

Sermon 56: Romans 7:5-6: Flesh and Spirit

OUTLINE

In the flesh
Of the Spirit

INTRODUCTION

We are all familiar with dramatic before and after stories. We have heard the stories about men and women who have lost 25 kilograms, went to gym and got a six pack. Or men and women who have had their teeth fixed, a face lift, some hair plucking, a proper haircut and some stylish clothes picked out by a fashion consultant. These, before and after stories, have been told about houses, businesses, neighbourhoods, etc. Well, Paul is going to tell the before and after story of a Christian in relation to the law in Romans 7:5-6. Remember that Paul is dealing with the Law question that would have been on so many people's minds. The question of, if we are saved by faith and the only purpose of the law is to increase sin and not holiness, what is the purpose and nature of the law? He has told us *that* we are dead to the law, and *how*, through the body of Christ. Mentioning the fact that through our union with Christ we are to bear the fruit of holiness, Paul launches into a before picture in v5 referring to our former condition as, 'in the flesh,' and how the law could only bear fruit for death; as well as an after picture in v6 described as service 'in the new way of the Spirit.'

These two verses are the launch pad for the rest of the chapter. The thoughts that Paul lays out in these two verses explain the rest of chapter seven. He has just made the statement in v5 that the law arouses our sinful passions to produce sin, this statement needs explanation which shows that the law is in fact holy and the source of sin is ourselves and that the law is in no way dysfunctional. We see Paul showing how the law produces sin in the unbeliever v7-13, as well as the law continuing to aggravate the remaining sinfulness of even the regenerate, 14-25. The law, due to the weakness of our flesh can only produce death, this is why we need Christ for justification and the Spirit for sanctification, not the law for justification and sanctification. The law due to our sinfulness in fact proves to have a negative effect, something totally unexpected by those who would have thought that the law was the silver bullet that enables the Jews to get into heavens by works. We will look at Paul's description of life as an unbeliever and what the law did in that condition; as well as what Paul means by serving in the new way of the Spirit.

In the flesh

In verse 5 Paul takes us to the before picture, a very sad story of what we used to be before we were united to Christ. 'For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.' Here he shows us that far from being a stairway to heaven the law was an anchor around our ankles, that it had the surprisingly negative effect of compounding our sins not helping us out of them. The pressing question that forces itself upon is, what does Paul that the law arouses sin? This is

the very question that Paul answers in 7-13 showing us that we sin not because the law is sinful but because we are and the law is the mirror which exposes us for what we are. Paul does not leave it at that he adds a second example from the life of the believer in v14-25 showing how the law continues to expose our remaining sin. This is all in aid of defending the law from making us in any way sinful. Paul's wording in 5:21 and here in 7:5 seem to paint the picture of the law making us sin, the rest of this chapter is an argument to show that sin is our fault and the law merely exposes us for what we are. Since Paul is going to deal with this issue in detail in the rest of the chapter for the sake of not being too repetitious I will leave off those statements about the law for now and focus instead on what Paul says about the flesh.

You will notice at the beginning of verse 5 that Paul speaks of the before picture as 'in the flesh.' What does this mean? The word 'flesh' is one of those words that has many meanings, and if you read the wrong meaning into it you go down a wrong trail. For example, the word 'flesh' can mean a body, Jesus became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). The reference is neutral and not negative in any way. Then we have the word 'flesh' used in distinction with 'Spirit' indicating something that is dead and weak, that is marked by inertia and inability, we see this in Isaiah 31:3, 'The Egyptians are man, and not God, and their horses are flesh, and not spirit....' Do you see how the weakness of the Egyptians is caught in the word 'flesh' and this is set against the power of God's Spirit. Jesus uses it this way in John 3:6, 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.' In the context of the new birth we cannot give ourselves regeneration from any power within ourselves we need God to reach down and save us by His power. Thirdly, we see Paul using the word to describe the sinful nature within every person, Christian or not in Galatians 5:17, 'For 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.' Flesh is shorthand for describing those contrary desires that war within us. Then we also see a fourth use in Paul where he uses the word flesh to describe life in Adam, the condition of being under law, under the dominion of sin and far from God, and this is the way he is using it in 7:5, to describe our pre-Christian, adamic condition.

