

“LAWFULLY MARRIED”

Studies in Romans – 9

Romans 7:1-13 (p. 1095)

Last week in chapter 6, Paul posed this soul-searching question: If it is true that, in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God has provided grace great enough to resolve the compounding crisis of sin, what difference does that make in the way you live your Christian life? If the sin in your life has more than met its match in Jesus, how does that affect the way you behave as Christ’s man or woman?

That’s not the sort of hypothetical question that dusty theologians love to debate. That question poses an immensely practical problem. Because, sooner or later, every Christians has to face the fact that, while sin has lost its death-grip on us in the death of our Lord, sin itself is not about to roll over die. In fact, sin still wreaks havoc in people’s lives – including Christian lives. That’s why one mark of Christian maturity is admitting that, even though we may be saints, we still act like sinners. Sin may no longer have the power to kill us, but it can sure make our Christian lives miserable.

Some Christians, however, have difficulty with this. They assume that because we died to sin in Christ, now that we’re born again we’re free from sin’s influence. But common sense tells us that’s simply not the case. We may be dead to sin, but sin isn’t dead to us. And anyone who tells you otherwise either isn’t playing with a full theological deck, or they’re covering something up. Set aside the problems with faulty theology, and just look for a moment at the cover-up.

It strikes me that some of the world’s best actors are Christian leaders. That was not intended as a compliment. Really it’s a tragedy, considering the kind of cover-up that goes on. Of all the people who should be realistic about the problem of sin in their lives, who ought to be able to admit their weakness openly, you would think that Christian leaders would be at the top of the list. Sadly, pastors can be the worst offenders. Even though, like all Christians, we can get sidetracked by doubts and immobilized by fears, many pastors have become adept at covering it up. We only want others to see our strength.

Thank God that wasn’t true of Paul. In Romans chapter 7, Paul does something he seldom does (which is what makes these words all the more precious). He begins to speak in very personal terms about his struggle with sin in his own life, both before and after he met the Lord Jesus. Speaking from the heart as he does, Paul demonstrates a kind of transparency that I fear is all too rare. As I think about it, the Christian leaders who have been most helpful to me are those

who have openly shared their inner struggles. And that's what Paul does for us here.

Chapter 7 is divided between his life before becoming a follower of Christ (verses 1-13) and his life as a follower of Christ (verses 14-25). There are at least two key pieces of evidence in the text that tell us this is the case. For one thing, in the first half (especially verses 7-13) the verbs are almost all in the past tense. He is speaking there of things that have happened and are done. But in the second half (in verses 14-25) the verbs are all in the present tense. He's describing the current state of affairs in his life. These are issues he's dealing with as he writes this letter.

The second piece of evidence is the way in which he describes his situation. In verses 7-13 Paul describes how sin sprang to life through the law and killed him. It finished him off! In fact Paul puts it quite bluntly; in verse 11 he writes: "*Sin... put me to death.*" But in the second half of the chapter, in verses 14-25, we find Paul not only very much alive; he is now engaged in a fierce ongoing battle with sin. In fact, near the end of the chapter, in verse 23, he'll write, "*I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law in my mind...*" In his life before Christ (Volume One) he was dead in the water. But ever since he was made alive in Christ (Volume Two) he's fighting sin tooth and nail.

Today we'll look at the first half of this chapter. Next time we'll see how Paul uses the last part of chapter 7 to set the stage for what may be the most remarkable chapter in this letter. Without question, chapter 8 is one of the greatest passages in all of Paul's writings. But for now, let's see what we can learn from our lesson today about our relationship to God's law.

Paul begins by drawing an analogy with marriage. Remember, all analogies have their limitations. Paul sets up the analogy by noting that, according to Jewish law, from the woman's perspective, marriage was a binding contract for life. As long as her husband was alive, she was stuck with him, for better or for worse. If the marriage relationship was insufferable, her only viable option was to make the best of the situation and hope that he would precede her in death – by a significant number of years. But let them be separated by death, and she would be free to remarry (hopefully a little more happily).

Now here's the analogy. In verse 4 Paul writes, "*...you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead...*" Paul reminds you, his reader, that in Volume One of your life story you were married to the law. And being married to the law was like being married to someone who was not only perfect in every way. Your spouse was the sort of perfectionist who expected the same perfect behavior out of you.

