

The Continuing Struggle

by Ray C. Stedman

As we have been reading through this great letter from Paul to the Romans, we have seen the gospel of Jesus Christ which is able to set men free. This is the central declaration of the gospel: Christ has come, he has died, he has risen again, and he has come into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit in order that we who believe in him might be free. That is what the gospel is all about – freedom!

- Freedom from self-centeredness,
- Freedom from hostility and bitterness,
- Freedom from anxiety and all kinds of fears,
- Freedom from bondage to evil habits of any type –
- This is the freedom Christ has come to give us.

He has come to release us, to free us to be the men and women that God has designed us to be, living in the midst of (as Paul describes it) “a generation of crooks and perverts,” yet being lights shining in the darkness of our day. As we have seen all the way through this book, and especially in Romans 5 and 6, this kind of life is totally possible in Jesus Christ. Yet there are at least two ways we can miss this, even though we are Christians:

1. Paul has dealt with one of these in Romans 6. In the last half of Romans 6 he has pointed out that, even though you are a Christian, you can give yourself over to the bondage and slavery of sin. You can continue to give way to sin. You may think it is not worth your while to

fight or you may enjoy the pleasure that sin gives you, so you keep on doing the things that are wrong. This is what theologians call *antinomianism*, which means, simply, “against the law.” Antinomianism reflects an attitude that unfortunately is common among us – the idea that God, in his grace, will forgive us, so why not indulge in sin? I will go ahead and sin because I know God will forgive.

The answer to that attitude is found in Chapter 6, Verses 15-22. The Scripture says that if you do live on that basis, sin will enslave you, it will shame you, it will limit you, it will defile you, it will spread corruption and death in your experience. And though you may be a Christian, you will have a very unhappy, miserable Christian life because you cannot give way to sin without being enslaved by it.

2. The second way we can miss God’s freedom for us is exactly the opposite. We attempt to handle this problem of sin by trying our best to do what God wants. By discipline and dedication of heart and the exercise of determined willpower we seek to do our best to do what God asks, to live according to the Law, and to fulfill the requirements that the Law demands.

Now, this takes many forms. Sometimes it comes as a challenge to take certain steps by which we can overcome certain problems. It all sounds very good, because it is an appeal to do that which is right, but it is what the Scriptures call *legalism* – the exact opposite of antinomianism. It is a whole-hearted attempt to

do what God wants. And yet, as we have already seen in the opening verses of Chapter 7, the end result of attempting to live on that basis is that we become defensive, self-righteous, critical of others, proud of our own record. But also, we become unaccountably bored, dull, discouraged, depressed, and even, frequently, despairing. That, basically, is the story of Romans 7.

We already saw in Romans 7:1-6 that there is no need to be like this. Legalism is not the answer, either, and there is no need for it. We are not under the Law, but under grace. Romans 7 is a commentary on Paul's great declaration of Romans 6:14: "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law, but under grace." In the first six verses of Romans 7 we looked at what Paul said about this woman with two husbands – the woman representing us, and the two husbands representing our being tied to sin in Adam (our first husband), then freed by the death of Jesus on our behalf. Not only are we freed from sin, as Paul points out, but we are freed from the Law as well. The Law condemns us, but we are no longer under Law if we are resting in Christ. Therefore, the Law does not serve any useful purpose in delivering us from sin.

That raises the question: "What, then, is the purpose of the Law in a Christian's life?"

Is the Law really contemptible and worthless? Ought we just to dispense with it?

There are many Christians around us who say, "I'm a Christian, saved by grace. The Law has no meaning to me at all. The Law was given to Moses for the Israelites but it doesn't apply to a Christian. Let's dispense with it."

Now, Paul never speaks this way, and neither does Jesus. In fact, Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that if anyone disparages the Law, changes it, or waters it down in any degree whatsoever, he is under the curse of God. The Law abides forever.

Therefore, we must clearly understand what Paul is teaching here about the function and purpose of the Law. We must know

1. that the Law cannot deliver us from sin. It simply cannot do so. But

2. it can always do one thing well – even with Christians – it can expose sin in us and drive us back to Christ.

