

# The Law is Spiritual - But I Am Fleshly

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 7.! Romans chapter 7. While you're doing that, welcome.

! My name is BK.! I gotta say something to it.

And I think I'll say is that I believe truly, theologically, if Adam and Eve had a mother, we would not be in this predicament, right? So that's my word for that.

So let's just look at verse 14, Romans 7. If you're new, visiting, we're in a pretty intense passage of Scripture, and I pray that you'll be blessed just by our time in here as we go through this text over the next several weeks.

I pray that Lord will give us new, fresh understanding if we were confused about it, and I pray that He would give us assurance if we were thinking right about this. But it's a tough passage to understand, so let's just start in verse 14.

[ 1 : 21 ] 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 thing I hate.

Now, if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that is good. So now it is I, 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 is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good that 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.

Before I say anything more about this passage directly, I think it's important to just look at where it fits in to the story of the book of Romans or in the overall structure of the book.

[ 2 : 36 ] If you remember, it is written by the Apostle Paul as he is wrapping up his missionary journeys. He has had three missionary journeys. He has been ministering in Asia, Asia Minor, Macedonia, that type.

And he wants to go west. He wants to go to Spain. He is writing these saints, hey, I can't wait to see you in Rome and then I am going to head off to Spain. But before I do that, I need to bring some money to Jerusalem because the saints there are weary and without.

So during Paul's three missionaries, over many years, Paul has interacted with dozens of churches, evangelized, taught up, brought up elders, pretty much nonstop.

And as he travels, he meets other people, other churches that are started and he's helping them understand God's will. But there's this underlying tension that has existed in the early church.

And we read about this in the other epistles as well. Christianity, which came out of the Jewish faith, is it Jewish or Gentile?

[ 3 : 46 ] Right? So this tension now exists within the church. You've got Jews and Gentiles and they're trying to figure out how does this whole thing blend together that we can be one church?

Are we supposed to be more Jewish or are the Jews supposed to be more Gentile? So they're working through this. So this tension exists there.

So Paul sits down to write this book under the power of the Holy Spirit to start explaining exactly what salvation is. Because if they were thinking, you need to be more Gentile, you need to be more Jewish, they've been missing the point this whole time.

So this is what he's addressing. So Paul knows that there's questions that all Christians ask. First one being, what's wrong with the world and what's wrong with me?

What's wrong with the world is the same question that a Jew and a Gentile ask. Number, second question is, being so messed up, how can I ever be made right with God?

[ 5 : 01 ] That is a question that both a Jew and a Gentile argue with, struggle with. And within this text, Paul has shared the good news that, guess what, you can't make it right.

It's only through the gift of the Son through, or the gift of God through the Son, Jesus Christ, that you can be redeemed. And that message is the same for the Jew and the same for the Greek. Then the third question is, now that I am a new man or a new woman in Jesus Christ, how do I change? How do I become more like Jesus? How do I become more like the Apostle Paul? How do I grow in holiness? I used to be messed up, God redeems me, but I still struggle. Why? Why? Why? Here's the thing, that's the same question for the Jew as it is for the Gentile. And this is the question that Paul is answering right now. [6:03] Why is it so hard to change? We just read Paul's words, his struggle. Why do I do the things that I do not want to do? There's this struggle there.

Verse 15, he goes, For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. And then in verse 18, For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

So Paul isn't speaking for Jews. Paul isn't trying to relate specifically to Gentiles. He's relating to us as human beings. Amen?

The fact of the matter is, it doesn't matter if you're a Jew, a Gentile, a non-believer, a mature believer, or a new believer.

Every person who walks the face of the earth, according to Romans 7, knows what is right and wants to change or fights to avoid the change. But there is some confusion because we know that God gave us a law.

[7:11] Both Jews and Gentiles are under the law. The Jew, the Ten Commandments, God's moral laws, ceremonial laws, civic laws, hundreds of them. And the Gentiles, they had their own conscience and their eyes that spoke out against them.

In verse 19 of Romans chapter 1, For what can be known about God is plain to them because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived.

