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SERIES: The Gospel Is
MESSAGE: Power in the Struggle
PASSAGE: Romans 7:7-25
SPEAKER: Ryan Harmon

Have you ever found yourself asking this question? "If I have been justified by faith, if I've been freed from the reign of sin and death, if I've been ushered into a brand new life with Jesus, then why do I struggle? Why do I struggle to live out what is true of me in Christ?"

Do you ever ask that question? I have. We just sang about it, prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love. I've walked through that struggle. I walked through it this week and I'm quite confident you have as well. And so this morning, here's an encouragement: you're in good company. Because the apostle Paul struggled as well. That's what we're going to look at this morning. And I believe by looking at the struggle that he himself walked through, that he describes for us in Romans 7, we can gain both insight and encouragement on how to struggle well. So open your Bibles with me to Romans chapter 7 as we continue our study of the gospel in Romans. Romans chapter 7. We'll be in verses 7 to the end of the chapter.

Now, last week, we were reminded that because we have been united to Christ, we therefore have been set free from old obligations. We are no longer under obligation to the law. Set free from old obligations and set free to step into a new life, to serve in the newness of the Spirit. The gospel is union with Christ. We've been joined together with him.

Now, as Paul continues in chapter 7, there are two main purposes that he is going to try to convey to us as we continue. The first is Paul wants to make it abundantly clear that even though we are no longer under obligation to the law, he's not saying that the law is bad. He's quite eager to uphold the goodness of the law. But, and this leads to his second purpose. He also wants to make it abundantly clear that as we seek to live out this new life, the law is powerless to help us live it. The law can't lead us forward in faith. We need something more. We need something with more power. We need help and the law can't provide it.

In order to bring out those two purposes, Paul is going to give us a very personal account of his own struggle. And I think through it, we can gain a lot of encouragement and a lot of insight. So he begins by addressing this reality of the law, that it is good, but we're also free from it. And that raises a question. Verse 7, he says:

7 What shall we say then? Is the law sin?

Now you can hear behind that question the accusation that was coming towards Paul: because he's saying we are free from it, people were asking the question, does that mean it's bad? Is the law sin, therefore? So what say you, Paul? Well, he continues in the end of verse 7. He says, emphatically:

7 May it never be!

Don't even think about it. Some of your translations might say, "God forbid." Don't even think about it.



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7 May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the law; for I would not have known about coveting if the law had not said, "you shall not covet."

See, the law isn't sin. It is just the opposite. The law revealed an exposed sin. That's what Paul experienced, and he begins to give us his own account. He said, I wouldn't have come to know sin except through the law.

Now, we talked last week about how the law, Paul said, aroused sinful passions. We talked about how when we are told what not to do—often because we are people that are prone to rebellion, when we're told what not to do—we want to do it all the more. It stirs up a desire. That's just what Paul described here. When God said in the last of the Ten Commandments, "you shall not covet," Paul became very familiar with coveting. Started to see it everywhere. Started to understand how often he covets, and what coveting truly is. He wouldn't have known sin, he said, except through the law. So that's the beginning of his personal account.

Now, as we move forward, I want to talk about the challenges of understanding this personal account of Paul, because as I studied this week, I will just tell you, of all the chapters in the Bible that I have ever studied, I've never found one that is more hotly debated than Romans chapter 7. Romans chapter 7 is a chapter that is interpreted very differently by very good, very godly, Jesus-loving people. People that would call themselves wonderful friends disagree on this chapter.

Now, I'm not going to get into all the details, but I do want to say from the outset that if you are interested in that, you certainly can dig in and you can look at all the different interpretations. The question that ultimately is the one that is asked and widely debated is this: when Paul says "I," when he uses that personal pronoun, who is he referring to? Now I know you might be thinking, man, these theologians. They just make everything so complicated. He said "I," he's talking about himself. And I think that's probably right.

But there are reasons to think he may be alluding at times to Adam. He may be alluding at times to Israel's situation while they were under the law. But I think the best interpretation, the best way to understand this, is to take it at face value. This is Paul giving us his own personal experience, but there's still a question—this is where a lot of the debate takes place: is this Paul describing his experience before he was saved or after he was saved? Is this Paul talking about life before Jesus or after Jesus?

