

Series: The Reign of Grace

Today's Message: Freed from Sin's Power and the Powerlessness of the Law / Jeff Kennedy / Oct 23, 2022

Romans 7:7–13 “What should we say then? Is the law sin? Absolutely not! But I would not have known sin if it were not for the law. For example, I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, **Do not covet.** ⁸ And sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind. For apart from the law sin is dead. ⁹ Once I was alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life again ¹⁰ and I died. The commandment that was meant for life resulted in death for me. ¹¹ For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. ¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. ¹³ Therefore, did what is good become death to me? Absolutely not! But sin, in order to be recognized as sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that through the commandment, sin might become sinful beyond measure.”

Introduction: If ever you need an ultrasound in the future you will discover that whatever the news you receive—news of a growing life in a young mother; news about a blockage in your arteries or stones in your gallbladder, a lump in your breast tissue or in my case—a nodule on your thyroid that needs to be removed—whatever the news, good or bad, happy or sad, the ultrasound is only designed to enlighten you to your actual condition—to reveal what is true. It has only diagnostic utility and will not cure you of anything that is found to be true. Chapter 3:20 “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.” Paul told the Romans that this, generally, is the function of God’s law in the OT. This good, spiritual, holy and just law of God was given to reveal what is true about us.

Up to this point Paul has made his case:

Paul has told believers that **We have been freed from the condemnation (penalty) of sin (Ch’s 1-5)** through the justifying grace of God by faith apart from our works.

Paul has told us in Ch 6 that **We are freed from sin’s control (power) (Ch 6)**. Therefore, we are to count ourselves dead to sin, having been crucified, buried and raised to life with Christ in baptism of the Holy Spirit, walking in the newness of life.

Now, in chapter 7 he tells us that **We are free from sin’s collaborator/partner (Ch 7)**. The law now becomes something of an unwilling accomplice, an unwitting co-conspirator through which sin brings death to me. And the law exacerbates the problem because sin, working through the law, kills us. Guns don’t kill people—people kill people with guns. Cars don’t run over people—people run over people with cars. The law doesn’t kill people—sin kills people through the knowledge of the law.

Now if that’s true, why does Paul appear to describe himself as being hopelessly defeated and enslaved to sin?

Romans 7:14–20 “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold as a slave under sin. ¹⁵ For I do not understand what I am doing, because I do not practice what I want to do, but I do what I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want to do, I agree with the law that it is good. ¹⁷ So now I am no longer the one doing it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good

lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good that I want to do, but I practice the evil that I do not want to do. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, I am no longer the one that does it, but it is the sin that lives in me.”

Three Primary Views of the Wretched Man of 7:14–25

- **First View: Paul is describing the best possible (optimal) Christian life.** On this view Paul is here describing a Christian’s struggle with sin. When Paul says, in the first person singular (I am unspiritual...I do not understand...I do not do what I want to do...” this really describes the Christian’s everyday experience—and given Paul’s high level of faith, commitment, and obedience to Christ’s word—for *Paul to express this as his frustration means that none of us can possibly escape this experience*. This just is as good as it gets.
- **Second View: Paul is describing a sub-optimal Christian life.** On this perspective, Paul is not describing *the* Christian life, but rather *A* Christian life. A person who, without a daily reliance on the Spirit’s power finds themselves once again enslaved and trapped in areas of sin that indeed will dog us unless we surrender to the sanctification process. Paul doesn’t want this to describe the Christian life, but sometimes it does.
- **Third View: Paul is here describing the pre-Christian life as a Torah observant Jew.** On this interpretation, Paul merely continues speaking in solidarity (with one voice) with his fellow Jews who had received the law, who love and delight in the law, yet they find themselves hopelessly defeated and unable to obtain the righteousness according to the law that they pursued. Proponents of this view point out that Paul here describes a person whose experience is very different from his prescribed mentality in Chapters 6 and 8.

I want to say two things: **First, none of these views is a matter of orthodoxy.** I do not want anyone to be bound by my conscience on this debatable matter. **Second, I am going to make a case today for which of these three views I hold to.**

So, what view do I hold? I hold the third (and possibly the second) view. Paul is not here describing either the optimal Christian life, nor is he really describing a substandard Christian experience (maybe a carnal or immature Christian etc...). No, Paul is here continuing his discussion (in context) of the powerlessness of the law to cure us from ails us—innate bondage sin.

Now, in order for me to make this case today, I need to first address the degree to which the believer can expect to experience ongoing temptation, then turn to the arguments for an unregenerate wretched man (vv. 14–25), then address some common objections to that view.

I. Believers should continue to resist sin so long as they remain in fallen world. Christians find themselves in a constant battle against warring impulses of the fleshly nature. Folks, I wish that were not true. I wish I could assure you that if you just followed a certain regimen of prayer, Bible study, service with your spiritual gifts, church membership etcetera, etcetera that you will someday be free of the temptation to lust, covet, feel murderous anger, or pop off with your mouth in gossip, disrespectful speech etcetera, etcetera. But, that would be an empty and false promise. Short of dying (the soul being released from the body) or being resurrected (receiving a new and immortal body), you and I will have to resist sin. Why?

