

ROMANS

Part 15: “The Psychology of Sin”

Romans 7:7–25

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Sunday, May 8, 2022 (Mother’s Day, Easter Season)

Scripture Reading

“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin” (Rom 7:7–25).

This is God’s Word; *thanks be to God.*

Prayer

Almighty and Everlasting God, we thank you for the gift of your word, and we pray your truth would illuminate our understanding. Today on this Mother's Day, we also thank you for the gift of mothers. Thank you for the mothers of all the people who are now hearing these words. Thank you for the life they have brought into the world. I pray your blessings over the mothers of our church family that you would bless them and fill them with grace as they love and care for their families and children. I pray for your comfort and peace upon women in our church who desire to be mothers but do not have children. Surround them with the love of the church and comfort them with the truth that their worth and value are in you. We pray for those who have loved and lost mothers and for mothers who have lost children. May you draw near to their broken hearts and grant them peace and eternal hope. And for us all, today, may your Holy Spirit reveal Jesus Christ that we might be transformed by his glory. In Jesus's name, we pray. AMEN.

Introduction

We are continuing our journey through the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Romans is Paul's longest letter in the New Testament. It is historically one of the most influential writings in all of Scripture. And it is, in its own right, a theological treatise on the power and the glory of the gospel.

Romans chapter 7 is all about how Christians are to understand the Old Testament law. When Paul uses the word "law" in Romans 7, he has in mind the "Torah," the law of Moses, the 613 commands within the first five books of the Old Testament that the people of Israel were commanded to live by.

Last week, we learned how we are to understand the law in light of the gospel. This week, we will learn how to understand the law in light of sin.

Throughout Romans, we have come to see how Paul understands sin as something that is not less than the breaking of God's moral law but it is something more. Paul envisions sin as a spiritual force that exerts dominion over humanity. Sin is an anti-god power that seeks to oppose God and bring death upon his people and brokenness into his creation.

Here in Romans 7, we will learn something crucially important about sin. As we examine how sin interacts with the law, we will discover how sin *thinks*. We are going to uncover **"The Psychology of Sin."**

As we walk through today's passage, we will see three truths about the psychology of sin: **1.) Sin is An Opportunist, 2.) Sin is a Deceiver, and 3.) Sin is a Tyrant.**

Exposition

1.) Sin is an Opportunist

The law of God is perfect and true. It shows us a vision of God's holiness, and it reveals how God has called his people to live righteously and justly.

But the power of sin is a judo-master and an expert in reverse psychology. Sin seizes the law of God that was meant to protect us against evil and instead uses it to *provoke* us toward evil.

We see how this works in the first few verses from our reading today. Paul writes, *“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’ But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died”* (Rom 7:7–9).

The command “you shall not covet” is commandment number ten from the famous ten commandments (Ex 20:17). It is a good and wise commandment that warns us against constantly comparing our lives to the lives of others. It is a commandment that warns us against living in a state of jealousy towards those around us. At a broader level, the commandment to not covet shows us that sinful actions flow downhill from sinful desires.

But here’s the problem. Sin is an opportunist that seizes the opportunity provided by the commandment of God to produce all kinds of disordered desires.

When we are told not to do something, often our natural response is to experience temptation toward the very act that is being prohibited. That which has been forbidden instantly becomes irresistibly attractive. And the very law that was meant to prevent sin becomes a mechanism by which sin is promulgated.

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) operates in a similar way. The human immune system is meant to prevent the spread of disease in our bodies. A major part of our immune system includes white blood cells that identify and attack foreign antigens and illnesses in the body. But HIV attacks the body in and through the white blood cells of our immune system.

HIV will attach itself to a helper T cell and then use it as an engine of multiplication to multiply more of the virus in the body before rendering the cell dead and useless. If left untreated, HIV will spread rapidly through the body, often resulting in the deadly disease of AIDS.

