

Husband Number One: Life Under the Law

Romans 7:1-25 and 8:1-4

August 30th, 2009



In the year 2000, I was given a sabbatical to study the book of Romans. I loaded up my motorhome, along with thirty commentaries and headed to Florida. They were written by some wise men that had spent a lifetime studying or preaching through the book of Romans. I decided I wanted to put into print what I would learn from the first six chapters of Romans. I intended to return with a half of a book on Romans. When I got to Florida and met my son, we camped for several weeks in a motocross park. I had every intention of going through those commentaries and noting all of the things I had borrowed from other men. I sensed the Spirit of the Lord lead me in a new direction, which was to spend as much time as necessary to rightfully exegete Romans 7. Every time I got ready to open one of those books from some of the men that I respect, I would sense this: *don't do that*. So I didn't. For about three and a half weeks, when my son was riding six to eight hours a day, I would comb through chapter 7. I knew the longer I studied, the further away I was getting from what I had been taught, from what my church believed, and from what Christendom, in general, believes about chapter 7. Therefore, nine years later, I stand humbly before you to say that what I will teach is not in the majority view of the Christian Church. It is not what the majority of our Sunday school teachers at HBC believe. It is not what the majority of our congregation believes. As your pastor, I must be faithful to what I believe the Word of

God teaches. But I do not want to be arrogant or prideful. I want to say upfront that I sincerely respect great friends and great men who disagree with me on this passage. However, I do not believe this passage should be a point of division in the Church. But in this chapter, we are facing a most controversial subject in the Christian Church, and I know that I am in the minority view.

Scripture

“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. 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 it is good. So now it is 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 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. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. There is therefore

now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

Life Under Law

We went over the first six verses of chapter 7 in the last lesson, which served as the introduction. Paul reminded the Jews that they have been set free from the Law of Moses and are now in a new, married relationship to Jesus Christ. The law aroused their sinful passions in the old relationship, and it produced death. In the new relationship, a believer does not serve in the old written code of conduct (the law), but in the new life of the Spirit.

What Paul said here was startling. Imagine you are a Jew and have been taught the Law of God from the time you were born. You believed the law had been given to curb man's sin. If you sinned less than you wanted to, you could take the law and earn a right relationship with God. But Paul has told the believer that because of his identification in believer's baptism with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, he has actually died to sin and become alive to God. He is no longer under the law, but he is under grace. The Jew who heard this might have thought if the law was taken away, they would sin more. Paul will teach this is not true. If you want a person to sin less, take him out from under the law and marry him to Christ. Put him under grace and let God put His Spirit within him. Then you will have a man who will live a victorious Christian life. Now as Gentiles, we were not married to the law, but Israel was. So Israel now has a new point of reference, a new relationship with Christ as her husband. In order for her to fully understand this new relationship, Paul reminds Israel of her old husband, husband number one.

Please understand that I believe that verses 7-25 describe the life of a Jew who had been married to the law. This is what life under the law would

have been like. This is what life under the law produced in a person's life. But it is nothing like what a Jewish person would have thought. So, in a theological sense, this would have been earth shaking.

- **Law Produces Sin**

If you have ever been in a second marriage and it is better than the first, you would thank God for husband number two. Many times when someone comes out of a bad marriage, they want to blame the bad marriage on the other spouse and free themselves of the responsibility. So Paul imagines that people are hearing him say that the problem in the first relationship is the law. But Paul is saying the problem is not with the law, it is with the sinner who has been captured by sin. This is why he asked if the law was sin. He said, "*By no means!*" He tells us what God's intention was in marrying Israel to the law. That intention was to show them that they were sinful and needed a Savior. Paul teaches that God gave the law to reveal sin. He says he would not have known sin if it were not for the tenth commandment: "*Thou shalt not covet.*" He did not know what that sin was until he came under that commandment. He isn't saying he didn't know what the act of covetousness was. He isn't talking about sin as an action. He is talking about sin as a power. He would have not known, at his core being, that he was a sinner separated from God, had he not come under the tenth commandment. Can you imagine being a Pharisee, having worked your way through the first nine commandments, believing you had honored all of them, and then get to the tenth and suddenly have sin produce coveting in you? Paul tells us that apart from the law, sin was dead. He was alive once, and then sin came alive and he died. In other words, as a Pharisee living under the law, he was in control of his life. He had it together and was a moral man until he tried not to covet. The more he tried not to covet, the more he wanted to covet. He realized there was something going on inside of him that was taking him into captivity. That is how the law works.

