

Spirit Versus Flesh

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[0:00] Good morning. My name is Matthew Capone and I'm one of the pastors here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church and it's my joy to bring God's word to you today.

I'm especially grateful we didn't have to cancel services because of the snow and I'm grateful for all of you who braved it and made it here this morning. We are continuing our series in the book of Romans and you'll remember that the book of Romans is a letter written by the Apostle Paul in the 50s AD and it is called Romans because it is written to the churches in the city of Rome.

This letter is about the gospel. It's about the good news of Jesus' life and death and resurrection and we are in the middle right now of Romans chapter 7 which is about the law of God.

What is it that we mean when we say the law? What is the law of God? Well it is God's commandments to mankind and we have the law summarized for us in the Bible in two different ways.

In the Old Testament the law is summarized by the Ten Commandments. We find that in Exodus chapter 20 and Deuteronomy chapter 5. In the New Testament in Matthew chapter 22 Jesus gives us a different summary of the law. He breaks it down not into ten things but into two things and he says the law is to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

[1:28] Now those are not unrelated. When Jesus says love God he's talking about the first four of the Ten Commandments. When he says love your neighbor as yourself he's talking about commandments 5 through 10.

Now I think I've mentioned before that as we're in chapter 7 we are in one of the most complicated parts of all of scripture. So we're now this week not just in one of the most complicated chapters we're actually in one of the most complicated parts of the most complicated chapter with verses 13 through 20.

And so as I often say when we come to things that are complex I'm going to say something not everything. This is the beginning not the end. The big picture of this section is this.

It is about the war between the spirit and the flesh in the Christian life. If you forget that just take a look page 8 of your worship guide you'll see that's our sermon title.

Spirit versus flesh. Now also because we're against a complicated passage my strategy this morning is to just go in as straight of a line as I can.

[2:38] So we're just going to go from top to bottom. I'm going to focus on explanation up front. We'll have some application at the end. With that I invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 7 starting at verse 13.

You can turn in your worship guide which you'll find on page 7 of your work. Yeah on page 7. No matter where you turn remember that this is God's word. In Jeremiah chapter 23 tells us that God's word is like a hammer that breaks a rock into pieces.

Which reminds us that there is nothing so powerful that can stand against it. So that's why we read now chapter 7 starting at verse 13.

Did that which is good then bring death to me? By no means. It was sin producing death in me through what is good.

In order that sin might be shown to be sin. And through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. For we know that the law is spiritual.

[3 : 44] 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.

Verse 16. 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 not do. If I do what I do not want.

It is no longer I who do it. But sin that dwells within me. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Our Father in heaven.

[4 : 48] We do thank you and praise you this morning. For bringing us together safely in this weather. Thank you that you preserved us this week.

We thank you even more that you have given us your word. That you speak to us in ways that we can understand. And we ask that you would do that this morning. That your scriptures would be clear to us.

That you would help our minds to understand a difficult passage. That you would be at work in our hearts. That we would love it and believe it. And even more than that you would show us Jesus Christ.

That we would see his beauty and glory and majesty and holiness. We would see his power and authority. We would see his mercy and his grace and his love.

That you would grow our love and affection and reverence. And obedience to him. And we ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Last week we started off by discussing the nature of evil.

[5 : 55] In fact that was a main focus for us. And I gave you the example of the orcs in the Lord of the Rings. Who are men or elves who are ultimately twisted and perverted. And so we came at this from a couple different ways.

First of all we looked at that quote from Return of the King. Where Frodo says evil can only mock. It cannot make. Evil can't give life.

It can only ruin and twist. And then we looked at that letter from C.S. Lewis. Where he says evil is good spoiled. Evil is a parasite.

I bring that up because verse 13 is simply repeating that over again. It's summarizing that concept for us one more time.

Verse 13 says did the law bring death? No. The law is good. Sin twisted the law. Sin used the law to bring death.

[6 : 51] Sin brings death. The law does not. So verse 13. That's simply review. Remember I told you we are going to walk in a straight line this morning.

That's going to take us to 14 though. Which is where we start with the hard things. Look with me at that verse. It says, For we know that the law is spiritual. But I am of the flesh sold under sin.

Now for this to make any sense to us. We have to understand the difference between what is meant by spiritual and flesh. And if you were at the prayer conference with us. You already heard this yesterday morning.

