



In his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel* Brennan Manning describes an inner battle within that we know all too well, “When I get honest, I admit I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and I get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.”

I've titled my sermon *The Struggle is Real* because I know exactly the struggle Manning describes. Do you ever feel like you are being torn between two moral opposites? On the one hand you want to do the right thing, but on the other you want to do the wrong thing, like Homer Simpson, with a little devil sitting on one shoulder and an angel on the other? So, how do we deal with that? How do we live with our sin? How should we understand it? Why do we constantly struggle with it? And what if we struggle with sin a lot and it becomes a habit? What does God think about that? Those are hard questions many of us have wrestled with. Let's read Romans 7:7-13 and look at what God's Word has to say to us about that issue this morning.

**What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.**

**Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.**

God gave us the law to show us our need for grace.

In these opening six verses Paul explains why God gave us the law (Mosaic Law, Ten Commandments, etc.). God gave us the law to show us our need for grace. Paul is struggling to find a

place where God's law fits into God's purposes. Remember, he was a man who was steeped in Jewish tradition since birth and blamelessly upheld the law through adulthood. Now, Jesus has come and ushered in the new way of the Spirit, so what place in a Christian's life does the law have, if any? Imagine living your entire life around keeping the law, only to find that it leads to death. Like the young business woman who spent her whole career climbing the corporate ladder only to find that the ladder was leaning against the wrong wall. Many Jewish Christians in Rome were at odds over this issue.

From the time God gave Israel the law, well over 1500 years before Romans was written, the people of God believed the way to love God and live for God was to obey and follow the law. Now Paul comes along and says, “Stop living by the law and live by grace.” It was a religious paradigm shift and not everyone was buying it. So, in these verses Paul describes the relationship between the law and sin. He says the law does three things: it reveals sin, it provokes sin, and it condemns sin.

In verse 7 Paul asks a rhetorical question, Is the law sinful? His answer, No. First, the law reveals sin in us (7a). The law exposes sin for what it is. Paul says he would not have even known what sin was if it had not been for the law. The law is not sinful; it is the sin in him that made the law ineffective. Let me illustrate this with a really disgusting example. If you are a little OCD like me you are going to hate this! I read a story recently about how a carpet cleaning company got its business: “In our family carpet cleaning business we offered a special service for removing pet urine odors. To show potential customers their need for the service, I would darken the room and then turn on a powerful black light. The black light caused urine crystals to glow brightly. To the horror of the homeowner every drop and dribble could be seen, not only on the carpet, but usually on walls, drapes, furniture, and even on lamp shades. One homeowner begged me to shut off the light: ‘I can't bear to see anymore. I don't care what it costs. Please clean it up!’ Another woman said, ‘I'll never be comfortable in my home again.’

“The offense was there all the time, but it was invisible until the right light exposed it. It would have been cruel to show customers the extent of their problem and then say, ‘Too bad for you’ and walk away. I brought the light so that they might desperately want my cleaning services.”

Disturbing, right? In the same way, God shines the light of his law on our hearts, not just to make us feel guilty and leave us that way but to show us our need for grace. He has a cleaning service in Jesus Christ.

Paul then goes on to give us his own personal example of how the law revealed his sin. Paul confesses that out of all the Ten Commandments, the one that got him was the last one, "Thou shall not covet." In Paul's mind, as a good Jewish Pharisee, he could keep 9 out of 10 Commandments. He only worshipped the one true God, never made an idol, never misused God's name, kept the Sabbath holy, honored his parents, didn't murder, didn't commit adultery, never stole and never lied. Incredible! But, you know what, he couldn't stop coveting. To covet is to be discontent with what God has given you. It's a craving deep down for more of what you have enough of already. More than simply wanting something, it's an absolute longing, a must-have, a willingness to do anything to get more beauty, wealth, approval or popularity than you have. I don't know what Paul coveted exactly, he doesn't say, but he confesses to the effects of sin producing "every kind of coveting." The law, specifically for Paul the Tenth Commandment, revealed his sin and his need for grace.

Second, in verse 8, Paul says the law provokes sin. In other words, sin is awakened by its exposure to the law. This is an easy one to illustrate. We all get this. What do yellow traffic lights encourage you to do? Speed up or slow down? When you see a door sign that reads: "Private-Do not Enter," what do you want to do? Open the door! Parents, when you tell your children to do something do they ever do the exact opposite? Yes! Why do we do all these things? For no other reason because it's wrong. Like a ferocious tiger in a flimsy wooden cage, the law aggravates sin by constantly poking at it.

