

Rom 7 God's Law and the Christian

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Life's a bit of a struggle sometimes.

In our church at the moment,

we have people struggling to keep their homes,

people struggling with really poor health: physical and mental,

people struggling with the effects of aging on their memories,

people struggling with the effects of other people's abusive behaviour,

people grieving the death of their most cherished loved ones,

people caring for others whose needs are very demanding.

But you know, the greatest struggle is often with yourself.

I weigh 10 kgs more than I would like to weigh.

What I've decided I should do

is have 1 sandwich an apple and a banana for lunch.

I've made that decision.

I just struggle to stick to my decision.

Often I will decide that I'm just too hungry after lunch,

and have a slice of bread and jam as well.

The excellent home made jams from the art show

certainly help that temptation.

Keeping your weight under control is a struggle.

It's a struggle against yourself.

The desires of your flesh

pitted against what you know in your mind is right.

That's the struggle of Romans chapter 7.

Let's have a look at it.

The part of Romans 7 that we identify with

is the struggle that Paul has with himself.

But that's not the main reason Paul puts it there.

Paul is concerned about the place of God's Law for the Christian.

In Romans chapter 6,

we read, "You are not under law but under grace."

The Christian is not under the law.
Those are pretty charged words for Paul's Jewish readers.
We Australians are pretty comfortable about not being under law.
We're an anti authoritarian lot.
And though we're mostly pretty law abiding.
We don't exactly hang our love for the law on our shirt sleeves.
But Paul's Jewish readers had been given the Law by God on Mt Sinai.
The Law was God's big gift to their nation.
The thing that marked them out over every other nation.
They were God's chosen people.
And they were marked as God's chosen people because they lived
according to God's law.
For them,
having God's law was like having the yellow jersey
that is given to the race leader in the Tour de France.
You wear it with pride
because it shows you're better than everyone else.
And Paul says to them,
"Now you've become a Christian,
you aren't under law but under grace."
Well that's a big claim and for the Jew an unpopular claim.
So Paul justifies his claim.
He does it using an analogy of a married woman.
Before her husband dies she's not free to marry again.
But after he dies, she is free to marry again.
The point is:
the Law only has control over you while you are alive.
If you die,
you don't have to worry about obeying the law any more.
Here's the punch line.
The Christian person has died.
We said it last week.
The Christian person is united with Jesus.
When he was nailed to the cross,
we were there with him.

We died with him.
 And so, because we have died,
 the Law has no authority over us.
 We are released from the Law.

What does it mean for us to be released from the law?
 Verse 6 tells us that we serve in the new way of the Spirit.
 We don't stop serving God
 because our lives are no longer under the Law.
 We just have a new way to do it.
 I touched on this last week.
 We decide how we will serve God.
 No longer is it all set out for us.
 What we eat, what we wear, how we worship.
 Instead we decide what best shows our love for God.
 Why is this called the new way of the Spirit?
 Because we believe that God's Holy Spirit lives in our hearts.
 And the Holy Spirit prompts us with ideas
 about how to show our love for God.
 The Holy Spirit enlivens our minds
 so we can understand God's word in the Bible,
 so we will know what pleases God.
 And the Holy Spirit changes our hearts so we will want to please God.
 We serve in the new way of the Spirit
 and that means our lives aren't governed by the Law.

When you've held something dear for generations,
 and some new kid on the block comes along and says,
 "Sorry we don't do that any more."
 It's liable to get your back up.
 The older generations in the Anglican Church
 can probably empathise with Paul's Jewish readers.
 Our parents did it this way.
 Our grandparents did it this way.
 We've done it this way all our lives.

And now you are saying there's a new way, Paul!
Are you saying that there's no point to the law at all?
And Paul says,

"No. No. No.

Don't get me wrong.

The Law is a good thing."

So in verses 1-6 he speaks of how we are released from the Law.

But in verses 7-12, he defends the role of the Law.

