



Life Under the Law
Religion without Jesus is Nothing More than Rules We Cannot Follow
Romans 7:13-8:1

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Romans 7:13–8:1

“Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? Far from it! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by bringing about my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful. For we know that the Law is spiritual, but **I am fleshly, sold into bondage to sin. For I do not understand what I am doing; for I am not practicing what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate. However, if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, that the Law is good. But now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me,**



but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I do the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin that dwells in me. **I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully agree with the law of God in the inner person, but I see a different law in the parts of my body waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin, the law which is in my body's parts.** Wretched man that I am! **Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. Therefore there is now no condemnation at all for those who are in Christ Jesus.**" (NASB 2020)

Paul is now speaking about himself. This is Paul pre-realm change. This is Paul the Pharisee who outwardly appeared to have it all together as he hunted down Christians, but as we are going to discover, not so much together as one would think. His focus is still on the Mosaic law, and he is still addressing the elephant in the room.

We know this to be the case from Paul's own statement in verse 14.

Romans 7:14

"For we know that the Law is spiritual, but **I am fleshly, sold into bondage to sin.**" (NASB 2020)

More on that to come.

Remember this as well, Paul has already told us that this is God's Law, it is spiritual and it is good. But what happens when we try to deal with the demands of the Law, while still in the flesh? His preliminary conclusion, which we examined last time, is in verse 13.

Romans 7:13

"Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? Far from it! **Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by bringing about my death through that which is good,** so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful." (NASB 2020)

For the person who does not know Jesus Christ, for the person who does not have the Holy Spirit living inside of them, for the religious individual who thinks they can do this on their own and tough it out...you can't. The Law cannot and does not save us from our slavery to sin, it reveals that slavery to us. It does indeed tell us what the elements of that sin looks like, but that is all. The Law cannot and will not justify us, it will not and cannot sanctify us. Only Jesus Christ can do that.

But what does life look like if we do indeed try to go it without Jesus? This also includes the one who is a believer and falls away.

You see, a believer can make a decision that will cut off the ability to hear from the Holy Spirit. Sin which grieves Him. In other words, saved but in the flesh.

There are way too many people running around today in churches all over the world who are saved, but in the flesh. These nominal worldly Christians turn towards religion and legalism in order to feel like they are getting by, but I have news for you. It will not work, not ever.

Galatians 5:17

"For the desire of the flesh is against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, in order to keep you from doing whatever you want." (NASB 2020)



We must make a decision every single morning and most likely several times during each and every day after we come to Christ. Serve the Lord, walk in the Spirit or, do my own thing. Can we, as followers of Jesus Christ, if we have opted to live in the flesh failing to live by the Spirit, experience what Paul explains here? The answer to that question by the way is...yes.

I find this in verse 13 to be, for me, a pointer that this is autobiographical for Paul as well as illustrative.

Paul does indeed talk about his own life as a young Jewish man and as a Pharisee, but he also leaves this broad enough so that all of us can drive through this before we come to Christ as well if we opt to live in the flesh. Looking at the first phrase in verse 13, "Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me?" There are two words which are interesting to me, in the Greek; the phrase "death for me" is just two words. θάνατος ἐμοὶ (Thanatos egō). The death of or for me. Paul is talking about himself. "This passage depicts Paul (and us) trying to defeat sin in his/our own strength and finally learning to surrender to Christ and the Spirit." (Osborne 2017, 207)

Romans 7:14

"For we know that **the Law is spiritual**, but **I am fleshly, sold into bondage to sin.**" (NASB 2020)

For Paul as well as for all of us. Before we came to Jesus Christ, we were fleshly. The Greek word for flesh is σάρξ (sarks). This word as used here "denotes human nature and all that is peculiar to it, in and according to its corporeal embodiment, and hence, sinfully conditioned human nature." (Bullinger 1908, 134)

I am fleshly means "I am not saved and I am operating devoid of any spiritual direction at all."

Paul likes to use this term using it at least 26 times here in the book of Romans alone. What we are learning here in Romans 7 is important for Paul and for those of us who have opted for realm change and are now living for heaven rather than self.

