

LESSON NINE
THE BONDAGE OF THE LAW IN OUR FLESH (2)

Scripture Reading:

vv. 7-25

- 7:7 What then shall we say? Is the law sin? Absolutely not! But I did not know sin except through the law; for neither did I know coveting, except the law had said, "You shall not covet."
- 7:8 But sin, seizing the opportunity through the commandment, worked out in me coveting of every kind; for without the law sin is dead.
- 7:9 And I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.
- 7:10 And the commandment, which was unto life, this very commandment was found to me to be unto death.
- 7:11 For sin, seizing the opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.
- 7:12 So then the law is holy, and the commandment holy and righteous and good.
- 7:13 Did then that which is good become death to me? Absolutely not! But sin did, that it might be shown to be sin by working out death in me through that which is good, that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.
- 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am fleshy, sold under sin.
- 7:15 For what I work out, I do not acknowledge; for what I will, this I do not practice; but what I hate, this I do.
- 7:16 But if what I do not will, this I do, I agree with the law that it is good.
- 7:17 Now then it is no longer I that work it out but sin that dwells in me.
- 7:18 For I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but to work out the good is not.
- 7:19 For I do not do the good which I will; but the evil which I do not will, this I practice.
- 7:20 But if what I do not will, this I do, it is no longer I that work it out but sin that dwells in me.
- 7:21 I find then the law with me who wills to do the good, that is, the evil is present with me.
- 7:22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inner man,
- 7:23 But I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and making me a captive to the law of sin which is in my members.
- 7:24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?
- 7:25 Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh, the law of sin.

OUTLINE:

II. Three Laws—7:7-25

- A. The Law of God—Rom. 7:12, 14, 16
- B. The Law of Good—Rom. 7:18, 22-23
- C. The Law of Sin (and Death)—Rom. 7:17-18, 20, 23
- D. The Body of This Death—Rom. 7:24
- E. The Wretchedness of Man Trying to Fulfill the Law—Rom. 7:14-20

SECTION 1:

1. What is the relationship between the law of God and the law of good? Please explain with an example.
2. What does “the law of sin” do in us?
3. How did Paul use Romans 7 to prove that we are no longer under law?

SECTION 2:

1. What was God’s intention in giving us the law?
2. Why it is wrong to say that “nothing good dwells at all in us”? What is the proper understanding of this based on Romans 7?
3. What was Paul’s realisation of the three laws in Romans 7?

SECTION 3:

1. Is it true to say that the lust in our flesh is removed after we are saved? Please explain this point with a verse.
2. What is the difference between the warfare in Galatians 5 and Romans 7?
3. Is Romans 7 an experience of a Christian or a non-Christian? Consider Paul’s experience.

SECTION 4:

1. Why are there two laws in every human being?
2. What is the correct understanding of the nature of man? Use an example in the Old Testament to explain.
3. What is the meaning of “the body of sin” and “the body of death”? How do we deal with them?

[Section 1]

THE BONDAGE OF THE LAW IN OUR FLESH

(2)

II. THREE LAWS

In 7:7-25 we see three laws, and it is possible for us to locate them.

A. The Law of God

The law of God is just, good, holy, and spiritual (vv. 12, 14, 16). This law is outside of us or we may say that it is above us. This law of God makes many demands and requirements of the fallen man that he might be exposed (vv. 7-11).

B. The Law of Good

While the law of God is above us and outside of us, making demands upon us, the law of good is in the mind of man's soul (vv. 23, 22). We may say that the law of good in our mind corresponds to the law of God and responds to its demands, trying to keep it (vv. 18, 21, 22). Whenever the law of God places a demand upon us, the good law in our soul responds to it. If the law of God says, "Honor your parents," the good law in our mind immediately replies, "Amen! I will do it. I will honor my parents." This has been our experience throughout life. Each time the law of God made a demand the law of good in our soul responded and promised to fulfill it.

C. The Law of Sin (and Death)

However, in our members is a third law, the law of sin, which wars against the law of good. As we have seen, the law of sin is in the members of our fallen body, the flesh (vv. 17, 18, 20, 23). It constantly wars against the law of good and makes man a captive (v. 23). Whenever the law of good responds to the law of God and attempts to fulfill the requirements of the law of God, the evil law in our flesh is aroused. If the good law should fail to respond, the evil law would perhaps remain dormant, as if it were sleeping. However, when the evil law learns that the good law is responding, the evil law seems to say, "Are you going to practice good according to the law of God? I will not allow this!" The evil law wars against the law of good and invariably captures us. Thus, we become a captive in the law of sin which is in our members. This is not a doctrine; this is our life-history.