That is what the Law is for, and that is the story of Chapter 7, Verses 7-25. This section falls into two parts:

- In Verses 7-13, Paul discusses how the Law exposes sin and kills the believer. That is the term he uses: "the Law kills us."
- Then, in Verses 14-25, he takes up exactly the same theme – how the Law exposes sin and kills us – but this time it is not explained, it is experienced.

In the first section Paul tells us how it works; in the second section he tells us how it feels. This is a feeling generation, and, therefore, this is a passage that ought to strike a very responsive chord in your heart, for Paul describes how it feels to be under the Law as a Christian. He describes what it does to you and just exactly how it feels.

In Verses 7-11, the apostle begins to describe his own experience in relationship to the Law:

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Far from it! Indeed I would not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found 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. {Rom 7:7-11 NIV}

This is Paul's experience. It is clear that he is describing something that he himself went through. But, also, Paul employs the past tense throughout this passage, which suggests that he is describing his experience before he became a Christian. This probably happened not long before he became a Christian, but Paul is describing something that is common to the experience of many of us today. No

doubt many of us have had exactly the same experience that the Apostle Paul describes.

Paul, as we know, was raised in a godly home. He was raised a Jew in the city of Tarsus. He was brought up to be a typical Jewish son, and he was taught the Law from birth. So when he says he lived “apart from the Law” he doesn’t mean that he didn’t know what it was. He simply means that there came a time when the Law came home to him. “The commandment came,” he says.

We have all had that experience. We have read Scripture that was just words to us – beautiful words, perhaps, but we didn’t understand them. Then, years after, an experience that we go through makes those words come alive. This is what Paul is talking about here. He knew the Law from birth, but he did not know it in the sense of understanding what it was saying until he went through a certain experience. Here he describes that experience, one that he had before he became a Christian.

In this home in which he was raised, Paul, like many of us today, was protected and sheltered and kept from exposure to serious temptations. He was raised in the Jewish culture, where everyone around him was sheltered also. Therefore, he grew up relatively untroubled with problems of sin.

Now, there are many people like that in this congregation. You have grown up in a home where you have been protected and sheltered, and you have run with a crowd of friends who, likewise, have been kept from exposure to various things. You haven’t fallen into evil.

Many young people, like Saul of Tarsus, think they have handled the problem. What about keeping the Law? It’s not hard! Hardly any temptations come under these circumstances. These people think they have no struggles along this line. They have the world by the tail – they can handle it. As Paul describes it, they are alive apart from the Law. But then comes a time when they are exposed. They are thrust out into a different lifestyle, a different crowd of people. They move out on their own and suddenly they find themselves removed from the shelter and protection and love and cultural defenses that have been theirs from childhood on. Perhaps the new crowd – as a way of life – does things that these sheltered young people have been taught are wrong.

Now, for the first time, they feel the force of the prohibition of the Law. The Law says, “Thou shalt not covet, commit adultery, murder, steal ...”

– whatever it may be. And yet the crowd around them says, “Let’s do it – it’s fun!” For the first time, they begin to feel the prohibition of the Law. Then a strange phenomenon happens. Something about that situation arouses within them a strong desire to do the things that are prohibited. Maybe they are able to resist them for awhile, but, nevertheless, they find themselves pressured, pushed by something within them that wants very badly to do these things.

Now, that is what Paul discovered. It was the tenth commandment, “Thou shalt not covet” {Exod 20:17a KJV}, that got to him. He thought he had been keeping all the Law because he had not done some of the external things prohibited in the other commandments. But this one commandment talks about how you feel inside, your desires, your imagination, your ambitions. It says, “Thou shalt not desire what another has.” Paul found himself awakened to this commandment and discovered that he was coveting, no matter where he turned. When the Law came, he found himself aroused by it and brought under its power. It precipitated an orgy of desire. Many of us have felt this same way.

I have seen this happen. When young people, raised in sheltered homes, move out on their own – perhaps when they go to college, or get a job, or move to another city – they find that suddenly all the control they had seemed to be exercising over evil vanishes. They give way and are plunged into an orgy of evil, in one form or another.