Just imagine what it would be like to be in that kind of a marriage. Every little mistake on your part, every oversight, every tiny infraction of your spouse's inflexible standard of perfection, would reinforce your sense of inadequacy – your

ineptness – your incompetence. How would you react under those circumstances? Be honest. Wouldn't there be times when you just felt like smacking him alongside the head? Even though you may love him, wouldn't you be tempted to get back at him, in spite of the fact that you'd feel guilty for doing it?

That, says Paul, is exactly what we would have done before we met Christ. In verse 5 he writes: “*When we were controlled by the sinful nature (Volume One of our story) the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.*” In other words, when we were “married to the law,” our constantly reinforced sense of incompetence eventually aroused our sinful passions. And so, because we knew we could never be perfect, we ended up doing things that were perfectly rotten. In Paul's words, we “bore fruit for death.”

But the analogy doesn't end there, thank God. Paul says that your old marriage to the law has ended in death. But it was Jesus who died. And in his death on the cross, every demand that the law ever made on you was satisfied once and for all. In Jesus' death on your behalf you have been set free to marry again. And here's the kicker. As you get to know the risen Lord Jesus, you begin to realize that this is the One who has always loved you, who loves you more than his own life. And as you give yourself to Him, heart and soul, you are finally able, in the words of vs. 4, to “bear fruit to God.” The perfection the law calls for can finally begin to blossom in your life. (Volume Two of your life is begun; and it will continue forever!)

It's a fine analogy; but Paul knows it can be misunderstood. So in verse 7 he anticipates the objection of the legalists, the lovers of the law, and asks, “*What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not!*” There is nothing wrong with the law. In fact, he says, if it weren't for the law I wouldn't have realized how sinful I am. I'd be lost and not even know it. The law was that solemn diagnostician that sat him down and said, “*Listen, Paul, this is your problem. You'd better do something about it, and do it now!*”

But Paul is also a realist. He had learned the law's limitations first hand. But it was a painful lesson – in fact it was a lesson that, in his own words, cost him his life. He writes in verse 10: “*I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life, actually brought death.*” What is Paul getting at?

I think Paul is alluding here to perhaps the darkest moment in his earlier life as a model of righteousness – back when he was “married” to the law. In Philippians 3 he wrote: “*If anyone else thinks he has reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless!*” Paul says that in his former life (that is, before he met Jesus) his pedigree, his passion and his perfection were second to none!

In spite of his impressive credentials, Paul says here in Romans 7 that sin, like a parasite, latched on to the law he loved and used that law to destroy him. Sin took hold of that which is good, and used it for its own dark purposes; and this is how it happened. We know that Paul was obsessed with enforcing God's law. The harder he tried, the farther he was willing to go. Then one day he went too far. He decided that, in order to protect God's law, he would go so far as to hunt down and kill anyone who opposed it. And this is how it got started.

Do you know when do we first meet Paul in the Bible? It's in Acts 7 – only there he was going by his Hebrew name, Saul. In fact, in Acts 7 we meet to two young men. One was a newly ordained deacon named Stephen. Stephen's mistake was that he talked openly about his faith in Jesus. Some people took offense and brought false charges against him. It wasn't long before they incited a mob to drag Stephen outside the city where they executed him. As that angry crowd pick up jagged pieces of limestone and battered the life out of Stephen, standing there and giving his blessing to this mob was a zealous young Pharisee named Saul.

From that very day it says that Saul "began to destroy the church." As a fanatical defender of God's law, Saul went from house to house, dragging off men and women to prison. He got papers from the high priest so he could go as far as Damascus to arrest followers of Jesus and bring them back for trial and execution.

If you're familiar with the story, you know that on that road and in the follow-up meeting with Christians in Damascus, Saul was brought to his knees. He came to the shattering realization that, in his passion for defending God, he had not only broken God's law, he had broken God's heart as well. And Saul died inside. Years later, in Romans, chapter 7, verse 13, Saul (now going by his Greek name, Paul) looked back on that lowest point in his life and wrote this: "*...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 be utterly sinful.*"

That was the point at which Saul the Pharisee died inside. But it was also the point at which Paul the Apostle was being born. Volume One of his life story was shutting down; Volume Two was beginning. As we will discover next time, the Apostle Paul would still go on struggling with sin. The difference, however, is that from that point on his daily battle with sin would be fought, not in the fear of defeat, but with the certainty of victory. Your assignment for next time is to study chapter 7, verses 14-25.