

Wretched Yet Righteous

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on November 7, 2021.

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. 7:14–25).¹

The Goodness of the Law

God gave the special revelation of his law to Israel at the base of Mount Sinai, full and complete. As comprehensive, we may best understand it as organized into three divisions: the moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments; the ceremonial law, containing ordinances of worship; and the civil (or judicial) law, directing the temporal governance of ancient national Israel. It was under this comprehensive law that Jesus came, living under the moral law, faithful to the ceremonial law, and according to the civil law. And it was regarding the law, as well as the rest of the Old Testament canon, that Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:17-18).

In his life, death, and resurrection, Christ did indeed fulfill the law. The ceremonial law was abrogated under the New Covenant. The civil law expired with the conclusion of ancient national Israel. And the condemnation of the law ceased for all who trust in the perfect righteousness of Christ. As such, for the Christian, God’s moral law becomes not a dirge but a delight, a rule of life for all saved by grace.

Understanding this, Paul’s response to the law is not to overthrow it. “On the contrary,” he says, “we uphold the law” (Rom. 3:31). Rightly does he confess that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Rom. 7:12). As the law of God is “the declaration of the will of God to mankind,”² it is of and from God, reflecting our sinfulness in the

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² “The Larger Catechism Q. 93,” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Lawrenceville: Christian Education & Publications, 2007), 229.

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mirror of God's holiness, restraining evil, and revealing the pleasure of God. God's law is indeed a blessing to the righteous. As the psalmist celebrates,

The perfect law of God
Revives the soul of man;
His statutes which are sure
Make wise the simple one.
The precepts of the LORD are right
And fill the heart with great delight.

God's radiant commands
Shed light on what we see;
The fear of God is pure
And lasts eternally.
The standards of the LORD express
His perfect truth and righteousness.

Of far more worth than gold—
Than much pure gold—they are;
Than honey from the comb,
Than honey sweeter far.
They warn the servant of the LORD;
In keeping them is great reward (Ps. 19:7-11).³

This is how good God's law is: perfect, reviving, sure, wisdom-giving, delightful, radiant, pure, eternal, expressing perfect truth and righteousness; beyond value and sweetness, warns and gives great reward.

The law is not the problem. The law is not of this world, but divine. Or, as Paul describes it, "the law is spiritual", but we are "of the flesh" (7:14). And that is the problem.

The Sinfulness of the Flesh

As if stating the obvious, Paul confesses what every living Christian must confess, "I am of the flesh" (7:14). Metaphorically using the Greek adjective typically used to describe body tissue, Paul describes the remains of the fallen human condition, his inheritance from his father Adam. In contrast to the "spiritual" law, he is fleshly or unspiritual. In describing himself this way, he is neither giving an excuse for sinning nor a description of victimhood but describing a paradox of the Christian life. We who have been born again to spiritual life, we who have been justified as righteous through faith in Christ, we who have been adopted as children of God, we who are being sanctified by the Holy Spirit are still captive to our sinful flesh. It is, as one commentator labels it, "the tyranny of indwelling sin."⁴

³ *Sing Psalms: New Metrical Versions of the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 2017), 46.

⁴ F.F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 156.

Adding to his metaphor of flesh, Paul says that he is “sold under sin” (7:14) and “captive to the law of sin” (7:23), referring not to his former condemning and damning enslavement to sin and death prior to his conversion but his temporal existence as a born again believer still temporarily captive to his sinful flesh, wretched yet righteous, already redeemed but not yet glorified. The Christian’s ongoing struggle with sin can feel like slavery at times, or a civil war within us. Paul described the struggle this way to the Galatians: “the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17).

Ever candid and perhaps perplexed, Paul confesses aloud, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (7:15). Such an honest statement is perhaps shocking from the apostle’s pen. I agree with Matthew Henry who said, “Had I been required to speak of Paul, I should have said, ‘O blessed man that thou art.’”⁵ But Paul knows the truth of his wretchedness, the corruption of his nature, and he knows we need to hear it. Because we too are frustrated by the, perhaps often unexpected, power and influence of our flesh. We know what the law says, and agree that it is good, but then our flesh rears its ugly head, leading us away from obedience and joy and toward sin and shame. Every Christian knows this experientially.