In Romans 7 we see three laws: the first law, the law of God, demands and makes requirements; the second law, the law of good in our mind, is quick to respond; the third law, the law of sin in our members, is always on the alert to war against the law of good in our minds and to defeat us, capture us, and imprison us. Each law has its own aspect. Romans 7 describes the experience of each one of us. Perhaps even today you continue to repeat Romans 7. Do not think that you are different. According to God's economy, however, Romans 7 is not necessary. As we pointed out in a previous message, Romans 8 continues Romans 6. Nevertheless, due to our poor situation we need Romans 7 to expose us and to help us.

Some Christians insist that Romans 7 is necessary, that, experientially speaking, it must come between Romans 6 and Romans 8. Some good Christians hold this concept. Do you still cling to the thought that Romans 7 is necessary between Romans 6 and 8? There is no doubt that Romans 7 describes Paul's personal experience. The argument among the teachers of the Bible concerns the time when this experience occurred—before or after Paul's salvation. Although some believe that Romans 7 is a continuation in experience of Romans 6, if we read Romans 6 through 8 carefully, we will discover that Romans 7 relates Paul's experience before he was saved. In 7:24 Paul said, "Wretched man that I am!" In 8:1 he said, "There is now then no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." Romans 8:1 proves that the experience narrated in Romans 7 occurred before Paul was saved. It is not his present experience, because he said that there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. Therefore, the experience of Romans 7 occurred before Paul was in Christ; it was his experience before he was saved.

Why then did Paul find it necessary, after Romans 6, to describe his experience before he was saved? He included it to prove that we are no longer under law. I have already mentioned that Romans 7 was written to explain a short clause in 6:14 which says that we "are not under law but under grace." Romans 7 tells us that when we were under law we were the old man. While our old man was still alive, we were under the law. However, as regenerated, new men we are no longer under the law, because our old husband, the old man under the law, has been crucified. Then Paul continues to relate how pitiful and wretched it is for anyone to be under the law. It seems that Paul was saying, "Dear saints, do you

still want to be under the law? If you do, let me tell you about the experience I had. The law does not help you; it deceives you and gives occasion for sin to work on you. The law even kills you. You should not want to be under the law anymore. But, even if you want to be under the law, you can never keep it.” Paul then describes the complete story of his experience before he was saved. He says that the law of God made demands upon him, that the good law in his mind responded to the law of God, but that the law of sin in the members of his fallen body warred against the law of his mind, defeating that law and bringing him into captivity. Paul’s conclusion was, “Wretched man that I am. My body is the body of this death. I cannot escape.” Thus, Romans 7 is a record of Paul’s experience before he was saved, a record which proves that we cannot keep the law and that encourages us not to try. Whenever we attempt to keep the law, the third law, the law of sin, captures us. Keeping the law is an impossibility for fallen man.

[Section 2]

God did not give us the law with the intention of helping us. Its purpose is to stir up Satan to trouble us. God’s intention in giving us the law was to expose the sinful law within us. If we think that we must keep the law, we are absolutely wrong. We are not strong enough to fulfill the requirements of the law. Do you not know that the evil law within you is actually the powerful person of Satan? Can you, as a fallen man, defeat Satan? It is impossible. He is a giant and, compared to him, you are a weakling. You are weak, and the good law within you is impotent. You have a good will and a positive desire, but you cannot fulfill it. You, as the old man, are only good to be crucified and buried with Christ, as you were already in 6:6. You should not pull out the old man who was buried in a tomb and expect him to keep God’s commandment. The good law in your mind represents your strength, and the evil law in your flesh represents Satan’s power. Since Satan is more powerful than your strength, you can never defeat him, but are always captured by him whenever you attempt to keep the law of God. This is the correct meaning and understanding of Romans 7.

Although Romans 7 describes Paul’s experience before he was saved, it depicts the experience of most Christians after they are saved. I doubt that there is a single exception to this. After we were saved, we all made a total response to God’s law. Consider as an example a young man who has

recently been saved. He has repented and made a thorough confession of his sins to the Lord. On the night he was saved he made a decision, saying to himself, “I should not behave that way any longer. I should not do the evil things that I once did. Tonight I will make up my mind to never do them again.” Then this new convert prays to the Lord, “Lord, I am sorry for the way I have lived. From now on I want to be a good Christian. I don’t want to do those things anymore.” This young man is a typical representative of all genuine Christians. As a young Christian I did this numerous times. We all have done the same thing before the Lord. But we all can testify that we cannot do what we made up our minds to do. We simply are what we are—persons with a good law within us. After we were saved, this good law in our mind responded to the law of God outside of us, and we made up our mind to be a better person.

