

Romans 7:1-12
(Psalm 119:97-104; Matthew 5:17-20)
“What the Law Can Do”

Introduction

Paul has already shown us that the law of God cannot justify us, in other words, that our own best efforts to please God cannot reconcile us to God or gain eternal life. All of that is God's gift of grace to us. Now in chapter seven, Paul will argue that the law also cannot sanctify us, it cannot make us holy. So, if chapter six speaks to us about the problem of our sin, chapter seven addresses the problem of our righteousness.

What do I mean by that? For many of us, even greater than the problem of our sin is the problem of our “righteousness.” We know that we cannot justify ourselves and that only grace can save us. But we turn around and think that sanctification is our own project, the work *we* now do to make our selves holy. Of course, the Christian life involves effort, self-mortification, and heart-felt response to God's grace. But all our effort depends completely upon that grace, freely given us in Christ Jesus. Remember Paul's final words in his first Thessalonian letter:

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24).

Not only is *justification* God's work that must be received through faith, but *sanctification* is God's work as well that must also be received through faith, and then worked out day after day through our union with Christ, in joyful obedience to his Word, in the strength of his Spirit (see Philippians 2:12-13). Both sides of the equation are crucial: this is not quietism, “let go and let God.” God calls us to respond to him in the joy of obedient faith. Jesus said, “the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matthew 23:13). But it is grace alone that grants the strength to endure, and it is our union with Christ that assures us of victory. Salvation is not a presumption, but rather “an inference based on evidence” (Eric Alexander).

Now the seventh chapter of Romans falls into three parts: in the opening six verses, Paul uses the illustration of marriage to remind us that the law only applies to the living and that death sets us free from the law. In verses seven through twelve, Paul shows us what the law *can* do, and beginning in verse thirteen the remainder of the chapter focuses on what the law *cannot* do.

This morning, we will look at the first two sections: first an illustration that points out three aspects of our freedom in Christ, followed by three pictures of what the law is able to do, and how God uses his law in preparing us to receive his grace.

Body

1. Paul uses an illustration to show us our freedom in Christ (7:1-6).

The law is no longer binding on those who have died (7:1-3).

We who have died in Christ are free from bondage to the law (7:4-6).

We who have been reborn in Christ are free to “bear fruit for God ... in the new life of the Spirit”: we are now free to fulfill God’s law through his Spirit (7:4&6).

2. Paul then shows us what the law *can* do (7:7-13).

The law shows us what sin is (7:7&12).

The law brings sin to life (7:8).

The law enables sin to put sinners like us to death so that we might be reborn in Christ and live no longer in the flesh but in the Spirit (7:9-11).

Conclusion

What are we to make of this? Let me ask you two questions:

First, has the law had its way with you? Has it put you to death so that you might be reborn in Christ?

And, secondly, if it has, are you now trying to become a holy person by keeping rules, by binding yourself again to the law in order to maintain your relationship to Christ and grow in your holiness? If so, then let the apostle Paul pose the second question in his own words, just as he posed it to the Christians in Galatia: “Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Galatians 3:2-3).

Hear the good news of the gospel, quoting again from Paul’s Galatian letter:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:19-20).