Now, I am not a biblical scholar. I've studied this a lot, but I can just tell you people that I greatly admire disagree on this topic. But here this morning as we dig into this text, we don't have the luxury of saying, "oh, we just aren't sure." We have to take a stand. And so as we move forward, I'm gonna humbly offer up to you, acknowledging that there are people who are godly people that disagree, going to humbly offer up that I believe the best way to understand Romans 7 is to see this as Paul, the believer, giving us his personal account. So as we move forward, we're going to understand that this is Paul, redeemed Paul, talking about the struggle to live out that which is true of him and of anyone who is in Christ. Because of that, I think for all of us who are in Christ, this can be a very helpful text, can help us understand some of the challenge of living out our faith.

So again, summary: is the law sin? No, the law is not sin. The law revealed and exposed sin. But that leads to another question: "if the law isn't sin, why did we need to be freed from it?" So Paul helps us understand a little bit more in verse 8. He says:

8 But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the law, sin is dead.



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What was the problem? Why did we need to be freed from obligation to the law? The problem is sin. The law is not the problem. Sin is the problem. Sin saw in the law an opportunity and seized it to produce that which it seeks to produce, to produce more and more sin. The imagery is as if sin saw the law and saw in the law a great resource from which it could start to produce an abundance of goods, an abundance of produce, of crop, let's say. And so it set up shop. It built a production facility right next to the law in order to produce its deadly good, sin and the death, that it leads to.

In Nebraska, we are the second-most leading producer of ethanol in the country, second only to Iowa. Now, we're second because we also are second only to Iowa in terms of how much corn we have. Iowa has more corn. The corn is not as good, but it has more corn, okay? Now, why are there so many ethanol plants in Nebraska? Because we have corn. And where there is corn, there is opportunity. And so ethanol plants set up shop to begin to produce ethanol from the resource that corn is.

And in much the same way, sin looked at the law and saw it as our resource from which it could produce an abundance of sin. Now, if we as a state stopped producing corn, how many ethanol plants would we have? They would soon all go away. Where there is no corn, there is no means of production. There is no resource from which you can produce ethanol. And so in much the same way, God, turned the tables on sin. When he turned the page from the old covenant to the new covenant, he set aside the law. We are no longer under obligation to the law. God's removed the resource that sin had taken advantage of.

Now, as we continue, Paul is, essentially, in verses 9 and 11, he's gonna repeat what he's already described. He says in verse 9:

9 I was once alive apart from the law;

And I'm not going to go into it, but that would be one place where some interpreters would say, ah, that seems to be that seems to be referring to Adam there. Only Adam was ever alive apart from the law. But I think the best way to understand this is to understand that Paul is saying, before he understood the full of the law, he thought he was doing pretty good. Not that he was spiritually alive, but he thought, I'm doing pretty well.

9 but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; 10 and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; 11 for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me [that's what sin does] and through it killed me.

Sin seized. It hijacked the law that was intended to be good, that was to result in life, and in turn brought about sin and death. So again, returning to the question that was first asked in verse 7, is the law sin? Not at all. Rather, Paul says in verse 12:

12 So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Holy and righteous and good. Paul wants to make it abundantly clear, while he may be accused of demeaning the law, that is not at all what he was doing. The law, the commandment, is holy and righteous and good, but it was seized by sin. It was used by sin to produce more sin. The law was co-opted by sin, and ultimately, that led to a condemnation of death for all people. For all people.

Now as Paul continues in verse 13, he asks one last question:

13 Therefore, did that which is good become a cause of death for me?



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So here's the logic of that question. Since sin leads to death, and since sin used the law to bring about death, is the law ultimately the cause of death? On our death certificate, when it lists the cause of death, would right there in that space, would it say the law? That's the question. Paul, again, answers it in the strongest possible terms, and then, again, tells us his own experience. Verse 13, end of it:

13 May it never be! [There it is again. May it never be.] Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

Cause of death. It's not the law. The cause of death is sin. Sin is the orchestrator. It is the cause of death. And what God did is in giving the law, he exposed how truly horrific, how utterly sinful, sin actually is.

See, sin's method, how it went about its work, how it still seeks to go about its work, reveals just how wicked it is, just how viable it is, just how diabolical sin is. Sin took that which was intended for good, and twisted it and contorted it, made it become a producer of evil. That's what sin does, it inverts, contorts. It ruins that which God intended to be good.

