

## STRUGGLING WITH SIN

Anyone here this morning who has an occasional problem doing the right thing? Do you ever feel that maybe you would like to get those words back that just passed through your lips? Do you ever wish that you had never tasted alcohol or experimented with an illegal drug? Do you wish you had shown more love to your children, your parents, or your spouse? I know I have such feelings and I have a much longer list of regrets because of my actions than I wish I had. If you struggle as well with a life that has had its share of sinful mistakes, I believe you came to mmmmmmmthe right place this morning. If you don't have any such feelings whatsoever, I want to congratulate you because you're the only person on this planet who has ever in all of history been able to achieve such a level of perfection other than Jesus Himself. But I would also suggest you seek counseling as soon as possible.

Last time we concluded with verse five of Romans chapter seven. In order to be able to understand Romans 7:6, however, we need to first review verse 5. So let's read these two verses together, Romans 7:5,6:

*5 When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced sinful deeds, resulting in death.*

*6 But now we have been released from the law, for we died with Christ, and we are no longer captive to its power. Now **we can really serve God**, not in the old way by obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way, by the Spirit.*

The first two words of verse 6 tell us that we are not *in the flesh* anymore. We are now free from the Law. We have been released from any legal liability to the Law. The Law said, *you are guilty, you die*. So Jesus came and died our death to sin on the cross. Jesus was willing to pay the penalty for our sin. We died with Jesus when we came to accept Him as our Savior. Now the Law has no claim over the believer. The believer has no legal liability any longer to keep the Law. The penalty that we would have had to pay as an unbeliever was taken away by Christ. A believer is no longer a slave to the Law and consequently, through the power of the Holy Spirit, has the ability not to sin.

Verse 6 tells us the unbeliever was held **captive** by the flesh, by its sinful impulses. In this condition he/she was under an obligation to keep all of the Law all by themselves if they wanted to be saved and gain eternal life in Heaven. The unbeliever was held captive, a prisoner, by these things. But the moment he/she came to believe and accept Christ as Savior, they were set free from captivity. We learned in chapter six that once we receive Christ and are saved, we no longer have to sin. Sin is no longer our master. One is set free from the tyranny of sin and the Law. The Law can no longer condemn you and you will no longer have to die alone in sin without any chance of salvation.

Verse six goes on to say that because of this freedom we can now really serve God, not

by the old way of having to keep all of the Law, but in a new way that is much more effective because now we have the power of the Holy Spirit within us to guide and empower us. Our service is no longer relying on keeping a list of rules. It's not just going through some repetitive ritual. It's not a matter of obeying the rules while people are watching us and then doing or thinking something that no one may know about. Salvation plants within you a new nature and that new nature wants to serve God. That new nature comes from deep within your heart and is provided by the Holy Spirit.

We are no longer **bound** to try to obey the Law to please God. We are **now free** to obey the Law because of the power of God, the Holy Spirit, within us. We couldn't obey it before we were saved. We can obey it after we're saved if we submit our will to the will of the Holy Spirit who is now living within us. We are free to serve God rather than ourselves, which is what we did before. If you long to be free, the first step is to surrender your self-will. Perhaps that sounds contradictory to you, but you will find it to be true if you do it. A believer then serves God's Law out of a changed heart and receives the blessings for living such a life. A believer, however, might legitimately raise the question,

*"If we have now been set free to serve the Law, why is it so hard to want to do that sometimes? If we've been transformed, if we've been made to produce good fruit and service, why do we struggle so and do things we know we don't want to do and feel so guilty about after we do them?"*

We might find some help in answering that question in the next seven verses in Romans chapter 7. Before we get into this text, however, let us remind you of the greatest good news ever known.

Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.

