

“Wretched”

- Romans 7:7-25 -

by Pastor Tim Dodson
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Romans 7:7-25 *What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, taking opportunity by*

the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. 9 I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. 10 And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. 11 For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. 12 Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. 13 Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. 14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. 15 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. 16 If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. 17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. 19 For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. 20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. 21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. 22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. 24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

“Be a good boy...” “Be a good girl...”

Ok, let’s face it. In most situations we don’t really care *why* a person obeys, we just want them to obey. Ask any cop, he’ll tell you. The world is immersed in something called “ethical behaviorism.” That’s the idea that society as a whole determines what is correct and proper behavior and then we train people through laws and behavior modification to meet that standard. Never mind that that standard keeps moving, such is our cultural norm and of course has found its way into our practice within the greater church.

Paul had just spoken over the previous few verses concerning the impact of the law and our failure to not only *follow* it but to *get out from underneath* its guilt, power and the ramifications of its judgement. *Because of that*, one can tend to look at the manifest and impact of the law...the Old Testament Mosaic version as well as the new and modern rules to redemption, and see the whole matter as something bad. Perhaps even something evil! One could question its validity and its consequences and we can tend to do what many have indeed done, and that is toss all the rules and standards of Christianity and just embrace a ‘feel good relational version’ that fails to draw any lines whatsoever and simply saves us for eternity and makes us feel better about ourselves because “Jesus loves me unconditionally.” Certainly there are groups of believers that attempt that path albeit inevitably to their eventual demise.

Therefore we must not slide into that abyss. There IS a standard! It is God’s “righteous standard.” That’s the point of the law. It’s what we have to *do*, and what we have to *be* in order to ever stand before our Creator who is holy and righteous! But the book of Romans is teaching us that the Law was never given to *establish* righteousness but rather to effectively establish *guilt*. God gave us the Law so we might clearly see how grossly short we fall in our own “solo” attempts to “be right” before God: our efforts to be declared a “good person” because of our own works. Our own individual and personal efforts to *do* and *be* to therefore indeed stand before our Creator.

Our secular world today has jumped on this bandwagon and now we have all sorts of ways for you to be social conscious, culturally engaged, and humanly zealous. We can “go green.” We can “save the whales.” We can be artisan, diverse, organic, proactive, sustainable, and tolerant. We can build houses with Habitat for Humanity and take inner city kids on field trips “back to nature” in the north woods. We can help our neighbor, support immigrants, feed the poor, and work for affordable housing. The list is long. All ways that we can try to convince ourselves that we are good people and worthy of life.

Our “new” church laws today, the extra-biblical regulations and denominational ordinances, they fair no better! Through the gospel we got free from one impossible standard that we *didn't* write, only to write a new one of our *own*! They too, like the worlds version, are just *man's* standards! They are what *we* think we are to *do* and *be* in order to be right with God! But if we could just put Christianity in a box labeled “do's and don'ts” and tie a ribbon around it, then it would seem that Jesus died for nothing because we didn't need rescued at all, we just need to “try harder.”

The point of the law was so that I might clearly see that I can't climb that mountain, even on my best day. The law was to take me to that place in myself that I come to understand that I can't achieve that standard and am therefore drowning. That I **need** rescued. That I **need** to be “saved.” And coming to that point and admitting that is the hardest thing to do. It flies in the face of who we are in the flesh. But that “surrender” is the heart of salvation.

It must occur to be redeemed. It's not so much that I have to “throw in the towel” and give up the fight but rather I have to “tag” Jesus to take my place in the ring. This is a stark issue in our world today and a stark issue in our churches. There is just something in us that believes we can save ourselves...culturally, socially, and physically. And that is assuming that one believes he or she needs saving at all. But that realization and acknowledgement is a bridge we will all cross on our way to God...for there is no other road home.

Ironically, we *thought* we were doing ok before we heard the gospel! We wanted to believe we were at least holding our own. We may have been just trudging along through life like everyone else because we were just like the next guy. But one day God's message found us. Suddenly, there was a profound realization that we were not ok at all but were in fact so very broken.

