

## Rom. 7:7-25 – The Challenge of Appropriating Gospel Power

A couple of weeks ago I conducted a study on the theme of mortifying the flesh. We studied Rom. 8:13 which reads *For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live.* The text needs to be understood in the context of Paul's theme in Romans which is that *The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.* It is by the power of the gospel that we are enabled with the Spirit's help to mortify the deeds of the body and know the vitality of spiritual life as well as gain the assurance of eternal life.

I'd like to return to that theme this morning to view it in terms of the challenges we face when it comes to mortifying the flesh and living by *the law of the Spirit of life in Christ* (8:2). If this portion of Romans 7 reveals anything to us it reveals that the Christian faces great challenges in his Christian life. The easiest way, I suppose, to identify a false prophet, or a phony preacher or teacher is to hear them say that the Christian life is easy. We're supposed to be blessed with the material things of this world and our lives are to be lived with wealth and health and ease.

What a contrast to the words of the hymn which ask: *Must I be carried to the skies On flowery beds of ease, While others fought to win the prize, And sailed thro' bloody seas? Sure I must fight, if I would reign; Increase my courage, Lord; I'll bear the toil, endure the pain, Supported by Thy word.*

This section in Romans 7 identifies what is arguably the strongest foe we face. And it's not a foe from without it's a foe from within. It's the power of the flesh. We see that power described in Paul's experience when he writes: *that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.* (v. 15). *For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do* (v. 19).

The power of the flesh is further demonstrated by the way Paul makes reference to it as a law – *I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me* (7:21). This is not a law in the sense of being a commandment. It's a law, rather, in the sense of an active principle. You could liken it to a physical such as the law of gravity which means that just as certainly as an object falls when you drop it by the law of gravity so evil is present with us even when we would do good.

What a formidable challenge the Christian faces then. There are things that have to be overcome. There is resistance to the practice of knowing, reckoning, and yielding which are the things we're taught to do in chp. 6. Aren't you glad the Bible reveals this challenge? I look upon a passage like this and before I even try to address the challenge I first rejoice that I'm normal – I'm a normal Christian. This battle against the flesh is common to all Christians. Can't you relate to what Paul states in these verses? Isn't it good to see how the gospel really meets us where we truly are in life?

We are to know the gospel, believe the gospel, and present ourselves to God in the light of the gospel but as this section of Romans shows us there is a challenge that must be met in order to do these things. There is a challenge that must be addressed when it comes to

mortifying the flesh in the power of the gospel. This is what I want us consider this morning – the challenge of appropriating the power of the gospel.

## We Must Take up the Challenge of Appropriating Gospel Power

And the text equips us to take up this challenge by showing us a number of things that we must understand:

### I. We Must Understand the way Sin Works -

In v. 7 Paul raises the question – *is the law sin?* And in his usual forceful manner he answers the question immediately with the phrase *God forbid*. But the question we do well to ask is this - Why does Paul even raise such a question – *is the law sin?*

We would have to say that he raises the question because there seems to be such a close proximity between sin and the law. Sin does operate by the law. We didn't read it in our Scripture reading this morning but look back in v. 5 of this same chapter – **{cf. 7:5}**

*When we were in the flesh* – Paul says. And here the reference must be to that period before we were saved. One of the issues in Rom. 7 is to whether or not Paul is speaking from the perspective of someone who is lost or someone who is saved. We'll clarify that issue as we go but for now the reference is to the time when the believer was in the flesh and before there was any spiritual element to his being. He was spiritually dead and therefore in the flesh and when he was in the flesh the verse tells us that the motions of sins worked by the law to bring forth fruit unto death. This is a telling statement on the sinfulness of man and it's one that is easily verifiable in our own lives. The law of God provokes our sinful natures. When God tells us we can't do something or we can't have something then such is the depravity of our fallen natures that we desire to do the thing God tells us we can't do. And we desire to have the thing that God tells us we can't have.

