

Somebody Who Can Help

Romans 7

1. Introduction

In this series, we're looking at four of the major inevitabilities of life—things that, good or bad, are just part of life. Our goal is to see how a relationship with God can change our perspective from one of (sigh) that's life to ... THAT'S life!

First, we looked at the inevitability that death is a part of life. We saw from Romans 5 that, with God, we have reason for hope that we can overcome death.

Last week, we looked at the inevitability that, in this life, we all have to serve somebody. We saw from Romans 6 how we're all, by nature, slaves to sin, but with God we have freedom to serve a new master.

Both Romans 5 and Romans 6 frame these topics by presenting contrasts.

In chapter 5 we see the contrast between two corporate identities or races—Adam and Christ. In chapter 6 we see the contrast between two masters—sin and righteousness.

Adam → curse of death → serve sin → Adam's disobedience → guilty by association & action → separated from God

When we step back and look at these contrasts as building on one another, we see that all who are associated with Adam are under the curse of death and serve sin as their master. It was through Adam's disobedience that death entered the world, and every human being after him is guilty of sin on two accounts: 1) we are guilty by association with Adam; and 2) we are guilty of conforming to his pattern of serving sin rather than righteousness.

That's the bad news. Though we may not want to hear it, that's life.

Jesus Christ → gift of life → serve righteousness → Jesus' obedience → free from being guilty of sin → united with God today & forever

The good news is that all who are associated with Jesus Christ receive the gift of life that breaks the curse of death and enables them to serve righteousness as their master. It was through Christ's obedience that life re-entered the world, and every person who believes in Jesus is set free from sin on two accounts: 1) we have freedom to serve righteousness as our new master; and 2) death doesn't bring eternal separation from God, instead it ushers Christ-followers into the eternal presence of God.

That's the good news, and *that's* life.

2. Inevitable Laws in Life

Today we're looking at another inevitable fact of life. We're all governed by laws.

I think, by nature, we tend to be divided along two lines in our response to laws or rules. We are rule-followers or rule-breakers. Which are you?

1. Natural/Scientific laws.

- a. Scientific laws summarize and explain a large collection of facts determined by experimentation and evidence. It is generally understood that they reflect cause-effect relationships fundamental to reality, and are discovered rather than invented.
 - i. **The law of thermodynamics** tells us water freezes at 32 degrees and boils at 212.
 - ii. **The law of gravity** tells us if we lose our balance we'll fall down, not up.
 - iii. **The law of inertia** tells us an object in motion stays in motion, and an object at rest stays at rest unless an outside force acts on it.
 - 1. The greater the mass of an object, the greater its inertia.
 - a. ILLUSTRATION. Rolling a cotton ball vs. a bowling ball
 - 2. I hope you're here today either to stay in motion spiritually or to have an outside force act on you to help you get in motion. Either way, the law of inertia is in play even in your spirit.
 - iv. We are governed by scientific laws. That's life.

2. Social laws. Govern society.

- a. Jurisprudence is the foundation of a system of laws or rules that enable society to function and are enforceable by institutions.
 - i. EXAMPLE. I drove about 45 mph on my way here today because social law has established speed limits. I don't particularly like this law, but for the most part I obey it because it's been enforced in my life. It cost me hundreds of dollars in several speeding tickets when I was younger, but I finally accepted the jurisprudence of speed limits.
- b. Our relationship to social law is different than natural law. We can't break natural law, but we can break social laws. So, there are consequences put in place to deter us from exercising our ability to break them.
 - i. When we break bigger laws, there are bigger consequences. We're governed by social laws. That's life.

3. Universal/Metaphysical laws.

- a. In our culture, there is a growing embrace of Eastern Mysticism or New Age philosophies and their understanding of how the world works.
 - i. Some say there are 7 universal laws, some 12, some 20 ... I found one list of 105!
- b. These collections of "laws" reflect various theories about how people relate to the higher powers of the universe. Often, these theories take observable natural laws and apply them to philosophical or spiritual categories.
 - i. **The Law of Vibrations** says everything in the universe moves, vibrates and travels in circular patterns. The same principles of vibration in the physical world apply to our thoughts, feelings, desires and wills. Each

sound, thing, and even thought has its own vibrational frequency, unique unto itself. Thus, good vibes or bad vibes.