So in these verses, Paul has been seeking to absolve the law, to clear it of any wrongdoing. The law was not the problem, sin is the problem because sin always distorts God's purposes. And it did just that with the law. So before we move on to verse 14, which starts a slightly different section, let's summarize what Paul has said, and let's affirm it with him. The law is good, but the law cannot save. It's never what it was intended to do. Sin leads us to use the law in such a way, and that leads us to our second point. The law is good, but it was used by sin, hijacked by sin.

That leads to the last point. Therefore, therefore the law, while good, cannot free us to live our new life in Christ. See, in Christ, God has turned from the old covenant under the law to the new covenant in Christ. We have been set free from the obligation. We are no longer under the reign of sin and death, but that still raises the question that we opened with. Why then do we struggle? Why do we struggle? Now, as Paul continues in these next 11 verses, he is gonna walk through the depths of why we struggle and offer us a word of hope. So beginning in verse 14, he says:

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

Now, I believe this verse is the key to understanding our struggle and to understanding the rest of the chapter, so we need to talk about it in detail for a few moments. I believe the heart of this struggle, the heart of the tension that we all feel, can be found in these two words: spiritual and flesh.

Spiritual and flesh. That explains the struggle that we find ourselves in. He said, we know that the law is spiritual. To say that the law is spiritual is to say that it is from God. It is good because it is from God. He already said, the law is holy and righteous and good. The law is spiritual, but he continued, but I am of flesh.

So what does that mean? Flesh is a word that Paul uses often, and there are two ways that he uses that word. The Greek word "sarx," probably heard it before. Now, one way that Paul used it, and it's a very common usage for Paul, is that the flesh describes that which is opposed to God, that which is in rebellion. That's why we said, formerly we were in the flesh. We were living according to the ways of the world. The only way we could live. That's one meaning of flesh. One understanding of flesh.



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There's a second way to understand flesh that I think is the key to understanding this passage, and it just means human. Flesh and bones. We're meat. We are meat, we are merely human. That means that we have incapacities because we are merely human. That means that we are not purely spiritual, like the law is purely spiritual. We are human beings, flesh and bone, living, walking around in mortal bodies. We are not only spiritual. If we were, there would not be struggle.

But we aren't only spiritual. We have spiritual realities to us. We're spiritual beings, yes. We are also physical beings, embodied. That's the biblical understanding of what we are as human beings. So what this means is that while we remain in the body, Paul said, he is of flesh, it means that we are fleshly. We're walking around in unredeemed bodies. We have limitations. We have incapacities, and sometimes we feel, and we are, divided people, because God has done something new, in redeeming us. We have been made spiritually brand new. We are new creations. But these new creations, we walk around in bodies that are still decaying, that are still wasting away, that are mortal.

Now, we await the day that that will no longer be the case when Jesus will come back and our bodies will be transformed, will be made new, glorified just as Jesus' body is—a resurrected, glorified body. We long for that day, but we aren't there yet, and therein lies the struggle. There lies the struggle.

Just last week, I was talking with a couple who was just going through a number of health ordeals, and it brought to mind what Paul says in 2 Corinthians. He says, though the outer man, our bodies, are wasting away, our inner man, our spiritual reality, our spiritual life, is being renewed day by day. We're a little bit like—don't want to take it too far—a little bit like cell phones. That have the brand new operating system, but the hardware is ancient. We await the day that all of it will be made brand new. So while we no longer live in the flesh, according to sin, we remain of the flesh. We are fleshly people. That means we have limitations. Our bodies have not yet been redeemed, and that means there is a struggle as we try to live out that which is true of us in Jesus Christ.

Now, with that in mind, Paul continues in verse 15. He says:

15 For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I'm doing the very thing I hate. 16 But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the law, confessing that the law is good.

There's the tension laid out. That's the struggle. Paul, as a born again, redeemed, regenerated follower of Jesus Christ is confessing that because of his frail humanity, because of his fleshliness, he is not always able to do that which he desires to do. Says he agrees with the law, but then when he seeks to do it, there's resistance. There is an obstacle. He's not always primed, not always ready to do it. There is something else in him that is creating a struggle.

