

. . . Ended, But Not Yet

Romans 7:7-25

May 15, 2011

Last week we looked at our relationship with the Mosaic Law. We saw that, if we are in Christ, we are no longer bound to the Law in the same way a person who has died is no longer bound to his or her spouse. Marriage ends with death. Likewise the power of sin over us ends when we die on the cross with Christ. This week we see that, even though the power of sin and the Law is broken, and thus their dominion over us is broken, we are not yet completely free from them.

Yet Paul again asks a question and then gives its answer. It was probably a question he had heard. It was certainly an objection he was aware could be raised against what he was teaching. So far, we have seen a negative view of the Law. Paul has taken great pains to show that the Law, instead of making us righteous before God actually brings more of God's wrath upon us. In saving us from our sins, Jesus also released us from the Law and brought us under the control of the Spirit. This puts the Law and sin in the same category. Paul asks the question as he takes steps to separate them again.

"What shall we say, then? Is the law sin?"

Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law." (v.7) So, we should not be surprised that sin and the Law are not the same thing in God's economy. The Law is not some evil thing from which good people have to be rescued. The Law is a good thing, given to us by God. It points out our sin. It shows us more clearly the ways in which we sin and fall short of the glory of God.

The problem is that, when we are under the control of our sinful natures, we are powerless to obey the **Law**. Instead of showing us the path we must take, as it was intended to do, the end result is that the Law only makes us more guilty. Even worse, when the Law tells us what not to do, it puts the idea of doing it in our

heads. Our sinful natures are so perverted and messed up that the good thing that God gave us to help us steer away from sin actually tends to draw us into it. Instead of pulling us away from sin, the Law gave sin more power. Paul used the example of coveting. Paul would have coveted without the Law, but by being told not to covet, and trying to figure out what coveting was as a result, Paul thought about coveting and thinking actually made him covet more. For the sinful nature, forbidden always seems sweeter and the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.

This is why Paul wrote, *"Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death."* (vv.9-11) The more Paul learned about the Law, and the more zealous he was for it, the more sin sprang up in him and closer he moved to death, not life. This was not the fault of the Law. It was Paul's fault and the result of the sin in him.

It is the same way with us. Before we know and accept what God requires of us, we may have a life of sorts. It will be a life marred by sin and which will incur God's wrath, but we will at least not have agreed to do good things we are not doing and not do the bad things we are doing. Once we have God's Law, once we intentionally accept what God says about right and wrong, we must obey it and this makes our lives worse. If we really understand it, our lives become a sort of walking death as we are always either doing something we have been told is wrong, or trying to deal with the guilt of what we have already done. When the commandments come, sin springs to life in us and we realize how dead we really are. Sin deceives us, and the commandment puts us to death. Like **Eve**, we believe the lie that there is more to life and better stuff than what

God has for us. We don't understand that the stuff we think is better is actually death.

So, even though Paul has been talking about the Law as if it were bad, and even though the Law's effect is to bring death instead of life, it is a holy thing. Paul makes it clear, "*So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.*" (v.12) The Law cannot be blamed for our inability to follow it. It is not the Law's fault. The fault lies entirely with us. Our sin is to blame. The Law points that sin out and even aggravates it, but it is not responsible for our guilt.

Having cleared up the relationship of the Law to our sin and guilt, Paul now needs to clear up the relationship between the Law and the death it brings to us. "*Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.*" (v.13) The Law brings death, not because God is a monster who only wants to see us suffer, but because we are monsters who turn harder away from God the more clearly He speaks. That is the sinful nature at work in everyone who is not in Christ. We don't naturally run toward God, we **hide** from Him. After eating the forbidden fruit Adam and Eve heard God walking in the garden in the cool of the evening and hid because they were naked. In the same way we still sense our nakedness and sin in God's presence and hide from Him. God's commands only point out that sin more clearly. What was always sin now becomes flagrant disobedience and outright rebellion. The Law makes our sin as bad as it can get.

The next part of this passage is perhaps one of the clearest and most honest descriptions of the difficulties of the Christian life there is. It is something with which we all deal, whether or not we admit it. If the Apostle Paul had this problem we all suffer from it. If you do not think this applies to you and you are not struggling with

sin, then you are one of three things: a super-Christian who has moved beyond the scripture and could teach the apostles a thing or two, or not aware of your own sin and in need of examining yourself and asking the Holy Spirit to point your sins out to you, or you are not a Christian at all and do not have access to the Holy Spirit's convicting power. Of these, by far the least likely is the first. So, if you never find yourself in the next two paragraphs, my advice to you is to listen closely and to get right with God. Paul declared:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. (vv.14-20)

At first it seems as if Paul is talking about his life before he knew Christ. After all, he said that he is unspiritual and sold as a slave to sin. Yet, he also talks about his desire to do the right thing and to obey God's Law. We only have this desire as God starts working with us. When we are far from God we do not have a desire to do right in His eyes. Our minds are on the things of this world and the desires of our sinful natures. Paul describes a situation in which he wants to do the right thing, but the sin that is still strong in his sinful

nature prevents him from doing it. He wants to do good, but he cannot carry it out.