Let me show you what happens if you get these definitions confused. Firstly, let apply this to Christ. We are told in John 1:14 that the Word became 'flesh' which one of the four are we to use to describe this description. 1. A body; 2. Weakness; 3. A sinful nature; or 4. Our situation in Adam? Some have made the mistake of saying definition number three, thinking that every reference to flesh is negative and there are no neutral ones. This has resulted in some scholars saying that Jesus did not merely have a human nature kept from sin, but that He took to Himself a sinful nature. This of course undermines the sinlessness of Christ and cannot be accepted. Another well-known error is what is called, the 'Carnal Christian' doctrine. There are those who think that Christians can be in the 'flesh' and need a further step in commitment or experience to move from the flesh into the Spirit and become victorious and surrendered Christians. This error comes from 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, 'But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, 3 for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among

you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?’ In these verses Paul is not creating a category of fleshly versus Spiritual Christians but is comparing the immaturity of the Corinthians to unbelievers. This distortion has led many to seek second experiences and has even resulted in the preaching of the Gospel without repentance. Campus Crusade have preached a Gospel where you accept Jesus as Saviour, this gets you to the rung of being a fleshly Christian, and you only need to exercise faith to get here. Then when you are ready you practice repentance and accept Him as Lord, and this gets you into the Spiritual category. This teaching divides Christ, separates faith and repentance which the Spirit always produces together and creates people who have an intellectual faith but have never seen their sins and turned to Christ in truth. All because we got the word ‘flesh’ wrong!

Paul is talking about what we used to be when we were strangers to Christ, enemies of God, dead in our sins, under the dominion of satan and the condemnation of the law. A Christian can never be in this situation, we are united to Christ and through Him we have died to the law through His fulfilling of it, we are dead to the power of sin and flooded with His resurrection power for holiness, we are in the Spirit. Paul contrasts these two conditions of being in the flesh and in the Spirit in the very next chapter. Romans 8:5-8, ‘For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. 6 For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. 8 Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.’ Do you see how it is impossible for a Christian to be in the flesh and a Christian at the same time by this particular use of the word flesh?

Now we know that the Christian is, ‘in the Spirit’ but what is the Christians continuing relationship to sin and the flesh? As we read verse 5 we see that it speaks about sinful passions that are aroused by the law within us, as Christians we still experience an ongoing struggle with sinful desires, how then do we talk about a Christian’s ongoing struggle with sin if we are not in the flesh? Theologians have coined a very important phrase which helps us to understand our present situation as Christians, it is called, ‘the already but not yet.’ If you have never heard it before it sounds very confusing but I want to show you how this is the best way to discuss the Christians ongoing relationship with sin and the flesh.

Firstly, think of the flesh as representing everything that is part of this present evil age which is fading away. Then think about the Spirit as everything that belongs to the new Creation. The believer’s life is the place where these two ages collide, we are in the Spirit, that is we have eternal resurrection life and can never die, only fall asleep; but we are still in a body that is still affected by sin and has contrary and sinful desires. The ‘Spiritual’ life is lived ‘in the flesh’. Paul sums up this tension in Galatians 2:20, ‘I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but *Christ who lives in me*. And the life I now live *in the flesh* I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.’ You can say that although we are no longer ‘in the flesh’ as in Adam, ‘the flesh’ is still in us as in a sinful nature. We do not walk in the flesh, as in being ruled by it and under its power, but we do

walk in it, in that we live in these bodies that still love sin. This results in Christians feeling like strangers to themselves and aliens in their own bodies, they love God and hate sin but still see the desires for sin as a law in their members. This is the conflict that Paul sums up in Romans 7:22-24, 'For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 23 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. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?' It is because of this tug of war within us that Paul writes in Galatians 5:16-17, 'But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For 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.' The good news is that these are not two equal powers within us, because we are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, we have died to the power of sin and the remaining sin within us is not stronger than the Spirit. This is the battle between equals but the battle between sin that is dying and the Spirit who is bringing the new unconquerable day of the New Kingdom. Verse 6 catches this new atmosphere in the life of the believer.

Of the Spirit

V6. 'But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.' Although we are in the body we are not in the flesh. Paul is not talking about a special group of Christians who have ascended the ladder of Spiritual experience but every Christian. While we were in sin, the law was our boss, the law held us prisoner for judgement, for condemnation. We were not free but now Christ has fulfilled all the demands of the law and having died with Him we are released from the condemnation of the law. Not only that Paul tells us that the negative way in which our sinfulness was provoked to inevitable sin is also overcome and now we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not the old way of the written code. Lets look at a comparison between the new and the old.

