

A new battle

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 7, which is on page 1136. Romans chapter 7, and we're starting from verse 6.

But now we're released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

What then shall we say? That the law's sin? By no means. Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet, if the law had not said, you shall not covet.

But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive, and I died.

The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.

[1 : 09] So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good then bring death to me? By no means. It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very things I hate.

Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my flesh.

For I have the desire to do what's right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law, that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

[2 : 24] For I delight in the law of God in my inner being, but I see in my members another law, waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells within my members.

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Amen. Thanks very much for reading for us. Please do keep that passage open on page 1137 as we continue this series in these middle chapters of Romans.

We prayed already. So let me begin. I want you to imagine a 17-year-old at school. For some of us, we don't have to try very hard to imagine that, I realise, but just imagine a 17-year-old at school.

And every morning, he leaves the house and he is a complete mess. His hair is a mess. He smells. He hasn't brushed his teeth.

[3 : 33] And the more his mother tells him to do something about it, the less he does. It's almost as if he delights in being a complete wreck as he leaves the front door every morning to head off to school.

The more she lays the law down, you're not going to school like that. Well, he delights to do so. But then one day, things begin to change.

His hair is brushed. He no longer smells. His teeth are clean. What has happened? Well, there is a new affection on the scene.

A girl in his sights. Not, of course, that he'll get it right all the time. It will still be a battle to remember to brush his hair and so on.

But nonetheless, he longs to please her. And that, I think, gets to the heart of what is going on in these verses.

[4 : 39] In Romans 7, verses 7 to 25. You see, just have a look, will you, at verse 7. What then shall we say? That the law is sin?

Here, he sees that is the Jewish Christian believer in Rome who has heard everything the Apostle Paul has said about God's law, the Ten Commandments, and the Old Testament, and is horrified. Is the law a bad thing? After all, chapter 7, verses 1 to 6, the Christian has died to the law. The Christian is released from the law. Does that mean the law of God is bad? I may say that for those of us who are already kind of mentally beginning to switch off and to have perhaps looked at the headings there on the outline on the back of the service sheet, and it all looks most unpromising. Let me say that what God has to say to us in this passage this morning is absolutely life-changing. It is life-changing for those of us who are just kind of looking in on the Christian faith as interested observers from the outside, and it is also life-changing for those of us who are committed Christians here this morning already.

So as you see from the outside, we're simply going to look, first of all, at the law and sin in the pre-Christian life, and then law and sin in the Christian life. First of all, in the pre-Christian life, and have a look at verse 7.

[6 : 00] I'll read all of it this time. Now, do you see, it's not that there's something wrong with God's law.

It is rather there's something wrong with us. The law shows us what sin is. It shows us what is right and what is wrong, and that to do wrong is wrong in God's sight.

Now, before I became a Christian, I assumed that on the whole I was okay with God. I was perfectly happy getting on with my life, and frankly, and in my arrogance, I assumed God was quite happy getting on with his life as well.

Until, that is, I heard a talk from the Bible. I came face to face with God's law, as it were, to use the language of Romans 7, verse 7.

And at that point, I understood for the first time that I was sinful in God's sight. And actually, in God's sight, I was sinful and deserved his judgment on the final day.

[7 : 23] But noticeably, it's not just that the law shows what sin is, but then sin incites us to disobey God's law. Have a look at verse 8.

But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive, and I died.

Once there's a rule, what does a rule do? Well, immediately, you see the rule, don't you? And it puts in your mind the possibility of disobedience and breaking it.

It's the mother, isn't it, telling her teenage son to brush his hair, and actually he delights in not doing it. You know, he kind of ruffles it all up, just to make it even worse than it was before.

A few months ago, the evening before my birthday, back in January, I knew that sort of preparations had been made for the great day. And I went to say goodnight to Jemima the night before.

[8 : 33] And I walked into her bedroom. And at that moment, she said to me, as soon as I walked into her bedroom, Daddy, don't look under my bed. Now, you've guessed it, I had no intention of looking under her bed as I walked into her bedroom.

But at that moment, that was the only thing I wanted to do, to look under her bed. Finally, verse 10, the law condemns us to death.

The very commandments that promised life proved to be death to me. The law of God says the penalty for sin is death and judgment. So in Genesis chapter 2, Adam was told by God that if he ate of the fruit of the tree and knowledge of good and evil, he would die.