1. The Beach Boys know all about the law of vibrations.
- c. For many, these universal laws govern the way they think about spiritual things.
 - i. **The Law of Divine Oneness** says everything is connected to everything else. What we think, say, do and believe will have a corresponding effect on others and the universe around us.
 - ii. **The Law of Divine Flow** says that, by living in the moment, centering ourselves in love and being in service to others, we live in the law of divine flow. When we do this, we maintain a stronger connection to our God self.
 - d. I don't bring up universal laws in order to endorse or affirm them in the way I would scientific laws or social laws, but simply to point out that **part of our human experience is to relate to the world around us in terms of laws—even parts of the world we cannot see. That's life.** So, even those who aren't religious want to create some set of laws to try and wrap their minds around spiritual things.
 - i. **Why? Because the presence of laws helps us make sense of things.** To know the laws is to know how things work, and that makes it safe for us to explore new places, try new things and gain new knowledge.
 1. ILLUSTRATION. Even though I've never been there, I wouldn't be afraid to go for a swim in Australia or China or Ireland because the laws of physics tell me that, with a little effort, I can rise to the top of the water just like I can at Adler Pool in Libertyville. I'm also confident there are laws preventing someone from shooting me for swimming (as long as I stick to the public places).
 2. It's the same for spiritual things. **Those who claim to be enlightened frame their beliefs in terms of "universal laws." It is their effort to make sense of the world we cannot see and explain how we relate to it and to God.**
 - a. But I believe there is more reliable guide to understanding spiritual things and relating to God. Which brings me to another law.

4. God's law.

- a. In the Old Testament, we have the record of God's law being given through Moses. According to the Bible, it is God's revelation of himself to people.
 - i. In the OT we find statements like, "He has revealed his word ... his laws and decrees"
 - ii. There are instructions like this one from Deuteronomy 30, "For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you."
- b. **According to the Bible, God's law is the way to make sense of the world we cannot see, and it explains how you and I can have a relationship with him.**
- c. In other words, if you and I want to know God and have a relationship with him, we must obey the law he has given. That's life.

To help us understand God's law, we'll continue our exploration of Romans 5-8 by looking at Romans 7, especially verses 13-25 which famously depict the human struggle to keep God's law.

Turn to Romans 7.

3. Responses to God's Law (Romans 7)

Before digging into verses 13-25, I want to point out a few things about the chapter as a whole to help frame our thinking. John Stott points out that, in terms of how people respond to law, this chapter presents three options.

1. **Fear it.** A legalistic response.

- a. Legalists fear the law and are bound to it. They measure themselves against it, either feeling condemned for failing to keep the law, or feeling self-righteous because they have kept the law.
 - i. Verses 1-6 communicate to the legalist that fear is not the right response to God's law. Even when the law was first given in the OT with all its consequences for disobedience, God offered grace through a system of sacrifices that allowing law-breakers to escape condemnation.
 - ii. Especially now, in a NT context, when one places their faith in Christ, the law no longer holds weight, either to condemn or exalt them. Their attachment to the law has been severed in order to put them in a new relationship to God based on their attachment to Jesus.
- b. This section also makes it clear that, even though people are no longer bound to the law, it doesn't mean they can sin all they want. Quite the opposite. It gives them power and motivation to live a more righteous life than they ever could under the law.
 - i. ***It is righteousness flowing from the inside out, not imposed from the outside in.***

2. **Reject it.** A relativist response.

- a. Relativists, Antinomians hate the law and reject it. They blame God's laws for the problems we have and think everything would be better without them.
 - i. Verses 7-12 are a defense of the law against the unjust criticism that it causes sin and death. Paul attributes these to our sinful nature, associated with Adam. He argues that the law itself is good.

3. **Embrace it.** A willing response.

- a. These are people who love the law and try to fulfill it freely and willingly.
 - i. Verses 13-25 describe the inner conflict of those who want to obey God's law but find themselves unable to do it.
 - b. In this section, Paul depicts in personal language the inner turmoil of the person who tries to obey the law in his own effort and willpower. **He argues that the law itself is good, but the sin within us is too great to be overcome by the good law or good effort.**
 - c. In other words, if we're going to fulfill God's law, it's not going to come from anything we can muster in our own strength. **We need somebody who can help.**
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4. Our Need for Help

In this section, Paul describes three ways we all need help if we're to have any hope of being law-abiding citizens in God's kingdom.

1. We need help because God's law is spiritual, and we are not (14-15).

The first thing we see is that the law is spiritual, but we are not. If we include ourselves in this representative "I", we find our efforts exposed to fulfill the law on our own outside of the power of the Spirit. It is fundamentally because we are not spiritual. Instead we are slaves to sin, no matter how good-natured or well-meaning.

This is a good time to stop and acknowledge the debate over how to understand this passage. There are several opinions about who the "I" is.