I read about a hotel in Texas that is on the Gulf coast. They were so close to the ocean, they worried there could be a problem when they opened. They posted a sign in all of their rooms that said, "No fishing from the balcony." Have you ever dreamed of a vacation where you could fish from your balcony? You have never even thought about that! When they posted those signs, guess what started happening? There were fishing poles dangling everywhere off of the balcony! Management had a problem, and someone advised them to take the signs down. They did, and within a few months, there were no more people fishing from the balcony.

There are some things you would never even think about doing had someone not told you that you couldn't do it! As long as someone tells you not to do something, you think you are ok. Paul thought he was ok until sin, the power of sin, took the commandment and started producing in him the desire to sin. Paul said he realized that the commandment he believed God had given to bring about life, actually brought about death to him.

- **Man Becomes More Sinful**

Now he is in a dilemma. But the law was not the problem. The problem is sin. He said that God gave the law so that man would come to realize that he is dominated by a principle in his life outside of Christ called the power of sin. God has allowed Israel to come under the law so the law can activate sin, and they can actually become more sinful. That blows my mind! For centuries, people have been thinking that God gave the law to Israel so they wouldn't sin. And Paul said that God gave the law to Israel so that they would actually become more sinful! The reason is because until a man realizes he is a sinner, he will never see his need of Jesus Christ.

Now, I just want to say that if you are one of those people who want to put the Ten Commandments back on the walls of the schools and you want to show the kids that they are sinners and need a Savior, then let's do it. But if you want to do it thinking that putting them on the walls will produce a change in our children's lives, you have missed it. Paul is striving to say

that the law cannot bring about a change in a lost man's life because sin takes advantage of the situation and actually makes a man more sinful.

- **Sold Under Sin**

In verse 13, Paul teaches that sin is what is producing death through what is good. In verse 12, Paul taught that the law, or commandment, is holy, righteous, and good. Verse 14 tells us that the law is spiritual. Paul is laboring to say that your first husband, the law, was not the problem. Paul said the problem is sin. He said, "...for I am of the flesh, sold under sin." This is where we have a problem.

Everything I have said so far is in the majority opinion with most evangelical Christians. But when we get here, this is where the trouble starts. In our English bibles and the Greek text, up until this point, Paul has been using past tense verbs. Any time a person uses past tense, you assume they are not talking about their present state. So it is really easy to see that verses 7-13 talks about Paul when he was a lost Pharisee. But when we come to verse 14, Paul switches from past tense verbs to present tense verbs. From verses 14-23, Paul uses present tense verbs, which immediately causes a person to think on the surface. If he is now talking in present tense, he must be talking about his present condition, right? It makes sense, but it is totally wrong, and I say that with full humility.

❖ **The Debate: Augustine and Pelagius**

You need to understand that the Greek fathers, who carried on the teaching of the apostles for 300 years after they left this earth, all understood these verses to be talking about Paul as an unregenerate Pharisee. I did not know this when I was on my sabbatical. I didn't have this information. The Church started teaching that these verses were talking about Paul as a Christian in the days of Augustine. Augustine was a great man of faith in the fourth century. He was the first man to take the teachings of Paul and articulate what we now call Reformed Doctrine: total depravity, unconditional election, Christ's atoning death on the cross, an

effectual call, and security of a believer. When Augustine began to teach that a man cannot come to Christ outside of the work of the Holy Spirit, there was another man who opposed him named Pelagius. Pelagius taught that man was born like Adam was created, righteous and morally neutral. Man, on his own, without aid of the Holy Spirit, can come to Christ because man, innately, desires good. He desires and loves God, and has the ability to bring himself into a right relationship with Him, without any help from God. Now, we know that is total heresy. Augustine began to debate Pelagius and they had a big counsel meeting with the Church over this doctrine. Up until this point, Augustine believed what the Greek fathers taught on these verses concerning Paul speaking of himself as a lost man. Pelagius debated that Paul, as a lost man, desired the law of God. As a lost man, he wanted to do good and what was right. Augustine had no answer. So Augustine restudied the passage after the debate, and then changed his mind and made Paul a saved man battling with sin. For the next 1600 years, the Church has accepted the view of Augustine, except for a few.

But according to Greek scholars, there is what is called a dramatic or historical present in the Greek language. This is taking a present tense approach to something that has happened in the past, but putting it in the present tense. You make it personal so that it dramatizes, illustrates, or brings to attention what you are trying to convey to the audience.