It's like his Jewish readers have said to him,

"If what you're saying is true,
then the Law has no point."

And they hold the law dear.

They recite psalm 19 from memory.

"The law of the Lord is perfect,
reviving the soul.

The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy,
making wise the simple.

The precepts of the Law are right,
giving joy to the heart.

The commands of the Lord are radiant,
giving light to the eyes."

How could what Paul says about serving in the new way of the Spirit
possibly be true?

So Paul responds by laying out the role that the law does play.

It doesn't regulate our lives
but here's what it does do.

The Law exposes sin verse 7,

The law provokes sin verse 8,

The Law condemns sin verses 9-11.

The Law is like a spotlight.

It lets me know that certain things are wrong.

Now I could probably work out that murder is wrong
without anyone to tell me.

But take the example Paul uses in verse 8,
coveting.

The tenth commandment.
Wanting what someone else has.
It's a bit more subtle to work out that coveting is wrong.
In fact most Australians think it's perfectly normal.
We call it keeping up with the Jones.
If you actually sit down and think about it,
you can see why coveting is wrong.
But most people actually kid themselves it's OK.
And so the Law does a very useful thing.
It exposes sin for the ugly thing that it is.
The Law doesn't only expose sin,
it also provokes sin.
There's a great story
that Saint Augustine writes about himself in his confessions.
He writes about when he was a teenager
and he stripped someone else's pear tree of pears.
And he asks himself,
"Why did I do it?"
It wasn't because he was hungry.
He wasn't hungry.
He didn't eat the pears.
In fact he fed them to some pigs down the road.
Why did he do it then?
He did it because he knew it was breaking the rules,
and somehow breaking the rules is exciting on its own,
even if you don't profit from the crime.
The very fact that there were rules about stealing
provoked Augustine's theft.
The law provokes sin.
And the Law condemns sin.
That is,
once you have sinned,
the Law lays out what the penalty for your sin will be.
And there's no mistaking it,
we know what the wages of sins is

Paul says it three times.
The commandment came and I died in verse 9,
The commandment brought death in verse 10.
The commandment put me to death in verse 11.
The Law exposes sin, it provokes sin and it condemns sin.
You might think that Paul is saying that the Law is a bad thing.
But no.
There's no problem with the Law.
It's doing exactly what it was designed to do.
Sin is the problem.

Take an example from my teenage years instead of Saint Augustine's.
There were railway tracks
and a sign saying you mustn't cross the railway tracks.
And there was a tunnel under the railway tracks,
so that if you needed to get to the other side of the railway tracks,
you could do so safely.
But the Law provokes sin.
Had there not been a sign telling me not to cross the tracks,
I would most likely have been perfectly content to use the tunnel.
But is it the fault of the sign if I choose to disobey the Law?
No.
The sign is a good sign.
It was put there so that people wouldn't have accidents and get flattened
by trains.
The problem is not with the Law.
The problem is with sin.
And that's what Paul says in verse 13.
Did that which is good (the Law) become death to me?
By no means!
It was sin that did it.
Sin just used a perfectly good Law to work its mischief.

So Paul has explained to us that we are released from the Law.
The Law no longer regulates our lives.

And he has explained that there is nothing wrong with the Law.
The Law is doing what it was designed to do.
But where does that leave us?
Well it leaves us with a daily struggle.
I've headed this section "The weakness of the Law".
The Law does its job perfectly well.
But it can't help us to obey it.
The Law has no power to help us to follow the Law.
The Law can't make us good.
And so the Christian person gets a struggle.
I mean any person might have a struggle.
The illustration I used at the beginning of the sermon,
me deciding I'm going to eat the right things,
but not having the will power to carry it through.
You don't have to have to be a Christian to have that sort of struggle.
Flick open the pages of New Idea
and you'll see that we all struggle to put mind over matter.
But the struggle is worse for the Christian person.
The reason is that we have a much more acute sense of God's standards.
The non-Christian person has a pretty good gut sense
that murder is wrong –
unless they are commanding the Russian army in Ukraine.
And they know that they shouldn't commit adultery.
And sometimes
you'll run into a non believer with a sensitive conscience
who can discern that coveting is wrong
without reading it in God's word.
But for the Christian,
we have a far deeper insight into the blackness of the human heart.
For starters we are well acquainted with God's word.
So we know that not just is murder wrong,
but God looks upon anger the same way.
We know that not just is adultery wrong,
but God looks upon lust the same way.
And we have the Holy Spirit at work in our lives,

