

The Root of the Problem

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[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 30th of September 2001.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled The Root of the Problem and is based on Romans 7, verses 1-13.

And you'll probably find it helpful to have open before you in the Bibles, Romans 7 on page 918 in the Black Bibles under the pews in front of you.

Romans 7 on page 918. And for those who are visiting or those who've forgotten, we've looked at Romans 1-6 in recent months.

We had a bit of a gap after chapter 5. We looked at 6 three weeks ago, then had another gap. Here we are at the beginning of 7. Next week, another gap. And then we'll continue with the rest of 7 through to chapter 11, starting in a fortnight's time through till nearly Christmas.

[1 : 1 2] Well, let me pray. This is not an easy chapter and an easy part of this letter, so we need God's help. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you speak to us through the words of Scripture, and we pray that you'll do so now.

Help us not only to understand, but pray that you may place your law on our heart by your spirit, that we may bear fruit for God and find life eternal.

We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. The law is an ass, so they say. Convoluting, complicated and confusing would be a way of describing the law in our own society these days.

How times have changed. The Ten Commandments have 179 words. The Declaration of Independence, 1,322 words.

And a document of legislation for the European community about where you can and can't smoke, 29,942 words. So the next time you complain that the Bible's a bit long-winded or difficult to read, especially the laws, be thankful that you're not reading the European legislation on smoking.

[2 : 2 9] Every parliament, it seems, in our country sets new laws and very few get repealed or done away with, so that the total number of our laws seems to grow year by year, parliament by parliament.

It's the same in church government. Next Thursday night, our next annual synod of church government in the Melbourne Diocese begins. And before us, there are at least half a dozen new laws that we will need to debate and perhaps approve.

And it seems to me that year by year, synod by synod, there are more and more laws that we need to follow and obey and keep in both church and society.

And so it's fairly true to say, I guess, that the society in which we live is marked by being legislative, legalistic and litigious. Who can remember all the laws that we need to follow in our society?

One year after passing your learner's permit, who can remember which corners you're allowed to turn left or right at in the city, and they seem to change every year anyway, how far you can park from fire hydrants and all that sort of stuff?

[3 : 35] It becomes more and more complicated just to live. Oh, for a life without laws. Well, in St. Paul's day, he being a writer of this letter to the Romans, just after the time of Jesus, Judaism, the life of the Jewish religious society, was also very legalistic, in practice at least.

They not only had the laws of the Old Testament as we understand it, but parts of Judaism had what they believed were oral laws handed down without writing from the time of Moses.

And there were all sorts of things being written about how to interpret and what laws to keep and how to understand them. How far you could travel on the Sabbath day without breaking the Sabbath command.

What sorts of things you could cook and eat and so on. And it's still the same today in parts of Judaism. For example, apparently, I was told this week, that you are limited on where you can travel on the Sabbath day, the day of rest for Jews, but you're allowed to travel over water.

So if you want to travel a long distance, it's good to put a hot water bottle underneath you. Because then you'd be regarded as travelling over water and therefore able to travel further on the Sabbath day.

[4 : 48] Now on a good day, let me say that Jews, perhaps today and certainly in St. Paul's Day, delighted in God's laws. They rejoiced in the fact that God had given them laws.

It was a privilege for them to have received the laws of God. And we see the high points of that praise of God for law in the Old Testament, in say Psalm 19 or Psalm 119, where those psalms, amongst others, praise God for the laws that God has given to the Jewish people.

And many Jews in Paul's day and today as well, as well as in Old Testament times, believed that through the law that God had given, evil and sin would be restrained, people by keeping the law would be able to conquer sin and thus find the salvation that God had promised for them.

And there are Christians today who perhaps think similarly, that somehow through the laws of God, we are able to keep them and thus be good people and through our good works find acceptance from God and salvation.

Now in such a context, Paul's words in Romans can be understood to be rather perturbing. Because Paul has made it clear that salvation comes only through faith in Christ and independent in a sense of the laws that were given through the Old Testament.

[6 : 10] And that salvation will not come through keeping the laws of the Bible as God had given them in the Old Testament. So we read, if you remember back in chapter 3, verse 20, no human being will be justified in God's sight by deeds prescribed from the law.

