



Last week in Romans 7:1–6 we examined the powerlessness of keeping the law. I put a tape across 2 chairs to represent a hurdle. The hurdle represents the law. In the times of the Bible and still today, people strive to meet this standard in the hope of pleasing God and earning his favor. Paul said in Romans 7:4–5, *“follower of Jesus, you are released from the burden to meet the perfect standard of the law.”* This means that we should not focus our attention on meeting the standard of the Old Testament law, like stepping over this hurdle. That’s living in the “old way.”

So how is the Christian supposed to live? Paul answers that in 7:6, *“serve in the new way of the Spirit.”* Here’s how you do that: 1) Meditate on God’s word and surrender yourself to his on-going transformation. I think this is what Jesus had in mind when he said, *“If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”* (John 15:5. 2) Ask God regularly, “Who should I show love to today? Who do you want me to give some extra grace to today? Who needs some encouragement today?” Living this way, although it will always be in alignment with the character of God (which was part of the law), is more of an adventure than a burden.

Today we will build on this concept. And God’s message will likely stretch all of us as we try to shake off the old way of living according to the law and live in the new way of the Spirit. This is not intuitive! That’s why I’ve titled my sermon, *The Old Way or the New Way*. The choice is ours.

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 (Romans 7:7–13).

You’ll notice Paul’s use of the first person “I.” He’s talking about himself and he uses the past tense, so he’s talking about his life prior to becoming a Christian. Specifically, he’s explaining how the law functioned in his life.

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 major and radical change and not everyone was buying it. So, in these verses, Paul describes his relationship between the law and sin before his conversion. He says the law does three things:

- it reveals sin
- it provokes sin
- it condemns sin

The Law Reveals Sin

In verse 7 Paul asks a rhetorical question, “Is the law sinful?” His answer, “No way!” But it does reveal sin in us. The law exposes sin for what it is. Paul says he wouldn’t have even known what sin was if it hadn’t been for the law. Let me illustrate 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.”

In the same way, God shines the light of his law on our hearts because he wants us to see our need for a Savior. The law reveals

sin. Paul then goes on to give us his own personal example of how the law revealed his sin of coveting: The 10th Commandment.

The Law Provokes Sin

Second, in verse 8, Paul says the law provokes sin. In other words, it's like sin is lying dormant until the law shines on it. Then sin awakens. In Paul's heart it produced "every kind of coveting." This is an interesting one. It's intuitive that the law reveals sin. But why does it provoke sin?

Let me illustrate. Robert Cialdini, an expert on the theory of persuasion, did an experiment at the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona. The park had a problem; tourists were taking 14 tons of petrified wood annually, one little piece at a time. Cialdini wanted to know if the warning signs, which were placed all over the park, discouraged stealing. So he ran an experiment. He placed loose pieces of petrified wood on various trails throughout the forest, right there easy to steal. On some trails signs were posted with the warning not to steal. On other trails no signs were posted at all. The result? The trails with the warning signs had nearly three times more theft than the trails with no signs.

How could this be? Cialdini concluded that the park's warning signs, designed to stop theft, in fact increased the temptation to steal. It planted the idea in their mind, "Oh, I never thought about having my own piece of petrified wood. That would be really nice. It's just one little piece. What's the big deal?"

That's what the law does. After it reveals our sin to us, it also awakens a greater desire to commit the sin.

The Law Condemns Sin

Then in verses 9-11 Paul writes about the third thing the law does to sin: the law condemns sin. In verses 10-11 Paul says,

"the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death ... and put me to death."

This is just what verse 5 says. *"The sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death."* Death = condemnation.

Paul is methodically building his case against the "old way" of living under the law of God. It reveals sin, provokes it, and then condemns it. Still on his mind are the echo's earlier in chapter 7 that the law bore the fruit of death. Due to the complexity of the nuances in this argument, Paul feels the need to clarify, emphatically, in verse 12, that the law itself is not bad. Verse 12 says, *"the law is holy and the commandment is holy, righteous and good."*

The Psalmist describes the beauty of the law in Psalm 19:7: *"The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple."* In verse 13 Paul describes it in a different way by saying that the law is not the killer. Sin is the killer. However, God uses the law as a weapon

to bring spiritual and moral death because God is relentlessly working to get humanity's attention and show us that we need a Savior. If a person tried to live the "old way" they would vainly try to step over the hurdle of the law in their own strength. And that is impossible. A Savior is needed.

Up to this point Paul has defended the holiness of the law while condemning the effects of sin. He moves on in verses 14-25 to build his case further against "the old way" of living by describing the weakness of the law to defeat sin in his own heart. He stays with the first person "I" but now he switches to the present tense. To understand this section properly, keep his point in mind—he's still working to show us that although holy, the law is weak and unable to bring fruit for God.

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? (verses 14-25).

Wow! Paul describes his struggle and defeat to live a holy life with stark honesty here, doesn't he? He says the law is spiritual, the law is good, but I'm unspiritual: I'm a slave to sin; I don't do the things I want to do; I do the very things I don't want to do. It's almost like there are two "me's" inside of him. And he always seems to come out on the wrong side.

This passage is at the center of a big debate. Who is Paul describing here? Himself before he was a Christian? Himself as a new Christian? Himself in the present state, as he was writing this letter to the Romans?

Pre-Christian Experience

There are some who believe this section is describing Paul's pre-Christian experience, just like verses 7-13. His description here is **not** the struggle of a follower of Jesus, but the struggle of an unbeliever living under the law, living the "old way."