Here's what the Scriptures say about that...

1. **We struggle against sin. Hebrews 12:3–4** “For consider him who endured such hostility from sinners against himself, so that you won’t grow weary and give up. ⁴In ***struggling against sin***, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” The writer of Hebrews says, you and I should not grow weary, nor should we throw in the towel—because we haven’t struggled against sin nearly as much as Jesus did.
2. **Temptations are common and can suddenly come upon us. 1 Cor 10:12–13** “So, whoever thinks he stands must be careful not to fall. No ***temptation has come upon you*** except what is common to humanity. But God is faithful; he will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to bear it.” That is, the temptations that come upon us are the lot of all who name Christ as Savior and Lord. God is faithful to relieve the pressure of that temptation why? So we can bear it. The Christian life is joyfully and triumphantly bearing up under temptation and bearing suffering.
3. **Resisting temptation is possible with alertness in prayer. Mark 14:38** “Stay awake and pray so that you won’t ***enter into temptation***. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” What did Jesus require of the disciples? Vigilance—to guard against temptation.
4. **Christians are tempted to constantly submit to sin’s slavery. Gal 5:1** “For freedom, Christ set us free (freedom from the law). Stand firm, then, and ***don’t submit again to a yoke of slavery***; 6:1 “Brothers and sisters, if someone is overtaken in any wrongdoing, you who are spiritual, restore such a person with a gentle spirit, watching out for yourselves ***so that you also won’t be tempted***.” Christians are warned not to resubmit to the yoke of sin’s slavery working through the law. And we also see here that this is a possible Christian experience—resubmitting to a yoke of slavery to sin.

Christians have an ongoing struggle with temptation and sin.

But is *that* what Paul is describing here in Romans 7:14–25? The answer must be no. Paul is not here describing struggling with sin but slavery to sin and the hopeless defeat that that enslavement to sin brings.

II. Believers should no longer live hopelessly defeated by sin. We constantly struggle with it but we are not to again become enslaved to it.

How can this be true? The first point that Paul makes here is that...

- 1. We are no longer under the dominion of sin or “in/of the flesh.”** Rom 7:5 “For when we were **in the flesh** (*té sarkí*; dative of sphere), the sinful passions aroused through the law were working in us to bear fruit for death.” This construction means, “in the sphere, realm, or under the dominion of).

Let’s recap his case for this...

- Rom 6:6–7 “For we know that our **old self** was **crucified** with him so that the body **ruled by sin** might be rendered **powerless** so that we may no longer be **enslaved to sin**,⁷ since a person who has died is freed from sin.” We have died to sin and are set free from its reign and its dominion over us.
- 6:14 “For **sin** will not **rule over you**, because you are not **under the law** but under grace.” *Sin shall not rule over your life precisely because you aren’t under the dispensation, or administration of the law which enables sin.* Instead, you are under the dispensation of grace by the Spirit’s power.
- 6:17 “But thank God that, although you **used to be slaves of sin**, you obeyed from the heart that pattern of teaching to which you were handed over,¹⁸ and **having been set free from sin**, you became enslaved to righteousness.”
- 7:5 “For when **we were in the flesh**, the sinful passions aroused **through the law** were working in us to bear fruit for death.”

Summary: When Paul uses this phrase “in the flesh” or “fleshly/unspiritual” he is referring to the believer’s past as in the sphere, the realm, or under the dominion of the fleshly, sinful nature; under its control and its power. But Paul said, the old man was crucified with Christ so that the body ruled by sin might be rendered powerless.

- 7:14 “For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am **of the flesh, sold as a slave under sin**... 22 “For in my inner self I delight in God’s law (Psa 19:7; 119:16, 24, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174),²³ but I see a different law in the parts of my

body, waging war against the law of my mind (knowledge of Torah) and **taking me prisoner** to the law of sin in the parts of my body... ²⁵ So then, with my mind I myself am **servicing** (captive/enslaved) **the law** of God, but with my flesh, the law of sin.” Wait, did he not just repeatedly say that we are not “of,” “in,” or “under” the flesh—that is its dominion—and that we used to be slaves sold into bondage under sin’s reign? So how, can Paul say this is true for you Christians in Rome, **but not for HIM?** But that’s precisely what he would be claiming if vv. 14–25 describe Paul’s present Christian experience. Again, we see a person who is held captive, enslaved to sin in the realm or the dominion of the flesh, and a person who is enslaved to the law—the two things that Paul has said the believer is now delivered from. 7:3 “But if her husband dies, **she is free from that law...** (she’s set free from the covenantal law which bound her to that relationship) Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you also were **put to death in relation to the law** through the body of Christ... 6. But now we **have been released from the law**, since we have died to what held us, so that we may serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the old letter of the law.”

Summary: Again, let’s be clear—the believer still struggles, is at war, and battles against the sinful impulses of the fallen body—which by itself is hopelessly ruled by sin.