Paul of Romans 7: Unregenerate Pharisee

- **Slave to Sin**

So when Paul says the law is spiritual, but he is fleshly, sold under sin, he is not saying that as a Christian he is sold under sin. He is taking a present tense method that the Greek's used in their society. He wants you to see what the problem with a lost man is. The problem with the lost man is not the Law of God. The problem is a man that is lost is a slave to sin! He does not have the Spirit of God within him, he is fleshly. Paul says, "*I am of the flesh, sold under sin.*" Look at the language! Paul said in Romans 6 that when you die with Christ, you are set free from sin. You can no longer be a

slave to sin because Christ died to sin once, so you died to sin with Him. You are a slave of righteousness. So how can he now say, *oh yeah, by the way, you cannot be a slave to sin, but I am?*

In the Greek, "*sold under sin*" means sold into slavery. This is continuing what Paul said earlier when he said there was a time when he was in control of his life as a Jew and the law came along and killed him; it enslaved him to sin. I cannot believe the guy that wrote the book of Romans, who talks about the glorious freedom in Christ, was a slave to sin when he wrote it. If he is a Christian and saying that he is a slave to sin, we need to quit trusting this Book, because it just told us a lie. You cannot tell a believer that Paul says he cannot not be a slave to sin anymore, and then turn around and say that Paul was a slave to sin. It doesn't make sense!

- **Doesn't Understand His Actions**

In the next verses, Paul said:

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do the thing I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good."

In other words, Paul is saying, I don't have a clue why I am doing what I don't want to do and not doing what I want to do. I don't understand my actions! If you believe that Paul is a Christian here, how can he give you the key to living a victorious life in the next chapter, but say here that he does not understand? He cannot be writing as a Christian here.

Now, don't get uncomfortable; stick with me here. He is writing as a Jew who had been taught the Law was the way to God. Now he is having this struggle within himself and he cannot keep the law anymore, and he doesn't know what is going on! He is struggling. He is coming to the realization that what he wants to do, he can't do. What he doesn't want to do, he does. Then he suddenly figures this thing out. It is sin. There is a power called sin in him that is taking him into captivity and making him

into a slave of sin. That is why he says if he does what he doesn't want to, then he agrees with the law because the law is supposed to make you realize you are a sinner. It shows you that you do not have the ability to do what you want to do. Paul agreed that the law was good, and it was to bring him to see his sinfulness.

- **Inability to Do Right**

Now, verse 18 is the verse that we cannot get around:

"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."

Paul is in a state where he says he has the desire to do what is right, but he doesn't have the ability to do it. Can a Christian say I have the desire to do what is right, but I don't have the ability to do it? No, absolutely not! Yes, the Bible teaches total depravity. Total depravity means that when Adam sinned, every part of man, physically, spiritually, and psychologically was affected by the fall. But there is a big difference in total depravity and utter depravity. The Bible never teaches utter depravity. It never teaches that man will become as sinful as he could become. Utter depravity teaches that a Pharisee could never even have the desire to want to serve God and that would contradict Scripture.

As he looked back on his life as a Pharisee in Philippians 3, Paul said that when it came to the law, he was blameless. He said he had a zeal for God. In Romans 10, Paul said the nation of Israel had a zeal for God. If he was utterly depraved, he wouldn't have a zeal for God. That doesn't contradict that a sinner doesn't seek or search for God. But the Bible teaches that man, on his own, cannot come to Christ. God has to intervene. This is not a man on a desert island; this is a Jewish Pharisee who was raised to believe that keeping the law would make him right with God. So he desired to do what was right, but he has realized he cannot do it because he doesn't have the ability. If Paul is a Christian here, then I will start teaching what everyone else is teaching. You make a profession of faith when you

are a kid, get saved, and live like the devil if you want, because when you die you will go to Heaven. You cannot help but sin. If the Apostle Paul is saying he doesn't have the ability to do what he wants to do, and cannot keep from doing what he doesn't want to do, then you can blame your sin on God's poor, pitiful salvation.

- **Sin Reigns in Him**

Listen; when you got saved, God put a brand new man in you, and that man does not have the desire to do what he used to want to do. When that thought comes into his mind of doing what is wrong, he has the ability, every time, to stop it because of the power of the Holy Spirit of God that is within him and the new nature he has in Christ! Watch as we go on, because this just becomes clearer to me:

"For I do not do the good 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."