I was in the Colorado Rockies this past week. A man met me to take me into the mountains for a conference. When I came out to the curb, he was waiting in his new, powerful, shiny Lincoln Continental. I got into the car and expected him to turn on the ignition. But to my amazement, he started driving without turning on the engine – or at least that’s how it seemed to me. I suddenly realized that the engine had been running all the time. It was so quiet that I hadn’t heard it. As we moved up into the Rockies, the power of that engine became manifest. We traveled up the steep grades in those great mountains without difficulty because of the power released by the touch on the accelerator.

Now, that is something like what Paul is describing here. Sin lies silent within us. We do not even know it is there. We think we have got hold of life in such a way that we can handle it without difficulty. We are self-confident because we have

never really been exposed to the situation that puts pressure upon us – we never have to make a decision against the pressure on the basis of the commandment of the Law “Thou shalt not...”

But when that happens, we suddenly discover all kinds of desires are awakened within us. We find ourselves filled with attitudes that almost shock us – unloving, bitter, resentful thoughts, murderous attitudes – we would like to get hold of somebody and kill him, if we could. Lustful feelings that we never dreamed were there surface and we find that we would love to indulge in them if only we had the opportunity. We find ourselves awakened to these desires. As the great engine surges into life at the touch of the accelerator, so this powerful, idling beast within us called sin springs into life as the Law comes home to us. We discover something that we never knew was there before.

Now, is this the Law’s fault? No, Paul says, it is not the Law’s fault. He goes on in Verses 12-13:

So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful [exceedingly sinful]. {Rom 7:12-13 NIV}

That is what the Law is for. It is to expose the fact that this evil force is in every one of us, waiting only for the right circumstance in order to spring into being, overpower our will, and carry us into things we never dreamed we would do. Many of us experience this. According to this passage, the great power of sin is that it deceives us. We think we have got life under control – and we are fooled. All sin is waiting for is the right occasion when, like a powerful, idling engine, it roars into life and takes over at the touch of the accelerator and we find ourselves helplessly under its control.

The Law is designed to expose that sin, and to make us feel this way so that we begin to understand what this evil force is that we have inherited by our birth into this fallen human race. The Law shows sin to be what it is, something exceedingly powerful and dangerous, something that has greater strength than our willpower and causes us to do things that we are resolved not to do.

In Verses 14-25, the same experience is described again, but this time in terms of how we feel when it happens. There is only one major difference between this section and the previous one. In this section, Paul switches to the present tense. That is significant because it means that he is now describing his experience at the time he wrote this letter to the Romans. This, then, is a description of the Law as it touches the Christian’s life. It does exactly the same thing as it did before we became a Christian, only now we have it from the point of view of the Christian, the believer who is deceived by the sin that is still resident within. Verses 14 and 15:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual [carnal, fleshly. Paul gives us now an excellent definition of carnality], sold as a slave to sin. I do not know what I am doing. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. {Rom 7:14-15 NIV}

Some have been convinced, from this verse alone, that Paul was a golfer. If you have ever tried golf, you know that this is the very thing that happens. What you want to do, you do not do. What you do not want to do, that is the very thing you do. Of course, Paul has a much greater problem than playing golf.

The key to this whole passage is Verse 14: “The law is spiritual,” Paul says. “It deals with my spirit. It gets right at the very heart of my being.” Fundamentally, as we have seen, human beings are spirits. The Law is spiritual, and it touches us in that area. “But I am carnal,” Paul says. “I can’t respond to it. I am sold as a slave to sin.”

Now, this always raises a problem. Compare this with Chapter 6, Verse 17, where Paul is speaking of slavery and says, “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to in, you whole-heartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were committed. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness,” {cf, Rom 6:17-18 NIV}. If he could write that to the Romans, surely it was true of him as well. And yet, how could a man write that he had become in Christ a slave to righteousness, and just a few paragraphs later write, “I am carnal, sold under sin, a slave to sin”?