That means they've been understood. You walk in this world and you know it is a world of order. This is a God who created someone who is bigger than myself. And I have to deal with this. Ever since the creation in the world and the things that have been made, so, as Paul says, they are without excuse. So this is where Paul is confronting some of our habits, wrong thinking. We wrongly think, if I want to get closer to God, the Jew says, I need to get closer to God. I need more law. I need more law.

[8:52] Quote is, I feel closest to God on the trail, right? I feel closest to God in the mountain. Whether it's hiking, climbing, ocean paddling, skiing. Creation becomes a spiritual experience.

Didn't they nail it? I think they nailed it. Number two. The wellness culture. Yoga. Breath work. Meditation. Mindfulness. Cold plunges. Semantic healing, right?

We're all into these trendy type of things. Places like core intentions reflect the strong wellness spirituality in Squamish. Did he get it right?

He got it right. All right. I can't believe I'm calling AI he, but it got it right. Number three. It says the other God that gets rules in Squamish is performance and identity.

Adventure culture can become a form of transcendence. If I conquer this mountain, this rope, this race, then I will finally feel whole. The fourth one.

[9:59] Self-improvement spirituality. And I would say this exists within our greater culture. From podcast to self-help, therapy, language, manifestations, energy, and finding your truth.

And then, of course, there's moralism without religion. It's seen in environmentalism, activism, ethical living, veganism, sustainability. Sometimes functioning almost like righteousness systems. If I live rightly enough, I'll feel clean. So how did it do? It's pretty good, right? That is what's known. AI just reads all the news for you and gives you what the reality is, what's going on.

And that is what Paul is addressing here in this passage. If you were with us last week, you know I laid down a foundation for this passage.

And I'll just explain it to you very briefly why this passage matters. How we understand this passage affects how we view the Christian life. This is what sets our expectations and understandings of not only ourselves, but others as well.

[11:10] Second thing I want you to keep in mind. Faithful theologians, pastors, and Christians have long disagreed who Paul is talking about. Is it him before he was saved?

After he was saved? Maybe it's just I as in a Jew. There's many different options. So the reason we bring that up is when we come to a passage like this, we need to approach it with humility.

And I stated there's a warning. We need to make sure we don't force our view onto the text. That we want to take this text, understand it, and then we can draw the truth from it.

So, this morning we struggle. We step into the struggle itself. We're only going to cover verse 14 this morning.

Look at how Paul begins this text. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh.

[12:16] Immediately Paul creates this contrast. The law, which is good, holy, reflecting the character of God. And Paul saying in me, I'm fleshly, I'm weak, I'm broken, corrupted.

Now let me say something important before we move any further. Many people read Romans 6 or Romans 7 in an emotional or experiential kind of way.

They immediately think that's me because we can relate to the text. I feel that. I understand Paul's frustration. That must mean who he's talking about is me.

Right? Whether if you're mature, you think he's talking about a mature Christian. If you think you're a believer, you're a young believer, you're thinking it's me. And if you're just a non-believer but struggle with it, you understand that you start thinking it is me.

But the issue we need to understand here is there is a struggle. And the question is what kind of struggle is this? What is Paul trying to prove?

[13:27] Paul's trying to prove that many sincere believers will spend their whole Christian lives trying to accomplish in the flesh what can only be done through the Spirit.

You see, when we try to do the things of God in the flesh, we end up frustrated, exhausted, defeated, or prideful. But we never get to experience true freedom.

And this is the purpose of Romans 7. It prepares us to feel the full weight of life under the law with no spirit.

You with me? It's life under the law with no spirit. So that when we get to Romans 8, we go, whew, thank God. And we're excited about it.

But like I said, because this text is so misunderstood, I want to go through this text slowly. I'm not saying every verse this slowly. But this morning, I've got three simple points to this passage.

[14:30] The first one, we're going to look at the law is spiritual and what Paul means by that it's spiritual and what are the necessary implications of that. Number two, we're going to look at what does Paul mean when he says, I am of the flesh.

And the third point we're going to look at is, what does it mean to be sold under sin? It's interesting just bringing this up. This is our 50th sermon in Romans.

And I want to repeat something that I hope I remembered to say 50 sermons ago. But my goal through this series is that I want you to understand Romans and I want you to be able to think through these issues on your own.

That's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to exposit God's word so we can know how to rightly apply it to our lives.