True confession, after moving to San Francisco, on the way to the park by our house, I came across a red fire alarm on my street corner. I'm looking at this thing and thinking, "There is no way this works. There's no cover on it. It's exposed and in front of a Middle School. It looks like 100 years old. I'm gonna flip the switch!" So, I did it. It felt good! Then, we all walked to the park and about 5 minutes later, you know what I heard? Sirens! But, I dismissed it as a total coincidence. A few weeks later we walked to the park again and guess what I did? I flipped the switch! And you know what, 5 minutes later the fire department came! This time I couldn't believe it! I was still doubting it. So I texted a CPCer who works for SFFD and asked him if the alarm system works. He wrote, "Most likely it works, you should try it, but if it works and the fire department comes, it's a \$500 fine!" I was horrified! Please don't call me in! That's the provoking power of the law. Not only did I pull the fire alarm once, I did it twice! The problem wasn't the law, it was my own sin.

The law reveals sin, the law provokes sin, and finally, Paul writes in verses 9-11, the law condemns sin. Paul says "he was alive apart from the law." Paul talking about how he had never really seen or understood the true essence of the law with all its demands. And now that he understands the law clearly in light of the gospel, he concludes that the law, specifically the Tenth Commandment, condemned him of sin. He's saying the law ignited his sin and brought an overwhelming conviction of guilt. So, the commandments that were supposed to bring life brought death and condemnation. I remember this so clearly soon after coming to Christ in high school. All of a sudden, some of the things I was doing felt wrong. I didn't know it at the time, but God was convicting me of my sin. And as I slowly began learning the law of God and reading the Bible, and as the Holy Spirit began to work in my life, I found myself suffocating under the weight and struggle with God's standards and my own sin. The law I didn't know before coming to Christ was now condemning the sin in me. That's part of the maturity process. And thankfully, God worked in me and I learned how to live in the Spirit.

Paul's conclusion in verse 12 is the law is good, but I am sinful! Take a criminal for example. Suppose a person is caught red-handed breaking the law. He is arrested, tried, found guilty, and put in prison. He can't blame the law for his imprisonment, can he? The law convicted and sentenced him. No one is to blame except himself and his behavior. In the same way Paul says the law isn't the problem, sin is. In Jewish thinking, the law is holy, righteous and good. Listen to how the Psalms describe the beauty of the law in Psalm 19:7,10, "*The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple....They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.*" The law is good, but we are sinful.

After all this, Paul in verse 13 anticipates another question, "Did that which is good (the law), become death to me? No way!" The law is not the killer, sin is the killer. The law uses sin as its weapon to bring spiritual and moral death. Paul's point is this: if we attempt to live a holy life by trying to keep the law, you'll be frustrated and you'll fail. God gave us the law to show us our need for grace.

Now that Paul has defended the law, he'll move on in verses 14-25 to describe the weakness of the law and the inner conflict we have with our sinful nature.

**We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do**

**not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.**

**So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!**

**So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.**

Our sinful nature causes us to do the very things we hate.

Paul has already argued how the law cannot be responsible for our sin. Now he says the law cannot be responsible for our holiness. That's the weakness of the law. It's incapable of making us more like Christ. We can replace the word "law" with legalism or religion. Here he is saying that it's not the law that causes us to struggle, it's our fallen sinful nature. Our sinful nature causes us to do the very things we hate.

Who is the "I" and the "wretched man" Paul is referring to? Is this Paul before or after he came to Christ? Or is Paul talking about someone else entirely? There are three major ways to interpret this text. It could be Paul was describing his pre-Christian experience. As Paul looks back at his life, he now recognizes that he was under the full weight of the law as an unbeliever. He was a slave to sin. From church history, some of the earliest theologians did not believe Paul was referring to his own struggle with sin. How could a mature believer experience defeat in this way? This is Apostle Paul we are talking about here! Modern scholar Douglas Moo sees Paul as "looking back from his Christian understanding to the situation himself, and other Jews like him living under the law of Moses." Others like Dr. Thomas Schreiner believe this passage is talking about the total defeat of sin in the life of a non-Christian. Truth is, if you are not a Christian, they are right, you have no power to overcome sin and live for God on your own. You're living under the yoke of the law.

From St. Augustine forward, the majority of scholars believe Paul was writing as a mature believer. Paul is describing our Christian experience with sin. Not our normal Christian experience with sin, but to those many occasions in life where we fall into sin and really struggle. Paul is arguing from his own Christian experience in dealing with the power of sin in his own life. They note the change in verb tenses from the past tense to the present tense and say Paul is talking about the here and now. Like Paul, the humble thing for a Christian is to say, "nothing good lives in me!" Non-Christians are completely unaware they are lost and actually think they are wonderful. Only a Christian can say they

delight in God's law and have become a slave of it. Non-Christians don't even know God's law nor do they delight in it. A Christian longs to be delivered from sin and can thank God for Jesus, like Paul. Likewise, all Christians struggle and fight sin but we should refuse to surrender to it. That is what Paul is describing here; a genuine Christian who does the very thing he hates.