For through the law comes the knowledge of sin. In chapter 4, you may remember, we read, for the law brings wrath, but where there's no law, neither is there violation.

In chapter 5, we read, but law came in with the result that the trespass multiplied. And then in chapter 6, we read, for sin will have no dominion over you since you're not under law, but under grace.

Now that's just a sample of what Paul has said about the law so far in this letter, in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6. And whenever Paul has discussed the law so far, we could be excused for thinking that he regards it with some disdain, even contempt, as though every time he speaks about the law of God, it's almost in a derogatory way, putting it down or marginalising it, in a sense, as a means of salvation, and so on.

What follows in today's section, the first half of chapter 7, are two things. Firstly, in verses 1 to 6, Paul talks about being released from the law.

[7 : 37] And then secondly, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, given what he's said thus far, he gives a defence of the law of God that's given in the Old Testament.

So firstly, verses 1 to 6, Paul speaks about being released from the law. Do you not know, brothers and sisters, if I'm speaking to those who know the law, that the law is binding on a person only during that person's lifetime?

The old expression in the old marriage service is, till death do us part. And I think these days, it's so long as the both of us shall live, or something to that effect.

The ideal in Christian marriage is that it is lifelong. Christian marriage pertains while both partners live. And in God's eyes, what ends marriage is the death of one partner.

And after the death of the husband or the wife, the widow or widower is no longer bound by the marriage vows that she or he has made one day. That's the ideal of Christian marriage.

[8 : 48] And though in the Bible there are some concessions to divorce, here and there, basically marriage is for life. Till death do us part.

So Paul says then, that if a person has, and the Bible says elsewhere, that if a person enters into a marriage when their previous marriage partner is still alive, then they are in effect an adulteress, or an adulterer.

So Paul says here, in verses 2 and 3, a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband.

So accordingly, she'll be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she's free from that law. And if she marries another man, she's not an adulteress.

Now Paul's not actually arguing about marriage. He uses that as an illustration. But it's a fairly straightforward illustration. Marriage is for life. If a partner dies, you're free to remarry.

[9 : 50] You're not bound by the marriage vows that you've made. Paul says it's the same sort of thing with Christians and the law of God in the Old Testament. Law is no longer binding when death occurs.

But if you die, then you're no longer bound by the laws of the Old Testament. He's speaking primarily, I think, to Jewish Christians at this point. Now the key thing to understand is, well, when do we die?

Because Paul's not talking about heaven here. He's not just talking about the fact that in heaven there will be a society without laws. We're free from the law. But he's actually addressing people who are living here on earth.

And he's already said in chapter 6 that Christians have died in Christ. Physically, we haven't died. We still live, obviously. But in Christ, our old self has died.

When he died, we died in him to sin, was how he put it in chapter 6. He's transferring that analogy from chapter 6 to say that Christians in effect have already died in Christ not only to sin but to the law.

[11 : 01] So he says in verse 4, in the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ. So death has occurred. Therefore, we're no longer bound to the relationship that pertained in the Old Testament of Jews to the law.

The result being that we are free to take another or belong to another. It's as if, in one sense, Paul says, in the Old Testament or Old Covenant, there was a marriage relationship of God's people to the law.

But the people of God have died in Christ. So that old marriage relationship to the law is broken. Therefore, they are free to belong to another or to marry another without in effect committing sort of spiritual adultery.

So he goes on to say in verse 4, you've died to the law through the body of Christ so that you may belong to another. That is to Christ, that is to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.

In the Old Covenant or Testament, law is like a marriage partner. But now Christians have died in Christ. Now they're free to have another marriage partner and that is Christ himself, the one who's risen from the dead.

[12 : 18] And the purpose of it all is so that in our lives we bear fruit for God. Now the trouble with law being a marriage partner in inverted commas in the Old Testament times is that law brings out the worst in us.

You know, there might be some people who you know, family members, people you work with, neighbours and so on, and somehow you grate with them or they grate on you.

And somehow when you're in a relationship with them or with them in some way, they sort of bring out the worst in you, provoking you somehow to things that you don't want to say or do or feel.

The law is like that with us. It arouses within us the worst. It arouses within us sin. It incites us to sin. It foments sin within us.