Life prior to "belonging to Christ" is characterized as life in the flesh, which in turn is defined as a life of sinful passions aroused by the law and producing death. The flesh is linked to sin, law, and death. To live in the flesh is to live in the old age rather than the age to come. (Toews 2004, 380)

To live in the flesh, once we have opted for realm change and begun to live for Jesus, is a backwards step. It is equivalent to the recently released slaves of Israel wanting to return. God rescued them from slavery, brought them across the Red Sea on dry ground with mighty miracles, brought water from the rock at Horeb, gave them manna and then showed up in might and power there at Mount Sinai. Not only that, as He also provided for all the food needs of the people, He demonstrated His loving care there at Mount Sinai. So, what happens as soon as they set off for Canaan? They complain about pretty much everything even referring to going back to their old life in Egypt. Why?

Numbers 11:4-6

"Now the rabble that was among them had a strong craving. And the people of Israel also wept again and said, **"Oh that we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."**" (ESV)

When we come to Christ as Savior and Lord, He changes us from the realm of the flesh which has as an endpoint, hell and the second death, to the realm of heaven and eternal life. We now have all of the benefits of being one of His kids as well as all of the responsibilities as well.



Responsibility number one is obedience to Him and learn how to live in the family. I mean, He has just given them His law and one of them was about caring for parents. "As God promises to take care of his dependents, Israel, for a long time in the promised land, so individual Israelites must take care of their dependent parents for a long time, as necessary, in their own families... There is not promise here of individually long life spans. Rather the promise refers to God's protection of his covenant people if and as long as they keep his covenant." (Stuart 2006, 461-462)

The key is obedience. The reminder, God will indeed take care of you and has already done so with security, protection, water, food, and much more. He does the same for us too as we come to Christ. But for some of us, we remember the leeks and the onions and the garlic. The so called "good things" of life that we enjoyed prior to coming to Christ. And even though some of those good things came with a huge price tag attached, like slavery and death, as time goes by, we don't see the slavery part anymore. Satan lies to us and hides that reality from us enticing us to think it was better doing some of the things we used to do. And when we give into the temptation, we are the ones who do that. Back to the flesh we go.

James 1:13-15

"Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for **God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one. But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.** Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." (ESV)

We have willingly ignored the way of escape we had.

1 Corinthians 10:13

"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. **God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape,** that you may be able to endure it." (ESV)

For the one who does not know Jesus, they are sitting ducks. They already belong to the enemy.

For those of us who know Him, we have His Holy Spirit and the promise of a way of escape, but it does require a decision on our part. Live to the Spirit or live to the flesh. Yielding to the flesh starts the process of binding us again. Don't go there. As believers, we do indeed know better, Paul though picks up with the one who is not saved or who is deep into the flesh. And he is still writing about himself by the way. He is fleshy, carnal, subject to and under the influence of the world. Not free, still a slave to sin. As Christians, we are free, but are we living it out; fully appropriating it in the Spirit?

Romans 7:15-17

"For I do not understand what I am doing; for I am not practicing what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate. However, if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, that the Law is good. But now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin that dwells in me." (NASB 2020)

As a follower of Jesus Christ, Paul now has the ability to look back and see himself and as he does so, he portrays his inability to do what the Law says to do as a failure to do what he wills. For the person without Jesus, that means following rules to the letter and for Paul, that was defeating. He admits his failure, it was indeed a heart problem.

Deuteronomy 10:12-16

"And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments and statutes of the LORD, which I am commanding you today for your good?



Behold, to the LORD your God belong heaven and the heaven of heavens, the earth with all that is in it. Yet the LORD set his heart in love on your fathers and chose their offspring after them, you above all peoples, as you are this day. **Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn.**" (ESV)

He reads the Law and as a observant Jew and Pharisee, realizes he needs to follow the Law. But he can't do it. How do I do what Moses says? Was he fully aware of this at the time before the encounter on the road to Damascus, that we do not know, but we do know that as he looks back, he realizes the futility of trying to follow the Law in the flesh.

At one base I served at, we had a problem with folks driving too fast in the housing area, especially when it was bus pick up or drop off time for students. Everyone was always in a hurry, and we did everything we could to try and make sure folks would follow the law. The speed limit was 10 when the light was flashing. Ever try and do that?

