about his current life as a disciple of Jesus. If that is the case, then Paul is describing in very passionate terms, the struggles that he still experiences with sin in his life: *enslaved, not understanding, not doing what I want to do, nothing good dwelling within me.* And while his passionate plea for deliverance (which he gets to in the end), does speak to the very real struggles that we Christians still face with sin, as commentator Douglas Moo points out, this is so contrary to what he has just written to believers just one chapter earlier: that we have been *raised from the dead by the Glory of the Father so that we might walk in newness of life* (6:4)

While Christians do continue to struggle with sin in their lives, how can Paul so radically shift from adamantly declaring *Now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification.* (Romans 6:22), to now wailing—supposedly as a believer—*Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* (7:24). In giving weight to the context of what Paul is saying, I prefer the first interpretation.

3. Paul is writing about a **"carnal" Christian.**

There is also a third interpretation which was based on Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church where Paul told some Christians who were so immature, that *I could not speak to you as spiritual people but rather as people of the flesh* (3:1). Those who take this position believe that Paul is teaching immature believers about what it takes to become more mature believers who, while they are not completely free no longer have constant struggles with sin.

While I think that the first position is theologically the strongest, at least to some degree, it is possible to make plausible arguments for all three positions. So before we go further let me share a couple of cautions:

- This is not the only place in Scripture that addresses the issue of “sin in the life of the believer,” so we can’t rely only on these few verses to develop a dogmatic position.
- And if we keep the context in mind, that Paul is currently writing about what the law can and cannot do, even if we don’t agree on what Paul is talking about here, we can still apply this passage appropriately and effectively in our lives.

Remember that the overall idea that Paul has been reinforcing over and over in his letter is that **we have to die to the law in order to be accepted by God and to bear fruit for God. Faith in Jesus alone is the only way to be justified and it is also the only road to genuine sanctification as well.**

But the fact that we need to die to the law does not mean that the law is bad. In fact, the law, as we saw two weeks ago, is good because it reveals our sinfulness, self-centeredness and our need for a Savior. The problem isn’t the law—it is the sin that the law reveals. So, regardless of which perspective he is writing from, as an unbeliever, or as a believer, or something else, the cry of misery that we hear in verse 24—***Wretched man that I am!***—is not caused by the law but rather by indwelling sin.

So whether Paul is talking here about his sin-bound life before coming to faith or his continued struggle with sin after coming to faith, I think we can still draw some practical applications out of this passage for us, who as believers also continue to struggle with sin.

----- Practical Applications -----

1. It’s not OK to make peace with my sin

I worry that a person might be tempted to look at this passage and think that if Paul struggled this much with sin, what chance do I have? I might as well just give up trying to adhere to the law, knowing that God is a gracious God and He’ll forgive whatever sin I just can’t seem to get victory over.

Or as I have heard others, even Christians, sometimes state: “*Well that is just the way God made me. I can’t help it if I have a bad temper, or if I lie all the time, or I look at pornography, or if I cheat on my taxes. God made me this way and He’ll understand.*”

While those things may very well characterize your flesh, which is still present in your life, the good news is that even though you can’t do it on your own, there is a way to get victory over every sin you struggle with; this leads us to our second application.

1. It’s not OK to make peace with my sin

2. God does not intend that I live in continual defeat

This passage is a great example of why we can't just take one passage from Scripture and develop a doctrine based on that passage alone. Were we to do so with this passage, we'd think that Paul lived his whole life in continual defeat when it came to his battle with his sins. But we need to remember Paul's purpose here, which is to reinforce the conclusion that it is not the law that is bad, but rather that it is the sin that resides in our flesh that is the problem.

Who will rescue me from this body of death?
Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ
our Lord! [I have been rescued].
Romans 7:25

And, as Paul implies in verse 25, there is a solution, a way that we can be victorious in this battle.