So Paul says in verse 5, while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions are roused by the law, we're at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

[13 : 23] Far from preventing sin, you see, the law of God actually incites it, provokes it, arouses it, increases it, multiplies it. Far from leading to salvation by conquering sin through the law, it actually leads to death, to spiritual death because it provokes sin within and leads people to the condemnation of the law and thus to die.

Now we can perhaps think of examples of the way in which that happens. Sometimes a film or a book gets censored and often what results is more and more people go to see the film or read the book or want to at least because there's something perverse within human nature that says, well if it's prohibited then I want to do it or see it or read it.

children obviously like adults have the same sort of thing. Sometimes something is prohibited and perversely it provokes them or arouses within them a greater desire to do what is prohibited.

One of the great early theologians of the church was a man by the name of Augustine. He was the bishop of a place of the name of Hippo in North Africa in about 400 AD and he wrote a book that's still quite famous called His Confessions.

In it he recounts at the time that he was 16 with what he calls a gang of naughty adolescents stealing pears from an orchard.

[14 : 55] It wasn't because they were hungry that they stole pears. Indeed he says that they had their own pears and they were better anyway than the ones that were in the orchard. His reflection is this.

My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing that is I wasn't wanting the pears but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong.

That is he did what was wrong for the thrill of doing what was wrong. He didn't want the pears he didn't need the pears but that he along with this group sinned because the law that said in effect you shall not steal other people's property excited them to commit the sin.

And he asked the question was it possible to take pleasure in what was illicit for no reason other than that it was not allowed. That is if it had been allowed it would not be exciting fun a thrill a desire.

And the law is like that from time to time with us. There is a sense in which our perverse sinful nature is actually aroused or stimulated by laws primarily God's laws but sometimes human laws as well.

[16 : 11] Paul is particularly talking about God's laws of course. And the reason why our society has so many laws why Parliament passes more laws why the European legislation about smoking is so long and long winded why synods pass more laws every year is not because law actually helps us conquer sin and evil but because by our perverse sinful nature people find loopholes in laws so you need to keep adding to laws to prevent more and more loopholes from happening.

And maybe the reflection of sitting on a hot water bottle to travel further is an illustration of just that sort of point. The law provokes sin. It arouses sin within us.

It brings out the worst in us. But Paul says Christians have been freed from the binding of the law. So in verse 6 he says but now we are discharged from the law released from it dead to that which held us captive dead in Christ of course is what he talked about.

So that we are slaves not under the old written code that is the Old Testament law written on tablets of stone and parchment and so on but in the new life of the spirit.

Now this verse has been misunderstood by many Christians in every generation. We are freed from the old written code and now we live a new life of the spirit.

[17 : 40] It's been misunderstood and has led many Christians astray because it misunderstands what the new life of the spirit is. Because too many Christians have understood this contrast to be the law is out we're free to do what we like under God's spirit.

Let me give you an extreme example of that. Hasn't happened to me but it's happened to other ministers whom I know. Somebody comes to them and says that God has led them to leave their wife or their husband and to begin a relationship with somebody else whom they love.

And the spirit has led them to this because love is the fulfillment of the law and love now applies to this person not my marriage partner. freedom in the spirit of God will never lead to that because the contrast is not between the law that's now been tossed out and the freedom of the spirit.

The contrast is between a law that is written down on tablets and parchments and now a law of God that has been written on the hearts by God's spirit.

The spirit doesn't abandon the law or overturn it or throw it away. the difference is how the law is applied to us. This letter of Paul to the Romans is written so that these Christians who read it in Rome and subsequent generations of readers like us will live godly lives, lives of obedience of faith.

[19 : 11] Not lives that are at liberty to do whatever we like, but lives that live godly, obedient, faithful lives under God.

In the first half of chapter six, Paul in order to motivate his Christian readers to live such lives, used an analogy of freedom. We are free from sin, don't let sin reign over you.

But then he balanced that in the second half of chapter six with the analogy of slavery. Yes, there is freedom from sin, but then he used the analogy you were slaves to sin, but now you are slaves to God.

It's not a freedom or license to do whatever you like. But now a new slavery to God. And now he uses the analogy of marriage to make the same sort of point and motivate the Christian readers in the same sort of way.