We wanted 20, no one would do 20 they would do 30. We had the sign changed to say 15, and they still did 30, so we changed it to 10. The only difference now was the dollar amount on the ticket for civilians, or the mandatory visit with the Commander for military members. That worked better than the sign did. We even had an accident there at the crossing and the car that hit the student in the cross walk was doing, 8 or 9 miles per hour. The student was in the cross walk, ticket. But not the severity that it could have been. Our problem, folks wanted to follow the law, but either didn't, couldn't, or didn't care. What worked well was someone standing and pointing a radar gun right at you. That is not sustainable.

These were not bad people; they wanted to do the right thing. But life would get in the way. Paul dealt with the same thing in his personal life. Having the Lord standing there with a radar gun probably would not have worked for him either.

Back in the 18th century, some churches in Britain realized the disconnect between wanting and doing just in the church service. So, some came up with the staff position of "sluggard-waker."

This was due to the length of time some would teach, hours. Makes me feel better already. "Not surprisingly, the more elderly members of the congregation tended to doze off and a "Sluggard-waker" was appointed to patrol the church to keep an eye open for any offenders. Men would be prodded with a stick which had something softer, such as feathers, on the other end for the fairer sex. At Benenden, John Barber was paid 8 shillings in 1792 for "walking the church". (The Marsh Warblers n.d.)

Paul wanted to follow the law, but there were gaps that existed and he was having difficulty reconciling those gaps between the wanting and the doing. And without Christ, those gaps would remain. Only Jesus can do what Moses stated was required, a heart change.

What Paul wills is that "good" required by God's law; the "evil" that he does, which he hates and does not acknowledge, is, then, a collective term for those things prohibited and in conflict with God's law. (Moo 2018, 479)

This problem did not come up because of the Law. He tells us once again in verse 16 that the Law is good. The Law provides instructions on how to live. The problem is not the lack of wanting to do the right thing, it is the sin to which the unbeliever is under the control of. For the believer who has surrendered to the flesh, the old man is dead, but that old sin nature has just been given a shot of go juice by the believer giving in to temptation and the problem for the believer, until they return to the Lord, is indeed the flesh. For the person who is unsaved, this is life as normal, but for those of who know Christ, this discovery that we still have a barely controllable sin problem is not fun to discover. We need Jesus, all the time.



It comes as a terrible discovery for a new believer, or an untaught believer, to realize that their problem with sin is complex. (Constable 2003, Ro 7:17)

Romans 7:18–20

“For I know that good does not dwell in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I do the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin that dwells in me.” (NASB 2020)

If good does not dwell in me, before Jesus, that means I was totally depraved.

Total depravity before coming to Christ does not mean that before coming to Christ, you didn't want to do the right thing. We have seen here that Paul wanted to do so but failed in the execution consistently. Why? His depravity. He has already told us earlier in Romans 2:14-15 that we have a conscience, but that is not turned into inherent moral ability.

Folks who do not know Christ can indeed do good. Remember the work of the Holy Spirit to restrain evil before the rapture is very real. This helps unsaved people to do good works. I used to watch that take place every single year when it was campaign time for a specific charity my employer worked with.

People volunteered to do good works and help others who were less fortunate, but it was always a quid pro quo situation. You get time off to do so. You get noticed by your boss and the big wigs of the company. You get paraded up on stage as a “big donor.” In other words, selfish motives.

Prior to coming to Christ, yes, I was totally depraved, but no, I did not go out and try and commit every single sin. And I was not as evil as I could be either. But the problem is this, sin is degenerative and as time goes by, left untreated, moral deterioration gets worse and worse.

2 Timothy 3:13

“But evil people and impostors **will proceed from bad to worse**, deceiving and being deceived.” (NASB 2020)

I remember dealing with someone who never gave their life to Jesus. This individual did not start off life with the goal to be as wicked as possible and to see how many other people's lives could be destroyed in the process. But we also do not know who or what the Holy Spirit has used to restrain the evil. In this person, it was the death of his mother. When she went home to be with the Lord, yes, she was saved where he was not, it was as if the restraints had been removed.

And he was no longer a young man either.