Many have said that Paul is all confused here. Of course, he is not confused at all. He is simply describing what happens when a Christian tries to live under the Law. When a Christian, by his dedication and willpower and determination, tries to do what is right in order to please God, he is living under the Law. And Paul is telling us what to expect when we live like that – for we all try to live that way from time to time. Sin, you see, deceives us. It deceived Paul as an apostle, and he needed this treatment of the Law. It deceives us, and we need it too.

Now Paul tells us what happens. There are two problems, basically, which he gives us in Verse 15: “I do not know what I am doing. For what I want to do I do not do...” That is problem Number 1: I want to do right – there are things I would love to do, but I cannot do them. The second problem is: “but what I hate I do.”

In the verses that follow, Paul takes the second problem first, and shows us what happens in our experience. Verses 16 and 17:

And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. {Rom 7:16-17 NIV}

That is a very important statement. Paul makes it twice in this paragraph, and it is the explanation of and the answer to how we can be delivered from this condition. Verses 18-20:

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature [or my flesh]. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. {Rom 7:18-20 NIV}

Let’s examine this very carefully. Paul says that as a Christian, redeemed by the grace of God, there is now something within him that wants to do good, that agrees with the Law, that says that the Law is right. There is something within that says what the Law tells me to do is right, and I want to do it. But also, he says, there is something else in me that rises up and says “No!” Even though I determine not to do what is bad, I suddenly find

myself in such circumstances that my determination melts away, my resolve is gone, and I end up doing what I had sworn I would not do. Have you ever felt that way?

So, what has gone wrong? Paul’s explanation is, “It is no longer I who do it; it is sin living in me.” Isn’t that strange? There is a division within our humanity indicated here. There is the “I” that wants to do what God wants, and there is the sin which dwells in “me,” which is different than the “I.” We must understand what this is.

Human beings are complicated creatures. They are not simple organisms. We have within us a spirit, a soul, and a body. These are distinct, one from the other. What Paul is suggesting here is that the redeemed spirit never wants to do what God has prohibited. It agrees with the Law that it is good. And yet there is an alien power, a force that he calls sin, a great beast that is lying still within us until touched by the commandment of the Law. Then it springs to life, and we do what we do not want to do.

Notice that Jesus himself agrees with this. On one occasion he said, “If your right hand offends you, cut it off,” {cf, Matt 5:30}. He did not mean that you should actually chop off your right hand, because that would be a violation of other texts that indicate that God made the body and made it right and it is morally neutral. What he means is that we should take drastic action because we are up against a serious problem. He indicates that there is a “me” within us that runs our members, that gives orders to our hands and our feet and our eyes and our tongue and our brain and our sexual organs, and controls them. That “me” is giving an order to do something wrong, but there is another “I” in us who is offended by this. That “I” does not like it, does not want it. And so, Jesus’ words are, “Cut it off.” In a moment we are going to see how that happens, what it is that cuts it off and thus enables us to handle the problem. That is the way man is made. Our will power is never enough; sin will win, and we will do the evil that we swore not to do.

Now look at the other side of this problem in Verses 21-23:

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law [another principle] at

work in the members of my body, waging war against the law [or principle] of my mind [my agreement with the law of God] and making me a prisoner of the law [principle] of sin at work within my members. {Rom 7:21-23 NIV}

Here is the same problem exactly. You want to do right and determine to do right, knowing what it is and swearing to do it, only to find that under certain circumstances all that determination melts away and you do not do what is right. You do exactly what you did not want to do. So you come away angry with yourself. “What’s the matter with me? Why can’t I do what is right? Why do I give way when I get into this situation? Why am I so weak?” This is right where we live, isn’t it? This is what we all struggle with. The cry of the heart at that moment is (Verse 24):

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? {Rom 7:24 NIV}

What is this? Well, right here you arrive at where the Lord Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” {Matt 5:3}. Blessed is the man who comes to the end of himself. Blessed is the man who has arrived at spiritual bankruptcy. Because this is the point – the only point – where God’s help is given.