So before I say anything more, let's pray. Dear Holy Heavenly Father, we thank you for this word. We thank you for Paul's brutal honesty.

[15:40] We need to hear that. Father, I pray that we would come to truly understand that life without the Spirit is a defeated life.

It's an exhausting life. It is a tiring life. It is a life that has no freedom. Father, I pray that if anybody here is enslaved to the desire to please you through the flesh, to trying to accomplish with the law, what the saints in the Old Testament couldn't do, but for some reason, we often think the law is the road to harmony with you when the road to harmony is through Jesus Christ.

So, Father, as we open this text, I pray that you give my words clarity and give our hearts a clear understanding of what you're saying here.

In your most holy and precious name, amen. So, first point. The law is spiritual. What's interesting is what Paul states at the beginning of this.

He says it's spiritual. He could have described his struggle, his failure, the contradictions of his life, his frustrations, the slavery idea or conflict, but the first thing he does is he begins by defending the law.

[17:18] And this matters because if you've been following Paul's argument through Romans 7, you can understand why people might start blaming the law. Think about what Paul's already said.

The law exposes sin. The law increases transgression. The law, sin even uses the law against us. And we know that the law produces death and it stirs up sinful passions.

So, after hearing all those things, the natural conclusion anyone would have would be, maybe the law is the problem. Maybe the law is the problem.

Paul says, absolutely not. So, when he says, for we know that the law is spiritual, he's saying the problem is not with God's law. It's not with God's standards.

It's not with God's holiness. The law is spiritual. Now, maybe you feel the way I've been feeling all week that I felt a little bit repetitive on this section because we're going to get into certain things.

[ 18 : 22 ] But there's three reasons why Paul is repeating what he's been saying before. Let me give you the three reasons. One, he wants clarity for oral communication. He does not want you to misunderstand what he's saying.

One commentator write, Paul is so repetitive because of the extraordinary complicated character of man and sin. That should resonate with us, right?

Because that's our relationship. It's complicated. Number two, there are shades of difference to Paul's argument. And the third reason, Paul is establishing a logical pattern.

So, Paul is not writing because he's got nothing to say. Paul is writing because he wants us to clearly understand. So, what does Paul mean when he says the law is spiritual?

Does it mean it's mystical? Does it mean it's emotional? Does it mean it's inspirational or symbolic? The answer is no. It's none of those things.

[ 19 : 29 ] What Paul simply means is the law is from God. And because the law is from God, it exists, it belongs to the realm of the spirit.

Okay? That's what he's simply meaning. What he means is it reflects the very character and nature of God himself. For he's already said, the law is holy. It's righteous.

It's good. Why? Because God is holy, righteous, and good. Therefore, the law can never be flawed. The law can never be defective.

The law will never be excessive. The law will never be unfair. And the law perfectly reflects the holiness of God. Okay, you with me on that?

Because here's the implication of that. And this is big. If the law is of the spirit, is of God, that means every problem exposed by the law is a real problem.

[ 20 : 29 ] You with me? Every law that it exposes, the problem exposed by the law is a real problem. Every sin revealed by the law is actual guilt.

And three, every command violated is genuine rebellion. Boom! That's big. The law tells the truth about us.

And that's exactly why people resent it. I'm going to be honest with you. I have never heard, I've just been in Squamish eight years, maybe the doctors here can correct me, but I've never heard of anyone going over to Squamish Hospital and attacking the x-ray machine because it found a break. Right? Or cursing out an MRI machine because it pointed to a tumor. Doesn't happen. The machine did not create the problem.

The law did not create the problem. It reveals the problem. And that's what the law does. The law shines light into places we desperately want to keep dark.

[ 21 : 48 ] And let's be honest. This is why people naturally want to lower God's standard. That's why we want to redefine sin. We want to soften the language.

We want to normalize rebellion. Right? We rename greed as ambition, lust as freedom, pride as confidence, covetousness as success, and rebellion as authenticity.

Why? Because if the law remains truly spiritual, then we are truly guilty. And fallen humanity cannot tolerate that conclusion.

If you don't believe what I'm saying, read social media. If you watch TV or movies, you know how they try to normalize sin all the time.

Now let me just go even a little bit deeper with this. The law not only exposes our outward actions, it exposes our inward corruption.