This is exactly how sin works. Sin uses the law of God to seduce its victims to the forbiddenness of sin that it might multiply, spread, and bring forth death. As verse 10

states, *“The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me”* (Rom 7:10).

Make no mistake: sin never gives what it promises. That brings us to our next point.

2.) Sin is a Deceiver

Let’s look back at our text: *“For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure”* (Rom 7:11–13).

Sin always lies. Sin will promise you pleasure, but it will only give pain. It will promise you life, but it will only bring forth death.

There is this haunting parable in Proverbs chapter 7 of a young man who is ultimately seduced into a sin that costs him his life. At the story’s beginning, the young man is in a morally grey place. He is ambling around at the time of twilight when it is neither day nor night. He certainly is not walking in broad daylight, nor is he yet in the full darkness of midnight.

He idly meanders by a corner nearby the house of a known prostitute. It’s almost like he’s not entirely committed to sinning. He’s just entertaining the notion. But before he knows it, the woman appears, and she wastes no time. She tells him that her bed has new Egyptian linens and that she has prepared it with aromatic perfumes. She claims her husband has gone on a long journey, so they can sin in safety since no one else will know.

But before she makes this speech, look at how Proverbs 7 describes the moment the woman encounters this young man, and observe how similar it is to the language of Romans 7: *“She seizes him and kisses him, and with bold face she says to him, ‘I had to offer sacrifices, and today I have paid my vows; so now I have come out to meet you, to seek you eagerly, and I have found you’”* (Prov 7:13–15).

Just like the power of sin in Romans 7, she “seizes”¹ this young man. And her first words are not an appeal to sensual desire. Her first words are an appeal to the Old Testament law.

She has just come back from making sacrifices at the temple. She has paid her vows. She has done all the right things according to the letter of the law. Surely there is no harm in a little sinful indulgence, right? To put it bluntly, the woman deceives this young not by ignoring the law of God but by *appealing* to it!

¹ The LXX of Proverbs 7:13 translates “seizes” (ἠρῆσαυ) as “ἐπιλαμβάνομαι,” which comes from the same root (λαμβάνω) as the word Paul uses for “siezing” (λαβοῦσα) in Romans 7:8,11.

Proverbs 7 is using the illustration of sexual temptation, but in reality, this is a metaphor for how all of temptation works.

Sin is deceptive. And if you listen to the voice of temptation long enough, it will attempt to justify itself to you and convince you that what it wants you to do is not all that wrong. But it is all a fatal trap. Here is the way the parable of Proverbs 7 ends, *“With much seductive speech she persuades him; with her smooth talk she compels him. All at once he follows her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a stag is caught fast till an arrow pierces its liver; as a bird rushes into a snare; he does not know that it will cost him his life”* (Prov 7:21–23).

Do not be deceived: the end of sin is always death.

3.) Sin is a Tyrant

In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis makes a crucial observation about the nature of temptation and sin. Writing these words in the midst of World War 2, Lewis states, *“No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness—they have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it.”*²

What Lewis is saying is counterintuitive but very true. People who live in constant sin are often unaware of the true extent to which sin has enslaved them. Conversely, the only people who know the true power of sin are those that are actively trying to resist its influence.

Paul will make a similar observation in the following few verses of Romans 7, which are probably the most memorable and the most debated verses of this entire chapter: *“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my*

² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 142.

members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Rom 7:14–23).

In New Testament scholarship, there is quite a bit of debate over exactly what Paul means in this section. Some understand this section as Paul himself confessing to either a past or present struggle with sin. Others believe that Paul is exposing the mindset of the unredeemed, pre-converted mind that is still under the spiritual dominion of sin. Others view this passage as an example of the interior dialogue of all Christians who are frustrated when they fall into temptation.

I’m not going to argue for one position or another because I don’t know for sure which one is correct.

But there are a few things that I do know for sure:

a.) The law of God is holy. But the law of God cannot save us from sin.

b.) When you become a Christian, you do not lose your *ability* to sin. What you lose is your ability to *enjoy* sin.

c.) Sin will not give you freedom. Sin will only enslave you.