In Deuteronomy chapter 30, when God gave the law to his people Israel, he told them that it would perish, that they would die if they didn't keep it. Now, we get this badly wrong, don't we?

Because we live in a culture that values Christian morals, but by and large, doesn't want to know anything about Jesus. So perhaps the couple who want to get their child baptised and kind of bring their child up in a kind of Christian moral framework.

[9 : 55] Or the politician who trumpets, you know, Christian moral principles. Or they actually think you're here this morning because you value Christian morality.

Or they think it is a good thing for your child to go to Sunday club. But can we see the point is that law and morality cannot make us right with God?

You see, it is not that you and I are essentially good people, and what we need is a kind of bit of moral guidance, just to kind of keep us on the right track. Now, turn back to Romans chapter 3, verse 20.

What do we see in Romans chapter 3, verse 20? For by works of the law, no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The purpose of God's law is to show what sin is. To show that sin is sin. Sin. No one can be put right with God by law keeping. It's why over the page, verses 23 and 24.

[11:14] We read, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by God's grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

So imagine for a moment that you are lost. And yes, you have a map, but you kind of, you're really lost.

And so you kind of look at the map and sort of turn it this way and that way, and it doesn't really help, because you're lost. And you kind of look at the map and you don't know where you are on the map. You really are lost.

And what you need at that point is not glasses to see the map better. You need someone to come and rescue you. To come and find you and take you home.

The purpose of God's law is to show us our sin, that we face God's judgment. It was designed to show us that we need a rescuer. But the law itself is not the means of rescue.

[12:18] The rescue comes through the death of Jesus Christ, dying on a cross in our place, so that we can be right with God.

So I want to appeal to those of us this morning who have yet to put our trust in Jesus. Please don't think that morality will save you.

Please don't think the Christian message is try harder. Try to live a moral life. Try to be a better person.

Keep the Ten Commandments. Now I'm conscious that for some of us, actually, that would be a very difficult thing for us to hear. But have a look again at verse 10. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.

Let me say, if you do think that morality or the Ten Commandments is the way to be right with God, then just try keeping them. Just for a week.

[13:18] Just for this week. Not just kind of externally, but internally as well. So not just kind of physically not murdering people, but not the anger either, that is at the heart of a murderous heart.

And not just no physical adultery, but none of the lust that lies at the root of an adulterous heart. Not to mention the other commandments.

Now let me warn you, you will fail, but you will also see your sin more clearly. And that, of course, will be God's great kindness.

To show you that actually you cannot get right with him through law keeping, by keeping the commandments. And to show you your needs to turn to Christ and to trust in him and his death in your place.

Law and sin in the pre-Christian life. Let's move on and think about verses 14 to 25 and law and sin in the Christian life. Now you may know, and those of us who are in growth groups will know it as we looked at these verses earlier on in the year.

[14:40] There's much debate about the sort of person these verses are describing. Is it the Christian believer? Is it the unbeliever? Or is it a kind of a halfway house, a kind of semi-converted Christian who doesn't yet have the Holy Spirit?

Well, let me tell you why I am convinced that Paul is describing the Christian believer. And it's because in verses 14 to 25 he is describing the person who wants to please God.

He is describing the person who, in their minds, they want to please God. Do you see that in verse 18? For I have the desire to do what is right.

Verse 21, what I want to do right. Verse 22, I delight in the law of God in my inner being. Now that is the mark of the Christian believer.

You see, by contrast, look on into chapter 8 to see how Paul describes the unbeliever. Chapter 8, verse 5. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh.

[15:50] Or verse 7. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God.

For it does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot. Now that word flesh doesn't mean sex, which perhaps we might think it does in our context. It simply means self.

The unbeliever lives for self, not for good. The mind of the unbeliever is set on living and pleasing self, not God. As for the suggestion that Romans 7, 14 to 25 perhaps describes a believer without the Spirit, well, that can't be right.

It's because every Christian believer has the Spirit. Have a look again at chapter 8, verse 9. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

Every Christian believer has the Holy Spirit from the moment when they came to believe in Jesus. Now, you may want to ask more about that later, but I'm convinced that these verses we're looking at this morning describe the Christian, and they describe the normal Christian life.

[17:08] They describe normal Christian experience. And as such, they are very, very encouraging. You see, have a look back to chapter 6, verse 13, which we looked at a couple of weeks ago.

Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life. Do you remember how we said that word present kind of takes us to the parade grounds?