[ 23 : 01 ] And if you remember earlier when Paul says, you shall not covet, and why did he bring up that commandment? Because he was saying, because coveting happens internally.

Nobody sees it. You can look moral and great on the outside while being incredibly, completely corrupt on the inside.

And suddenly, the law moves beyond behavior and exposes the heart itself. That's why Jesus intensified the law in the Sermon on the Mount. You might say, I haven't committed adultery. Jesus says, what about lust? I have not murdered. What about hatred? So when Paul says that the law is spiritual, this is what he means. It means the law penetrates beneath external performance and exposes the condition of the heart. And honestly, if you consider yourself a religious person, this is what makes you squirm. [ 24 : 09 ] Because the fact is, religion loves external measurement. Religion loves visible righteousness. Religion loves its checklist, right?

That's why legalism is attractive because it creates measurable Christianity. But here's the thing. The law keeps pressing inward. The law exposes our motives. The law keeps uncovering our corruption. The law keeps dismantling self-righteousness. And that is what Paul experienced. Remember? He was a Pharisee. He talks about this in his own testimony. He wasn't an immoral pagan before conversion. He was disciplined, moral, religious, and serious. In fact, he says, outwardly, I was blameless. [ 25 : 08 ] But when the law confronted his heart, everything he thought about himself collapsed. It's true. It's true.

In church, this is one of the most dangerous illusions in Christianity. It's the illusion that external morality equals spiritual life.

You can attend church, know theology, defend doctrine, avoid scandalous sins, maintain respectable behavior, and still remained deeply enslaved internally. Thus, this is why Paul begins with, the law is spiritual. It's not the villain. The law is functioning exactly as God intended.

John Calvin wrote, and I thought this was a brilliant quote, the law requires a celestial and an angelic righteousness in which no spot is to appear.

[ 26 : 17 ] But I am a carnal man who can do nothing but oppose it. And that is exactly where Paul is going.

The law is spiritual and the flesh is powerless to obey it. Which leads directly into the devastating contrast in the center of this verse which brings up point two.

And this is where the problem begins. The real problem is the flesh. The real problem is the flesh. But I am of the flesh.

Now, feel there's this collision, right? Law is spiritual. I am the flesh. This is the crisis. And the problem is not the law. The problem is me. And notice what, who says this?

Like I said before. This is the apostle Paul. This is the man who wrote Romans, planted churches, suffered for God. A man who was caught up into the third heaven and yet he still says, I am fleshly.

[ 27 : 25 ] That statement should humble everyone in this room. One of the clearest signs of spiritual maturity is not growing in self-confidence, but a growing awareness of remaining sin.

Immature believers usually think, hey, I'm doing pretty good. Mature believers increasingly see, apart from Christ, I am far weaker than I realize.

See, Paul is not done denying salvation here. He's exposing the ongoing weakness of the flesh.

Now, when Paul says of the flesh, some of your Bibles interpret that saying is I am carnal.

You guys have it if you're using King James Version or New King James Version or if you remember it from when you were younger, you hear this word carnal. And the old word carnal causes some confusion for many people because today we often use it to describe someone who is worldly, backslidden, or acting sinful.

That's not the point that Paul's trying to make. That word for fleshly means human weakness still affected by the fall.

[ 28 : 47 ] You with me on that? Human weakness still affected by the fall. We are flesh. There's going to be remnants of the fall in us.

And this is a point where Christians have debated this passage for centuries. Some, like Martin Lloyd Jones, argued that this language sounds too strong to describe a mature believer like Paul. And other Reformed theologians argue that Paul is describing the remaining presence of sinful flesh still clinging to the believer.

Here's the point. It doesn't matter where you land. The problem is not the law. The problem is the weakness of fallen humanity apart from the power of the Spirit.

Now notice Paul does not say he is in the flesh. He says he is of the flesh. It's like saying he's related to Adam.

[ 29 : 54 ] He's a part of that line. But that doesn't mean he's in it. This distinction matters because Paul is not excusing sin. He's not denying salvation.

He's simply confessing weakness. And he's simply saying I have the residual effects of being an Adam. And here's the thing.

