

December 15/16, 2012

## **The Gospel Story: Who Will Set Me Free?**

*A Study of Romans*

**Romans 7:14-25**

Pastor Bryan Clark

Imagine yourself in a really bad, unhealthy relationship. Some of you have experienced that—maybe it's a marriage; maybe it's a dysfunctional home, something out in the marketplace, a friendship. In the midst of a relationship like that, you have to figure out some way to survive. So you create certain behaviors, certain thought patterns, certain coping skills. It affects how you view yourself, your identity—who you think yourself to be—and it all becomes very unhealthy and very destructive. Then the relationship ends. But the problem is: nobody presses a *clear button*. You don't leave all that behind; you take it with you. You take those behaviors, those thought patterns, those coping skills, that way of viewing yourself, that baggage with you. And often it kind of lies dormant until you enter into another relationship—a relationship that has the possibility of being very healthy and very wonderful except you've drug all this baggage into the relationship. And it begins to create all kinds of unhealthy conflict because it's about thought patterns; it's about how you view yourself; it's about coping skills, and it begins to disintegrate what otherwise could have been a very meaningful relationship.

In the very same way, every single one of us was once married to Adam and that was a very unhealthy, destructive relationship. It was defined by sin and death. It was defined by a relationship cut off from God. Therefore we had to learn how to do life without God in the picture. And so we developed all kinds of coping skills and thought patterns and behaviors and ways of viewing ourselves with shame and guilt and all the struggles that define that relationship. The moment you trusted Christ as Savior, that relationship with Adam died and you remarried into a relationship with Christ but, again, nobody pushes the *clear button*. I'm not suddenly super spiritual, able to put my life on autopilot and live righteously every day. Those old thought patterns, those old coping skills, those old behaviors—the way I lived my life without God in the picture—come with me as baggage, as residue from the first marriage and begin to cause conflict and confusion with a relationship that has the potential of being everything I ever wanted a relationship to be. The question is: Will it always be that way? Do I have to struggle? Is there a way to find the freedom that Jesus promised for me? That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Romans, Chapter 7.

The first half of Romans 7 that we dealt with last week reminded us that at one time we were married to Adam. He was our first husband and that was a relationship of sin and enslavement and death. But the moment we trusted Christ, that relationship ended, freeing me to remarry, to remarry into Christ and all that goes with that. And even though there's this magnificent, what we call positional, truth that's automatically true of me in Christ—I'm justified; I'm reconciled; I'm redeemed; I've been made right—and there's the promise that one day my life will be in perfect alignment with what is theologically true of me today, but until that day there's a struggle. Sometimes we tend to bring the residue from the first relationship into the relationship with Christ. We bring the baggage and we hang on to things like the Law, our legalism, religious rituals—thinking somehow they can set us free, which only creates more conflict. Starting then in verse 14, Paul, I think, is going to seek to convince us again that the Law is not the solution; it is not the way out. More law, more legalism, more religion, more rules will not set us free.

Now this is a very discussed and debated text. All of the debate really centers around the question as to whether or not this section of chapter 7 is describing a believer or an unbeliever. There are godly people on both sides of the issue and there has been for hundreds of years. So it would be good not to be overly dogmatic because there are legitimate arguments on both sides. However, it is very important to remind ourselves: that's not the point of the text. Some people spend hours and hours debating that, but never get to the point. The point of the text, I believe, is Paul's argument to convince us, before he tells us, what *is* the solution which will set us free. We have to ultimately let go of the other options and so to understand that the Law, which could not provide freedom *before* salvation, does not now suddenly have the power to set us free *after* salvation—and to realize there has to be another way, another solution. In order to interpret the text, you do ultimately have to make a decision. Do you think it's talking about a believer or an unbeliever? I think it's talking about a believer. I just can't make sense of the argument that this is in reference to an unbeliever and there are several reasons for that.