- a. Is Paul talking about himself? If so, is he reflecting on his life before faith in Jesus, or maybe his early days as an immature follower of Jesus, or is this the ongoing struggle every Christian has for his or her whole life?
- b. Is Paul talking about Adam and the way his nature influences people?
- c. Is Paul talking about Israel as a nation under the law?
- d. Is Paul talking about everybody in general, but nobody in particular?

I'm taking the view that Paul is talking about himself as representative of sincere Israelites in the OT under God's law. Every Jew who was at all sensitive to spiritual things sensed frustration at the failure to live up fully to the law's demands. Frequently they saw clearly their doing did not match their willing. Of course their experience is not unique to being an Israelite, and we can quite naturally identify with their frustration.

The result of an unspiritual individual trying to keep a spiritual law is confusion and frustration. This person cannot reconcile even his own actions. His desire is for one thing, but his actions go a different direction, even doing things he hates (15).

We can't live up to God's law on our own because we are preoccupied with physical things to the neglect of spiritual things.

- i. **Preoccupied with ourselves (needs, wants, hurts, etc.)**—can't forgive others, serve others
- ii. **Preoccupied with life demands**
 - Struggle to keep a rhythm of time with God—leads to compounding consequences.
 - i. **Analogy of exercise**—regular exercise→good eating/sleeping→good shape. No exercise→bad eating→bad shape.
 - ii. Regular time with God→good influences→good attitudes & actions. No time with God→bad influences→bad attitudes & actions.

2. We need help because God's law is good, and we are not (18-19).

Second, the law is good, but we are not. One's desires may be for good, but we find ourselves unable to carry out the good things we want to do. The line of reasoning is basically the same as in verses 14-17, with the additional indictment that the individual's actions are in fact evil and continuous.

We can't live up to God's law on our own because our good intentions aren't enough to result in good actions.

- i. **Marriage**—crock pot for Christmas. Good intention; dumb action / **Girlfriend**—gym membership gift
- ii. **Apprentice Training**—throwing SHYG leader into action without warning. Action that is right for me, not someone else.
- iii. **Aid & Assistance**—foreign policy, poverty relief, personal help can create dependency

3. We need help because God's law has an enemy within us (21-23).

The third, and climactic, reason the typical Jew was frustrated in his ability to keep the law is the presence of another law working internally against the good purposes of God's law. This law shows up as an ever-present evil influence even though he sincerely *wants* to do good.

Paul goes so far as to say that, in his mind, he delighted in the law of God, yet even this pleasure in it was not enough to overcome the law of sin. This law is described as waging war against his better thoughts and making him a prisoner of his own nature (22-23).

Paul has been saying this all along. In verse 13 he asks, is the "good" law not so good since I can't possibly obey it?

- i. Verses 13, 16-17, 20, 25b
 1. He affirms the goodness of the law, and then he exposes sin's self-serving purpose in using the good law to bring about death to those under it. Knowing that all will fail to keep its commands, sin seized the opportunity to magnify its condemning effect on people.
 2. Speaking as one enlightened to the problem, Paul confirms the truth that it is the indwelling power sin that makes it impossible for one to keep the law.

We can't live up to God's law on our own because we cave in to bad influences.

- i. **Lying**
 - In order not to hurt someone
 - In order to get what we want or need (even a good thing)
 - i. Job interview: "are you a team player?"
- ii. **Compromise**
 - Fitting in to cultural expectations
 - Compromise integrity for approval
 - Compromise integrity for quick results

In a summary expression of exasperation, Paul gives voice to the plight of the willing law-abider. In modern language, "I'm messed up! Can anybody help me?!" (24)

5. Someone Who Can Help

Finally, speaking as one who knows the gift of grace through Jesus Christ, Paul gives thanks for the salvation and deliverance that comes only through him (25a).

Jesus is the answer to the question, who will rescue me?

Have you put your faith in Jesus? Have you chosen to follow him? If so ...

1. **Jesus helps you by giving you his spirit to make you spiritual.**
2. **Jesus helps you by accomplishing his intentions through you.**
3. **Jesus helps you by conquering the enemy within you.**

Paul goes on to unpack all these things in Chapter 8, so I hope you'll come back for the final week of #thatslife.

For now, don't reject God's law or fear God's law. Lean in to his ways, strive with all your effort to obey him through a holy life. Not to earn God's favor or escape his wrath.

Obey him because he's changed your perspective on death by giving you a reason for hope.

Obey him because he's changed your perspective on serving somebody by giving you freedom to serve a new master.

Obey him because he's changed your perspective on keeping his law by giving you somebody who can help.

Obey him because when you do, you can have the joy and peace and fulfillment of discovering life with God. And THAT'S life!