So, in his early 50's, he began to act out on things he may have done as a younger man but had played the game of being a family man for decades. He was always verbally and emotionally abusive, but now it became more physical, and when he impregnated another woman, much younger than him, he was shocked when his wife of over 30 years divorced him. He lost his entire family as a result.

His anger went off the charts as did his blood pressure and the strokes began to take place. He married and then divorced wife two and settled on wife three and all of this in around 5 to 10 years after his mother died. The restrainer had been removed.

The cost, his entire family left him, his children wanted nothing to do with him and after another series of strokes, he died a confused angry man not understanding why his first wife, since he had lost all knowledge of the previous 20 years, would not come and pick him up from the hospital. Total depravity, if



left untreated and uncontrolled, always leads to the same endpoint. Satan hates all of us and wants us dead. Those who do not know Jesus, seem to participate with that activity.

Total depravity does not mean that the unsaved have all made the same progress in sinning. The level of depravity expressed among the unsaved is variegated; some are worse sinners than others. The variation is analogous to a cemetery where all inhabitants are equally dead but not all are equally decomposed. (McCune 2009, 63)

We all need Jesus because without Him, we are indeed slaves to sin. That old man must die. A regime change, a realm change is indeed required. Again, why is that the case?

Romans 7:20–21

“But if I do the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.” (NASB 2020)

Before Christ, the old man is the problem. After coming to Christ, it is that nagging sin nature that is still there. Before coming to Christ, Paul knew there was a problem but was incapable of resolving it. After coming to Christ, he now knows the problem, the diagnosis and the solution. And it is all based on a decision we make and keep making as we reject what the flesh wants us to do. I like how Dr. McGee puts it.

When you are attempting to serve God in the Spirit, have you discovered that the old nature is right there to bring evil? Perhaps an evil thought will come into your mind. Every child of God, regardless of his state, must admit that in every act and in every moment evil is present with him. Failure to recognize this will eventually lead to shipwreck in the Christian life. (McGee 1997, 694)

Ephesians 2:8–10

“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. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” (ESV)

Paul, as a professional law keeper, a Pharisee was not engaging intentionally in the sin he found himself doing. But without Christ, he was a slave to sin.

When Paul tells us “I am no longer the one doing it,” he is not saying the devil made me do it. Sorry Flip Wilson, but that is simply not the case. “But things being what they are, it is the indwelling sin that brings about the evil action. Paul’s will is not behind it. He is not saying that he is not responsible; after all, it is his action. He is saying that he is no careless or audacious sinner. His will is firmly in opposition to evil, and that is to be borne in mind in assessing the situation.” (Morris 1988, 294)

Without Christ, sin is right there waiting, lurking and controlling, we are enslaved. But in Christ, we have been set free.

John 8:34–36

“Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (ESV)

We have already been told by Paul, that when we come to Jesus Christ, that slavery has ended. Jesus said the same thing.

Here is what Paul drilled into us earlier here in Romans.



Romans 6:4–7

“Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too may walk in newness of life. **For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for the one who has died is freed from sin.**” (NASB 2020)

As a believer, if you find yourself falling into this trap, Jesus Christ has set us free. Repent, return and reestablish the relationship.

1 John 1:6–10

“If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. **If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous, so that He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.” (NASB 2020)

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul referred to this as dying daily (1 Corinthians 15:31). He also stated to them what he had to do personally.

1 Corinthians 15:34

“Sober up morally and stop sinning, for some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.” (NASB 2020)

In our culture, Satan is working to put the follower of Jesus into a stupor of sorts as he uses the culture to get us to just get along with the culture. That makes us more like the world than Jesus. Remember, we now live for a new King, His name is Jesus. We are part of His family now and will live with Him forever. Let's learn to live as members of that family. In Christ, we can indeed go there, without Him, it is not even possible.

Romans 7:22–24

“For I joyfully agree with the law of God in the inner person, but I see a different law in the parts of my body waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin, the law which is in my body's parts. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (NASB 2020)

We all know what we should do, even before coming to Christ we know that. I have interviewed numerous people who have been the cause of a traffic accident and most say the same thing, “I knew better.” There is that occasional person who is so far gone that they want to know why their driving the wrong way on the road caused the accident.