Though honest, you may find Paul’s confession discouraging. You may wonder, what good is the Christian faith if I am still captive to the flesh? You may think: My life seems the farthest thing from the successful Christian life. You may even be discouraged by the consistent evidence of indwelling sin. What encouragement is there for flesh-bound saints this side of glory? Yes, it is easy to focus on the power of the flesh in our life, but let me show you how the power of the Spirit prevails.

The Righteousness of the Spirit

Paul says, “I do not do what I want” (7:16); “I have the desire to do what is right” (7:18); “I do not do the good I want” (7:19); “I delight in the law of God, in my inner being” (7:22); and, “I myself serve the law of God with my mind” (7:25). There are three things I want to draw to your attention from these verses. First, God’s law is always good, even when we are bad. It does not change according to the winds of culture nor the ways of human behavior nor the whims of opinion. It remains the bedrock standard of holiness, righteousness, and goodness.

Second, our flesh does not define who we are; Christ does. He who could candidly confess, “I know nothing good dwells in me” (7:18) also confidently claimed, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come” (2 Cor. 5:17). We may be wretched in our flesh, but we are righteous in Christ Jesus.

Third, the Holy Spirit changes our desires from the sinfulness of the flesh to the righteousness of the Spirit. Guess what a child of God wants to do? What is the desire of every Christian? Do unbelievers delight in the law of God? Who delights? Who has a mind to serve the Lord and his law? Only those who are in the process of being conformed to Christ. We may be moral ruins

⁵ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible: Genesis to Revelation*, ed. Leslie F. Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 1770.

under construction,⁶ but we *are* under construction! The sanctifying work is underway. And one day the project of our sanctification will be finished, or as Ruth Bell Graham had put on her gravestone, “End of Construction—Thank you for your patience.”

For you and me, our construction is not yet complete; our salvation awaits us, which can sound contrary to the gospel, until we realize that we who have been *saved* are being *saved* and will be *saved* in the end. For example, Paul writes to the Ephesians, “For by grace you *have been saved* through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9, emphasis added). To the Corinthians he writes, “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who *are being saved* it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18, emphasis added). And to the Romans he writes, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more *shall we be saved* by him from the wrath of God” (Rom. 5:9, emphasis added). In all three cases Paul is describing one salvation but different aspects of it: past, present, and future.

When we are born again by the Holy Spirit, we are led to repentance and faith. Through faith we are justified, or reckoned, as righteous. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who is progressively sanctifying us. And, we will one day be glorified, freed from our sinfulness, living sinlessly in glorified bodies in the worshipful presence of God forever.

So today, we who have been justified are being sanctified, and yes, it is a bumpy ride, not because of the Spirit but the flesh. Yes, there will be days when we will cry out with Paul, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (7:24). And sometimes we will feel the farthest thing from Christlike, but as Paul reminded the Romans, we know that “if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Rom. 8:10). It is here in the Christian paradox of wretched yet righteous, in a state of already but not yet, that we do not despair but gives thanks: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Though we do not always do good, he has given us the desire to please the Lord. Though we do not always obey God’s law, he enables us to delight in it. We need not be discouraged in the painful construction of our sanctification, because “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:6). So let us pray in the Spirit:

Heavenly Father,
When thy Son, Jesus, came into my soul
instead of sin, he became more dear to me
than sin had formerly been;
his kindly rule replaced sin’s tyranny.
Teach me to believe that if ever I would have any sin
subdued
I must not only labour to overcome it,
but must invite Christ to abide in the place of it,
and he must become to me more than
vile lust had been;

⁶ R.C. Sproul, ed., *The Reformation Study Bible* (Orlando: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2015), 1991.

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that his sweetness, power, life may be there.
Thus I must seek a grace from him contrary to sin,
but must not claim it apart from himself.
When I am afraid of evils to come,
comfort me by showing me
that in myself I am a dying, condemned wretch,
but in Christ I am reconciled and live;
that in my self I find insufficiency and no rest,
but in Christ there is satisfaction and peace;
that in myself I am feeble and unable to do good,
but in Christ I have ability to do all things.
Though now I have his graces in part,
I shall shortly have them perfectly
in that state where thou wilt show thyself
fully reconciled,
and alone sufficient, efficient,
loving me completely,
with sin abolished.
O Lord, hasten that day.
Amen.⁷

⁷ Arthur Bennett, ed., *The Valley of Vision* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002), 294--95.