Some Christians have wrongly told people that there is nothing good at all in them. As some preachers were talking this way some professors argued with them saying, “I don’t believe this. I can testify that I do have something good within me. I honor my mother and have a real heart to love her. Isn’t that something good within me? And I did make up my mind not to treat my students unfairly. Doesn’t that mean that I have something good in me? How can you say that there is nothing good in people?” We must be careful about this, as Paul was in composing Romans 7. Paul said, “In me, that is in my flesh, dwells no good thing.” If he did not make this modification, he would contradict himself, for in the following verse he mentions his will to do good. Man has three parts: a spirit, a soul with the mind, and a body with its many members. In the members of our fallen body nothing good dwells. However, we must remember that man was created by God as good and some amount of goodness remains in all men. For example, if you take a piece of metal and cast it into the dirt, it may be defiled, but its nature is still metal. You cannot claim that the metal is no longer metal. Man was created by God, and God never created anything bad. Everything God created was good, including man as God’s creature. Regardless of how fallen man has become, the goodness of God’s creation remains in him. Even bank robbers still have an element of good in them, an element which was created by God.

Although man was created good, the evil nature of Satan was injected into his body when he partook of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. The tree of knowledge denoted Satan, the evil one,

who has the power of death. Thus, when man ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, Satan came into his body. Satan's principle, the factor of every evil thing, is the law of sin. In our mind we have a principle created by God, the law of good. Hence, if we understand Romans 7 adequately, we will know where we are and what we have within us. We have a good law in our mind and an evil law in our flesh, two laws which are incompatible. The good law represents the good principle created by God, and the evil law is Satan's principle in our flesh. Satan in our flesh hates God, deceives man, and tries his best to damage and ruin humanity. Thus, whenever man's mind by the good law thinks to do good, the evil law immediately rises up to fight, defeat, and capture the pitiful, wretched man. This was Paul's experience before he was saved when he was an enthusiastic Judaizer and lover of the law. Day and night he attempted to keep the law of God. Eventually, he realized that the law of God was outside of him, the law of good, corresponding to God's law, was in his mind, and that whenever he willed to do good another law in his members fought against the law of good in his mind, capturing him and making him wretched. Paul discovered that his body was the body of death. In keeping God's law, in doing good to please God, this body of death is just like a corpse. Paul came to realize that he was a hopeless case due to the powerful element of sin dwelling in his fallen body. This is the clear picture portrayed in Romans 7. Once we see this picture we will praise the Lord that He has no intention for us to keep His law.

[Section 3]

Romans 7 reveals that a battle is raging within us. The law of good, responding to God's law, is in our mind, and the law of sin is in our members, fighting against the law of good. The battle is extremely intense. Some teachers of the Bible say that the war in Romans 7 is the same as the conflict in Galatians 5. However, they are different. If we examine Galatians 5, we will see the difference. However, before we turn to Galatians 5 I want to say a word about the flesh.

Some Christians hold the concept that before they were saved they had lusts in their flesh, but that after they were saved the lusts disappeared. There is a school of teaching which instructs people in this way. This teaching says that before we were saved there was lust in our flesh, but that afterward the lust was removed. According to this teaching, the flesh of a saved person becomes good.

As a contrast to this school we have Galatians 5:16 which says, "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." Surely the "ye" refers to genuine Christians. Hence, it is still possible for true believers to fulfill the lust of the flesh, for such lust remains within us. Regardless of how genuine a believer we may be, we must be on the alert and not be cheated by the enemy, who may tell us that we no longer have lusts in our flesh. Such a concept is dreadful and misleading.

Let me relate an incident that occurred in North China many years ago. A particular Pentecostal movement was prevailing in that region, sweeping across all of North China. They said that since they had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit they no longer had any lusts. As result of this teaching, men and women began to stay together, claiming that they were spiritual and without lust. After a short time there were many instances of fornication, and that movement was nearly killed. In fact, it was even difficult to preach the gospel for a period of time because the Chinese people, mainly due to the ethical teaching of Confucius, hate any form of fornication. Thus, that Pentecostal movement gave Christianity a bad name in North China. We must never accept the deceptive teaching which claims that since we are sons of God and have the Holy Spirit we have no lusts in our flesh.