One of the reasons would be: in this whole section of Romans he's addressing believers. He keeps calling them brethren. There is one point—and that would be the first half of chapter 7—where he diverts back to a discussion of his relationship with the Law *before* he was a believer. But in that discussion he uses past-tense terms, clearly referring to himself *before* Christ. But starting in verse 14, he moves to present-tense terms, clearly referencing his relationship *now* in Christ, representing his own struggle but I think representing the struggle of many Christians or all Christians. I also think there are just too many statements that are made in this text that simply can't apply to an unbeliever. Given what Paul's already told us is true in Romans, I just can't make that argument work. So I'll try to point those out on the way through the text. If you have a New American Standard, the paragraph heading—the little italics there—probably says: *The Conflict of the Two Natures.* Remembering that that's not inspired—that's put there by an editor—I think that's a very unfortunate title. It actually represents one theological position but many of us think that's not a correct statement. You can't actually have two natures. So it would be best just to maybe eliminate that and let the text speak for itself. In verse 14 it says:

**For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.**

(\*NASB, Romans 7:14)

Now some of your translations have: **For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual.** It's a very unfortunate translation because it confuses, I think, the discussion. The word is not **unspiritual**; the word is *sarx*. It's the Greek word for flesh. The idea is that the Law came from God. The idea of spiritual is the Law has divine origin. It comes from God—we learned that last week—and it's good and it's right and it's noble. But it has never had the capacity to save us; it has never had the capacity to set us free. But we are human; that's what he means by flesh. We talked last week about the fact that the word flesh is used in different ways throughout the New Testament. You can't just attach a definition and think that's going to define the term in every text. Sometimes it just refers to flesh and blood; sometimes it's the fact that I'm human. Sometimes it refers to me and who I was before God was in the picture. In this case, it's referring to the fact that I'm human; I'm flesh and blood and there's certain baggage that goes with that.

The biggest baggage is, as a human, I was born into sin and, because of that, I carry the baggage, the residue of my first marriage with Adam into my relationship with Christ—and that is going to create problems. The second part of that verse affirms that is indeed what he means when he says: **I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.** The word **sold**, that verb is in a perfect tense which means it refers to something from the past but has an ongoing effect into my life in the present. It's also a passive verb which means I didn't sell myself into sin; I was sold into sin, referencing the statement

that I sinned in Adam by virtue of the fact that I am a human. I sinned in the sin of Adam and that has defined my story. It represents a life lived with God not in the picture and all of the coping mechanisms and thought patterns and behaviors that were a part of that. The moment I trusted Christ as Savior I didn't cease to be human; I didn't cease to be me. I've got junk that I carry into the relationship and it continues to cause problems. That's essentially what he's saying there.

**For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, *confessing* that the Law is good.** (Vs. 15-16)

This is one of those statements that just doesn't make sense for an unbeliever. What he's talking about is he has this battle going on. There's that which he wants to do but he doesn't seem to do it. And there are things he doesn't want to do and he finds himself doing those things. And in the midst of all of that, when he looks in the Law—and he's referencing basically God's Word—and when he looks in God's Law as a mirror, he doesn't look in it and resent it. He doesn't say, "This is really a drag, man, that God has all these rules." He says, "This is **good**." That word **good** means: it's right; it's noble; it's beautiful; this is the pathway to life. He looks into the Law and he says, "This is it; this is right; this is the pathway." But he's frustrated with the fact that he doesn't always live that way. And it's creating this tension. Verse 17:

**So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.**

Again, a statement I don't think an unbeliever could possibly make. What he's identifying is: there was an old man that was married to Adam; that man died. There's a new me and the new me is in Christ. Therefore, now there's a difference between who I am in Christ and this positional truth: I'm justified and reconciled and redeemed and that's true and it will be true forever! But there's still this thing in me that personifies sin and sin dwells in me and sin's trying to create all kinds of problems in my life. The word **dwells** there—one of the commentators talked about sin taking up squatter's rights in my life. That's a really good way to understand it. Paul has already told us we're no longer enslaved to sin. Sin's not the boss; sin doesn't run me; I don't have to listen to sin. When I was married to Adam I had no choice. I do have a choice now! But sin still hangs around; it's taken up squatter's rights and it's still trying to be the boss, still trying to run the show, still trying to make a mess of my life. And one of the problems is: my flesh is vulnerable to that because that defined me in my first marriage and so I have a little bit of a tendency to go that way and it feels familiar and I tend to drift back to old patterns.

It's worth noting that when he says that *sin dwells in me*, he's not at that point talking about behavior. Behavior, by its very definition, doesn't dwell in me; it's action. What he's saying is: there's something more than just my behavior; there's a deeper principle and, until you deal with the deeper principle, you're never really going to win the battle. This is why the Law doesn't work; this is why legalism doesn't work; this is why religious rituals don't work. The only thing they have the capacity to do is try to manage external behavior. You're never really going to solve the problem as long as you're just painting over rust. The rust just keeps coming back. You've got to deal with the deeper issue. For those of you that are parents still raising young children, this is really important to understand. It's very easy to get children to conform to certain rules and behaviors but that doesn't mean you've accomplished anything. Until you get to the deeper root issue, until there's been cultivated within your child a passion to do the right thing, all you've done is managed external behaviors. Trust me, that doesn't last. Eventually the rust shows through.