Don't we, as parents, see that phenomenon in our children? The thing they can't have is the thing they want and there are no alternatives. Now Paul illustrates this concept in vv. 7 & 8 by referring to the 10<sup>th</sup> commandment – *thou shalt not covet. I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead.*

It's as if sin lies dormant within a man until the law of God requires something of that man and then sin is awakened or provoked. This is our depravity. This is our sinful nature. And while there is a close proximity between sin and the law we must never treat the matter of sin in such a way that we blame the law or call the law sin. The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, and just, and good (v. 12).

The law is not responsible for our sinful condition – sin is responsible for our sinful condition. It's sin that bucks against the law. It's sin that is provoked by the law. It's sin according to v. 13 *that works death in me by that which is good*. It is on account of his sinful nature that man desires what God forbids or man forbids what God requires.

Now you may recall if you're familiar with chp. 6 that Paul emphasized the point that as believers we are dead to sin. *How shall we that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?* (6:2). And the point that Paul was stressing throughout the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans was that we are dead positionally to sin – i.e. we are viewed by God as having died to sin when Christ died to sin.

But now in chp. 7 Paul is not dealing with our position but with our experience – life in the real world. For while we know and reckon on the fact that positionally we're dead to sin – still in our experience in life we know that sin is alive and well. And so Paul says in 7:14 *For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.* You remember, now, what we read back in v. 5 *when we were in the flesh.* There the reference is to what we were in the past. But now in v. 14 Paul is stressing not the past but the present – *I am carnal. I am sold under sin.* This verse teaches us that Paul's sinful nature was still in existence and was still functional. Paul knew it too well. And don't we know it too.

Sin is still alive. Sin is still at work. Sin is still provoked by the law of God. Sin is still working within us in rebellion against God. And it makes life frustrating for the Christian. He does the things he shouldn't do. He fails to do the things that he should do. And this frustration reaches a peak in this 7<sup>th</sup> chapter when Paul at last cries out in v. 24 – *O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?* This is a very graphic statement – *the body of this death.* I understand that in the days of ancient Rome one of the penalties that was inflicted upon criminals was for a dead corpse to be tied to the criminal in such a way that the death of that corpse would eventually feed on the man who was alive and would in time kill him too.

This is how Paul felt sin. This is how we feel sin as well. It's a weight upon us. It brings forth death. It drags us down. It disables us and we long to be delivered from it's presence. We still know it's influence and if we're to take up the challenge of appropriating gospel power and mortifying the flesh then we must view sin rightly. We don't make believe that it doesn't exist. We are not of that foolish mindset that sets forth the notion that the Christian can be perfect in this life. We are in a battle. And the key to waging good warfare is to acknowledge the battle.

So we take up the challenge of appropriating gospel power by understanding how sin works. We have a sinful propensity within us that has not yet been removed. Perhaps the best commentary on this section in Rom. 7 is found in Gal. 5:17 where Paul writes – *For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.* Isn't that what Paul is describing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of Romans 7? We understand how sin works.

## II. We Must Understand the way the Law Works –

If there is one area that can hinder the power of the gospel from working properly it is this area of the law. This has always been a challenge to the Church. There has always been the temptation to the Church to think that having begun by faith she is then perfected by law. This was the challenge the Church in Galatia faced. And Paul addresses them very harshly in that epistle.

*O foolish Galatians, he says in Gal. 3:1 – who hath bewitched you, that ye should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ hath been evidently set forth, crucified among you? This only would I learn of you, Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are ye so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?*

The Galatians were under the delusion that having begun by faith they progressed by something other than faith. They didn't really understand what function the law served. And what Paul reveals to the Galatians is essentially the same as what he tells the Romans in this 7<sup>th</sup> chapter.

What does the law do? Look again at v. 7 – *I had not known sin, but by the law.* Look again at v. 13 – *Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.*

We have seen that the law provokes sin. What we must see now is that the law reveals our sin and reveals how exceeding great our sin is. Where gospel power becomes thwarted is at the point that we think the law somehow reveals our righteousness.

If the devil can deceive us into measuring our righteousness by the law then he has successfully deluded us into feeling less dependent upon Christ. Now I have to be careful at this point. If our lives are changed by the gospel then we ought to appear to be more righteous. I don't speak the same way I use to speak. I don't do the same things I use to do. So in a practical manner of speaking I could say that I appear to be more conformed to the law than I did before I became a Christian.

