

## The Struggle is Real!

*Series: Righteousness Revealed*

Romans 7:7-8:1

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Last year I was reading a daily devotional and came across a rather unusual accountability partnership that demonstrates the power of grace over sin. It reads, “Paul was trying to break his habit of using profanity. Swearing had become a second language to him and he desperately wanted to overcome it. He began meeting with another man from his church, and with Bill's help, set up an aggressive plan for purifying his speech.

Here's the plan: each Sunday Paul would report to Bill the number of times he had used profanity during the week and would put five dollars in the offering plate for each incident. The first week cost Paul one hundred dollars! Although the following weeks improved to some degree, he was not having the success that he desired, not to mention the fact that he was quickly running out of money! After a few weeks, Bill had an idea that he thought might make the difference. He informed Paul that things were going to change the following Sunday, but he wouldn't tell him how they would change. Curiosity gnawed at Paul all week. A few times he tried to find out what the new plan was, but each time Bill simply responded, "Trust me, Paul. This new strategy will cost you less and challenge you even more."

Sunday finally arrived, and before the worship service began Paul looked more discouraged than ever. Bill knew his friend had failed again. This time Bill put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Paul, my new plan is called grace." Bill then took out his own checkbook, wrote in the church's name, dated it, signed it, and left only the amount blank. He handed the check to Paul and said, "Your sin still costs something, but you can go free on my account; just fill in the numbers—I'll take care of the cost. Oh, by the way, next week there will be more grace." That first week of grace cost Bill fifty-five dollars, but the second week cost him only twenty. And there was no third week . . . Paul was so overwhelmed by the grace of Bill that his heart broke to think of his friend having to write another check to cover his sin. It was only after the discovery of Bill's grace and love toward him that Paul was able to overcome his life-long, sinful habit of swearing.”

I share that story to start us off this morning because I think it's helpful in recalibrating our hearts and minds to the discussion in Romans 6 & 7 where we left off last time. Paul demonstrates that grace is not a license to sin but also that grace is more powerful than Law/law to change lives. Those living under grace will always outperform those living under the performance-based mindset of law—be it the Mosaic Law or the religious laws man comes up with.

Just to catch us up to speed on what Paul has taught in Romans, so far it is clear that **1) All men are guilty of breaking God's standards.** It doesn't matter if you're a secular atheist, a moralist who thinks he's a good person, or a religious Jew busy with religious works. All men are sinners, helpless to save themselves by anything they do. They have all broken God's Law and therefore cannot be justified by it. That's the *bad news*. The *good news* is that **2) God freely justifies**

**(declares righteous) those who believe in Jesus as their Savior.** Paul even went back to Genesis and Abraham to demonstrate that salvation/justification has always been by faith and not by our works of any kind. He demonstrated that it was Jesus' single act of obedience that undid the act of disobedience by Adam, making peace with God possible.

But then we shifted gears in chapter 6 and started to talk about sanctification—the process of becoming more like Jesus and seeing our personal, behavioral righteousness line up more with our positional righteousness in Christ (standing and state; condition and position). And again, Paul taught that **3) we are to yield our lives to God**, living by faith in Christ and our union with Him. There is no mention of living by the Law now that we're saved. He even said, "sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace." He made that statement in 6:14 and is explaining it in the rest of 6 and 7. In Romans 7:1-6, Paul used the illustration of marriage to say that we are no longer married to the Law because we have died and have been remarried to Christ. We were made to die to the Law so that through our union with Christ we would bear fruit for God. We contrasted Law and grace and discovered there's no reason at all why anyone should ever want to live under law after seeing what it does to the human spirit. And in the rest of the chapter, Paul's going to share about his own experience under the Law.

## I. **PAUL'S EXPERIENCE UNDER LAW. (7:7-14)**

This is His personal testimony. You'll notice him start to use personal pronouns, speaking from personal experience. He speaks of his struggle with the sin nature and how it was affected by the Law and how the Law couldn't free him from the sin nature's dominance. It's a picture of human struggle and frustration that every one of us can relate to. In fact, I was in Dairy Queen not too long ago and I saw a young man, maybe 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> grade, who had a shirt that simply read, "**The struggle is real.**" I thought, you're too young for that. And then I thought, "Maybe not. Middle school was awful. It was like the worst time in my life with all the peer pressure and junk I was exposed too and trying to navigate." My point is we can all relate to the struggle within. It was just a few weeks ago that I asked one of my children, "Why did you do exactly what I told you not to do?" Their answer? "I don't know." Well, I do know, and so does the Apostle Paul. He explains it.