Firstly, the old way of the written code was, 'Do this and you shall live,' life by law demanded perfection which we could never offer. The new way of the Spirit says, 'you cannot do it, so Christ will do it all.' But there is more. Not only does God supply what we need to be free from the condemnation of the law and accepted by God to serve. We are told that we are supplied now by the Spirit so that the irresistible force of Christ's resurrection is flooding our lives producing a harvest of new fruit alien to our weak natures. The old way of the law had to do as if our lives depended on it, but not anymore now we do because we have been made alive in Christ. In the old way of self-salvation the only reservoir for power we had to call on was the poor polluted wells of our fallenness, but not anymore we have been flooded with the New Kingdom power of the Spirit to bring about New Creation fruit in the barren land. The contrast between Law and Gospel says, 'Do this and you shall live, turned to, because you live now do.' But Paul is not merely contrasting Law with Gospel but Law and Spirit, so the contrast should be the added, 'Do this and you shall live, turned to, because you now live and are united to Christ's resurrection power by the Spirit, go and do with the certainty of His supply and power.'

Secondly, the old way of serving was dominated by self-interest and fear. The law demanded perfection and we had to keep it perfectly for salvation, our only motives would not have been love for God and self, and fear would have been our driving concern. But now, Christ has done all we could never do, and supplied us with His power for the new tasks of doing we are called to. Now we go to our good deeds, not out of self-preservation but gratitude, not with a sense of inevitable failure and punishment following, but with trust knowing that God supplies where He commands, and we can never disqualify ourselves. Paul describes the way of the Spirit as liberty, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.' (2 Cor. 3:17). But the law was called a burden/yoke and an impossible thing to keep, in Acts 15 when the apostles were discussing whether the Gentiles should keep the Law Peter stood up and said, 'And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, 9 and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. 10 Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? 11 But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'" We serve as sons not as slaves with hope and not despair.

Thirdly, the old way of law is characterised by shallow external religion, but the way of the Spirit focuses on the inward and intended meaning of the law. Look at Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. We see Jesus challenging the shallow, externalizing, religion of the Pharisees who had lost the true interpretation of the law. We see Christ applying the law both inwardly and outwardly when he challenges hate and lust and not only murder and adultery. We see Him challenging the small seeds of sin as well as the full grown ones when he takes on those thoughts and not only the actions. We see Him concerned with a lawkeeping that agrees with love not merely an external observation that makes loopholes for itself. This is the new way in which we serve. We do not merely have the law written externally on stone, but we have had God write the law on our hearts, so not only do we know it, we desire it. The old way of the law was ignorant and reinterpreted it to suite ourselves, we now see the heart of the law, we have had the veil removed in Christ and pursue holiness in truth and not in a legalistic fashion.

As you examine these differences you should feel desperately sorry for those who are still under the way of law. Think of the Seventh Day Adventists, they are so moral, they seem like such nice people, they agree with all the virtues we uphold, but the terrible difference is that they believe that their salvation depends on their lawkeeping. The good looking veneer of their religion is hiding a slavery that holds a person in darkness, fear and death. The good teaching in Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Mormonism, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the wonderful way of life that even politicians say all that religion is good for is a terrible slavery that ends in hell. Those people, those model citizens who think they are good enough and don't need God in New Zealand, those people who have happy lives because they get some of the benefits of God's morality who are in false religions and truth denying cults. They are slaves, and they are as bound in sin as a Satanist or a drug dealing, murdering, child molester. But that sinner who turns to Christ totally dependent on His death for righteousness, that alcoholic, or divorcee, or prostitute, or prisoner is free who have turned

away from law, that is any attempt to save themselves and cast themselves on God's mercy and the work of Christ.

And I have to ask you, are you functioning according to law or the new way of the Spirit?

If you are presently punishing yourself for some sin that you have done and are not resting in what Christ has done as sufficient to fully pay for your sin before God you are living by law not the new way of the Spirit.

If you have trusted in Christ but are filled with anxiety and care that you have broken your salvation and are living in constant fear of God judging you to hell, you are living law not the Spirit.

If you are suffering in sickness of financial problems are you feel that God is punishing you for your past sins, and not dealing with you as a Father to refine you, you are living according to law and not the new way of the Spirit.

If you are trying to buy blessings from God by being good, or trying to buy an answer to prayer by being good, then you are living by law and not the Spirit.

If you are battling sin with a mindset that says I can never change then you are living as if you are still under law and not united to Christ by the Spirit.

If you are having marriage problems because you are hanging onto every bad thing that your spouse has ever done to you, you are living your life by the principles of law and demanding perfection and not applying the grace that has been given to us, but forgiveness is part of the new way of the Spirit.

If you are terrorizing your children, and believe that shouting more and giving harder hidings will make your children good, then you have fallen prey to legal thinking that thinks law can change the heart, and have not realised that it is the Spirit by grace that renews the heart, and that we should be preaching the Gospel to our children for change.

We are free, serving is a joy, growth is possible this is the way of the Spirit, are you walking in it, or are you still thinking like you are under law?