This is really the emphasis we pick up in James' epistle. Faith without works is dead. Positional righteousness that doesn't lead to practical righteousness is not salvation at all – it's an abuse of salvation. It's the mindset of the sinner who thinks he can eat his cake and have it too. He doesn't want the consequences of sin but he still desires the pleasure of the sin. He's a hypocrite and he's lost.

So I'm not now denying that there is an observable conformity to the law in the eyes of other men. But what I am denying emphatically is that this observable conformity in the eyes of other men measures up to what God expects and to what God accepts. Where the Spirit of God is at work in the life of a Christian then even when he appears to be righteous in the eyes of other men he will nevertheless appear even more sinful in his own eyes. The more he understands of the glory of Christ and the more he understands of the searching demands of the law upon the thoughts and intents of his heart then the more he'll recognize that he's no closer to measuring up to God's standards now than he ever was.

He needed Christ as sinner and he still needs Christ as a Christian. And it is Christ's righteousness that gained his acceptance with God. And it is still Christ's righteousness that gains him acceptance with God no matter how holy he appears in the eyes of other men.

The law reveals our sin – indeed to use Paul's terminology – the commandment shows our sin to be exceeding sinful. And this in turn drives us to Christ. And the more we progress in

our Christian lives the more we see the exceeding sinfulness of our sin and the more we depend on Christ's atoning death and the more we thank Christ for the gift of His righteousness imputed to us.

Paul himself demonstrates this progression to us. In his earlier epistle to the Corinthians he refers to himself in 1Cor. 15:9 as the least of the apostles – *For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.* A little later on he refers to himself as being the least of all saints – in Eph. 3:8 – *Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.* And in a later epistle still – we find Paul writing to Timothy in 1Timothy 1 where he refers to himself as the chief of sinners – *This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.* (1Tim. 1:15).

You see the progression of grace in Paul's life then. The law did not have the effect on him of making him feel more righteous. It had the opposite effect. It made him feel more sinful. And this in turn would drive him to Christ and make him all the more appreciative of Christ's atoning death.

The law then functions as a guide to teach us righteousness. We strive to keep it because we love it and we're no longer afraid of it because we've died to it as a covenant of works. We're no longer under the dread of its power to condemn us. But let's not ever undermine the power of the gospel by deluding ourselves into thinking that we ever have or ever could measure up to its demands.

It reveals our sins and in turn drives us to Christ. And our progress in the Christian life becomes a progression of humility and dependence and gratitude – never a progression of self-righteousness. Let's take up the challenge of knowing the power of the gospel by knowing what the law does and what it doesn't do.

So we must know how sin works. It's provoked by the law. And we must know how the law works – it reveals sin. Consider finally from this portion of Scripture that if we are to take up the challenge of appropriating gospel power to overcome the flesh then:

### III. We Must Understand how the Gospel Works –

We could go back and analyze this portion of Scripture this way. Under the first heading we have a point of provocation. Sin is provoked by the law. Under the second heading we have a point of revelation. The Law reveals sin. Under the heading we are now considering we have a point of identification. And the question that must be considered is – *how do we identify ourselves?*

In the previous chapter Paul laid great stress on the truth that we identify ourselves as being in Christ – baptized into His death; buried with Him by baptism into death; planted together in the likeness of His death and in the likeness of His resurrection; crucified with Him; dead with Him; and then alive with Him. This is our identification with Christ.

In chp. 7, however, we are concerned not just with our identification with Christ but our identification with ourselves. The chapter makes it clear what we know in our experience –

i.e. that we have two natures that war against each other. And one of the key elements to gaining victory over the old nature comes through the recognition that we don't identify with the old nature.

Look at how Paul demonstrates what I'm talking about. In vv. 16,17 we read – *If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.*

Paul is not in this statement excusing himself from personal responsibility for his sin, but he is refusing to identify with his sin nature. This is not me! *It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.* He's saying in effect that he will not identify himself by his sin nature. That is not the real me. The real me consents unto the law that it is good. The real me, according to v. 22 delights after the law of God after the inward man.