That's what we're looking at today: **reasons why we struggle.** Why is it that when I want to do good, I find myself doing the opposite? I want to do God's will. I want to follow Jesus. But there is something in me that wants to prevent that. Why is it that what I want to do, I don't do and what I don't want to do, I do? Why do I have this inner war? And will it always be this way? It's exhausting. But the more important question might be, What's the answer? And, Is freedom available? Is there a reason we can have freedom?

### **1<sup>st</sup> Reason: We struggle because of what we know.**

We *know* what sin is through the Law and we *know* we don't measure up. As fallen, sinful descendants of Adam, we *know* we are sold into slavery to sin. Listen to Paul's experience:

*7 What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “You shall not covet.” 8 But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; 10 and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; 11 for sin, taking 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 righteous and good. 13 Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful. 14 For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. [emphasis mine]*

So Paul begins this stretch of the discussion by bringing up a wild question: “Is the Law sin?” or “Is it sinful?” It’s a wild question, but I can see someone asking that if sin is our master under law. But again, may it never be! The Law is not sinful, but it does reveal sin so that we know what sin is and we know that we are sinful as well. But that’s the purpose of the Law (3:19-20; 5:20). The Law was designed by God to reveal to us that God is **holy, righteous, and good**, but that we are not because we can’t keep it. Therefore, it would cause man to look to Jesus. In Galatians he calls it a tutor that leads us to Christ (Gal. 3:23-24). It was meant to point us to Christ. No one has ever been saved/justified by keeping the Law. The Law brings knowledge of sin so that every man might be aware of their sin and look to a Savior, not look back to the Law.

He specifically mentions the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment about **coveting** (“Thou shall not covet”), probably because it’s not an outward action but an inward attitude and so okay, you may never have murdered or stole something, but you have coveted. Everyone has. Everyone has desired their neighbors stuff at one point or another. So, you can’t say you’re getting into heaven by keeping the 10 commandments. We’ve all broken them. Even Jesus said that by lusting you commit adultery, by hating you commit murder. Paul says I didn’t even think about coveting until, focused on keeping the 10 commandments, I started coveting all the time! This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> reason we struggle.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reason: We struggle because the Law stimulates sin.**

If we see a sign that says, “Don’t touch. Wet paint.” We want to see if it’s still wet. If we see a sign that says, “Keep out!” we just want to take a peek. Matter of fact, you’ve all been here for 45 minutes. Not one of you here have thought of a pink horse since you’ve been here. But now that I mention a pink horse, you’re thinking about a pink horse. Quit thinking about a pink horse. How about this: don’t think about lunch. Thou shall not think about lunch. When I say that, you think, “I’ll think I’ll go to such and such a place for lunch after church.” See, it’s not a wise move for me to say that because even though I don’t want you to think about lunch because I want you to pay attention to the message, telling you not to just make you do it.

There’s was a hotel in Galveston, Texas that was so close to the water—even built over the Gulf—that they worried about people dropping fishing lines into the water from the guest room balconies.

Someone pointed out that glass windows, high winds, and large lead sinkers aren't a good combination, so management placed a sign in each room facing the ocean: "Absolutely no fishing from the balcony." Well, what happened? You guessed it! Guests in the first story restaurant dined to the frequent smack of lead weights against the plate-glass windows. Guess what happened when they removed the signs? The problem was solved.

So this is why Paul said the Law (personified) **killed** him. It **condemned** him. The more he tried to measure up to God's perfect Law, the more he realized it was condemning him. In 1 Corinthians 15:56 says, "The power of sin is the Law." Sin needs 2 things to work: 1) a vehicle 2) a power source. Our body is the vehicle. The power source is the Law. If I want to get rid of sin, we can get rid of the body or the power source. So we should get rid of the power source. But what do we usually do? Add more laws. More law, more legalism, more religious rules... and we think it will control the behavior. It might control external behavior for a while but it's like painting over rust. Eventually it will show through. Eventually people want to break free. They will rebel. This is why the Law cannot be the solution. Sometimes we think that if we are to be free from sin, we'll just add more laws. In reality, it's working against freedom.

So Paul's conclusion is not that the Law is bad or sinful. In fact, it's the opposite. What's the problem then? Us. We are sold into bondage to sin. The word **flesh** here I think is referring to our bodies, fallen with curse of sin, in bondage to sin. We have a sin nature. And so Paul says the problem isn't the Law, it's us. If you see a sign that says, "No swimming. Sharks present." You can't blame the sign if you go swimming and get eaten by a shark. It doesn't work that way.

