

Romans 7

¹⁵ I don't understand what I do. For what I want to do I don't do, but what I hate, I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I don't want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For I don't do the good I want to do, but the evil I don't want to do – this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I don't want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

²¹ So I find this law at work: although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. **8** Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son

Introduction

In 2001 English writer Nick Hornby wrote a novel called *How to Be Good*. Needless to say not only did the main character eventually completely fail in his efforts to be good, but he nearly wrecked his marriage in the process.

We all understand how difficult it to be good let alone perfect, however much we might want to reach that ideal

We make New year's resolutions or give up things for Lent and we fail. We struggle with bad habits, besetting sins, addictions, or a terrible weakness. Alcohol, smoking, anger or rage, pornography, or lust, laziness, gluttony. As Christians, we want to be good - we embrace those famous words of Our Lord Jesus Christ which we have in the *Prayers of Penitence* each Sunday and which echo the ancient Jewish *Sh'ma Yisrael*

The first commandment is this:

'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

We agree that this is the way we're meant to live which is why we say **Amen**.

And yet we know how impossible it is to live up to that ideal which is why we say **Lord, have mercy**.

When we confess our sins: "we **firmly resolve to keep God's commandments and to live in love and peace with all.**"

and yet every week, every day we know fall short: **We have sinned against our heavenly Father, and against our neighbour in thought and word and deed, through negligence, through weakness, through our own deliberate fault. We are truly sorry and repent of all our sins.**

but we know it will be the same next Sunday or even if we came back tomorrow.

We might well think then, *what hope is there for us ?* And indeed many Christians live with a permanent sense of underlying guilt.

In our Romans 7 passage today, Paul is taking the position of the devout Jew, which he had been once himself. But that devout Jew is also a picture for the whole of Israel, and in many ways also a picture of many a devout churchgoer who tries to lead a good life - but has not yet grasped the wonderful truth of the gospel: *I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.*

¹⁹ For I don't do the good I want to do, but the evil I don't want to do – this I keep on doing ... ²² For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³ but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am!

This passage is really the culmination of what Paul has been saying about God's Law which we find in the Old Testament, summarized in the 10 commandments or the two great commandments I've just mentioned. Yes the God's law is wonderful, it's right, it's true, Jews are right to admire it and recognise what an enormous privilege it is to have it, but it does not make us good! As Paul had no doubt discovered when he was a committed, pious Pharisee, the more he embraced the God's Law, the more it made him aware of how far short he fell.

The Law is like those plaque disclosing tablets which shows up all the gungy plaque on your teeth – it shows the grunge up for what it is, it shows you just how bad a problem you have - but does nothing to remove it. For that another solution is needed, i.e. regular, thorough, systematic brushing and flossing of your teeth.

In fact the Law is more like a very special plaque disclosing solution which not only shows up what's on your teeth, but goes through your entire body, finds every single impurity and draws them up to the surface of your teeth.

In the same way God's Law not only reveals our sinful nature, but it seems actually to draw sin to the surface. It's like those *Keep of the grass* signs. Until you see the sign you had no particular desire to walk on the grass, but once you see it, suddenly you have this great urge from within to go on the grass !

Sadly many sincere churchgoers believe that being a Christian is all about believing the right things and trying to follow God's commandments – and nothing more. If that were the case, then there would indeed be no hope for us. We would say with that devout Jew *"What a wretched person I am! - Who will rescue me?"*

But wonderfully Paul tells us: *Thanks be to God, who delivers (rescues) me through Jesus Christ our Lord!... Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,*

Paul's whole argument is that God's Law was not given to us to make us good, as many believe, but precisely to make us aware of our need of rescue from our sinful self-centred nature which is why we have the summary of the law before the confession.

More than that, Paul argues that God's Law actually draws to the surface the very worst in human beings – we see this in the Pharisees and Sadducees, who ended up condemning Jesus to death. It seems that, by the time Jesus comes to the end of his 3 year ministry, not only all the sin of Israel, but all the sin of all human beings is drawn out into the open and focussed on Jesus, leading him to be nailed to a cross.

But, says Paul, this was all God's plan from the very beginning: *what the Law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son... in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the Law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

The sin of the world ended up on Jesus' shoulders on the cross where he dealt with it once and for all. What sets us free from guilt, from God's condemnation is therefore not achieved by desperately trying to keep every jot & tittle of God's Law, for we shall never succeed. Jesus alone fulfilled the Law and so our only hope is, as Paul puts it, to be *in Christ Jesus* - *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,*

If we are *in Christ Jesus*, not only are we set free from guilt, not only are we no longer under God's judgement, not only are we in God's eyes clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ, but something begins to change inside us as well: *through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.* Jesus gives us his life-giving Spirit and begins to change us from the inside. We shall look at this more closely next week.

Does this mean we become good, perfect and free from sin overnight? No of course not ! Crucifixion is a slow means of execution, sometimes it took day, but the end result – death - was never in doubt. In the same way Jesus has crucified sin on the cross – it continues to wriggle and writhe and impact our lives, but the end result is never in doubt. One day it will be dead and on that day of resurrection all of us who are in Christ Jesus will be good, we will be perfect, we will be free at last !