revealing to us the things that our minds would otherwise cover up.
God is serious about transforming us,
getting us ready for heaven.
Just when you think you are on top of sin.
God, through his Spirit, reveals to you
a whole new area of selfishness.
One that was always there.
But one that there was no point showing to you,
because you would be overwhelmed.
If God let you see what you are really like all at once.
It would be over powering.
You would give up.
God is very gentle with us.
Showing us a little bit at a time.

And the result is a constant struggle.
If you aren't struggling,
then you have given up the fight against sin.
Many people read the apostle's words in verses 14-23,
and they find the open admission of his weakness embarrassing.
And it sounds like a struggle –
a great big struggle.
“I do not understand what I do.
For what I want to do I do not do,
but what I hate I do.”
Many commentators read Paul's words,
and they don't believe that he is writing about himself.
They say,
“He must be writing about what his life was like before he was a
Christian.
The Christian person must be further along the track of holiness
than this man Paul is writing about.”
But I think they miss the point.
It's because the apostle has made so much progress
along the path to holiness,

that his struggle is so great.
Don't think for a minute
that the struggle diminishes as you make progress.
No. The struggle intensifies.

When you read the biographies
of the great Christians from across the ages,
Augustine. Luther. Mother Theresa. John Wesley.
One thing that stands out is that they all –
all of them had an acute sense of their own fallenness.
All of them found the ongoing struggle against sin a battle.
None of them found that the battle disappeared as their lives went on
and they increased in godliness.
In the lives of great Christians,
There was none of the description that you read about Buddha.
That as he achieved religious enlightenment,
then the struggles of this life faded away
and he went onto a higher plane.
No.
The Bible's descriptions of spiritual growth
is never cutting yourself off from life and entering a spiritual plane.
It's getting down and getting your hands dirty.
Being part of the rough and tumble of life in the real world.
And increasingly making choices that glorify your Lord,
in the real world.
And this doesn't get easier.
Because if you show yourself to be faithful with a few things,
what did the Lord Jesus say he would do?
Put you in charge of many things.
And all the while,
he will grow you in knowledge and depth of insight
so you may be able to discern what is best.
Those are Paul's words to the church in Philippi.
That knowledge and depth of insight doesn't come for free.
First of all it will be self knowledge

and depth of insight about your own standing before God.
And the cost is shown in the painful struggle in our lives.

Is it worth being a Christian then?

If life is such a struggle,
what keeps us going?

Well, we have the certain hope of future glory,
and all the benefits that come with God's Spirit living in our lives.
We'll look at that over the next couple of weeks
as we look at Romans 8.

But even here

as the apostle lies tortured by the struggle going on inside.

And he cries out,

7:24 "What a wretched man I am!

Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"

But even at that moment,

simultaneously he has great confidence in God.

"Thanks be to God –

who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord."

The turmoil of living to serve Jesus in a fallen world is real, it's true.

But friends,

we know the end of the story.

It might be hard now.

But the day will come when there will be no inner turmoil.

The day will come when every fibre of my being

will long to serve the Lord Jesus.

And we will do it naturally.

There will be no sin living in us to cause us to stumble.

We will be remade in the image of our Lord.

And that has to be a comfort when the struggle in the present is fierce.

It's far easier to keep going

when you know that the final victory

is already yours.

I've never heard an athlete complain of tiredness
whilst doing the victory lap.
It's because they have already won the prize.
Thanks be to God
that our rescue is secure.