But Paul is here not describing struggling with sin in this passage—he is rather, describing slavery to sin. The wretched man of vv. 14–25 is hopelessly defeated by his sin for he is still in the sphere, in the realm/domain of the flesh; He cries out in frustration that even though he, as a Jew, knows God’s law (do not covet), delights in that law (echoing the Psalmists) but whose attempts to obey it are ultimately unsatisfactory. That’s why he tells them that this person had no “ability” to do the very thing that he tells the Christian in the very next chapter they now have the ability to do.

The Believer is to no longer live in bondage to sin and the law—because we have been set free from the sphere, the realm, the dominion of sin.

2. The believer is to live victorious over sin because we are “in the Spirit” (8:8–12). The resolution to the dilemma of Ch. 7 is Ch. 8 God has, by contrast, invaded the believer’s life with his empowering presence.

⁸ Those who are *in the flesh* (in the sphere, realm, under the dominion) cannot please God. ⁹ You, however, are not *in the flesh*, but in the Spirit (Where? In the sphere, realm, under the dominion), if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to him. ¹⁰ Now if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. ¹¹ And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, then he who raised Christ from the dead will also bring your mortal bodies to life through his Spirit who lives in you. ¹² So then, brothers and sisters, we are not obligated to the flesh to live according to the flesh,” We are walking in the newness of life until the resurrection. Who are the those who are “in the sphere, in the realm, under the dominion of the flesh?” By contrast, everyone who has received the Spirit of Christ *belong to Christ* and experience ongoing victory against the flesh.

Romans 7:14–25 describes Paul in his Pre-Christian life, and 8:1–12 describes the best Christian life—no longer a slave to sin working through the law to bring death—but not in the sphere, in the realm, under the dominion of God’s Spirit reigning in grace.

Answering Objections:

- “I feel like vv. 14–25 describe my Christian experience.” Well, I would say, that since 14–25 (the wretched man verses) describe a person who is in bondage to sin, hopelessly frustrated and defeated—I would say that you need to leave the elementary teachings of the Christian Faith and begin to grow in your understanding of a Spirit-empowered Sanctification in the Christian life. In short, vv. 14–25 should not, generally describe your Christian walk.
- What about Paul’s use of the present tense and first person “I do not do what I want to do; I do not understand...” and so forth? Paul uses the exact same construction in Romans 3 to speak in solidarity with unsaved Israel, projecting himself back into a pre-Christian state using first person present tense language.

- **Series of Diatribe Questions and Answers:**

Begins with the Law: Rom 3:1 “What advantage does the Jew have and what is the benefit of circumcision?” He begins chapters 3 and 7 with the Jew’s experience in the law—Ch. 3 the law of circumcision, and Ch. 7 the law prohibiting covetousness.

Diatribe Questions in the Mouth of his Opponents: Rom 3:5–6 he asks If God is unrighteous to inflict wrath? In Rom 7 he asks if the law is sin?

He Enters the Jew’s Experience in First Person Singular: Rom 3:7 “But if by my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?” Now, is Paul presently at the writing of Romans a liar? Romans 9:1 he says “I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying.” 2 Cor 11:31 he told the Corinthians that God knows he is not lying about the Gospel. Likewise, to the Galatians he declared in the sight of God that he was not lying to them. To Timothy (I Tim 2:7) that he never lied about his apostleship.

Is Paul also condemned as a sinner? Not if you believe Rom 8:1 applies also to Paul “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

- Doesn’t Paul thank God that he serves God’s law with his mind and the law of sin with his flesh (vv.24–25)? No. He thanks God that Jesus delivers him from this wretch condition. To reiterate, the word “serve” here is the same term used earlier for “enslaved” to sin and the law. He’s not praising God for the dilemma of being a slave to the law and the flesh, that *just is the dilemma he’s just described*. Paul asks, “who will rescue me from this body of death?” (v.24). Verse 25 does not

describe that deliverance—Romans 8 does. v. 25 instead summarizes the wretched man who is a slave to the law (which Paul has said the believer is delivered from in vv. 3–6) and a slave to sin (which Paul has said the believer is delivered from in Ch. 6). Contrary to the wretched man of 7:14–25, the believer is “released” and freed from both the enslavement to sinful flesh and the enslavement to the law which enabled our sin but didn’t enable us.

- Can a non-Christian “delight in the law” in their inner being (soul)? Wouldn’t that describe a Christian not an OT Jew? Not if you believe the Psalmist, as we’ve said—Psalm 19:7 clearly portrays the law as “refreshing the soul” and various composers in Psalm 119 repeatedly state they delight in God’s Word/precepts/law etc (in fact the phrase “delight in the law” appears in the book Psalms over a dozen times). Again, Paul is speaking in solidarity with his Jewish readers and describing their experience having the law, delighting in the law, and frustrated by it because they cannot live up to Moses’ injunction to keep it perfectly.

Paul is here describing his Pre-Christian Jewish life, knowing the law (“do not covet”), delighting in the law, but being hopelessly frustrated by his inability to live up to its exacting moral standard as a means of righteousness. This passage may also describe a Christian who, as Paul warned the Galatians against, has resubmitted themselves to the bondage of the Law—trying to get along in the Christian life under their own power and being trapped again in this wretched, hopeless pattern. In which Paul’s prescription is “don’t do that—that is not to be a description of the Christian life.”