It's the language of the soldier standing to attention on the parade grounds with his commanding officer in front of him, presenting himself to God.

Presenting himself, rather, to his commanding officer, saying, all that I have, I'm here to serve you. And we said, didn't we, that actually, that is, the Christian is like that.

And I hope that those of us who are genuine Christian believers have thought over the last two weeks, yes, I do want to live like that. Now, I long to live like that. I long to present all that I have, all that I am, to the Lord Jesus every day as my commanding officer.

[18:20] Well, let me ask, last Monday morning, how did you get on doing that? Was it straightforward? Or was it a struggle?

Was it easy, once you put your mind to it? Or was it a battle? Well, I guess on Monday morning, there may well have been some victories. But there have been plenty of failures as well, won't there?

If we're honest with ourselves. Now, Romans 7, verses 14 to 25, essentially says the same thing three times. So you get it in verses 14 to 17, 18 to 20, and 21 to 23.

So let me just read verses 21 to 23 again. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.

For I delight in the law of God in my inner being, but I see in my members, in other words, in his body, in his physical body, I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

[19:34] Do you see, on the one hand, the Christian now delights in God's law. The Christian hates sin. You see, God's law isn't irrelevant to the Christian. Yes, as we saw in chapter 7, verses 1 to 6, the Christian has died to the law in terms of the grip the law had on us before we put our faith in Christ.

The law then said, if you sin, you die. That's what we saw, isn't it, just now in verse 10. If you sin, you die. For now that Christ has died in our place, we are no longer condemned.

We are free from the law in that sense. But nonetheless, we still want to please God. Just like that 17-year-old we thought about at the beginning.

He's begun to change. Not because his mother is kind of standing over, standing over him, kind of throwing the rule book at him. He's begun to change because of a new affection.

But it will still be a battle for him every day, each day, trying to please his girlfriend. Well, in a far greater way, the Christian has been freed from the law and now has a new affection, a new desire that delights in God's law and wants to do what is right and to please God.

[20:58] Isn't that your experience if you're a Christian here this morning? But what do we find? Verses 21 to 23, there's a battle. We'll look back to verse 15.

We don't do the good we want to do and we do the evil we don't want to do. We find that we're such a kind of bundle of contradictions.

As Paul says, he finds his behaviour incomprehensible. It's as if there's a permanent state of civil war going on inside us between what we want to do and what we do.

We cannot do the good we want to do. Sin still lives within us. The very things we don't want to do are the things we end up doing. When you say, why is the Christian life like that?

Well, have a look at the first diagram on the outline. And if you've been here the last couple of weeks you'll recognise the first diagram. It's what we've seen isn't it over the last couple of weeks.

[22 : 03] The Christian has been united to Jesus and through our union with Jesus we have been brought from under the rule of Adam to the rule of Christ.

I may say if you've missed the last three weeks then in a sense these four talks today and the last three talks, they all run together. So do listen to them online if you've missed them. But look back to Romans chapter 6 verse 5.

It's a verse we've heard a couple of times this morning already actually. Romans chapter 6 verse 5. Do you remember how then we said that although we have been united with Christ we still await for the resurrection, the physical resurrection of our bodies on the final judgment day.

Which means of course that it's this second diagram which now best represents our Christian lives and Christian experience. As Christians we still sin even though deep down we don't want to because we live in the overlap between these two rules, these two ages so to speak.

An overlap which will continue until the new creation. So look at chapter 7 verses 24 and 25 and just see how the chapter finishes because both these verses get to the heart of what the normal Christian life is like.

[23 : 45] Chapter 7 verse 24. Wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord so that I myself serve the law of God with my mind but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

That is the normal Christian life. There is both verse 24 wretched person that I am who will deliver me from this body of death. But there is also verse 25 thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thanks be to God who he will deliver me one day with a new body in the new creation. Now I want to finish this morning with four reasons why it is such a good thing to know the Christian life is a struggle.

Four reasons why it is such a good thing and an important thing that we grasp that the Christian life is a struggle and a battle. First of all struggling with sin is a sign of spiritual health.

struggling with sin is a sign of spiritual health. Every time you and I do what we know to be wrong as Christians and are bothered by it that is a sign that we are genuine believers because it reflects doesn't it what Paul says here in Romans chapter 7.

[25 : 15] You see imagine for a moment a toddler beginning to walk. Now there won't be many conversations will there in the household which go like this. Darling come quick look at this she's fallen flat on her face yet again.