And as they say, one can't “un-see that.” Suddenly, there was no turning back. No way to return to that blissful land of ignorance. I knew I was lost without God. Like so many who have passed down through the ages, I thought following the *rules* would bring me life and fulfilment, and of course a right standing with my Creator. But I did not factor in one important aspect: **I** couldn't achieve it and moreover I couldn't sustain it! So for a long time I fought the fight until eventually I came to the end of myself. I simply couldn't do it.

The Law succeeded in its duty and purpose. I was “down for the count.” The more I tried to be right by following the rules the more I failed and the guiltier I became. Like Paul, it is in that moment one can only fall to their knees in desperate wonder: *what am I going to do now?* For most of us, we then consider the alternative: the hardest place we could go. The act of a desperate man: surrender and fall into Christ's *arms of mercy and grace*.

In the Old Testament works of Moses, in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, we are given the details of what we know corporately as “the Law.” Paul had already clarified the fact that the Law was given to establish guilt. In that there is no doubt. If Paul's review doesn't clarify the situation, certainly reading through that Old Testament list will do the trick! It's not that the law instantly *causes* our death (spiritual *and* physical), but it acknowledges that we are indeed *going* to die. That we are *as good as dead*, because of sin...because we *have* and *do* “break the law” *spiritually speaking*. The Law then serves as a big flood light exposing my guilt. It proclaims our guilt and thus that we are lost without hope. In this life and the eternal.

Ironically, sly Satan capitalizes on the existence of God's Law by using it as a club...to put me under condemnation. To "beat me up" through the guilt of my failure to "follow the rules." But that was not the purpose of the law albeit guilt does indeed accompany the breaking of God's laws as it does breaking of man's laws. If we kill someone, there is bound to be guilt unless we are a psychopath. And yes, there are "spiritual psychopaths"...those whom God has "turned over" to Satan due to continual rejection of the premise of repentance. However all of that is not the point or purpose of the law! As long as we remain under the ignorance of its purpose, Satan will use our lack of understanding of the law, *of God's great gift*, to bring us down. Ironic isn't it?

The problem is we have two natures always in play here: *ours and that of the Law*. The Law was (and is) *spiritual*, but man, yes even *Paul*, was *and is* carnal! Now we need to understand that Paul wasn't herein casting doubt on his own salvation state. He was however acknowledging that he was still a screw-up some times. What he writes and how he writes it reflects an evolution of his understanding. Like a "typical guy" he seems to be thinking out loud. Tracing his steps toward spiritual comprehension, he records the path of his walk toward freedom.

We know that the counter to all of this law is the presence of God's grace towards us. But the existence of grace can and often does simply create yet another conundrum. For the existence of grace ...*while embraced and certain necessary*, also at the same time makes Christians nervous. We instinctively understand the possibility of grace abuse and thus sin excuse. That's why whenever the issue of grace is presented it always seems to come with disclaimers and a plethora of footnotes to elaborate upon what grace is *not*. It's been said that "if you want to make church people mad preach on the law, and if you want to make them furious, preach on grace." The problem is grace is like a greased pig...hard to catch, and hard to hold on to. Grace is messy and lacks handles. Grace mess's your hair up and rejects the basic concepts of definition and *volume*. There is no "a little grace" or "a lot of grace." There is just **grace**, and thus when such is added to the mix, "how much" is irrelevant.

Pastor Dave's son Andrew, when he was little, would be fixin' to get a spanking and would tell his dad "give me grace! ...give me grace!" In his mind, grace was the "get out of jail free" card. A "secret weapon" to pull out when all else has failed and you are going down. It was "nuclear deterrent." It is such use that makes Christians cringe at its very existence. We're glad it's there because it will likely save our lives, but misused it becomes its own problem. It's the spiritual "opioid crisis." The "elephant in the room" is the question of "How much grace is too much grace?" And is my use of such just an excuse to sin...to give myself a long leash?

Even when we want grace and when we *need* grace, there still is a kind of embarrassed distaste of having to open that can and use it. Note that Paul is not saying he is not guilty. He's not "passing the buck" or "claiming innocence." No, he knows he is guilty! But we can't miss his obvious frustration! It's a pain shared by all of mankind... We search the depths of our souls and the corners of the world attempting to find victory over sin and the flesh but never with complete success. We are a living "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde!"