The analogy of marriage is that we are now bound to Christ, dead to the law that condemned us, but alive in a new relationship with Christ, a new life of the spirit of Christ, but that is not a life that is independent of God's law and holiness and standards, but rather where the spirit writes the law in the hearts of Christian people.

[20 : 27] In Paul's mind, you see, he has a big picture of the Bible. And in the Old Testament, there was a recognition that the law was a great gift of God, but it was impotent to actually change the hearts of people.

And so the Old Testament itself looked forward to the fulfillment of the law when the law would not just be written down on bits of paper and parchment and tablets of stone, but where God would actually write his law on the hearts of his people by his spirit.

That is what Jeremiah promised. And in slightly different language, other prophets like Ezekiel, but even earlier than that, Moses promised in the time of Deuteronomy. Paul is saying that has come through Christ and the giving of his spirit.

It's not an abandonment of the law, but now a writing of God's law on the hearts of God's people through Christ. That then leads to freedom to bear fruit for God, as verse 4 says.

Not to bear fruit for yourself or to live as you like, but to bear fruit for God and to serve him with our lives. Paul now defends the law.

[21 : 40] To this point, he could be misunderstood as disparaging to the law of God. But now he wants Christians to be very clear that the law is actually a good thing despite all that he said about it.

Despite the promise of being released from the binding, condemning law, he now speaks of its good purposes. And we see the first part of this in verses 7 to 13, and he goes on with that as we'll see in a fortnight in the rest of the chapter.

Typical of Paul, he begins a new section with a rhetorical question. What then should we say that the law is sin? I mean, after all, if the law of God arouses sin within us, is the law itself sinful?

He could be misunderstood as saying that. He says, by no means, a very strong no, definitely not. Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.

That is, the good purpose of God's law, as we have it through Scripture, Old Testament, and New Testament, for that matter, tells us what sin is. It tells us what is wrong in God's eyes.

[22 : 50] It tells us what is right in God's eyes. And that is a good thing. That's why God gave the law, so that we would know what sin is, and also what right behavior was as well.

Paul gives an example at the end of verse 1. I would not have known what it is to covet, if the law had not said, you shall not covet. That is, coveting is the desire of the heart for something that belongs to somebody else that is not rightly our own.

Often it's associated with actions to try and procure that thing, sometimes illegally, sometimes not, but it is coveting desiring something that belongs to somebody else. Paul says, without the law, I wouldn't know that coveting was a sin, but because we've got the law, I know that it is a sin.

The law is a good thing then, because it tells us what sin is, it reveals to us what sin is and what God's standards are and the converse of that. So the problem, you see, is not law.

That's good. The problem is our sinful nature, because the law which is good brings out the worst in us. So he says in verse 8, but sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.

[24 : 02] Apart from the law, sin lies dead. The law is good, but it's our sinful nature that's wrong. And Paul talks about sin here as though sin is like a serpent, like in the Garden of Eden, as though sin is a living being that has power, just like he described it in chapter 6 as well.

Sin is like a powerful force, and in verses 9, 10, and 11, he's almost reflecting on sin being the serpent in the Garden of Eden. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died, and the very commandment that promised life, proved to be death to me, for sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.

So often sin's like that. It promises life, as the serpent did to Adam and Eve in effect, but in the end it always leads to death. The real promise of life comes from God.

Sin is deceptive. It's pleasurable, but its pleasures are fleeting. If it wasn't pleasurable, no one would ever sin. sin, that's part of its deception and attraction.

But Paul is in effect reflecting on humanity in general, as well as himself. Sin, the law arouses sin, which ultimately leads to spiritual death.

[25 : 20] So he summarizes then in verse 12 and 13. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

That is, it tells us what God is like. It tells us what sin is like. And they are good and holy things to do for us. Did what is good then bring death to me?

By no means it was sin working 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.

A murderer goes to jail. It's not the fault of the law that he goes to jail. If he's a murderer he goes to jail because of sin. The law is good because it enables sin to be punished and identified as sin.

He's not there because of the law which is stupid or sinful. He's there because of his sinful nature. One of the great con jobs I think of modernism the last 200 years in western thinking is that people are basically good.