- 1. It's not OK to make peace with my sin**
- 2. God does not intend that I live in continual defeat**
- 3. The more I get to know of the righteousness of God, the more I am aware of my own sins.**

As I mentioned earlier, some people think Paul is writing here from the perspective of an immature believer who has not yet "learned the secret" of gaining victory over sin. Yet it is also true both from my own experience and the testimony of Scripture that the more mature in Christ I become, the more I actively engage in a struggle with any remaining or returning sin in my life. The reason for this is because the more intimately that I get to know Jesus, the more I understand about just how far from his mark of holiness I continue to remain.

Paul certainly discovered this truth in his own life: the more mature he became as a Christian the worse he saw his own sinfulness. If you read his self-descriptions from progressive letters he has written though the years, you can sense his growing awareness of just how far, even as a sanctified Christian, he had and continues to fall short of God's goal for his life (*cf. Philipians 3:7-14*)

*I am **the least of the apostles***
(1 Corinthians 15:9)

*I am **the very least of all the saints***
(Ephesians 3:8)

*Christ Jesus came to save **sinners,***
of whom I am the foremost.
(1 Timothy 1:15)

For I am **the least of the apostles**, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:9)

To me, though I am **the very least of all the saints**, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, (Ephesians 3:8)

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that (1 Timothy 1:15)

As Paul grew more and more like his Savior, he grew more and more discontented with himself, his own righteousness, and his own sinfulness. If this was true of Paul, should it not be equally true of us?

“When a man is getting better he understands more and more clearly the evil that is still left in him. When a man is getting worse he understands his own badness less and less. A moderately bad man knows he is not very good: a thoroughly bad man thinks he is all right.

This is common sense, really. You understand sleep when you are awake, not while you are sleeping....You can understand the nature of drunkenness when you are sober, not when you are drunk. Good people know about both good and evil: bad people do not know about either.”—C.S. Lewis, from Mere Christianity

- 1. It's not OK to make peace with my sin**
- 2. God does not intend that I live in continual defeat**
- 3. The more I get to know of the righteousness of God, the more I am aware of my own sins.**
- 4. This is not a battle I can win on my own.
The solution is a Person, not a plan.**

Paul ends chapter seven with his heart rending wail: *Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* But then he begins chapter 8 with...

*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, **so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.** (Romans 8:1-4)*

So the answer to non-believers still struggling in spiritual death and believers who continue to struggle with sin in their new life, is the same: Jesus. Both through justification and now the process of sanctification, Jesus has and continues to set you free from the power of sin and the obligations of the law, so that you might live in newness of life serving God.

During children's church one day, the pastor wanted to use squirrels as an example of prepared workers. So he started by saying, *"I'm going to describe something, and I want you to raise your hand when you know what it is."*

The children, excited to show what they knew, now leaned forward eagerly. *"I'm thinking of something that lives in trees and eats nuts ..."* No hands went up.

"It can be gray or brown and it has a long bushy tail ..." The children looked around at each other, but still no one raised a hand.

"It chatters and sometimes it flips its tail when it's excited ..." Finally one little boy shyly raised his hand. The pastor breathed a sigh of relief and said, *"Okay, Michael. What do you think it is?"* "Well," said the boy, ***"I guess the answer's supposed to be Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel to me."***

Well, this time around, the answer is Jesus. The more we get to know him the freer we become. As the Apostle Peter wrote in one of my favorite passages:

God's divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.
2 Peter 1:3

So, this morning, perhaps God has been leading you to make a decision in response to what you've learned. Whether that is committing your life to Jesus for the first time or it is committing to go deeper in your relationship with Jesus in some way, we are here to help you with that. There are several ways that you can let me know how we can help:

- You can talk to me or to one of our Elders after church this morning.
- You can fill out the information on the Connection Card—find it in the pew rack in front of you—write something on the back and drop it in the offering plate or give it to me as you leave and I will be in touch with you this week.
- Or drop me an email at jtsalley@gmail.com