NLT 15 I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate.¹⁶ But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good.¹⁷ So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.¹⁸ And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't.¹⁹ I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.²⁰ But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

It is a stark reality that in this life we are never going to achieve spiritual perfection. Certainly salvation ushers in a profound and often radical transformation and that fact cannot be denied. We are simply not the same person as before. We must be able to clearly see that we are reborn and changed into the image of Christ, for the alternative is that we simple have not be reborn at all. But we must understand that 100% will not be achieved on this side of eternity. The world will continue to pull, and we fall short of his glorious standard. The

moderator is our heart and conscious...*our intent and desire*. Thus herein the idea of “ethical behaviorism” fails us in the spiritual realm, because the “why” actually matters here: *Am I ok with that dropped ball?* And the critical additive to this mix is the practice of repentance. Seeking God for forgiveness and change. When I fall short, am I ok with that and simply use the grace card to cover our tracks or do we humbly come to God and seek forgiveness?

Sin is *within* our world and we dwell in that world. I cannot expect to swim in that pool and not get wet. There is no escape under our own power. Many will deny such a fact. Either in word or action, but ultimately most of mankind will refuse to acknowledge this. There are the “sinless perfection” bunch out there that want to believe that once reborn they will no longer sin. Good luck with that. So the “search” continues. We meditate, educate, discipline, follow eastern gurus, trip from one religion to the next, and mostly, we pretend a lot! But the end result is always the same. For still *“the good that I want to do, I do not do; but the evil I do not want to do, that I practice.”*

This issue can potentially drive us Christians a little mad. It seems Paul herein is not just upset that he fails God, but he seems to be experiencing some angst that he must tap into that fountain of grace in order to stay upright. Paul is coming to realize what we all must realize, and that is the truth that the gospel not only redeems us at the start, but keeps us in our state of salvation daily. We must embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ every day. It was the righteousness of Jesus that saved us to begin with, and His righteousness that keeps us there daily once we have been saved. It *was* always Him, and *is* always all Him. He “keeps us saved.” How many “righteous folks” are out there today trying to convince themselves that they are good people?

Paul “delighted” in the law of God. At least “inside” he did! Now if he could just get rid of the “outside” man. *“The law, though he delights in it after the inward man, gives him no power. In other words, he is trying to accomplish what God has declared to be an utter impossibility—namely, making the flesh subject to God’s holy law. He finds that the flesh minds the things of the flesh, and is very enmity itself to the law of God, and even to God Himself.”* - George Cutting

So the “war” continued with Paul and yes, with us! The battle between my desire to live in Christ and the reality that I live immersed in an evil world and I still walk this earth in a fallen flesh. When the believer attempts to win that battle in himself, he is always defeated! Self-attempts to rid ourselves of such can only bring the angst that Paul herein describes. Remember, this is *Paul!* The “Saul of Tarsus,” the “Jew of Jews”, the youngest Pharisee of his day who studied at the feet of famed teacher Gamaliel. Not to mention the fact that he was one incredibly smart, tough and righteous dude! And *he* failed! And *we* think *we* can get it done?

Ah, what frustration! Paul kind of reaches maximum load here. Can you relate? It makes you want to scream! I can almost hear his audible howl. The word “wretched” in the Greek encompasses the situation perfectly. It means *“defeated in exhaustion... utterly desolate.”*

Paul is ready to admit the obvious: *there is a stinking, rotting dead man handcuffed to him*. We all do well, at least for a while, to pretend he isn’t there. We lay on a heavy coat of spiritual deodorant, we whistle nonchalantly and try to look innocent. But the only reason no one ever mentions the sinful stench, is because everyone has their *own* “body of death” strapped to them! But the key to verse 24 isn’t his pain. It’s the word “who.” It isn’t *what* will free me...or *what do I need to do...need to buy...need to own...need to practice...* to get out from under this, but rather **“Who** will deliver me from this body of death?”

Now finally in verse 25 lies the answer! “I thank *God*” is the door, and *“through Jesus Christ our Lord”* is the key. Notice that such victory is found not just *by* Jesus Christ, but *through* Jesus Christ. It’s not just an issue of sitting back and waiting for the miracle to happen. It is the presence of and the walking in the Holy Spirit. Moving and living through the Spirit! The battle still continues, but with a “new” mind now. A mind of

understanding. I'm still in the fight, but I have "tagged" Jesus to get into the ring for me. I will not leave the battle, but I will win because of the one who fights with me and for me...