Paul is not excusing himself from the sin, but he is now realizing what the problem is. He said the problem is sin in him. It is taking over his life. He is a sinner and all he wants to do is sin now, yet, he really doesn't want to. But when he doesn't want to sin, he cannot help it. Are you telling me that this is a Christian struggling? This is not a Christian struggling. This is not what you battle, according to Galatians 5, between the spirit and the flesh.

- **Sin Captures His Members**

Paul says in verse 22:

"For I delight in the Law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members."

Paul is saying, as a Pharisee, in his mind, he desires to serve God. He desires to keep the law. But every time he has this good thought, he wants to covet. And then when he tells himself he doesn't want to, he sees a

principle within him. That principle is sin and it brings his members into captivity. To be captured means to be taken prisoner. You are a slave, sold under sin. You do not have the ability to do what you want to do because the sin in you is greater than the law of God in you. Paul is not describing himself as a Christian; he is describing himself as a lost man, a Pharisee.

- **Living in Misery**

He says in the next verse:

"Wretched man that I am!"

Can you imagine trying to do good and the more good you do, the more you realize something is wrong inside and you just can't do what you really want to? This word "*wretched*" means miserable; in misery. If you are under law and trying to redeem yourself by the law, you will live in misery. As a Pharisee, the best of the best, Paul realized he was in misery.

- **Dwells in a Body of Death**

Then he said (in the future tense verb):

"Who would deliver me from this body of death?"

Remember, Romans 6:6 said that if we have been crucified with Christ, the body of sin has been destroyed, or rendered powerless, so that we might not serve sin. Then he said in verse 7 that if you are dead to sin, you are free. A believer in Christ gets freed from the body of sin. He no longer has a body where sin is the dominate principle. If you are a believer, sin still lives in your body, but it is not the dominate principle in your life. The dominate principle is the Holy Spirit of God and the new man you are in Christ. It just makes sense that the body of sin that Paul talks about in Romans 6:6 is the same body of death he talks about in Romans 7:24.

Looking back on his life as a lost man, he is trying to tell the Jews under law that you cannot be saved except through Christ. He wants them to see that the only hope of their deliverance from this body of death, this body

that has sin in it which produces death, which leads farther and farther away from Christ, is Jesus Christ! This is not the body of a believer! I do not have a body where the death principle is the dominate principle of my life. The dominate principle of my life is the Holy Spirit of God.

- **Serving Sin**

At the end of verse 25, Paul tells them that if they stay a Jew under the law, they serve God with their mind and serve sin with their body. I could not stand in front of this church and tell people that they can serve God in their mind, but they can keep serving sin with their body! That is what Paul, the prince of teachers, is teaching, if he is a Christian in this passage. In his mind, he can serve God, but in his flesh, he can go out and party and show up in church on Sunday morning! Everything is ok because the blood of Jesus Christ will cover it all! Do you see why this is dangerous? This teaches people they can sin and blame it on the principle of sin in them! That is a lie...I am very passionate about this because for too many years, churches have let people live in sin in the Church. No one respects the gospel anymore. We have watered the gospel down to teach a man that he can be saved and still live like the world lives. That is not true!

Romans 8: Victorious Life

- **No Condemnation in Christ**

Now, listen to the language of 8:1:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Once you get into Christ and are no longer under the law, you are not condemned to live a life of misery. You are now free to do what you want to do and not to do what you don't want to do!

- **Free from the Power of Sin**

The principle is in the next verse:

"For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death."

How can Paul say in Romans chapter 8 that a believer has been set free from the law of sin and death, but in chapter 7 still be under the principle of sin and death? It is a contradiction.

- **Spirit Fulfills the Law in Us**

The next two verses say:

"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

The person in chapter 8 who is living and walking according to the flesh is not a carnal Christian, he is an unbeliever. If you live your life under the control of sin in your flesh, you are not a believer. Once you become a believer and walk around in the Spirit of God, the Spirit actually starts fulfilling the law in your life! The Holy Spirit of God is not going to make you lawless. He will give you the ability to do what the law could not do, and that is to live a life that brings honor and glory to a holy, righteous, great, and good God!

If you say you are a slave to sin and cannot do what you want to do, you are lost. You do not know God or the power of salvation. Listen; there is no reference to the Holy Spirit of God in Romans 7:1-25. A man who has the Holy Spirit knows the reason he is victorious is because he has the Holy Spirit. All the guy in Romans 7 has for battling the unredeemed flesh is his mind and the law. A believer is not left in that situation. He has the Spirit of God. If we have the Spirit of God within us, let's live like it!