This is what we need to learn. If we think that we have got something in ourselves that we can work out our problems with, if we think that our wills are strong enough, our desires motivated enough, that we can control evil in our lives by simply determining to do so, then we have not come to the end of ourselves yet. And the Spirit of God simply folds his arms to wait and lets us go ahead and try it on that basis. And we fail, and fail miserably – until, at last, out of our failures, we cry, “O wretched man that I am!” Sin has deceived us, and the Law, as our friend, has come in and exposed sin for what it is. When we see how wretched it makes us, then we are ready for the answer, which comes immediately (Verse 25):

Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! {Rom 7:25a NIV}

Who will deliver me from this body of death? The Lord Jesus has already done it. We are to respond to the feelings of wretchedness and discouragement and failure, to which the Law has brought us because of sin in us, by reminding ourselves immediately of the facts that are true of us in Jesus Christ. Our feelings must be answered by facts.

We are no longer under the Law. That is the fact. We have arrived at a different situation; we are married to Christ, Christ risen from the dead. That means we must no longer think, “I am a poor, struggling, bewildered disciple, left alone to wrestle against these powerful urges.” We must now begin to think, “No, I am a free son of God, living a normal human life. I am dead to sin, and dead to the Law, because I am married to Christ. His power is mine, right at this moment. And though I may not feel a thing, I have the power to say, “No!” and walk away and be free, in Jesus Christ.”

Some of you know that my wife and I were in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and made a recording for a television broadcast. With us on that program was a pastor from Canada who had been raised in Russia. He had a burden on his heart to get the Word of God into Russia and was part of an organization (among several that exist today) to get Bibles into Russia. He told us about his first experience of crossing the Russian border with a load of Bibles in the trunk of the car. He wasn’t going to try to smuggle them in; he just was counting on God to get them through somehow. He and a friend loaded the boxes of Bibles into the car, and as they drove up to the border, all his resolve and courage began to drain away. Within a mile or so of the border, his friend said, “How do you feel?” He said, “I feel scared.” So they stopped alongside the road and there they simply told the Lord how they felt. “Lord, we are scared. We didn’t get into this situation because we want to be here. It isn’t we who want to get this Word into Russia; it is you. This is your project, and this is your situation. We are willing to take whatever risks you ask, but you have got to see it through. We are scared and we don’t know what to do. We don’t have any wisdom, we don’t know how to handle this situation when we get to the border, but we expect you to do something.” He said that as they prayed that way, totally bankrupt, wanting to do good, unable to do it, but committing the matter to the Lord Jesus, they felt the inward sense of the Spirit of God witnessing to them that God would

act. They didn't know how or what he would do, but they felt a sense of peace. They drove on to the border, and when the guard asked for their papers, they gave them to him. He examined them, then said, "What do you have in the trunk?" They said, "Some boxes." He said, "Let me see them." So they opened up the trunk, and here were the boxes of Bibles. They expected surely that his next question would be, "What's in them?" But he didn't ask it. He simply said, "Okay," shut the door, gave them their papers, and on they went. Now, that is what this passage is describing for us. This is the way we are to live, the way we are to face every challenge, large or small.

There are teachers who teach that this passage in Romans 7 is something a Christian goes through once, then he gets out of it and moves into Romans 8 and never gets back into Romans 7 again. Nothing could be further from the truth! Even as mighty a man as Paul went through it again and again. This is a description of what every believer will go through again and again in his experience because sin has the power to deceive us and to cause us to trust in ourselves, even when we are not aware we are doing it. The Law is what will expose that evil force and drive us to this place of

wretchedness that we might then, in poverty of spirit, cry out, "Lord Jesus, it is your problem; you take it." And he will do so.

The chapter rightly ends with the exclamation in Verse 25: "Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" The next sentence belongs with Chapter 8. It is the summarizing verse that introduces the themes of the explanation Paul gives us in Chapter 8. But here is the way of deliverance for Christians. We do need the Law. We need it every time sin deceives us. But the Law will not deliver us from sin; Law will only bring us, again and again, to the mighty deliverer.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for the simple and clear teaching of this passage. Help us to understand that we are freed from the Law once it has done its work of bringing us to the knowledge of sin. We cannot control ourselves by that means or deliver ourselves from evil, but we can rest upon the mighty deliverer who will set us free. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.