If something is spiritual. Not in all cases. But in many cases in the New Testament. It means it is coming from or related to the Holy Spirit.

So when Paul says the law is spiritual. He is saying the law comes from God. God is the source of the law. So that explains why he can say in verse 13 that the law is good.

[7 : 52] How could it not be? If God gave it. It must be good. So that's what he means by spiritual. Something that comes from the Holy Spirit.

Then flesh is set up as an opposite to that. So if something is of the flesh. It is the life or the presence of sin. Paul actually defines the flesh for us later in this passage two times.

In verse 17 and verse 20 he says sin that dwells within me. So that's the flesh. The flesh is the sin that dwells within you.

Spiritual are the things that come from the Holy Spirit. So far so good. Except that introduces a problem immediately. Paul does have the Holy Spirit.

So how can Paul who has the Holy Spirit who is a Christian believer be described as being of the flesh?

[8 : 52] In fact we know he has the Holy Spirit because next week in verse 22 he's going to say this. For I delight in the law of God in my inner being. Only someone in whom God is at work by his Holy Spirit can delight in God's law.

So there's this contradiction at least seemingly. Paul has the Holy Spirit on the one hand. And on the other hand he says I'm of the flesh sold under sin. How can both of those things be true at the same time?

By the way that is the reason this is one of the most complicated and controversial passages in all of scripture. To understand what's happening here I'm going to take us back to Romans chapter 6.

You'll remember when we started Romans chapter 6 we talked about the three different ways to think about sin. Remember sin has a power. Sin has a penalty.

Sin has a presence. And so in Romans chapter 6 when Paul says you have died to sin. He means you have died to the power of sin.

[10 : 02] Sin no longer controls the capital city of your heart. But you'll remember the presence of sin remains.

That's what we confessed this morning in our confession of faith. That we all sin every day in many ways. To understand what Paul is saying here we have to be crystal clear about the difference between the power of sin and the presence of sin.

That's how we untangle what appears to be a contradiction. That's going to take us to verses 15 and 18 and 19. In verses 15 and 18 and 19 Paul says three times in three different ways.

I want I desire what's right. But I don't do it. I do what's wrong. So let's look at it. Verse 15. For I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate.

Why does Paul hate it? Paul hates it because the power of sin has been broken. So he loves what's right.

[11 : 17] Why does he still do what he hates though? Because the presence of sin remains. Verse 18.

For I have the desire to do what is right but not the ability to carry it out. Why does Paul have the desire to do what's right? Because and only because the power of sin is gone.

Remember when the power of sin is defeated and it's defeated in Christ's death and resurrection our desires change. So he has the desire to do what's right because the power has been broken.

Why does Paul not have the ability here? Same answer because the presence of sin remains. Verse 19. This is the last time he says it.

Three times three different ways. For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Why does Paul want to do good?

[12:20] You know the answer now. He wants to do good because the power of sin is gone. Why does Paul keep on doing evil? Because the presence of sin remains.

The reign. This is what we talked about in chapter 6. The reign of sin is over. If you're a Christian you are dead to sin. Sin no longer controls the center of your heart and your personality.

But the presence of sin remains. The war with sin continues. It's ongoing. It's ongoing. It's ongoing for the rest of our lives before we go to be with the Lord.

Again that's what we confess this morning in our confession of faith. You'll remember when we were at the beginnings of Romans chapter 6. I used this illustration from one pastor who talks about an invading army that controls a country.

A force comes in. They kick out the invading army. And the invading army no longer controls the capital city. So their power has been broken in a significant watershed sort of way.

[13:30] The enemy has lost its advantage. But there are still hostile forces running around in the woods. That is the presence of sin that remains.

When you died to sin you kicked sin out of the stronghold of your heart. That's not controlled by sin anymore. That's controlled by the Holy Spirit. But the battle with sin continues.

That was kind of the whole point of chapter 6. Paul's saying look you died to sin. So continue to fight against it. Right? Live. Become who you already are.

You died to sin. So act like it. Okay.

I'm going to do what I did last week. We're going to pause for a second. If I've lost you. This is the time to come back in. I've said something. And I'm going to say it again. So here's what we just talked about.