They'd point to several things to support their position: How can Paul say he's a slave of sin in v. 14 when back in chapter 6 he

said Christians are no longer slaves of sin? This whole section describes defeat at the hands of sin. But didn't Paul just get done saying in 7:4 that we died to sin and have been raised up with Christ to live a new life? It doesn't make sense! Not only that, in these verses Paul never mentions once the ministry of God's Spirit who indwells us when we become Christians. Back in 7:6 he says the Christian will now live in the "new way of the Spirit." And if you look ahead to chapter 8 the ministry of the Spirit is described in great detail.

Because of this, it would seem that the person being described doesn't know of the amazing power that comes from the Holy Spirit because they're not a Christian yet.

Normal Christian Life

But then there are others who believe Paul is just describing the normal Christian life. The power of sin is so strong that living like the "old way" and the "new way" is filled with lots of failure.

They'd point to several things to support their position: Paul's verb tense switched to the present tense. It's so relatable! All of us can relate to these conflicting urges within us and our failures. All of us know what it feels like to "not do what I want, but do the very thing I hate." This past week "I didn't do what I wanted to do" many times. I stayed up an extra hour reading in bed and hated myself for it in the morning. I grumbled and complained when my puppy messed up the house and hated myself for it when I learned he did it because he was sick. In verse 21 he says "I want to do good." Sounds like a Christian. In verse 22 he says, "In my inner man I delight in God's law." Sounds like a Christian. In verse 24 he describes himself as "wretched." A common way for a struggling Christian to describe himself.

So, which is it? There are very good arguments to be made on both sides of this debate. There are people I greatly respect who'll disagree with me on this. And I might even change my mind someday. But here's where I've come out today.

First of all, I don't believe this passage is intending to differentiate between the experiences of a pre-Christian experience or a normal Christian life. Instead, the focus is on the weakness of the law to change us and transform us into godly people. That's what Paul's been talking about since the beginning of chapter 7. These verses could be describing someone's pre-Christian experience as God is working on their heart.

Our Lead Pastor Mark Mitchell describes how this happened to him before he became a Christian at the age of 17. He says, "before I was a follower of Jesus, I was convicted of my sin; I wanted to do good, but was unable. That led me to seek forgiveness and salvation in Christ." The law revealed his sin to him but left him condemned. The only remedy was salvation through Jesus.

I also believe these verses could be a description of a Christian who's still living under the old way of the law. This would be a

Christian who tries to live their spiritual life according to a list of do's and don'ts. They either haven't discovered or refuse to access the power of the Holy Spirit that's available to them.

Let me illustrate this for you. Years ago in Florida at a Bible study with the boys from my high school youth group, one besetting sin would come up every single week. Guys would ask for prayer to be self-disciplined. They would set accountability goals. They set up a "call when tempted" system. I fully supported them in all of these ideas. I encouraged them to be strong. I shared stories of victory meant to inspire them to "do better." After months and months of this no one was experiencing on-going freedom from this besetting sin. Not one person! The law was revealing their sin, provoking it and condemning them.

I was pretty disappointed. Was I this poor of a leader? Didn't God have the power to bring victory over their sin? As I was praying for them one day I sensed the Spirit say, "Shawn, that one sin is the **only** sin you guys ever talk about. You're letting it dominate everything and you're trying to move ahead by making more and more rules for yourselves." I realized in that moment that our method would never work because we weren't getting to the heart of the issue. This is the exact same method that the Apostle Paul says in Romans 6 and 7 will never work. The law only produces the fruit of death.

The next time my group gathered I told them I had a new approach I wanted to try. We would no longer talk about that one dominating sin. We would not set any personal goals or set up any accountability for that one sin. There was a stir of discomfort. I told them our attempts hadn't worked so what did we have to lose! Instead, we were going to focus on topics Jesus talked about: loving others, serving others, leading people to know God more and meditating on God's word.

I didn't use the words of Romans 7:6 but as I look back I was instructing them to walk in the "new way of the Spirit and not in the old ways of the written code." This approach brought great change to our group. As we filled our minds and hearts with God's word, the Spirit started producing his fruit in us. It was awesome!

When that group was trying to beat their sin with their rules, they were perfectly described in verses 14-24. They were Christians but they weren't accessing the power of the Spirit. Instead, they were a bunch of Christian legalists. They were focused on the law and missing God's plan. They were not living the normal Christian life. They were defeated.

Let me be very clear, I do not believe Paul is describing the "normal" Christian life in these verses. I believe he's using a Greek style of writing called the "historical present" as he describes his past but uses present language. Why? Because the defeat is too extreme and there's no mention of the victory available to the Christian through the Spirit.

Now this doesn't mean that it's easy to walk in the new way of the Spirit. There's still a struggle involved. Paul describes this battle in Galatians 5:16-18 where he says, *"So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law."*

This sounds quite different from the defeated powerless person in Romans 7, doesn't it? There's a conflict here but there's victory for the Christian who walks in the new way of the Spirit. This is what I'd say is the normal Christian life. Meaning this is what God offers to all of his children. It's not easy but the choice for every Christian is, "Am I going to live the old way or the new way?"

After Paul described that struggle, returning to Romans 7:25 he gives us a glimmer of hope. He tells us that this struggle with sin can lead us to living the new way.

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.

Trying to live according to the law can lead a person to see that the law leads to death but deliverance is available through Jesus Christ. But until we learn about the ministry of the Spirit, the struggle continues, and Paul ends the chapter on that note.

So here's the bottom line: when you try to please God and live the Christian life on your own strength, the result will always be misery and defeat. That's the old way. That's rule keeping. That's moralism. Do you want to live like that or do you want to live in the new way of the Spirit?

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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