Paul says, "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh." He continues by saying that the flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh (Gal. 5:17). This is not the war between the evil law and the good law; it is the war between the flesh and the Spirit. The flesh and the Spirit are contrary to one another. This proves that, although we walk in the Spirit, we continue to have the lusts in the flesh and that our flesh remains the enemy of the Spirit. The Lord Jesus said, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6). Flesh is flesh, and nothing can change its nature. Never accept the thought that after you become spiritual your flesh is improved. This teaching is a great error and is dangerous.

Galatians 5:24 says, "And they that are Christ's have crucified the flesh with the affections and lusts." Unlike Romans 6:6, which says that our old man has been crucified, Galatians 5:24 does not say that the flesh, affections and lusts have been crucified. It says that we must crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts. The thought here is the same as the thought in Romans 8:13, which says that by the Spirit we put to death the

practices of our body. We cannot crucify our old man, because our old man is our being. No one can put himself on the cross and, in that way, commit suicide. However, we can crucify our flesh through the Spirit, meaning that we continually put our flesh to death. Our old man has been crucified with Christ once for all, but we have to crucify our flesh continually day by day. Then Galatians 5:25 says, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit."

Thus, Galatians 5 unveils the war between our flesh and the Spirit. Although most translators find it difficult to decide whether the spirit in Galatians 5:25 denotes our human spirit or the Holy Spirit, I am confident that it denotes the mingled spirit, the mingling of the Holy Spirit with our regenerated spirit. We must walk in such a Spirit. Thus, the warfare in Galatians 5 is the warfare between our flesh and the Spirit, a conflict utterly different from the war described in Romans 7.

The war mentioned in Romans 7 is a war between two laws, the good law and the evil law. It has nothing to do with the Spirit. It is even discussed in some of the old Chinese writings, where it is called the war between the principle and the lust. The principle to which these writings refer is no doubt the law of good. They also mention the lust which fights against the principle is in man's body. When, as a young man, I compared this war between the principle and the lust with Romans 7, I was surprised to find that they were identical. Thus, when I heard that some Christian teachers claim that Romans 7 describes Paul's experience after he was saved, I was quite bothered. Since even the old Chinese writings mentioned the war between the principle and the lust, and since this is identical with Paul's experience in Romans 7, how can we say that Romans 7 is the experience of a Christian?

Romans 7 describes Paul's experience before he was saved. Before he was saved he was very enthusiastic about God's law, attempting to keep it and to do good in order to please God. Although the Chinese hundreds of years ago did not know the law of God, they did understand the good nature of man mentioned in Romans 2:14-15. According to Romans 2, man by creation has three positive things in his make-up. First is man's good nature, for the Gentiles by nature do the things of the law (2:14), showing that the function of the law is written in their hearts (2:15). Second, man has a conscience (2:15). Third, he has the reasonings which accuse, excuse, condemn, and justify (2:15). Every

human being has these three elements within him. You need not be a believer in Christ in order to possess them. Every person has the good nature, a conscience, and the reasonings. Due to the presence of these three elements in man there is a war between the good law and the evil law or, according to the Chinese writings, between the principle and the lust.

Romans 7 refers to this war. Why do so many Christians experience such a conflict after they are saved? Because they were careless about their conduct before they were saved. Unlike Paul, they were not desirous to do good and to please God. However, many good people, not only among the Chinese but throughout the world, desire to overcome their lusts. Certainly such people experience Romans 7. They experience the antagonism between the good law and the evil law. Thus, Romans 7 does not describe the war between the Spirit and the flesh that is revealed in Galatians 5. The war in Galatians 5 is the typical experience of Christians; the war in Romans 7 is the experience of people who try to do good, regardless of whether they are Christians or not. Many Christians have the experience of Romans 7 after they are saved because it is only after they are saved that they decide to be careful about their behavior and try their best to be good. Therefore, they experienced after they were saved what Paul knew before he was saved. These Christians actually do the same thing that the Chinese tried to do hundreds of years ago. However, the struggle recorded in Romans 7, regardless of whether it is encountered before or after salvation, is not a typical Christian experience. It is an experience of our natural being. People who try to do good before they are saved have this experience prior to their salvation. Many others experience it only after they are saved, after they determine to do good and to please God.

[Section 4]

In every human being, whether or not he has been saved, there is a good element in his mind and an evil element in his body, the flesh. Paul uses at least three terms to describe the evil element—sin, evil, and the law of sin. Paul terms the good element in his mind "the law of my mind." This law of the mind is the law of good. Thus we have two laws, one in our mind and another in our fallen body. We have these two laws because we have at least two lives. With every life there is a law. Why do we have the law of good? Because we have a good life. Why do we have a law of sin? Because we have a sinful

life. Every person has these two lives—the God-created life which is good, and the satanic life which came into man’s body as a result of the fall.