So he's talking about: there's something deeper in me and it's a sin principle and it's a war with me and my flesh is vulnerable to that and that's what's creating this ongoing conflict. Verse 18:

**For I know that nothing good dwells in me,** (vs. 18a)

We would say hyperbole, a bit of an overstatement, because Paul has already said there's lots of good in me because I am now in Christ. So it's interesting, after saying that, he backpedals a little bit and he clarifies what he means by that.

**For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh;** (vs. 18b)

What he's referring to is in that part of me that was married to Adam, in that part of me that operates outside of God, that operates in my own strength, in my own power. In my own flesh I can want to do the right thing; I can try to do the good thing; I can try to do good behaviors. That was true of me before I knew Christ. But the problem is: there is nothing within me that ultimately will give me what I need to live that way. There's just this war against me that is not going to allow that to happen. So I need something more than just my own fortitude, my own strength, my own good intentions. That's the idea of what he's saying there.

**For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.** (vs. 18-20)

Again, a statement I don't think the unbeliever could possibly make. He's saying: that's not me anymore! Something has radically changed, but there's still this war going on; there's still this battle. I don't want to live that way but it seems like I do the things I don't want to do and I don't do the things I should do and all of it's creating this frustration, this misery.

Over the years I've had many people come into my office and visit with me about this very issue. They'll talk about this struggle and often times they'll say, "Pastor Clark, I think I'm probably not even a Christian! What's wrong with me?" And what they're saying is: this struggle—I couldn't possibly be a Christian if I'm experiencing this struggle. And part of what I try to explain is: it's precisely because you're a Christian that you have this struggle. Paul's been very clear. Before I came to Christ, I didn't worry about these things; I didn't have a conviction of sin. I was free in terms of righteousness. I just did my own thing; I was my own god. It isn't until I come to Christ and something deep down has changed, and now I don't want to live that way. I want to do the right thing; I want to be passionate for righteousness. That's not the way I want to live my life but now there's this struggle. It's precisely because something dramatically *has* changed that there's something in me that's unwilling to settle for behavior that isn't right. Well, that's what he's saying. Verse 21:

**I find then the principle that evil is present in me,** (vs. 21a)

Now the word **principle** is actually the Greek word for *law*. We've talked about this before—that when you see the word *law*, it's a little bit like the word *flesh*. It can mean any number of different things. You can't just get a definition and think that defines the word in every context. We do the same thing in English. We talk about: if our kids misbehave, I'm going to lay down the *law*. But then we also have the *law* that the government passes and then we have the *law* of physics and we have the *law* of gravity—and we have all these different ways that we use that term. And in the

same way *law* can mean the *law of Moses*; the law can mean the *entirety of Scripture*; the law can mean a *principle*. In this case it's a principle. It's this principle of sin that dwells within me. I think Paul's making a bit of a play on words. What he's saying is that the reason the Law does not have the power to set you free is because there are too many other laws at play—and those laws are too powerful for just good intentions under the Law to work. So he says: I find with this tension, with this battle going on, that there is this principle, this principle of sin within me. There is this battle going on. God didn't push a *clear button* and suddenly I'm righteous everyday. I've carried this baggage in from the first marriage and this is tough and there's something going on inside of me that's warring against what I really want to do.

**I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.** (vs. 21)

Now I'm guessing that many, if not most, here this morning could identify with what Paul has said. For example, he goes on to say:

**For I joyfully concur with the law of God...** (*The law of God there is His Word, is the Scripture.*) (vs. 22a)

What he's saying is that because something deep inside has changed, I look into the mirror of God's Word and I actually find joy there. This is the life I want; this is the roadmap to life. These are God's commands; these are God's guidelines. What we talked about last week: these are the railroad tracks that set me free. We don't look at that and resent it and think that this life in God is really kind of a bummer because God is so oppressive. So think about this: every week we gather together and we open up God's Word. You're not antagonistic; you're not fighting against this; you're not opposed to this; you're not resenting it. You're here because you want to learn; you want to know. This is the life you want. You believe that with all your heart and you're very sincere in your desire to walk uprightly and to please God and to invest your life in the things that matter. And on Sunday it sounds really good and, "I believe it and I'm in and I'm going to live that way!" And by Wednesday we feel like we're going in the tanker and we think, "What's wrong with me?" I really believe that; I believe it's true; I want to live that way, but sometimes my life doesn't reflect that. Why do I do these things? Why do I think these things? Why do I act that way? Why do these things come out of my mouth? And there's this grief in our heart that says, "Why do I do that? I don't want to be that way!"