[14:31] I just gave you three different critical concepts that you need to understand this passage. Concept one is a review from last week. And concept one is that evil cannot create anything.

All evil can do is ruin and twist what God has already made. So the law is not bad. God gave it. Therefore it must be good. The law is spiritual.

Sin twists it and uses it. So concept one. Evil can't create. It can only twist. Concept two. You need to understand the difference between spiritual and flesh.

Something is spiritual. That means that it comes from. It's connected to. Related to. The Holy Spirit. The flesh is what we've already said.

Paul defines in verses 17 and verse 20. Sin that dwells within me. Spirituals of the Holy Spirit. The flesh is the sin that dwells within you.

[15:33] So those are our first two concepts. Concept three. Sin has a penalty. A power. And a presence. For the Christian.

The penalty and the power have been removed. The presence remains. So that's what I told you. Now I told you again. Again. Now I said that verse 14 was our hard verse.

But we're not out of the woods yet. Because we also have verses 17 and 20. Verse 17 Paul says this. So now it is no longer I who do it.

But sin that dwells within me. And then verse 20 he says almost the same thing. Now if I do what I do not want. It is no longer I who do it. But sin that dwells within me.

And this kind of sounds like to our modern ears. A little bit like someone trying to shirk any sort of blame or responsibility. This sounds like the kid who comes to you and says. No I didn't break the lamp.

[16:38] The dog broke the lamp. Don't punish me. Punish Fido. You know it's sort of like. It sounds like that's what Paul is saying. I didn't do it. Don't look at me. I'm not responsible for anything.

No that's sin. That's sin doing something. I'm not sin. So don't hold me accountable. That's not what Paul is saying by the way. It sounds like that. But Paul is actually here taking seriously.

What we talked about in chapter 6. That you've died to sin. And so now you need to become who you already are.

Christians have died to sin. Remember they're united to Christ. And so what Paul is saying here is that when he sins. He is acting against who he really is.

Paul is saying that when he sins. He is acting against who he really is. We talked about this before.

[17:37] People today will say things like. I need to go find myself. Or I need to figure out what I want. Who I really am. Book of Romans says this.

You don't need to find yourself. I will tell you who you are. You have died and are risen with Christ. That's who you are. That's the truth about you.

You don't need to figure out what you want in this life. You're a Christian. What do Christians want? Christians want righteousness and holiness. That's who you are.

You don't need to go on a pilgrimage or a journey to figure that out. And so really what Paul is saying is this. When I sin. I am not acting like my true self.

My true self has died with Christ. My true self is united to Christ. What's true of Jesus is true of me. My true self loves God's law. And so he's really capturing that in the Christian life.

[18:39] Is where we're this side of heaven and we're living. There's a disorienting feeling when we sin. Because when we sin we are doing the exact opposite of our identity in Christ.

Now I won't say this about many things. Maybe about anything else. But I think it's appropriate if we're going to put this in the language of 2026 to say this. Paul is essentially saying I feel like a saint trapped in a sinner's body.

I feel like a saint trapped in a sinner's body. These things don't match. I've been bought by Christ.

I've been redeemed by Christ. I've died with him. I've risen with him. How in the world am I still sinning? So it is no longer I who do it. That sin that dwells within me.

So Paul is capturing. He's capturing the tension. The frustration of the Christian life. That there's a sense which as you're a Christian and you struggle with sin. You realize that the presence of sin remains.

[19:46] You think to yourself. I can't wait. Can't wait until the presence of sin is removed. Then I can really be myself.

I can really live out the person who's died and risen with Christ. Because when I sin that's not the real me. That's not the true me. The true me is controlled and ruled by God through his Holy Spirit.

Okay. What's the point? What are you supposed to take away from chapter 7?

I've been telling you a number of times when we come against these tough chapters. About the quote that's on page 7 of your worship guide. That Paul's letter to the Romans is arguably the most important piece of literature in the history of the world.

And if it is. If that's true. There should be some rich things for you in this passage. And there's a couple things I'm going to highlight. Although we really are just skimming the surface.

[20 : 56] First. The Christian life. Is an ongoing battle against sin. The Christian life.

Is an ongoing struggle against the flesh. Galatians chapter 5 verse 17. Paul basically says hey there's this ongoing war that is happening in the life of a Christian.