When Paul says flesh he's not merely talking about the physical body. And if you know church history there's groups that have grown to hate the body. Ah this body has all this flesh.

Like it's just this flesh is the only bad part. And if we can only beat it into submission we'd be okay. But when Paul is talking about the flesh he's talking about fallen human nature or our humanity corrupted by sin and weakened.

That includes our mind, our desires, our will, our affections, and our motives. So it's not just the outward it's the inward to.

[ 31 : 06 ] Everything is touched by sin. So you could beat that flesh into submission all you want but you still have to deal with the internal. You can buy a nice island out in the sound somewhere and live there on your own and say man I'm going to have no sinful people around me.

it's going to be great. It's going to be hell on earth because then you got to deal with your sinful stuff. Right? Right? the flesh is what we are apart from the power of the Holy Spirit.

And here's the danger. The flesh can become incredibly religious. The flesh can learn Bible verses. The flesh can attend church.

The flesh can clean up behavior. The flesh can even use Christian language. The flesh can even become externally moral.

But here's the thing. The flesh cannot produce true holiness. It can manufacture appearance. It can imitate righteousness. It can perform for a season but eventually it will collapse.

[ 32 : 30 ] It will collapse into either pride, self-righteousness, into hidden sin, into exhaustion, or into despair. Because the flesh has no power to transform itself.

Which brings us to the third statement. Sold under sin. For we know that the law is spiritual but I am of the flesh sold under sin.

See Paul is not saying believers are slaves to sin in the exact same sense as before conversion. Remember in Romans 6 we talked about that that we are enslaved to unrighteousness and when God saves us he moves us from this world to this world from death to life.

That's not the point that he's making here. He means that the flesh in and of itself is still completely powerless before sin.

So that flesh that I have here now that God has redeemed me it doesn't mean I get to and we say this all the time now that God saved me by grace I'm sanctified by my works right?

[ 33 : 46 ] I can do these things we just get that into our head thinking if I do these things I will become stronger in Christ no no no you are saved by grace and you live by grace amen the picture that Paul is giving here is that of a slave market that the man is totally captive to sin and lacks the spirit's liberating power the law says be holy the flesh answers back I can't the law says love God with all your heart the flesh says I fail the law says obey perfectly the flesh says who impossible and the flesh keeps collapsing under the weight of the command and this is Paul's entire point because he knows whose his audience is Paul wants to dismantle every illusion of self powered

Christianity he's crushing the fantasy that holiness can be manufactured through discipline alone effort alone rules alone religious performance alone he's basically saying my friends the flesh cannot fix the flesh and honestly this is where many Christians become frustrated because they think the answer is always try harder but eventually the sin returns the same frustrations occur and the same exhaustion returns why because flesh powered Christianity always collapses 100% every time the law is spiritual but the flesh is weak and this is where Paul wants us he wants us to think if holiness depends on me

I am hopeless that's a shocking statement so here is where Romans 7 14 leaves us tells us that the law is spiritual but I am of the flesh Paul is forcing us to face a painful reality the problem is not the law it's not God standard it's not God's commands the problem is in us my flesh is weak my flesh is corrupted my flesh is too broken by sin to produce the righteousness God requires and that means self powered Christianity will always fail the law can command holiness but it can't create it it exposes sin but it cannot conquer it and maybe some of you this morning are feeling this tension

you love

God's word you love all things about Christianity you want to obey Christ but you are painfully aware of your weakness to that I say praise God God because Paul is bringing us to the end of ourselves so that we stop looking inward for strength and begin looking entirely to Christ and this is where Romans 8 is going the answer to the weakness of the flesh is not more flesh powered effort the answer is the spirit of God Romans 8 2 says for the law of the spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death the law is spiritual but our hope is in not ourselves our hope is only found in

Christ let me pray dear holy heavenly father we just give you thanks for the God that you are for the love that you display to us to the abundance of grace and mercy you show through us through our families through our friends through members of our church we thank you for your patience with us we thank you that you are great in dispensing mercy when we deserve justice father these are great and mighty things and we thank you for them I pray just as we move through this sermon series that this would strip away any idea that there's anything that we can accomplish through our flesh that this work is a spiritual work not a work of man if it could be any of our work we could brag we could be proud but by wholly depending on you we are left to our selves who who