

## **Romans 7: What a Wretched Man I Am!**

I have a confession to make. Last weekend I did something I've never done before and I feel very uncomfortable about it. In fact for me it was like a leopard changing his spots. It's actually quite hard to say out loud but I'm going to try. Last weekend I found myself wanting Watford to win a football match.

Now some of you won't see the problem because, for whatever twisted reason you are a Watford fan, or perhaps because of some personal problem you don't actually like football. But for me, as a lifelong devotee of the mighty Luton Town, to stand up here and confess that I, a Luton Town fan, wanted Watford to win a football match, is almost unthinkable and I still can't quite believe I did.

Now you may not understand the divide between Luton Town fans and Watford fans, but all of us are used to situations where we belong firmly in one camp or another, with nothing in between. You arrive at the airport and if you have a British or EU passport you go one way and if you are a non-EU national you go the other. There are plenty more too: Marmite or no Marmite. Sprouts or no sprouts. Male or female. There are plenty of times in life when there is no middle ground and we find ourselves in one camp or another.

And right throughout the book of Romans Paul has been making that very point time and time again. We are either justified by faith in Christ or we stand condemned. We either are in Adam or we are in Jesus. We are dead to sin or alive in Christ. We are slaves to righteousness or we are under grace. All of these pairs of alternatives point us to the fact that when it comes to faith in Jesus Christ there is no middle ground. We are either in him, with all the benefits and blessings that brings, or we are outside of Christ, standing condemned, lost, unforgiven and facing hell.

And the point Paul made in the chapter we looked at last week, is that if we have crossed that great divide through faith in Christ then we cannot continue to live as if we were still on the other side of the chasm. We were spiritually dead; we are now alive. We were slaves to sin; we are now slaves to righteousness, slaves of God and we need to live like it.

But as Paul makes this point two questions come up in his mind which form the basis of chapter 7 and that's what we are going to consider this morning.

### **1: Freed from the law, but bound to Christ**

At the start of this chapter Paul adds another 'two ways to live' to our list; we are either bound to the law or bound to Christ.

You see although there are some people who have always lived as they liked, ignoring God and his laws, there are others who have always tried to live the right way, who have always tried to keep God's laws because they thought that by doing so they could earn God's favour. For a while at least Paul would have put himself in that category, and I meet so many people today who think exactly the same: that if they are good enough, nice enough, kind enough and don't do anyone any harm, then God will accept them and welcome them into heaven when they die. But as we've seen in Romans chapters 1 to 6 salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. And actually that's great news, because none of us can keep the God's law perfectly and if we try the only thing we are left with is condemnation. You see for someone who tries to earn God's favour by keeping God's laws, those commands don't just show them the way to live, they highlight all of their failures.

So imagine learning to drive on a deserted island where there are no other cars and no highway code and then suddenly finding yourself driving through Stevenage. On the island you'd try not to hit things, after all you didn't want to damage the car and you'd do that here too, but all of a sudden you'd be aware that people are driving differently. Then one day someone gives you a copy of the Highway Code and all of a sudden you're aware just how many rules you have been breaking without knowing it. It would be depressing, wouldn't it? You thought you were a good driver, careful, safe but in reality you're anything but.

In the same way, the more we get to know God's word and God's perfect commands, the more we are aware of the kind of holy life we should be living. And for someone who is trying to earn God's favour by their obedience, understanding more and more of God's law just raises the bar and brings with it a painful condemnation every time they fail.

Paul had spent his early life living just like this, only as a Pharisee he thought he was doing pretty well. You see the Pharisees thought that all sin was external, so as long as they kept themselves from physically doing sin, committing adultery, stealing someone's property, bowing down to false idols, and as long as they kept making the proper religious sacrifices then they would be seen as righteous in God's eyes. I think that's what Paul is speaking about in verse 9 when he says that once he was alive apart from the law. As a Jew it would have been impossible to grow up and not know God's law, but at the time his understanding of the law made him feel quite good about himself. He was a good and righteous person – after all he kept the law!

But something happened to make him realise that he was not righteous, and the command he mentions in those verses is the command not to covet. You see, coveting is a sin of the heart, not of the hands or the lips. And whilst Paul might have looked good on the outside, he was very moral and well respected, when he really understood the command not to covet he realised that he was a lawbreaker and deserving of God's condemnation.

That commandment, which was supposed to show Paul and all God's people the right way, the best way, and the blessed way to live, therefore became death to him because it showed up his sin.