Sin is not a friend who desires for you to have fun. Sin is a tyrant that wants to claim dominion over you and lead you into captivity and death.

Conclusion

Humanity was created to possess dominion over God's good creation. In fact, part of what it means to be made in the image of God is that we are to steward dominion over creation as God's representatives. We see that truth clearly in Genesis 1:28, which reads, *“And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth’” (Gen 1:28).*

But we abdicated that dominion when we fell into sin. And it's rather interesting to go back to Genesis and reexamine how we fell into sin in light of Romans 7.

God placed Adam and Eve, our first parents, in the paradise of Eden, where they enjoyed the goodness of creation and perfect communion with their Creator. However, God did give them one command—one law—they needed to obey. They could eat the fruit of any tree in the garden except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:9).

And through this one law, sin seized an opportunity to provoke evil desire (cf. Rom 7:8,11). Using the command of God, the ancient serpent deceived Adam and Eve into coveting what it was like to be God. He convinced them if they ate of the forbidden fruit, they would become like God (Gen 3:5). And succumbing to the lie, the very

commandment that promised proved to be death, and all of humanity was sold under the power of sin (cf. Rom 7:10).

There is a reason that Romans 7 can be read as a commentary on the Fall of Man. Paul is reminding us yet again that all of our sin flows from Adam's sin (cf. Rom 5:12). All of our sin is a participation in Adam's sin. And when we try to save ourselves by trusting in our good works according to the law, we are living as those who are in Adam and still under the dominion of sin.

Yet, as we have seen already throughout Romans, it is when we understand our desperate and cosmic need of our spiritual crisis that is the precise moment we are susceptible to the divine miracle of grace! As Paul concludes this chapter, *"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin"* (Rom 7:24–25).

Romans 7 is showing us yet again that the human righteousness through works of the law is hopeless. But the righteousness of God through faith in Christ is the fountain of all hope.

Christ is the one who fulfilled the law to perfection. Christ is the one who would not be deceived into sin. Christ is the one who suffered the power of death and rose again so that the dominion of sin and death would be broken.

Yet, there are moments in the Christian life when we will stumble and fail. It is crucial in those moments not to wallow in shame or tie your worth to your performance. Rather, let your failure cause you to cling to Jesus all the more.

There was a boy in our church who was baptized this last Easter, and he recently asked his dad, *"Why am I still sinning? Does that mean my baptism didn't work?"*

I relate to those honest questions more than you could ever know. There are moments when sin seems so pervasive, and we feel so weak. I feel in my bones the cry, *"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"*

But for what it is worth, I believe our sorrow over sin, our inability to simply tolerate evil in our lives, our frustration with enduring temptation is evidence that the Spirit of the living God lives within us and is calling us toward Christ-likeness. And while we stumble and fall in this life, greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world (1 John 4:4)! Our hatred of sin is evidence of God's work in our lives, and we can be sure of this, that *"...he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ"* (Phil 1:6). Thanks be to God that our deliverance has come and is coming through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ's victory over sin does not mean the process of our sanctification will be easy. It means that the end of our sanctification is certain.

So resist sin we must, and resist sin we will. The power of sin is real. The power of sin is dangerous and deceptive. But the power of sin has been dethroned by Jesus Christ. And there is a day coming very soon when the power of sin will be destroyed.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. Read Romans 7:7–25 and pay attention to the verbs associated with sin. What are the different things sin does in this passage? Have you seen sin do these same things in your life or in the lives of others?
2. Read Genesis 3:1–7 in light of Romans 7. How might we understand Romans 7 as a commentary on the fall of humanity into sin?
3. A few weeks ago, Pastor David defined sanctification as “the grace-filled process by which Holy Spirit helps us become who God has already declared us to be in Christ.” How might we view sanctification in light of the things we have learned in Romans 7.