[26 : 27] Politicians play to our egos about that. You notice how many times in the next lead up to this coming election politicians on both sides or all sides of politics will appeal to the good nature of Australian people as though somehow we're good and therefore we're going to make wise decisions and do the right thing and so on.

It is secular humanism. It's founded on the goodness of humanity and too many Christians have been conned and deceived by that philosophy in western thinking in the last 200 years.

The Bible's view is that human beings by nature are not good. We are sinful. Our minds, our actions, our thoughts, our speech is corrupted by sinful nature.

That's the biblical view. It's not the secular humanist view. It's not popular view in western society but it's the true view. The reason why we have so many laws is precisely because of our sinful nature.

If we were basically good, our legal system would be much simpler, much lighter to read. God's law is good and it's us who are not.

[27 : 37] And that's Paul's point here. The law is a good thing. It might arouse sin. It might lead to condemnation for sin. But that is a good thing. And he will elaborate more on that as we'll see next time.

So God's law is not an ass. God's law has its goal in Christ. It tells us what sin is. It convicts us of our own sin.

One of the functions of reading some services, the Ten Commandments or the Two Great Commandments is that it exposes not only God's standard and what sin is, but it convicts us of our own sin.

As we hear them read, we realize that we failed those standards. But then God's law also drives us to God for mercy. And even in the law of the Old Testament, there is built in this system of mercy that God mercifully provides through sacrifices and prayer and ultimately through Christ's death.

So the law drives us to Jesus as its goal. The one who not only alone fulfills the law perfectly, but the one by whose death we are liberated from law's condemnation.

[28 : 50] I've been thinking I might make an expedition to the North Pole. Seems a good thing to do. Winnie the Pooh did it and I thought I should do it. So I went out for a wander to the North Pole the other day.

I found a sign that pointed north. That was what I was looking for. I thought, what a wonderful sign. That's exactly what I need because I want to go to the North Pole, so therefore I need to go north. So I followed the sign. I didn't get to the North Pole, as you may well imagine.

The reason I didn't get there was not because the sign pointed in the wrong direction. The reason I didn't get there was because, as you probably all well know, my physical condition prevented me from making the long trek to the North Pole.

There's no way I'll ever walk to the North Pole. I would need some sort of helicopter that drops me within an inch or two of the North Pole if I'm ever going to make it. It's not the sign's fault. It's the fault of my physical unfitness.

I would never make it. I'll never walk there. I know that. I'm resigned to that. We the poo could make it. Don't know how with all the honey he ate. I can't.

[29 : 59] The law of God is a signpost pointing us to God's perfection. The fact that we don't make it to the end is not the fault of the signpost.

It's the fault of our spiritual condition. The law is good. It is pointing the right way and it is pointing to God's perfection. It exposes our own feeble sinful condition.

Indeed it arouses our sinful condition as well. The fact that we don't make it to perfection in our own ability is not the law's fault. It is our fault.

But in pointing also to the one who does fulfill the law, to Jesus, and the one who dies so that we're liberated from the condemnation of the law, it is pointing us to the one who takes us to where the sign points.

For the law itself is impotent to change our hearts and that's why the law of the Old Testament looked forward to the life of the Spirit when the Spirit would write the law on our hearts that empowers us to get to where the law is pointing.

[31 : 05] Oh, still, even now as Christians with God's Spirit, we only see feebly in some glimpses of where the law is pointing to. But we know that through the power of Jesus and the gospel, there is power to save us and bring us to eternal life.

The law is powerless to save. But if you remember back to what Paul said back in chapter one of this letter, where does the power to save come from? the gospel.

For it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith. That is where the law is pointing to Jesus.

And it's in faith in him that the power comes to do what the law of God points to that is powerless in itself to do. Let's pray.

Our heavenly father, we thank you for your words of law in the Old Testament to reveal to us what is sinful, to reveal to us your character, to convict us of our sin and direct us to Jesus Christ, the one who perfectly fulfilled the law, but more than that, who died so that we may be liberated from the condemnation of that law and bear fruit for you and find eternal life.

[32 : 26] we thank you that through faith in Christ we receive power for salvation in the gospel. And we thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.