Did you hear those kind of conversations when a toddler is beginning to walk? No it's darling come quick look at this she's walked three steps and she's still going. You see the remarkable thing is not the falling over the remarkable thing is the getting up and walking one or two steps.

And that too is the remarkable thing in Christian experience. You see surely one of the things we've seen in Romans is how strong sin is. How powerless we are to do anything about it.

How it seems normal. How even we even though we know it results in judgments as unbelievers yet we continue to sin. We continue to do it. The human inability to change.

which means that those who have put our faith in Christ when we are bothered by sin and when we struggle with it why that is a sign of spiritual health.

[26 : 33] Now of course the problem is that's not how you and I think is it? So you see if I had told you this morning that I no longer struggle with sin and you know I've kind of reached that stage in my Christian life where I you know I just don't struggle with sin anymore.

I think the great temptation would be to admire me for it. But of course the reality is the opposite.

And therefore can we see there is a warning here isn't there? There is a warning here for those of us who don't struggle with sin because of course that is a sign of spiritual sickness.

It may even be that your faith isn't genuine at all. But for those who sin and are bothered by it who do experience the struggle why that is a sign of spiritual health.

J.C. Ryle the former Bishop of Liverpool says of these verses a true Christian is someone who not only has peace of conscience but war within.

[27 : 47] Peace of conscience Romans chapter 8 verse 1 there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus but war within.

Now the second reason why we need to know that the Christian life is a struggle is so that we don't fall for false expectations. As we said earlier there are those who think that Romans 7 is describing a kind of second class Christian without the spirit or without enough of the spirit and that we need to move from Romans 7 and the life of struggle to the life of victory in Romans 8 where the Christian life is suddenly much easier and we move on to an entirely different plane of Christian experience. Now I have to say, I think that sounds very attractive. Quick fixes are always attractive, aren't they? Bookshops are full of books, aren't they? Promising the quick fix.

So perhaps it's the promise that you'll learn a language in two weeks or that you'll be able to organise your life in two days or totally declutter your life once and for all. It sounds wonderful but of course how discouraging it is when having thought that you were going to learn a language in two weeks, in two years time you're still struggling with it.

Throughout church history there sadly have been people who have promised the quick fix. some kind of secret which kind of gets you onto a kind of higher plane of Christian experience.

[29 : 24] A kind of higher life or baptism of the spirit or second blessing or whatever it may be. Tragically actually I was around a minister's conference last week and I heard of a leader in a church like that who had all but given up on Christian things simply because of the reality gap that he experienced between this kind of higher life teaching and his day to day struggle with sin.

Once we grasp Romans chapter 7 it will guard us against that kind of false teaching and false expectations of what the Christian life is like and therefore we won't give up when we find it hard. Thirdly, the third reason why we need to know the Christian life is a struggle is because it helps us to live out the gospel each day. Now I wonder if you've ever prayed a prayer like this. Heavenly Father, why didn't you make me perfect the day I became a Christian?

Have you ever prayed a prayer like that or at least thought it? Why didn't you make me perfect the day I became a Christian? It made my life much much easier. But the point is the whole of the Christian life is a life of repentance and faith.

That is how the Christian life begins, as we put our trust in Christ, as we repent and say sorry. That is how the Christian life begins and it's how the Christian life goes on.

[30 : 52] And therefore the fact that the Christian life is a struggle stops us trusting our own performance and it keeps us trusting in Christ. You see, it forces us to look to Jesus every day.

It forces us to live the gospel every day, every day, to confess our sins, to say sorry to God, and then every day to delight in the forgiveness that he has won for us on the cross.

Isn't that a great way to live? Fourth reason why it's good to know the Christian life is a struggle is because it makes us look forward. Have a look again at verses 24 and 25.

Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Struggling with sin stops us thinking we have arrived. And I guess that many of us with good jobs, living in nice houses where life is very good, we need this reminder, don't we?

[32 : 03] we need this reminder every day. That life here is not home, although we'll be tempted to think it is home.

That heaven is home, that the new creation is home. And every day that you and I battle with sin, it reminds us that we are not there yet, and that heaven is home.

Every day as we kind of drag around our sinful bodies like a kind of ball and chain, why that is a reminder to us that we are not home, that heaven is home.

And on that day we'll enjoy new bodies, resurrection bodies. Well why don't we have a time of quiet reflection?

Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.