The only good news is that Paul's sin was against his desire. He acknowledged that there is nothing good in him as far as his sinful nature goes. Therefore, it was not Paul in his new nature that was sinning, but the sin that still existed in him.

Once we are in Christ, we are given new natures by God. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*" (2 Corinthians 5:17) While there is still a sin nature in us, if we are in Christ that sin nature no longer define who and what we are. God makes us new and gives us a new identity in Him. As Bishop Rolle is fond of saying, now that we are in Christ, we do sin on occasion, but we are no longer sinners. We saw this a while back when we saw that we do not receive God's righteousness through anything we do, by being in covenant with Him, or by having His commands. We receive God's righteousness through His grace. This is the grace of God who, as we saw Wednesday evening, "*. . . gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.*" (Romans 4:17)

Paul deals here with something we talked about a couple of Wednesday evenings ago. It is the issue of the "already . . . not yet," in the Christian life. There are things that God has **already** done for us, but which are not yet fully worked out in us. There are promises He has made which are so sure that we can call them already done, but which have not yet actually been fulfilled. Living in God means living in two worlds, two times: this physical life, here and now in this world, and the reality of the world to come which is breaking into this one.

In the context of this morning's passage, we are the children of God, accepted as holy and pure before Him and covered with the blood of our elder Brother, Jesus. Yet we are still in bodies that suffer under the

influence of sin and are surrounded by, and immersed in, a world of sin. These bodies betray us by dragging our holy and pure spirits through the muck and mire of sin. We are not yet what we want to be or what we shall be.

Going on, Paul adds:

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (vv.21-24)

Once we are in Christ we live a sort of double life in this world. This is where the charge of hypocrisy comes so strongly against the church. The world has taken to rejecting the church because we have forgotten this tension of the already/not yet.

Churches err in two ways on this issue. We sometimes forget about the problem of sin still in our lives, ignore it and just live like the world. We forget the **holiness** of God. When we do this there is no difference between those who claim to be in Christ and those who want nothing to do with Him, and so there is no reason for those who are not in Christ to come to Him. We are not appealing to the world because we are just like those around us.

The other way we err is to fight hard against the sin in our own power. We forget the **grace** of God. As Paul has stated, we will always lose this fight and so we get frustrated, trying to hold ourselves and each other to standards we cannot reach, and then calling the people around us to the same standards. They then rightly point out that we cannot live up to those standards, so we have

no right to expect it of them. This makes us frustrated, irritable, and not appealing to the world around us.

If we are aware of the tension, then we are also aware of the wretchedness of our condition. If the Holy Spirit is in us convicting us of our sin, then we see this war Paul is talking about waging in ourselves. We, too, cry out, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” There is a reason the message of God’s salvation is called “good news.” Paul answers this cry. “*Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (v.25) God Himself is the answer to our predicament. It is God who saves us from the wretchedness of our sin and our lives in this sinful world, and He does it through Jesus Christ our Lord! Again, this is the reason for Jesus’ death on the cross and the reason we must join Him there, dying to sin and this world. Jesus did not die only so that we can go to heaven. He also died so that we can be made holy and live the lives here God intends for us to live. In this passage Paul points out that it is a difficult thing, and impossible under our strength. What he never said, however, is that we have to live life under our own strength! We have the **power** of God behind and in us and thus living the life we want to live in Christ is possible. It is the goal toward which we are to grow every day.

Through the rest of this letter Paul describes in detail how that works and what it looks like. We do not have time to go through that this morning, and so it will wait for the weeks to come. Today we are left with Paul’s summary and a note of hope. “*So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.*” (v.25) If we are in Christ then our minds are given over to God even as our bodies still struggle here. This does not mean that we are free to do whatever our bodies want. It does mean that God’s grace is given to every area of our lives and we need no longer fear His wrath. We need only to celebrate the victory His gives us and learn to live in it.

We do not do this by our own power. We learn to rely on the Holy Spirit and the power of God in us to not only declare us to be righteous, but to help us live that out.

We leave this morning with the Apostle John’s take on our love for God, the way we live that love out, and where our victory truly lies. “*This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith.*” (1 John 5:3,4) Just as our salvation is by faith, our obedience also is by faith. We cannot, but through **faith** God will bring us to greater and greater obedience and victory as we submit and give ourselves to Him!