This is why I like to compare the Law to an **X-ray machine**. It reveals our faults, but it can't fix us. Just because it reveals some fault in us doesn't mean the machine is bad. We might liken the Law to a **mirror**. The mirror reveals how dirty our face is but we don't take the mirror off the wall and use it to clean our dirty face.

But then Paul dives into his experience with the flesh more and the war going on inside of him. And I personally think this is a war everyone is familiar with, believer or not. But it is an experience amplified by anyone living under a legalistic performance-based system, believer or not.

## II. PAUL'S EXPERIENCE WITH SIN. (7:15-21)

15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. 16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. 17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. 19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. 20 But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. 21 I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. 22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, 23 but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my

mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

So is this not our experience? An inward struggle? We have this war between the flesh and the Spirit. Paul said in Galatians the Spirit wars against the flesh and the flesh against the Spirit “so that you do not do the things that you please.” But the answer is not the Law because this struggle is intensified for anyone trying to live under Law/law. The Law could not provide freedom *before* salvation, and it doesn’t provide freedom *after* salvation. This makes for the third reason we struggle:

**3<sup>rd</sup> Reason: We struggle because of who we are.**

He’s using a play on words here with the word “law” or “principle” in verses 21-22. It’s not always referring to the Mosaic Law but to a governing principle. He says there is a “law” at work in the members of our body. It’s a law of sin and living under Law (Mosaic) or manmade laws triggers it. It’s such a drag because we agree the Law is good and we want to embrace it and do it, but the struggle is real. Sin which dwells in me, frustrates that.

The word **dwells** is another key word. Sin dwells in us. It’s like a squatter dwelling in my life that doesn’t belong there. We’re no longer enslaved to sin. We’ve died to sin. Sin does not have to be our master. But we find ourselves listening to it at times and living under law doesn’t help. It even drives Paul to the point of misery. The word **wretched** carries a note of misery. Miserable man that I am! Note the exhaustion in his tone: *Who will deliver me from this body of death?* The NLT says, “*Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?*”

Notice also that he didn’t say, “*What* will deliver me?” He said, “*Who* will deliver me?” We need a Person to deliver us. A higher power than Law or ourselves. The “who” is answered in verse 25:

*25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. 8:1 Therefore there is 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.”*

I love this. I love play on words here. The “law of sin” is enticed by the “Law of God.” So Paul’s basically saying “we need a new law, and a law that takes place on the same battleground on in the inner man. The Mosaic Law is external. The law of sin is internal. What we need another internal law that is more powerful than the law of sin.”

If a massive plane like the Boeing 747 is going to overcome the law of gravity and fly, it needs a more powerful law—the law of aerodynamics. The law of aerodynamics can overcome the law of gravity. It’s a higher law. As sinful beings, we need the highest law—the law of the Spirit—which is available to every believer in Christ. That’s where the freedom is found.

**The reason freedom is real too: We have the law of the Spirit of life in Jesus.**

Freedom is found in the Spirit, not the Law. One man said, “God has provided through Jesus Christ His very Person, His very Spirit, to actually live in me, to give me what I need to live in a way I couldn’t possibly live myself.” If we will abide in Christ and rely on the Spirit of grace, we can get some serious victory over the sin in our lives. Paul calls it walking by the Spirit. “Walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16). So, **the struggle is real... but the freedom is real too!** Sin does not have to be our master because we have God’s Spirit living in us giving life to our mortal bodies (Rom. 8:11). This is the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead.

I’m convinced most Christians read about Paul’s struggles and they say, “See? I’m in good company. I’m always going to struggle just like this.” I guess in a sense that’s true. We will be in this struggle until the day we die, or Jesus comes back and we lose that sin nature altogether in glory. We’re all going to have moments where we scratch our heads and say, “Why did I just do what I do not want to do?” But that’s not the point. That’s not what Paul is after. He doesn’t want us content losing battles with sin. His point is *we can have victory*. We can learn to live in the realm of the Spirit and experience some serious freedom and victory in the here and now.

But again, we need something more than our own strength or good intentions. We need more than resolutions and trying hard. We need to learn to live by the powerful grace available to us in Christ and our union with Him. We’ll discuss that more in Romans 8. If you want some homework, may I recommend reading the book of Galatians?

My final encouragement though is simply this: Let go. Let go of the laws you’re living under. Let go of trying to measure up by keeping the Law or your own laws. I know you mean well. You have the best of intentions in trying to manage your behavior by law. But be honest and acknowledge that it’s not working. That you need the power of God’s grace only available by the Spirit. That spiritual life can only come from a deep, more intentional pursuit of Jesus.