Now that should sound incredibly familiar to you and I, because that is what it looks like to live out the Christian life. And because of that, we just want to acknowledge it as a reality. We don't want to allow it to be something that induces shame. Paul struggled.

Now, the other thing that we cannot do is we can't allow that to become an excuse to say, ah, that's just the way it's going to be forever. This is a statement of reality. This is a clear presentation of the reality of our condition as humans walking around in mortal bodies as we have something new, stirred up, and living in us. It's the reality of our condition. This is what it means to be human for now. It's not an excuse, but it is a reality.

So he continues in verse 17. He says:



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17 So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh;

I think he's being a little hyperbolic there. He's speaking extremely in order to help us understand the struggle.

18 For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me [I want to do it], but the doing of the good is not. 19 For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. 20 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.

So what's he saying? Let's remind ourselves again of what is true. We are, we have been in Christ, freed from sin. We are no longer under the dominion of sin. We are no longer in bondage to sin. We're no longer under the condemnation of sin. All that is true.

But what Paul is saying here in verses 17 to 20 is that while we remain in the flesh, while we walk around in these feeble mortal bodies, there are still inclinations. There's still habits that are formed. There is still this sin dwelling in our members that are inclined to do wrong and are at conflict, in conflict with what we deeply want because we are people who have been given the Holy Spirit. We still are inhabited in a sense by sinful tendencies.

Perhaps an illustration will help us understand this. And I'm going to pick a situation that's quite normal, but also a little extreme, not something that all of us struggle with, because I think in pointing out the extreme condition, it'll help us understand the condition in general.

So imagine, that you have a friend who is an alcoholic. They have been struggling with, they have been abusing alcohol for 30 years. And then, suddenly, they are saved. God comes in. Moves them from spiritual death to spiritual life. They are made alive to God. He puts his Holy Spirit in them. He begins to renew their mind, helps them have different desires. It's an amazing thing. Now, in that moment, here's what I believe about God. I believe that God absolutely can free them 100% from that addiction. I believe God can do that.

But I also believe from experience that he often does not do that immediately. Often, that person, our friend, the alcoholic, although they now have a brand new desire awakened within them because of the Holy Spirit—to live a life of sobriety, to no longer abuse their body and abuse alcohol—that desire is in them, but they still have inclinations towards their old habits. Addiction is a very complicated thing. They even have chemical addictions, a chemical reality that makes them susceptible to it. And so it may be that as they're driving home from church, and they just got done worshipping God, they drive by a bar they used to go to. It may be that their body just automatically starts to turn into that bar, because it's ingrained.

Now, what do I believe about God? I believe that in Christ, through his power, that person can increasingly live in greater and greater freedom. But I do believe that along the way there will be resistance. And that's what the struggle is all about. The sin, Paul says, that dwells in me, dwells in me because we are awaiting the fullness of our redemption. And until that day, we are not hopeless in this struggle, but we do need to acknowledge the reality of the struggle.

So we struggle. We fight for what is good. We seek after that which is true of us in Christ. Now before we get on to a few implications, let's finish the chapter here, verse 21. Paul says:

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



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Again, just a description of the struggle. Evil's present, but I want to do good. That's why there's tension. That's why there's struggle. Verse 22:

22 For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,

Now, again, I think this verse is strong evidence that this is redeemed Paul. Only someone who has been given the Spirit of God, been made alive to him, can joyfully concur with what he says. He joyfully concurs, he says, in the inner man—that is spiritually, Paul has been made alive. But, Verse 23:

23 but I see a different law in the members of my body [the outer man], waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.

Members again, just refers to the body. Graphic language here, there is a war. We have been freed from sin, but sin is not going to give up the fight. It's still going to try to bring us under its awful, horrific control. Now, ultimately, we believe we are in Christ, therefore, he will finish the work. Sin cannot bring us back into its camp, but there is still a struggle. There is still a struggle because of the sin which is in my members.

Now, you can hear in Paul the frustration, can't you? Seems like it's been building. It's been welling up throughout this entire chapter, calling it a war. This is a conflict, and he's weary of it. He longs to be someone that could just, with full integrity, without any resistance, just constantly live in a state where he is constantly serving in the newness of the Spirit without any resistance, with no obstacles. So all of that wells up and this cry, this exclamation that I'm sure all of us in our spirit have said to ourselves, cried out to God. Verse 24:

24 Wretched man that I am!

Now, wretched doesn't mean condemned, but it does mean desperate. It does mean desirous that it would be different. It does mean, I long for the day that there is no resistance in my pursuit of, my love of, my service to, God. Oh wretched man that I am. Still stuck with the lingering effects of sin. Paul longs to be a person that can say, I love God completely, 100%, with all my heart and mind and soul and even my strength, my body. I long for that day.