If it wasn't for God's love and provision and the willing sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, every human being ever born would be destined for an eternity in Hell. If you find that statement to be contrary to your understanding of what a loving God would do, we can understand that if you are not yet a student of the Bible. When you come to know and understand the Word of God in the Bible, you will no longer feel that way because you will clearly see that it is God's desire for everyone to be saved and go to Heaven for eternity. In fact the Bible says that in no uncertain terms in 2 Peter 3:9:

*The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. **He does not want anyone to perish**, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent.*

Every person in this world lives in rebellion against God's Law. And God being a God of justice must require punishment for such a violation. Would you want to go to Heaven and find the same kind of people there that you find here? Would you want to find the

same anger, hatred, sickness, pain, stress, and misery? If that's what was allowed into Heaven, it wouldn't be Heaven, it would be Hell. We should be grateful to God that He insists on nothing less than perfect living in Heaven. He provides that opportunity for perfection for us through Jesus Christ. First we get a new life here on this earth the moment we believe. Then when we die and are freed from this physical body with its sin nature, because we are one with Christ, we are given a new and perfect body just like the one Jesus has. We are totally free from sin and fit for an eternity of perfect living because of a new physical body that will last forever along with the new Spirit we were given when we came to faith in Christ, that enables us to live without sin. Heaven will be a perfect place because God is perfectly just.

So God sent Jesus into the world to pay the debt that all people owe for their sin; to die the death that all should die; and to bear the sin that all should bear. God has ordained that when a person believes in Jesus and accepts Him and His work on their behalf, their sin is forgiven **forever**. God has also ordained that not only is their sin forgiven, but they are granted the very holy nature of Jesus Christ. They become possessors of the divine nature of Jesus. It is given to the believing sinner and he or she is thus equipped to spend eternity with God. We saw it right at the beginning of the book of Romans and we see it again and again throughout the entire book. Paul began in Romans 1:16,17 by saying:

*For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, **saving everyone who believes**—Jews first and also Gentiles. 17 This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. **This is accomplished from start to finish by faith**. As the Scriptures say, "It is through **faith** that a righteous person has life."*

Now the essential words in the first eight chapters of Romans are the words, **grace** and **faith**. Paul is presenting a salvation that is a gift of God received by faith. This is a very unique message that Paul is presenting because he is presenting it in a Jewish context, in a Jewish culture. These people had been raised with the understanding that you appeal to God and you appease God and you please God by your goodness or by obeying His rules and laws. They believed that you sort of work your way into God's good favor. When Paul came along and preached a salvation that was a free gift which you could not earn, and that it was received not by good works but by faith, and that faith itself was a gift from God, it was very, very hard for the Jews to accept.

You see the Jews believed that the Law showed you how to get and stay holy, and that if you could no longer get holy by the Law, the standard for obtaining holiness, then you've taken away the ability to be holy, to be saved. So all they could imagine was society running amuck doing anything they wanted because the Law was no longer the means for salvation.

By the time Christ began His ministry around A.D. 27, the Jewish rabbis had increased the number of commandments to a total of 613. There were 248 commandments regarding things you **must do** and 365 commandments that you **must not do**. These commandments related to idolatry, lessons from history, blasphemy, temple worship,

sacrifices, priests, vows, agriculture, loans, business, slaves, justice, and relationships.

These rabbis managed to contaminate God's purposes over a period of 1500 years to the same degree that the Christian Church has managed to contaminate Christ's purposes over the last 2000 years. They had this vast number of laws and these laws had all kinds of rabbinical interpretations and variations. The people had law upon law upon law to obey until it was literally an all consuming way of life to try and keep the Law. They actually had to go through life holding a little scroll in their hands so they could refer to it all the time in hopes that they wouldn't make a mistake. You think we have stress in our world? That is exactly why Luke writes the following in Acts 15:10,11:

*Why are you now questioning God's way by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear?  
11 We believe that we are all saved the same way, **by the special favor of the Lord Jesus.**"*

But the Jews were so confused and probably more than a little angry. They knew that the Law had originally been given by God and that God had given the commandments for a reason. So they believed that because God gave the laws they needed to follow them. In fact there was a verse from the Old Testament in the original Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible written by Moses, and it appears in Deuteronomy 27:26:

*Cursed is anyone who does not affirm the terms of this law by obeying them.*

This verse certainly makes it clear that anyone who does not comply with all the commands of the Law will be condemned. To make it even worse Deuteronomy 28:15-22 confirms the previous verse with emphasis. We'll just look here at verses 15-19:

*"But if you refuse to listen to the Lord your God and do not obey all the commands and laws I am giving you today, all these curses will come and overwhelm you:*

*16 You will be cursed in your towns and in the country.*

*17 You will be cursed with baskets empty of fruit, and with kneading bowls empty of bread.*

*18 You will be cursed with few children and barren fields. You will be cursed with infertile herds and flocks.*

*19 You will be cursed wherever you go, both in coming and in going.*

Deuteronomy 28 just keeps going on like this throughout the whole chapter. It just keeps condemning and condemning, and the condemnation works its way through every conceivable activity of life. If they didn't keep all of the Law of God, they would be condemned.

Now let's get back to the book of Romans and as we do, hopefully we now have a little bit of an understanding of why the Jew felt so bound to the Law of God. They felt a very heavy burden. Paul recognizes this burden. Don't forget that Paul was about as fanatical about the Jewish religion as anyone could be before he met Christ on the Damascus road and was converted to Christianity. Look at what he wrote in Galatians 3:8-14:

*What's more, the Scriptures looked forward to this time when God would accept the Gentiles, too, on the basis of their faith. God promised this good news to Abraham long ago when he said, "All nations will be blessed through you."*

*9 And so it is: **All who put their faith in Christ** share the same blessing Abraham received because of his faith.*

*10 But those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under his curse,*

WHY?

*for the Scriptures say, "Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all these commands that are written in God's Book of the Law."*

This simply means that if you think you can get to Heaven on your own by pleasing God and keeping His Law, you've got another think coming because nobody can do that. Therefore you're condemned. There is only one way to Heaven and we see what that is in verse 11 of Galatians 3:

*11 Consequently, it is clear that **no one can ever be right with God by trying to keep the law**. For the Scriptures say, "**It is through faith that a righteous person has life.**"*

Continuing in verses 12-14 we read:

*12 How different from this way of faith is the way of law, which says, "**If you wish to find life by obeying the law, you must obey all of its commands.**"*

*13 But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*

*14 Through the work of Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, and we **CHRISTIANS RECEIVE THE PROMISED HOLY SPIRIT THROUGH FAITH.***

Anyone who is trying to please God by keeping all of His Law is under a curse. Why? Because you cannot keep the Law perfectly. James said it well in James 2:10:

*The person who keeps all of the laws except one is as guilty as the person who has broken all of God's laws.*

Breaking one of God's laws is not like breaking one spoke in a bicycle wheel. You can break one spoke and keep on riding. Breaking just one of God's laws is like breaking a pane of glass. You break it in one spot and the whole thing comes down. So they were all cursed. That is the bondage of the Law because you're trying to do something that's impossible, earn your way to Heaven by good works.

The bondage of the Law is that you are cursed by it because you cannot keep it.

Yet they tried and they tried.

Why did God give them laws they could not keep? Well, we've already learned that God did that to show them how sinful they were and to drive them to a place where they realized they needed a Savior to deliver them from sin and to provide them with the capability of obeying the Law. Paul wrote as we just read in Galatians 3:13:

*But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, **he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing.***

Christ took upon Himself the sin of the whole world. He did this so we might be set free from the curse of the Law. So Paul is saying here, "Look, we're not under the curse of the Law anymore. We're under grace. We're out from under that curse."

So now let's look at Romans 7:7-13, where we'll see that the Law can convict (convince) us of our sin, which is **the very reason God gave the Law in the first place**. In the second place He gave it so that it would be fulfilled, and the Law can be fulfilled by us through the power of the Holy Spirit living in us, as I believe you're probably beginning to understand by what we've learned so far. But we'll really get into that when we get to chapter 8 which discusses the power of the Holy Spirit. Let's begin with Romans 7:7 and to get the flow of what's going on in the verse we'll read verses 5 and 6 as well, Romans 7:5-7:

*When we were controlled by our **old nature**, sinful desires were at work within us, and **the law aroused these evil desires that produced sinful deeds, resulting in death.***

