

Romans 7:12-25
(Psalm 119:169-176; Matthew 7:24-27)
“What the Law Cannot Do”

Introduction

The great question always asked, and never agreed upon, by students of this chapter is, “Whom is Paul describing here?” Some argue that he must be speaking of himself before his conversion, others that he is describing his experience as he was coming to faith but not yet born of the Spirit, others that he is describing a defeated Christian who needs to step out of Romans seven and into Romans eight, and still others that he is describing the normal state of every Christian who struggles with temptation and sin.

The problem we have deciding between these views, and the reason that there will never be universal agreement as to which is correct, is that Paul seems to describe a person who in some ways manifests *each* of these different conditions. We could take our time this morning going through each view and examining the pros and cons of each. That would, however, be fruitless, I think, because we would run the risk of missing the point of these verses.

So, what is the point of these verses? Paul has shown us in the first half of chapter seven what the law *can* do: it can show us what sin is; it can empower sin by inflaming our desire to do what the law says we are not to do; and it can enable sin to put us to death so that we might be reborn by the grace of God. But Paul’s concern in these final verses is remind us of what the law *cannot* do, and what the law cannot do for the non-Christian, it also cannot do for one coming to Christ, or for a disobedient Christian, or for an obedient Spirit-filled Christian. So I think that Paul is writing to all of us, not only to one group of people, and that we should focus on the point of the text.

If you are here this morning as one who is not yet convinced of the truth of the gospel, and if it seems like simply another religious point of view, this text is crucial. We might as easily say that Paul is reminding here of what neither religion nor morality can do. Paul’s argument here points out the futility of any approach to life and death that depends simply upon our own best efforts at living well.

Paul ended the first half of chapter seven with the words, “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (7:12). But then he asks, “Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?” And he answers emphatically, “By no means! It was sin ...” [that brought about this wreckage] (7:13). He then proceeds to contrast with what the law *can* do what it simply *cannot* do. And only when we realize what the law cannot do will we stop turning back to the law in order to try to make ourselves whole.

Body

- 1. The law can show us what sin is, but it cannot cure our sin (7:13).**
And so, the law's weakness points us to the cross of Christ.
- 2. The law can show us what we ought to do, but it cannot empower us to do it (7:14-20).**
And so, the law's weakness points us to the Spirit of Christ.
- 3. The law can show us the war raging within our hearts, but it cannot deliver us from that war (7:21-25).**
And so, the law's weakness points us to our union with Christ.

Conclusion

The answer to the crisis of the law's inability to sanctify us is found in verse fourteen: "For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin" (7:14). The secret is in realizing that God's law is not a matter of written codes on tablets of stone, but is a work of God's Spirit, written on our hearts. Paul has already told us this earlier in the chapter: "But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (7:6).

Thus, Paul can answer the cry of his heart and ours, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of death?" (7:34), not with despair, but with a shout of gratitude and triumph, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" and carry us into the tremendous eighth chapter where we are shown the way of freedom in the life of God's Spirit.

Do you realize that, however much you love God's law, however much you esteem religion and morality, you cannot cure sin through your own best efforts, nor can you always do the costly thing God calls you to do, nor can you quiet the spiritual battle that wars in the heart of every person, and causes such grief to all who have not completely anesthetized themselves to their own brokenness and need? But God can do by grace what we cannot do by law, for he can place within us his own Spirit to free us from our flesh and begin to live his life through us, transforming us from the inside out into people restored to God's image, fully human at last, and living in the joyful confidence of those who have been brought from death to life.

Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. ... 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 (7:24-8:2).

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