Verse 22 provides to my thinking the proof that it is a saved person that is in view in Romans 7. I said a while back that controversy surrounds this passage in this regard. There are those who want to interpret Rom. 7 as if Paul was speaking from the perspective of someone who is lost. But a lost sinner does not delight in the law of God after the inward man.

Now the lost person will confess, like Paul confesses in v. 24 that he's a wretched man. The lost person like the person in mind in Rom. 7 goes through a conflict. One of the arguments I've heard to support the view that Rom. 7 refers to an unsaved person is the argument that pagan philosophers have expressed the same kind of internal conflicts. I've never taken the time to verify what was put forth to me but I think I can take the word of a man who was working on his Ph.D. at the time who told me that Plato, the ancient Greek Philosopher describes this conflict in his writings in nearly identical terms.

There is one very important distinction that must be made however. The unsaved man to be sure fights an internal conflict – but the issues of his conflict are the exact inverse of what Paul describes in Rom. 7. The sinner desires not the law of God – but rather the pleasure of sin. But the conflict he fights is against his conscience which testifies to him that his actions are sinful and call for judgement. He's not grieved by his sin, he's grieved by the fact that his conscience condemns him. He doesn't understand why his conscience condemns him. He hates the fact that his conscience condemns him.

This is the very opposite of what the child of God experiences. He too is aware of his sin. The believer's conscience also condemns the believer for his sin. But unlike the unbeliever, the believer doesn't hate his conscience, but rather his sin. He desires the law of God with the inward man. He wishes he was more conformed to the law he loves. He desires to be more like Christ and will not be happy until at last he is perfectly conformed into the image of Christ.

In the meantime, however, he wages war against his sin nature by refusing to identify himself by that nature. Paul teaches us this in v. 17 and he reiterates it again in v. 20 – *Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.*

We see then that so much of appropriating gospel power has to do with how we identify ourselves. We see ourselves in Christ. We see our old nature as crucified with Christ. We refuse to define ourselves or even identify ourselves by our old nature. Instead we identify ourselves in accordance with our union to Christ. This is an important key to appropriating the power of the gospel.

And even though the focus of Rom. 7 is on the conflict we must fight in order to appropriate gospel power, Paul still anticipates the victory and so exclaims in v. 25 – *I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

I wonder, this morning, what kind of conflict are you fighting? Every one of us goes through some kind of conflict. Whether you're saved or lost you're in some kind of battle. If you'll take the time to analyze the kind of battle you're fighting then you can know whether or not you're saved or lost.

The lost sinner loves his sin and hates the conscience that condemns his sin. He is constantly striving to rationalize his sin as something that is good even though his conscience accuses him. If this is your condition this morning, you would do better to side with your conscience and call upon Christ to save you.

The Christian, on the other hand, loves the law of God and hates the sin that defiles him and pulls him down. Have you come into the house of God this morning bearing the weight of your guilt and your sin? We're not ignorant of our sin. We understand how it works. We feel the presence of a sin nature and that nature is aggravated by the law – even the law that we love.

Let's take up the challenge of appropriating the power of the gospel this morning by understanding how sin works, by understanding how the law works and by understanding how the gospel works. The gospel teaches us to identify with Christ. By faith we confess Him to be our Covenant Head and our Substitute. We see ourselves joined to Him – in union with Him and we thank God that God sees us in Him also.

And because we see ourselves in Him and we believe that God sees us in Him, we refuse to identify ourselves by our sin nature. Oh we feel it's presence and we sadly acknowledge our own responsibility for our sin – but it's not you, it's not me. It's sin that dwelleth in you and in me.

I trust this morning that God will enable us to take up the challenge of appropriating the power of the gospel. Isn't it wonderful that the gospel is so practical? Isn't it a blessing that this book meets us where we really are in life and takes us forward in the will of God? May God make us more than conquerors this morning through Him that loved us – for the honor of His name and the good of our souls. Amen.