Between the flesh and the spirit. If you feel like Paul. And you are frustrated with your sin.

If you feel like Paul and at times it seems like you are a saint in a sinner's body. You're in good company. Don't lose heart.

Don't give up the fight. Don't abandon the war. If verse 18 is true of you.

[21 : 59] That you desire to do what is right. Then I can tell you right now how the story ends. The story ends with you fully and finally free from the presence of sin.

Keep fighting. Keep fighting. You have the desire of a Christian. If you stay in the fight.

I know. And Paul tells us. You will win in the end. When you are with Jesus in heaven. You will not be a saint in a sinner's body.

You will be a saint in a saint's body. Paul talks about this in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. He talks about one day you will have a spiritual body.

Remember spiritual. Spiritual doesn't mean you're going to have this ethereal ghost-like experience. No. Your body will be a body characterized. Connected to. Coming from. The Holy Spirit.

[23 : 11] Okay. So that's the first thing. Christian life is an ongoing struggle with sin. Don't give up. Second point is this. And this is actually a major point of chapter 7.

This might be the point of chapter 7. And it's this. The law cannot save you. The law cannot save you.

The solution to your problem is not more rules. There's an author named Maya Angelou who said this.

Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better. In other words, you have what you need inside of you.

All you need is more knowledge. If we can just educate people and tell them more things, we can get rid of racism and violence and hatred. Those are just misunderstandings. You know what Paul says about that?

[24 : 14] Paul says that's a lie from the pit of hell. Know better does not lead to do better. What have we talked about in chapter 7? Actually, sometimes when you hear the law, what aggravates your sin, you sin more than before.

No, knowledge is not your problem. You don't need to know better to do better. Actually, your problem is much worse. There is something deeply and fundamentally wrong with the human heart.

And it is so wrong with the human heart. It is something that rules and the law cannot fix. At best, the best case scenario, laws and rules can restrain sin in certain ways and for a time.

By the way, it can't restrain everything. There's a reason last week that Paul used the example of coveting. Are there any laws against coveting in the United States?

There can't be. It's a sin of the heart. That's part of why Paul picks that. He's getting at what Jesus got out of the Sermon on the Mount. Oh, you think you're doing great because you haven't murdered anyone and you haven't committed adultery?

[25 : 39] Okay. Let's look at your heart and see what we find. Have you ever coveted? Have you ever lusted? There are things we can't make laws against.

Which gets to the heart of the gospel. Paul is telling us, major point from Romans chapter 7, you can't save yourself. Knowing better will not lead to doing better.

You actually need help from the outside. You're not capable of going up to God. God must come down to you.

You're not capable of fixing your own heart. God must change it for you. Knowing better will not ultimately make you do better.

In fact, sometimes knowing better makes you do worse. Thankfully, the good news of the gospel is that God comes and does what rules and laws cannot do.

[26 : 58] God comes and does what rules and laws were never meant to do, which is to change our hearts, to break the power and the reign of sin that we do what is right for the right reasons.

Jesus comes, lives a perfect life as a man on this earth. In that perfect life, he gives us the righteousness that we desperately need but don't have. He dies a death that we deserve and in doing that, he takes the penalty that we deserve for our sins.

Doesn't stop there though. Jesus rises from the dead. He is ascended into heaven at the right hand of God the Father. What does Jesus do at the right hand of God the Father? He sends the Holy Spirit to his people.

This is what Jesus promises in John chapter 14 and chapter 16. This is why Jesus says, it's better that I go. So if I go, I can send the Spirit to you. And what does the Holy Spirit do?

Makes us spiritual people. Changes our hearts and our lives and our minds. And so that's the contrast. That's the contrast between the law which cannot save and the God who does.

[28 : 14] That's exactly what we are saying when we sing, run and run, the law demands, but gives me neither feet nor hands.

Better news the gospel brings, it bids me fly, it gives me wings. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we do thank you and praise you that you've given us something greater and more powerful than the law.

You've given us your Son. Your Son who has given us his righteousness and taken our sin and even more than that, sits at your right hand. He intercedes for us as we pray and he sends his Spirit to us as we follow after you.

We ask that you would remind us of that, you'd give us great courage and hope because of it. And we ask these things in the mighty name of Jesus Christ. Amen.