John Stott along with Martin Lloyd Jones believe that neither option is wholly satisfactory so they argue for a third way. Stott believes the people Paul is referring to are like Old Testament Christians. They love the law but were not Christian enough to obey it. In other words, they were trying to use the law for sanctification (holiness) and were not relying on the Spirit. In their thinking, Paul is describing an Israelite who is living under the law like many believers before Pentecost, but they lacked the Spirit. Stott writes, "They were born of the Spirit but not indwelt with the Spirit." They were saved, just not living a life of freedom and holiness under the power of the Spirit. You could say they were half-Christians. Some of you, I think, would fall in this category. You love God, come to church, and read the Bible, but you're trying to live the Christian life on your own power and strength. You're trying to keep all the religious rules but don't know how to live in the Spirit. We'll talk about the victorious Christian life the next two Sundays as we get into Romans 8.

Whatever your view, we can all agree that Paul is describing an inner battle with sin. The Christian, the not-yet-Christian, and the half-Christian all have the remaining sinful nature that's prone to evil, fighting for survival. The unbeliever can't keep the law, but neither can the believer! Because sin leads us to do the very things we hate. Paul is saying in these verses something like, "Yes, the ultimate control of sin was broken the moment you placed your faith in Christ and were justified. But, you still live with a sin nature. It's that insidious thing in you that you inherited from Adam that's constantly pushing you towards sin. So, when you see the law, which is good, which is what God wants from us, that sin nature pushes us in the opposite direction." So, the more we seek to do and be good, the more evil within presses upon us. The more holy we become the less holy we feel. The struggle is real, but the law isn't the problem, sin is.

Some of you might be thinking, "But I don't live by the law of Moses! I'm not Jewish, what's this got to do with me?" Most of us are not Jewish, but we all live by standards, by laws we fall short of. How many of you are still keeping **all** your News Year's resolutions? Anyone already given up on their diet or new gym routine? How many of you live by other religious laws? Again, you come to church, read your Bible, tithe, serve, and attend a Bible study. But deep down, if you are honest with yourself, you believe God owes you something because you are doing all those things. That's living under the law. There are so many other laws we live by in other areas of our lives—education, marriage, parenting, and cultural expectations. If you struggle with addiction,

you know this battle better than anyone. Just this week I've been trying to stay away from sweets and was doing great until a wonderful slice of coconut cream pie was presented to me! I caved in like a little school boy! In the face of all this pressure to keep the law, like Paul, we cry out, "Who will rescue me?" The answer Paul says is Jesus Christ. Paul then ends this chapter with the two cries of the human heart, "I'm messed up!" and "Thanks be to God!"

In his book *Newton: On the Christian Life* author Tony Reinke recalls a metaphor John Newton used to illustrate Paul's message: "Imagine a Christian sitting down with a blank page and pen. He begins to write out his perfectly scripted life, explaining how he would love others, how he would structure his prayer life, or how he would [build a beautiful Christian family]. But indwelling sin and Satan crouch at his elbow, disrupting every pen stroke and messing up every word and sentence as our Christian friend tries to write the script.

"At every point in the Christian life [our own flesh] and Satan jab our elbow, and our pen skids across the page as our perfect plan is reduced to scribbles. This is a metaphor of the Christian life with indwelling sin. Yet the biggest problem is that sin is not at our elbow—our sin is in us!"

That's what Paul is talking about. Jesus has rescued us from sin, but the struggle with it remains. If you are not a Christian, I want

you to know that God is holy and perfect. His law and his standard for us is holiness and perfection. How do you measure up to that? If God is holy we might put Mother Teresa and Billy Graham far under him, right? If that is the case, where do you think you land in comparison? Much lower, right? Paul, has already told us in Romans that the only way to become like God, the only way to become holy, is by faith in Jesus Christ. Only Jesus can bridge the divide that separates you from God. Come to him today and he'll give you the power to change and the power to live the life you've always wanted to live.

If you are a follower of Christ, Paul reminds us of two really important things I pray we never forget. One, no one gets so advanced in the Christian life that they no longer see their sin. In fact, the more you become like Christ, the more you will see your sin. The more holy you become, the less holy you feel. Second, no one gets so advanced in the Christian life that they don't struggle with sin. All Christians fall short in many different ways and we all struggle with sin daily. But don't be discouraged and don't give up! Let's all agree with Paul and say together, "I'm messed up!" and "Thanks be to God."

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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