So then he continues, he says:

24 Who will set me free from the body of this death?

When will I finally be free? Now, ultimately, Paul is looking forward into the future. He's looking forward to that moment that Jesus returns, that we ultimately are set free—not that our body is bad, but it is not yet redeemed, it is not yet restored, it is not yet glorified. He's longing for that day. Longing for that day where he is fully like Jesus, resurrected just as Jesus is.

But as we await that day, there is still reason for hope. There is a present reason for hope, and that's what Paul gets to in this brief prayer in verse 25. He says:

25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

There is hope, and his name is Jesus. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. But then he ends with a confession once again.



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25 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.

In the midst of this struggle, there is an exclamation of desperation that is briefly answered, and it points us towards what is coming next week. But we don't want to miss it today: where is there hope? Where is power to be found as we live out the struggle of the Christian life? There is one place where hope is found. Found in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Paul doesn't dismiss the struggle, but he does point to the one who is able to empower us to walk through the struggle. The content of the gospel—we call it the gospel of Jesus Christ—it's him. It's all that he did. It's what he did on the cross. It's what he now continues to do, to walk with us, to join us, to help us navigate the struggle of life, empowering us with his very presence. There is hope.

Now, ultimately, this is all forecasting to the moment of ultimate hope next week when we get into Romans 8. And everything in me wishes we could turn the page right now and dig into how the Spirit provides power as we walk this life out in the flesh. But we're not there yet. You have to come back next week.

Here, though, today, I think there is hope to be found, and there's insight to be found in chapter 7. First of all, we can find confidence in the fact that Paul himself confesses there is a struggle. We don't need to feel shame when we struggle. But Paul has also made it very clear, there are some things that are not going to help us in this struggle. What are those? Well, I ask, can my adherence to the law free me to live and to live victoriously in this current struggle? Answer, no. The law can't do it, not because the law is bad. The law is good. But the law has been co-opted, seized, by sin and used by sin to produce sin in me. The law doesn't have the power to pull me through the struggle.

What's another option? I'm afraid all too often that we turn to this option: can I trust myself? Can I, in my own strength, through gritted teeth, and through white knuckles, pull myself straight in this struggle to live out what is true of me in Jesus Christ? Answer, not for a second. Paul said, we are of flesh. We have incapacities. We are mortal. As feeble human beings, we cannot yet soar to the heights that God will one day take us. We can't lean on our own strength. That is not where hope is to be found.

Where is hope to be found? One name and one person: it's in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one. Jesus is the one who has come to dwell with us. He is the one that we now call Lord and Master. He is the one who has saved us from sin. He is the one who is saving us as we live out this life in our mortal bodies. He is ultimately the one who will save us through his work. We trust in Jesus. He's where our hope is found. He's the only one able to give us power in the struggle.

So this morning, do you struggle? If that's you, here's what I'd like to say: welcome. You are in a community of strugglers. Do you struggle alone? Well, no. You're in good company. Paul struggled, I struggle, and everyone in this room who is in Christ struggles. Look to your left and right, in front of you, behind you. You are surrounded by strugglers.

But is there hope in the struggle? Absolutely. Jesus can walk with us, can give us power to walk through the struggle faithfully, and to come to the place where increasingly we live in greater and greater victory in the midst of this current struggle. Jesus is the one that's able. That's why he deserves all the praise. It's in him alone that our hope is found. Let's pray together.

Our Father, we echo with Paul this word of thanksgiving. We say, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, because in him and through him we have been brought out of the domain of death, freed from the bondage of sin. And now we know that Jesus, you and you alone can provide us with power in the midst of the struggle. So, Lord, free us from shame. Help us to honestly assess who



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we are—our own frailty—and help us not to lean on our own strength, but to lean and trust in you and you alone. You are the one we worship. You are the one we praise. It's in you and you alone that we find hope. We pray these things in your name, amen.

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