So now writing to law-abiding Jews who have, like him, come to faith in Christ, he wants to tell them that they are now free from the condemnation that the law brings; free from the guilt that failure brings; and free from the fear pressure the law imposed upon them. He tells them in verses 1 to 6 that since they have died with Christ by faith in him, the old law no longer has any power over them. In those first verses he uses the example of marriage to make his point that death ends the power of the law over us. A couple at their wedding promise to be married 'till death do us part' and they remain married until death do them part. In the same way, Paul says, Christians are no longer living under the tyranny of the law, with all the condemnation and guilt that brings when they try and earn God's favour by keeping his commands.

Oh, he tells them in verse 6 that although they have been released from the law their life of service is not over because they have now been released to serve in the new way of the Spirit. In some ways that raises the bar even higher in terms of the holiness of life we need to strive for as Christians and it reinforces what we thought about last week. But now as those who have been freed from the law and who are in Christ there is no feeling of condemnation when we fail, because by faith in Jesus our sin has already been atoned for and our salvation is already secure.

So if you are still trying to please God and win his approval by obeying his laws, and are constantly being battered by the condemnation that comes when you fail, I want you to know that today you can be released from that life of constant guilt and fear. You do that by coming in repentance and faith to Jesus Christ and by letting him deal with your sin and failure on the cross. And having died to that old way of life you are then raised to a new life with Jesus, not only as your Lord, but also as your saviour.

That's the first thing Paul deals with in this chapter, those who are still feeling the oppression of the law and who fear losing God's mercy need to know that in Christ the law no longer has that kind of power over them too.

The second theme he deals with in chapter 7 is the fact that although we are now slaves to righteousness, freed from the law, made alive in Christ, born again, ransomed, healed, restored and forgiven we still continue to sin.

So...

## 2: Freed by Christ but still battling with sin.

Wouldn't it be great if coming to Jesus and being born again made you morally perfect? Wouldn't that be good? Church is great now, but think how much better it would be if there were no selfish Christians, no rude Christians, and no annoying Christians but just perfect Christ-like men, women and young people following their Lord together. Church would be fantastic wouldn't it?

And imagine how much easier it would be witnessing to Jesus in the world. You'd never have to apologise to people for your mistakes, for the expletives that come out of your mouth sometimes, or for failing to keep your word. They'd be no hypocrisy in your life; instead people would be able to see Jesus in you and be attracted to him far through your life. Witnessing would be a joy, wouldn't it, if we were perfect?

But we're not like that are we? We may have been brought from death to life, we may have died to sin and self and wickedness and unrighteousness, but very often it feels like those things are still alive and kicking within us. And Paul is pretty honest that he feels exactly the same way. Verse 19: "*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.*" Is that how you feel? It's how I feel very often. It's why we have confession as part of our service each week because we all have things to confess.

So why are we like that? Why can't we live the way we want to and know we should?

After his comments in verse 5, as well as in verses 9 to 11, we might be thinking that the reason for our inability to live holy lives is down to God's law. In verse 5 Paul talks about "*the sinful passions*" that the law aroused in us, "*so that we bore fruit for death.*" And in verses 9 to 11 he says 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 is the problem out there somewhere? It's always good to have someone else to blame for our failings rather than ourselves, so is the problem rooted in the commandments of God? Are they the problem?

As you might expect, Paul won't allow us a copout like that, and he's pretty clear that God's commandments are holy and righteous and good. The commandments, Paul says in verse 10, were intended to bring life. And if you think back to the Garden of Eden and the one command God gave Adam and Eve that is exactly what it was designed to do. God placed them in a beautiful garden, with access to the tree of life, but they were told not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because, if they did, they would die.

God's command to them was intended to show them the right path, the true path, the godly path, the path that brings life and peace. In the same way, God's commands to the Israelites, and his commands to us, are our maker's instructions for the right way and the best way for us to live in His world. Keeping God's commands brings life. Jesus himself told us that instead of being shackled to sin we should take his yoke upon us, for his yoke is easy and his burden is light. The obedient life is the blessed life. But what did Adam and Eve do? They broke the command and death resulted.

No, says Paul, the problem isn't with God's commands, the problem is much closer to home. If we want to know why we still sin we need to look at ourselves. And to help us see that, he is brutally honest about his own struggles.

In verse 14 he calls himself a '*slave to sin*', one who, according to verse 15, doesn't understand the way he behaves. In verse 17 he talks about sin living in him, and confesses in verse 18 that real goodness does not dwell in him. He is honest that there are times when, according to verse 19, is not the good he wants to do that he does, but the evil he doesn't want to do that he keeps on doing. In verse 21 he says that evil is right there with him, so much so that in verse 23 he talks about a war going on inside him, making him a prisoner of the law of sin.