That's exactly what Paul's talking about. He says: *we joyfully receive God's Word*; that is what we want. We're very sincere in that but we're frustrated by the fact that our lives don't necessarily reflect that on a daily basis. So he says there is something going on here that's at war with how I really want to live.

**For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,** (vs. 22)

Again, a statement that I don't think could possibly be made of the unbeliever. The **inner man** is a Greek word that's only used a handful of times in the New Testament and always in reference to a believer. I think it's in reference to the *new me* that's married to Christ, that's radically changed.

**...but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.** (vs. 23)

He's saying there are all these laws. There's this law of sin and there's this law of evil and it's waging war in the members of my body, and it's waging war against my mind. What he means by

that is we open up the Scriptures; we look into God's mirror; we identify God's truth and joyfully we choose to believe. And it defines us in these magnificent terms: this is who I am in Christ; I am clothed in the righteousness of God and I'm reconciled and I'm redeemed and I'm forever saved. And we believe that and it's magnificent truth! But, as I go out and live inconsistent with that, then *the law of sin and the law of evil and the members of my body start waging war on my mind*, and start saying: Maybe it's not true; maybe it doesn't really work; maybe it won't really work for me; maybe I can't be set free; maybe I can never live that way; maybe this isn't really true, and it starts to cause me to doubt and to question whether that's true. And then I go back to old definitions of myself with my shame and my guilt and my struggles. "I'm never going to make it and it's not going to work!" So you've got this war going on against your mind—your mind that is seeking to believe God tells the truth. And he says this is the war going on and he just can't seem to find freedom from it. Verse 24:

### **Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?**

**Wretched** does not mean evil; it means *miserable*. It means feeling the pain of this struggle; it's miserable. It's a frustrating way to live and he asks the question: **Who will set me free?** Does it have to be this way? Couldn't there be a better way?

At this point, I think, in verse 25 Paul just can't contain himself. He intended to discuss the solution in Chapter 8 but he has to say—it just comes out of him:

### **Thanks be to God (who has made a way out) through Jesus Christ our Lord!**

Again, a statement that could not be made by an unbeliever; it's clearly somebody that gets it. He is saying, "You don't have to live this way! There is a way out and God has made a way out and the way is made possible through Jesus Christ." This last part of the verse, then, says:

### **So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.** (vs. 25b)

Now there are those who take the position that this is describing an unbeliever and they would say: at the first part of verse 25 it reaches the crescendo that they finally get it and they come to Christ. But then they're really confused as to why he goes back to the struggle at the last half, the second half of verse 25. As a matter of fact that second half of verse 25 so messes with their argument that some historically have pulled that out of the text and stuck it somewhere else in the text because they don't know what else to do with it. But you can't do that; there's no justification for that. The structure of the text itself would say that's not the discussion here.

I think what he's saying is he's working his way up, talking about the struggle with the believer; he reaches this point and says, "There is a solution!" But then he comes back and summarizes the point of chapter 7. So what is the point of chapter 7? First of all: the point of chapter 7 is *not* to make you feel better if you struggle everyday. Over the years there have been way too many Christians that feel this misery and feel this struggle everyday of their Christian life and they go to Romans 7 and they say, "Well, I'm in good company! I mean Paul struggled and that's the way it was for Paul and so that's the way it's going to be for me. I guess that's just the way it is," and they actually use the text to basically lock themselves into this struggle for a lifetime. I would suggest to you: that is a gross misunderstanding of Romans 7. As a matter of fact, that's the last thing Paul wants for you. What Paul is doing before he gets to the solution—the way out—which is Chapter 8, is he is convincing us that we need to let go of that which hasn't worked. The Law simply does not

have the capacity to set me free. It didn't have that capacity *before* salvation which is the first half of the chapter, so it doesn't suddenly gain that capacity *after* salvation. The Law is good and it's right and it's holy but it was never a means to salvation. It never had the power to set me free. If anything, it just makes the situation worse.

