

Romans 7

The Human Condition

Are you the type of person who believes rules are there to be ignored and broken? Or do you believe rules are there to be observed and kept? By and large most religious people are into the rules. We like rights and wrongs and we want to make sure we are on the side of right. It is what gives religion a bad name – namely judgementalism and also hypocrisy for not keeping our rules and living up to the standards we set.

At a church gathering the vicar stacks a pile of apples at one end of a table with a sign saying ‘Take only one apple please – God is watching you’. On the other side of the table is a pile of cookies. Little Johnny places a sign by it saying, ‘Take all the cookies you want – God is watching the apples!’

In this week’s passage from Romans, Paul goes on further about the point of God’s law – God’s rules for life. Paul describes an experience we have all had, when we want to do one thing and yet end up doing another.

You are supposed to eat five portions of fruit and veg. a day for a healthy diet. It’s like the new law, the eleventh commandment drummed into you from the television to the playground. You feel a complete failure when you go to bed at night and realise once again you have not met the target.

We set ourselves good intentions – we are going to do this or that. We may set ourselves high standards, high

expectations, especially of ourselves. We don’t get there and end up depressed – sometimes quite seriously depressed – sometimes displacing our anger on to others.

Religious rules may not to the contemporary person seem very important. But in other contexts people still obsess about rules and keeping them. I read an article the other week about the contemporary obsession with clean eating – a fixation on food quality and purity. . Mental health experts are concerned that this dietary trend when taken to extremes is leaving a growing number of teenagers very thin at risk of dying. The tyranny of social media is constantly telling people how to be healthier and slimmer and giving details, often unqualified on existing diets. It can lead to a fixation on righteous eating. Young people are losing sleep over this and cannot afford the lifestyle needed to maintain it. There has been a huge rise in eating disorders and mental health concerns particularly among teenagers. Some see it also as a side effect of other competitive pressures being put on them by society to achieve and perform.

In contemporary society we seem to have replaced the religious moral law in which to tyrannise people with how far short they morally fail, with other laws from social media to work performance management and other regulations and policies in which to see if people make the grade.

Paul in this passage talks about making the grade. He may be talking about himself in which case scholars

have debated whether he is describing his life prior to his conversion or after he started following Christ? He may be describing the experience of humankind and the 'I' here is the equivalent of 'one' – the representative of all humanity. Whatever the autobiographical or historical details of the situation Paul has in mind Paul describes a conflict – a fundamental human conflict between willing and doing. Despite every good intention, every healthy resolution, every excellent desire, human beings find that they do not follow through on those plans. Verse 19 'the good which I want to do, I fail to do.'

It reminds me of G K Chesterton's pithy remark: the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried.

This state results, in Paul's analysis, not from some defect of character or some psychological burden, but from the omnipresence of sin.

Remember, for Paul, sin is either pride or rebellion, making yourself into God; or as in this passage sin is a real and tyrannical power that can almost force us into obedience. It pulls us away from missing the mark of goodness – drags us down into things that are destructive and deathly.

This description applies not just to all humanity, in that all have sinned, but especially to those who desire the good. Paul has in view here the religious person, the responsible member of the human community, the one who wants to be a contributing member of society. Despite every attempt to accomplish good for others and for the self, the efforts of the religious person come

to nothing. Sin's power is such that it corrupts even the best instincts of the most faithful and religious person. That's why religious people are always vulnerable to the charge of being hypocrites. We always fail to live up to what we believe in.

What is the remedy for this problem? More resolve to do good? More human will? Beat yourself up that you're not good enough. You failed again. Must do better? Or just ignore the law. Be free of the rules?

Paul continues in this chapter to reflect on what the purpose of the law is in Christian discipleship now that Christ has come and inaugurated a new era. Paul has already written about the law in negative and uncomplimentary terms. The law reveals sin (3.20), it condemns the sinner (3.19) defines sin as transgression (4.15, 5.13), brings wrath (4.15). In consequences God's righteousness has been revealed in the gospel altogether apart from the law (1.17, 3.21) although the law helped to bear witness to it. Sinners are justified by God, not through obeying the law but through faith in Christ (3.27).

So the question is now raised what about the law? How can the apostle Paul be so dismissive of God's law? Godly Jews saw the law as more precious than gold and sweeter than honey. How can Paul proclaim freedom from it now? What did he mean that we are no longer under the law? Are his words a clarion call for liberty and licence?

Paul's teaching is as relevant today as it was then. Advocates of the new morality in the 1960s claimed that all you need is love. The category of morality and law was abolished – the only absolute left is the commandment to love. But love as we know is notoriously subjective. For what one person calls love another may call it abuse. What one calls love another may call domination.

What then did Paul intend when he described Christians as being 'not under the law'? He used this expression in two different letters and so in two different senses which help to clarify what he is trying to say in this chapter. In Romans 6.14 he wrote that 'you are not under law but under grace'. Here the antithesis or contrast between law and grace indicates that he is referring to the way of justification (the way we are judged and proved acceptable in the sight of God). This is not down to our obedience to the law but by God's sheer mercy or grace, alone.