When Paul mentions a law here, he's not talking about the list of God's commands, but a force or power with which he is constantly struggling. In verse 18 he calls it his sinful nature and he means that part of us that wants to rebel and break the law and be a bit naughty, even if it's just a little bit. I'm sure you know what I mean.

If you've ever had freshly baked cakes in your house and are told that you can't have one, what is the thing you want to do more than anything? It's to taste one of those cakes isn't it! You weren't hungry before, but now that someone has said you can't have one, well, you're salivating and for a while at least you can't think of anything else.

It's the same when you walk past a sign that says 'wet paint: do not touch!' The temptation to reach out and touch it is immense? 'Do not walk on the grass!' Well! I wasn't planning on walking on the grass, but now you said I can't that's exactly what I want to do! Do you recognise those kinds of internal conversations? They seem awfully familiar to me.

Now if the apostle Paul struggled like this why should we be any different? Because we're not are we? We all struggle with sin and repeated sin. It is a constant battle and it does feel like there's a war going on inside because that's where the problem lies. The problem isn't out there; it's not the law's fault or other people's fault. It's our fault- it's our sinful nature that is the problem.

This is yet another reminder that there is no way we could have ever been saved by our good works, because even when we know God's commands and we want to obey God's commands we do not keep God's commands. And if you think that this doesn't apply to you, that at this point in your Christian life you've pretty much got it cracked, then let me remind you that when Jesus summed up God's law he said we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength – not 80% or 99%, but all of it; and that loving our neighbours as ourselves meant loving our enemies too. How often do we covet or lust or get jealous or feel ungrateful or take the easy way out or keep quiet rather than speak up for Jesus, things that no one else sees, except God? How often do we show favouritism or shun those we find hard to cope with?

And the thing is, as we go on as Christians and we get to know the commands of God better, it's as if the magnification of the microscope looking at the sin in our hearts is turned up so that we see the hidden depths of our sin that still remains. We may not be lying, or cheating, swearing or stealing as we once were, but there's plenty left, plenty of rebellion and sinfulness remaining, and plenty of times when our sinful nature takes over the wins a battle, despite our desire to follow Jesus.

All sounds pretty gloomy doesn't it? We may not be under the law anymore or feel the full force of condemnation that comes from trying to earn God's favour, but having been saved by God's grace we now want to live to please him and yet so often we let him down.

So what do we do? As I close let me give you two things to bear in mind which I hope will encourage you, and a warning to go along with them.

Firstly, if this is your experience you are already making progress. It may not feel like it, and you may hate the struggle, but if you realise that the things you are doing are wrong and you are desperate to live more in a way that pleases God then you are already halfway there. Part of the role of God's Holy Spirit is to convict us of our sin so that we might repent, turn from our sin, and with God's help live holy lives. So if there is a repeated sin on your mind right now, then take it to God, ask for his forgiveness and pray for his help to change. That's how we grow in holiness. If this kind of struggling is your experience you are already making progress. So be encouraged and carry on the fight.

So conversely here is the warning: if you think you are already there then you are deceived. You'll either be deceived because you don't really know yourself, or because you don't know the character or the commands of God.

It's easy to feel morally upright when we are comparing ourselves to other people, but when we compare ourselves to Jesus, and when we know God's perfect and righteous commands we fall far, far short. If you are not struggling, you are deceived, and you need to spend more time getting to know God and his word and I'd suggest reading and praying through Psalm 139 as you do.

But for those who are struggling here's the second encouragement: remember who you truly are. Paul's anguish is so strong because he knows that in his heart, at the deepest part of his being, he is Christ's and Christ is his. Paul knows that he has been born again, that he is now in Christ and not in Adam and he desperately wants to live like it. This constant battle makes him feel like a wretched man, hopeless, lost and sinful but then he remembers that he has already been delivered from the curse of sin and the penalty of sin. *"Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*

Friends, the fact that you sin does not change the fact that if you are a Christian you have been born again and are now united with Christ, not just in his death which pays for your sin, but in his resurrection which guarantees your resurrection. And on that great day, when Jesus returns we will see him as he is for we will be like him. Whilst we are here on Earth we will battle with these two natures: the old sinful nature, and the new Christ-like nature. But bit by bit as we trust God and read his words and walk in step with the Spirit our desires will change and our character will be moulded into the character of Christ.

In this life sin will be a constant struggle. We should fight it and it should grieve us when we fall, but if we are in Christ our failures can never undo the great salvation which Jesus won for us on the cross. And one day, one glorious day, that battle will be over. *"Thanks be to God, who delivers us through Jesus Christ our Lord!"*