*6 But now **we have been released from the law, for we died with Christ, and we are no longer captive to its power.** Now we can really serve God, not in the old way by obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way, by the Spirit.*

*7 Well then, am I suggesting that the law of God is evil? Of course not! The law is not sinful, but it was **the law that showed me my sin. I would never have known that coveting is wrong if the law had not said, "Do not covet."***

Paul is once again imagining what the Jews might be saying. "Paul, you just told us

*we're dead to the Law and it can't do anything for us, that we're no longer under it's authority. Are you saying that the Law is evil?"*

Paul's reply is that of course the Law of God isn't evil, but it wasn't meant to save us, it was meant to show us what sin is and that we can't keep the Law ourselves.

It was the Jews who had re-interpreted the Law and made it something God never meant it to be. They made it something that was external, something that could be seen by people. They never dealt with the inner thoughts of a person where all the real filth is actually found. They had created a situation where the outside of their lives looked good. The Jews did this in Jesus' day and people all over the world, who call themselves Christians and go to church every Sunday, are doing the exact same thing today. They make themselves look real good on the outside, but on the inside they're not quite so good. Christ commented on this very thing when He was here on earth and we find His words in Luke 11:39:

*Then the Lord said to him, "You Pharisees are so careful to clean the **outside** of the cup and the dish, but **inside** you are still filthy—full of greed and wickedness!"*

When Paul finally understood what the Law of God was saying should be done, not just by his actions but also in the thoughts he was thinking, that it had to do with his lusting, desiring, and wanting what wasn't his, then he knew that all the stuff he was doing on the outside as a Jew amounted to garbage because he was so filled on the inside with selfish thoughts and desires. Now that is what I call an honest evaluation and not many of us are willing to do it or admit it.

You may on occasion say to yourself, *"I gotta get my life straightened out because I notice that I lie, steal, drink too much, and I've got a bad temper. I've just got to get my life right."* Well, that's a commendable goal, but you need to understand the real nature of sin. The truth about sin is that it's not just something you do externally, like robbing a bank. That's the manifestation of sin, it is the result of the thought that began in your mind. Had the person dealt with the thought that lingered in his/her mind, they would not have robbed the bank. It's the same with every other kind of sin.

The only way you will ever clean up the evil desires in your heart is by a transformation by the hand of God. And that's what we've been talking about the last few Sundays.

**Faith in Jesus Christ is the only way to bring about this transformation of the heart because it is the only way that the Holy Spirit of Christ is going to come and live in your heart.** Remember what we said about becoming a totally new creation when you die with Christ and rise with Christ? Just imagine it! If you accept Christ as your Savior, God comes to live inside of you and He will never leave you from that moment on. He will be available to you when you call upon Him to help you not want to sin. He will help

you cast off those thoughts as they begin to form. He will be there to help you do the right thing and to do the next thing right. And to top it all off, you don't have to do anything to have all this because it's a gift of love. God offers you all of this as a gift and all you have to do is reach out and accept the free gift by faith. It actually breaks my heart that there are people who hear this truth and just laugh it off. Imagine doing that with a promise that guarantees eternity with everything you could ever want and much, much more, if you only say and mean it in your heart, *"Yes Lord, I do have these sinful thoughts in my heart and I need Jesus to cleanse me of them."* Twenty words, that's all it takes, and you're in. The choice of course is yours. Listen to what God said to His prophet Samuel in 1 Samuel 16:7:

*But the Lord said to Samuel, "The Lord doesn't make decisions the way you do! People judge by outward appearance, but **the Lord looks at a person's thoughts and intentions.**"*

And then in Luke 16:15 (NIV), Jesus says:

*He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but **God knows your hearts.** What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."*

God gave us His Law to serve as an divine MRI machine, so that we each might look into our hearts and see ourselves as God sees us. But what do so many people do? They look at the divine MRI machine and worship the machine instead of using it for the purpose God provided it. The Law is not to be worshipped. The Law is to be used to recognize that you can't keep the Law on your own, and the only way you're going to wipe that sin from your hearts is through faith in the work of Jesus Christ on your behalf. That's what the Bible tells us, plain and simple. And before a person can be saved, they must be willing to recognize there is something they need to be saved from. Now there are so many people that go through life saying to themselves:

*"I'm not such a bad person and a truly loving God wouldn't send a person like me to Hell. I try to do my very best. I try to do what is right. I obey the laws. I'm a pretty nice person and good people like me don't really go to Hell anyhow. I'm just one of the good folks."*

People really believe that and they live under this illusion, an illusion that truly needs to be changed. Even though you may have people thinking that you have control of your life by the way you act on the outside, and even thinking that you are citizen number one who could even have given Mother Theresa a case of the *"guilties,"* the truth of the matter is that on the inside you're not the same person as you're making people believe you are on the outside.

Now let's go back to Matthew chapter 5 and listen to the words of the greatest preacher who ever lived and see how He preached the message of salvation and how He used it to convince people of their sin. Beginning in Matthew 5:21, and I'll be reading this from the



modern translation, *The Message*, Jesus says:

*“You’re familiar with the command to the ancients, ‘Do not murder.’ I’m telling you that anyone who is so much as **angry** with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother ‘**idiot!**’ and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell ‘**stupid!**’ at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that **words kill**. “This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and **make things right**. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God. “Or say you’re out on the street and an old enemy accosts you. Don’t lose a minute. **Make the first move; make things right** with him. After all, if you leave the first move to him, knowing his track record, you’re likely to end up in court, maybe even jail. If that happens, you won’t get out without a stiff fine. “You know the next commandment pretty well, too: ‘Don’t go to bed with another’s spouse.’ But don’t think you’ve preserved your virtue simply by staying out of bed. **Your heart can be corrupted by lust** even quicker than your body. Those leering looks you think nobody notices—they also corrupt. “Let’s not pretend this is easier than it really is. **If you want to live a morally pure life**, here’s what you have to do: You have to blind your right eye the moment you catch it in a lustful leer. You have to choose to live one-eyed or else be dumped on a moral trash pile. And you have to chop off your right hand the moment you notice it raised threateningly. Better a bloody stump than your entire being discarded for good in the dump. “Remember the Scripture that says, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him do it legally, giving her divorce papers and her legal rights’? Too many of you are using that as a cover for selfishness and whim, **pretending to be righteous just because you are ‘legal.’** Please, **no more pretending**. If you divorce your wife, you’re responsible for making her an adulteress (unless she has already made herself that by sexual promiscuity). And if you marry such a divorced adulteress, you’re automatically an adulterer yourself. You can’t use legal cover to mask a moral failure. “And **don’t say anything you don’t mean**. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. **You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk**, saying, ‘I’ll pray for you,’ and never doing it, or saying, ‘God be with you,’ and not meaning it. **You don’t make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace**. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true.*

The Jews had taken God’s Law and developed an external religion with it. And Jesus is saying that the problem with them is **not that they kill on the outside** but that **they hate on the inside**. The problem with them is not that they commit adultery on the outside but that they commit it in their hearts and minds. Their hearts and minds are full of evil thoughts and this theme continues throughout Matthew 5.

In order for Jesus to convince people of their sin it was necessary for Him to show them that the Law of God is something that touches the inside of a person as well as the outside. On one occasion a rich young man came to see Jesus and asked Him, "What is the one thing I need to do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus reminded the young man of the Ten Commandments. When the young man said sincerely that he had kept them, Jesus felt love for him and went to **the heart of the matter, the young man's heart.** Jesus said to him, "*There is one thing lacking. Go and sell all you possess and give the money to the poor, and you shall have treasure in Heaven. Then come follow me.*" The Bible tells us that the young man went away sad because he had great riches.

His money had first place in his heart and he could not bear to put Jesus in that place of honor.

Does loving God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength sound easy (Luke 10:25-27)? Is doing that an external action? No, it's internal. Love comes from the heart. Let everything you do radiate the love of God. Let everything you do seek to glorify God and to praise Him. You can put all the Law into this one commandment. Now may the Word of God that you've just heard come alive for you and become a part of your behavior forevermore.