Some people insist that man’s nature is evil; others claim that it is good. One day when I was reading Romans 7 I found the answer to this argument. Both schools are right; however, they are only partially right. Both schools are right because man is not simple. Man is very complicated. For example, in the morning a man may be quite nice, behaving himself as a gentleman. He has a human life and conducts himself as a man according to the law of his human life. However, that evening he attends a gambling casino and acts like a devil. Is he a devil or a man? The correct answer is that he is both.

During their journey in the wilderness, the children of Israel spoke against God and Moses and they were bitten by fiery serpents which caused many of them to die (Num. 21:4-9). When the people prayed to God, God told Moses to lift up a brass serpent on a pole. Were those children of Israel serpents or men? They were men, because they had the actual appearance and life of men. They were also serpents because the serpentine poison entered into them and permeated them. Thus, a brass serpent was lifted up as their representative and substitute. The children of Israel were both men and serpents. Likewise, the Lord Jesus rebuked the Pharisees saying, “You generation of vipers.” On one hand, the Pharisees were the generation of men; on the other hand, they were the generation of poisonous serpents. We all have two natures: one nature is good, for it was created by God; the other nature is evil, for it is the nature of Satan injected into our body at the time of the fall. The good nature is in our mind, and the evil nature is in our flesh, which is our fallen body. With each nature there is a law, and the two laws fight against one another. If you try to do good, whether or not you are saved, you will discover the warfare between these two laws. However, if you are a careless person you may not realize them. But, whenever you try to be good you will discover these two laws within you. Before you were saved you tried your best to be good, but eventually you were defeated. You discovered that within you are two things fighting each other. This is the reason some people try to develop a strong will to control and suppress the lust in their body. Regardless of their attempts, eventually none of them can succeed fully.

Therefore, Romans 7 is not the typical experience of a Christian. As long as you are a person who tries to do good you will have the experience of the conflict described in Romans 7. The experience of Romans 7 is for that kind of person.

D. The Body of This Death

In Romans 6:6 our fallen body is called “the body of sin,” but in 7:24 it is called “the body of this death.” The “body of sin” means that the body is indwelt, occupied, possessed, and utilized by sin to do sinful things. Thus, in sinning the body is active, capable, and full of strength. The “body of death” means that the body is poisoned, weakened, paralyzed, and deadened, unable to keep the law and to do good to please God. Thus, in keeping the law of God and in doing good to please God the body is weak and impotent; it is like a corpse. We all have experienced that in doing sinful things our body is capable and strong; it can never be tired. But in keeping the law of God or in doing good to please God the body is weak to the uttermost, as if it were dead. Therefore, if we try to keep the law or to please God by ourselves, it will be like dragging a corpse with us. The more we attempt to do good, the more death our body brings us. So, the Apostle Paul calls our body “the body of this death,” that is, the death of trying to keep the law and please God.

Regarding the body of sin, which is active and powerful with its lust in sinning, we do not need to try to suppress it by a strong will or by any other means. Romans 6:6 tells us that since our old man has been crucified with Christ, our “body of sin” has been “made of none effect,” meaning that it is now jobless. Since the sinning person, the old man, has been crucified, his body has nothing to do and is unemployed.

Regarding the body of death, we do not need to drag it with us any longer. Since we are a regenerated, new man and are freed from the law of the old man, we do not need to strive to keep the law, for such striving only causes more death through the fallen body, which is the flesh. As long as we live by the new man with our new husband, the living Christ, we are freed from the law and delivered from the flesh and from the law of sin within it.

E. The Wretchedness of Man Trying to Fulfill the Law

Man has become fleshly, sold under sin (v. 14). In man’s flesh dwells no good thing (v. 18), and

man is unable to master sin (vv. 15-20). In such a situation, if man tries to fulfill the law of God as Paul did, man surely will have nothing but failure. Everyone who attempts this is defeated and becomes a wretched man. The fallen man with the law of sin in his flesh is a helpless and hopeless case. After we have been saved, we should make no attempt to fulfill the law of God or to do good in order to please God. If we do, we will certainly experience Romans 7 and become a wretched man. We need to realize that we, as the old man, have been crucified with Christ and that, as the new man, we are freed from the old man's law and have been married to our new husband, the resurrected Christ, that we might bear fruit to God and serve the Lord in newness of spirit.