And so he's wanting, out of chapter 7, for us to conclude that it won't set me free, which causes us to ask the question, "Then who will set me free?" Now normally, at that point I would say, "See ya next week..." but we're not going to pick up chapter 8 until mid-January. That seems a little abusive. (laughter) So I'm going to tell you: the solution in chapter 8 is: the Spirit of Jesus. The question is a very important one. It doesn't say, "*What* will set me free?" That would be the Law. It's "*Who* will set me free?" Basically God has provided through Jesus Christ His very Person, His very Spirit, to actually live in me, to give me what I need to live in a way I couldn't possibly live myself. It takes more than good intentions; it takes more than *want to*; it takes more than sincerity. Apart from the very power—the presence of God in me—I'm never going to get there. But we're never really going to surrender to that until we let go of the Law, until we let go of our legalism, until we let go of religion and its rituals, and embrace the solution that God offers.

We'll talk more about what that means in chapter 8. In the meantime, since we have a little break till mid-January, I want to encourage you to think about a couple of things. Over the last several weeks we have covered a lot of content. Romans is very complex. I would suggest that you go back and review and maybe try to pick the three or four truths that you thought were most impactful, were most helpful, that were most eye-opening. Think about what those are—maybe pull those out—write them in a journal or on a card. Put them somewhere, where everyday you think about them and you meditate on them and you think about: what's the implication to life. Let's get these things really in our heads before we continue on.

Second of all, if you identify with the struggle in chapter 7—which I assume is probably all of us—part of what you have wrestle with is: whatever we're doing, it's not working. And you have to look at that and you have to assess that and you have to prepare your heart that, when we talk about the Spirit of God in chapter 8, you have to surrender to that. You have to let whatever else isn't working go, and realize: I have to surrender and humble myself to the power of the Spirit in order to experience this freedom. So let's get our hearts ready for that.

And lastly—I mentioned a couple of weeks ago—if you've never followed your decision to trust Christ as Savior with the step of obedience of Baptism, I would encourage you to do that. We've set the date: February 9th and 10th. Over the last several years we've done our Baptism services on Sunday evening, but this time we're going to do it in the weekend services and we're going to do it as part of the celebration of what we're studying in Romans: that these are the faces; these are the lives; these are the people who have been radically changed by the power of Jesus. Those services will be awesome! If you've trusted Christ as Savior but never been baptized, I would encourage you to take that step of obedience. We can take about ten more people, so we need you to just call the church office and say, "I want to be baptized," and we'll walk you through the steps from there. But I would really encourage you to take that step as we celebrate the magnificent truth of Jesus which sets us free

*Father, we're thankful this morning that you have not left us alone to struggle. Lord, we feel the baggage from our marriage to Adam; we feel it everyday. We know there's a war going on and, Lord, with the best of intentions we try to manage our behaviors and fix things, often for all the right reasons. Lord, help us to be honest and face the truth that it just isn't working. Lord, help us*

*to open up our hearts and minds to believe the truth and to ultimately surrender our lives to the Spirit of Jesus within us, to find that freedom that our souls so long for. Lord, I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.*

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## **The Gospel Story: Who Will Set Me Free?**

*A Study of Romans*

Romans 7:14-25

Pastor Bryan Clark

### **Opening Discussion**

1. How have bad experiences in the past created patterns of thinking and behaving that creep into your life in the present?
2. Do you ever feel like there is a war raging in your life between what you want to do and what you actually end up doing? Why is that?
3. Do you ever engage in thinking or behaviors that might be motivated by a desire to beat the sinful monster within into submission? Does this work? Do you think this is the route to the joyful Christian life? Why or why not?

### **Bible Study**

1. Review Romans 7:1-13. Notice the shift from the past tense in 7:1-13 and the present tense in 7:14-25. Read Romans 7:14-25. See if you can identify all the statements that seem to be inconsistent with a view that this text is referring to an unregenerate person. What are some things Paul has said about an unregenerate person in Romans 6?
2. Is the point of this text to demonstrate that the Christian life will always be a miserable struggle or to make the case that the law does not have the power to set us free? If we identify with the struggle in the text should we draw comfort in knowing we're not the only ones who struggle like this or should we focus on what the text says about why we are struggling like this? In other words, is this a text to affirm that we all struggle so hang in there or a text to open our eyes to what isn't working so we are motivated to pursue what will work?
3. Compare Galatians 2:20 and I Corinthians 15:10 with Romans 7:14-20. As a believer, what is the difference between who I am in Christ and the "sin dwelling in me?" How does our first marriage to Adam create thinking, behaviors and habits that we drag into our second marriage with Christ?