But most folks are not like that. Saved or unsaved, most do not start off the day saying “Today, I want to damage a couple of cars and put myself and several others into the hospital.” As they began their day, they were just doing another day and then boom, a decision had to be made. I think I can beat that yellow. But no, you didn't. And now, reality jumps in.

The harsh truth for some, you sped up to do this and as a result were speeding at the time of the accident. Suddenly it goes from the realm of unintentional to, in the eyes of the law, an intentional act. But I agreed with the red light, I agreed with speed, but what did I do?



I have seen folks fall into despondency and deep depression over the realization that their actions not only were the cause of the accident, but the cause others being hurt as well. And now, because of the speed issue, there is the idea of intentionally and if someone has lost their life, serious criminal charges being brought. What have I done?

This is similar to the idea of what Paul is talking about here. Leon Morris continues “He is contrasting the real Paul, the Paul who is known only in the deep recesses of the man, and who delights in the law of God, with that other Paul who so readily does the sin of which the real Paul does not approve. It is true that the regenerate Paul would abhor that evil, and it is also true that the respectable and intellectual Paul would abominate it. But would the unregenerate delight in the law of God? I doubt it.” (Morris 1988, 295)

Paul comes to a serious conclusion about his status without Jesus, trying to do the Law in his own strength and failing...continually.

Romans 7:24

“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (NASB 2020)

There is a hard reality we confront when we come to Christ, the more we follow Him, the more we learn of His ways and who He is and how absolutely Holy God is, we tend to look at ourselves way differently than we did before.

This is what is so disgusting about many of the vapid tropes and phrases that we hear coming from the Laodicean church all around us. It is not about loving yourself above all else and having your best life now. It is all about loving the Lord preeminently above everything.

Many of us, before coming to Christ, can identify with Paul and many of us, after coming to Christ, can identify with Paul. “The more we advance spiritually the more clearly we see the high standards God sets for his people and the more deeply we deplore the extent of our shortcoming. Paul is surely referring to his own experience.” (Morris 1988, 296)

Paul does not leave us there, neither does Jesus. We get it, before Jesus, we are depraved and are wretches. But once we come to Jesus, we are a child of the King.

Romans 7:25–8:1

“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. Therefore there is now no condemnation at all for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (NASB 2020)

Paul realizes who he is in Christ. Before Christ, victory was not possible, now in Christ, victory is possible and only because of Jesus. He still makes a reference though about the dichotomy of who we truly are, saved and in the Spirit, yet still living in a fallen body on a fallen world.

Yes, there is application to us as followers of Jesus here.

The Law does not and cannot save. Before Christ, that is obvious from what Paul says here. For the believer, the proliferation of rules, ordinances, commands, and legalism, which is popular in many religious circles, does nothing more than frustrate us if we are unsaved to begin with, or living in the flesh. But if you are wanting to keep people closely tied to you and your “church” it will work, for a while until they learn the truth of God’s word.

Paul pronounces that truth in His glorious statement of true deliverance from the faulty life without Jesus and the faulty life of religion, once it has been trashed for true faith in Jesus.



Romans 8:1

“Therefore there is now no condemnation at all for those who are in Christ Jesus.” (NASB 2020)

What is the therefore there for? It is there because of where Paul has been in explaining what his life was prior to Christ, it is there for us to understand how we as followers of Jesus may possibly allow ourselves to be sucked down into the muck of the past, it is also there for the future.

This is the ultimate verdict; this is the why Paul can say “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ.” The verdict is, for those in Christ, no condemnation.

This place of confidence and peace comes after the confusion and conflict that marked Romans 7. Now Paul looks to Jesus and he finds his standing in Him. (Guzik 2013, Ro 8:1)

If you identify more with the issue Paul has just gone over than with the glorious future we have in Jesus. Join with us and move to the no condemnation column of the ledger.

Romans 3:21–24

“But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.” (NLT)

Romans 10:9–13

“If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God, and it is by openly declaring your faith that you are saved. As the Scriptures tell us, “Anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced.” Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord, who gives generously to all who call on him. For “Everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.”” (NLT)

ABC’s of Salvation

- A. Acknowledge that you are a sinner, tell Him that.
- B. Believe that Jesus died on the cross for our sin and that He rose from the dead.
- C. Confess that Jesus is Lord. Tell someone about what you have done.

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