In Galatians 5.18 however he wrote that 'if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law'. Here the contrast is between law and Spirit and indicates that he is referring to the way of sanctification (the way we become holy, more Christ like, more restored to the original image of God that we were created to be). This is not down to us struggling to keep the law, but by the power of the indwelling Spirit.

So for justification we are not under the law but under grace; for sanctification we are not under the law but led by the Spirit. .

It is in these two senses that we are 'freed' or 'released' from the law. But this does not mean that we are divorced from it altogether, in the sense that it has no claim on us of any kind, or that we have no obligations to it. On the contrary the moral law remains a revelation of God's will which he still expects his people to fulfil by living lives of righteousness and love. This is what the Reformers called the Third use of the law'.

To summarize three possible attitudes to the law, the first two of which Paul rejects, and the third of which he commends. We might call them 'legalism', 'libertinism' and law fulfilling freedom. Legalists are under the law and in bondage to it. They imagine that their relationship to God depends on their obedience to the law, and they are seeking to both be justified and sanctified by it. But they are crushed by the law's inability to save them.

Libertinism goes to the opposite extreme. Blaming the law for their problems, they reject it altogether and claim to be rid of all obligations to its demands. They have turned liberty into licence.

Law fulfilling, free people preserve the balance. They rejoice both in their freedom from the law for justification and sanctification, and in their freedom to fulfil it. They delight in the law as the revelation of God's will but recognise that the power to fulfil it is not in the law but in the Spirit.

Thus legalists fear the law and are in bondage to it. Libertarians hate the law and repudiate it. Law abiding free people love the law and seek to fulfil it.

Directly or indirectly Paul refers to these three types in Romans chapter seven. He does not portray or address them directly one by one, but their shadowy forms are discernible throughout. In verses 1-6 he asserts that the law no longer has 'authority' over us. By dying to it with Christ we have been released from it, and we now belong to Christ instead. This is his message for legalists.

In verses 7-13 he defends the law against the unjust criticism that it causes both sin and death. He attributes these instead to our fallen nature. The law itself is good (12-13). This is his message to the libertarians.

In verses 14-25 Paul describes the inner conflict of those who are still living under the regime of the law. If left to ourselves in our fallenness we cannot keep God's law, even though we delight in it. Nor can the law rescue us. But God has done what the law could not do, by giving us his Spirit (8.3-4). This is the experience of those who find their freedom in fulfilling the law.

Paul says in vs 24 'wretched creature that I am, who is there to rescue me from this state of death? Who but God? Thanks be to him through Jesus Christ our Lord! Next week we will look more closely at the start of chapter 8 but you need the first verse to hang onto now.

'There is no condemnation for those who are united with Christ Jesus'.

No condemnation. Hear those words: 'no condemnation'. If you keep blaming yourself for not living up to your own expectations; if you are over responsible or neurotic: hear those words 'there is no condemnation for those in Christ.'

All through this letter Paul has been wrestling with the big issue of our acceptance to God. Are we acceptable? Can we prove our worth? Can we earn our salvation? Can we merit divine approval through our own efforts? Well today people have substituted God's approval with other people's approval, trying to achieve fame and fortune and status, trying to prove their worth.

I once had to take a secondary school assembly that was celebrating achievements. I decided to be subversive and used one of Martin Luther King's sayings; Anyone can be great because anyone can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your verb and subject agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.'

All those pupils were being urged to study and get good exam marks to get on in life (and also improve the schools reputation) and I'm telling them that it's not necessary if they want to be great! Subversive!

RT Kendall was minister of Westminster chapel in London and an internationally respected preacher. He has a doctorate in theology from Oxford. And yet as a child he felt he could never come up to his father's

expectations. No matter how well he did, his father would never be satisfied; he always pushed his son to do better. One day R.T. got A's for all subjects on his report card except one, and for that he got B. he cried all the way home because he knew that when he showed it to his father, the one thing his father would comment on was that B. And he was right. His father looked at the card and said 'well pretty good son. Next time you can have all A's if you really work hard.'

Are you hard on yourself? Do you look at your failures and miss your successes? Do you carry the guilt for the world – the poverty in the world and not see the positive things happening? Do you see God as a hard task master – demanding?

Hear me out though – I'm not suggesting that we shouldn't do our best, have good intentions, achieve what we can, Attempt to make poverty history. But as Martin Luther King says you need a heart full of grace to do it. Why? Because when you know you there is no condemnation in Christ, when you know you are made right with God not through your works and your achievements and being a good person, but through the free gift of grace – then you are released from feeling wretched and the fear of failure. You will know that God can take your motives and actions, however flawed, and turn them into service of the good. That initiative of God enables us to live free of the paralyzing conflict Paul describes in this chapter, because we are confident that God has already acted to deliver us.

We play our part, we try our hardest but we leave the results in God's hands. We trust God to make things right. We know deep down that nothing can separate us from the love of God. We know deep down that God is for us not against us. These are all Paul's phrases which are coming up in the next chapter. We sometimes need to write them down and recall them, especially when we are being hard on ourselves or trying to justify ourselves.

Thanks be to God who delivers us through Jesus Christ our Lord!

References: J. Stott, Romans, Bible Speaks Today IVP 1994