The Struggle Within
Romans 7:7-25

When I was a student I got to hear an Australian minister called John Chapman speak - who some of you will know. And I can't remember what he was talking about, but I can remember a story he told. Because he got on a train to somewhere, and as he sat down he noticed a sign, which read, 'no spitting in this carriage'. And he said that, up until that moment, it had never occurred to him to spit in the train. But as he read that sign he could just feel the spit forming in his mouth, until the moment came and he spat!

Look at v5 from the end of last week's passage: 'Our sinful passions, *aroused by the law*.' In other words, far from God's law squashing our desire to sin, it stimulates it.

Now you might hear that and go, 'Er, if Paul's saying God's law isn't just *powerless* to stop sin, it actually *incites* sin - then that sound suspiciously like saying God's law *is* sin. Is that what you're saying??'

And Paul anticipates exactly that question: v7, 'What then shall we say? That the law is sin?'

How would you answer that? Because if you're of a more conservative type, like Paul's critics were, you'd say, 'No way is God's law sin! The problem is the bad people who don't keep it. It's them we need to sort them out.'

But if you're more progressive, you'll go, 'yup the law is sinful - all this telling people how they should live, who they can and can't sleep with, not letting them express their true selves, that's immoral. And if I want to spit on a train, who are you to tell me not to? We need to do away with all this law stuff.'

How does Paul answer it? Verse 7 again, 'What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! *Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin*.'

God's Law is not the Problem - Sin is
Now read today's passage and a word keeps on coming up - and from the 3rd century on it has had commentators and Bible scholars arguing. It's the word 'I' - or in Greek, *ego*. Because who is the *ego*, the *I*, Paul talks about? Verse 7, '*I* would not have known.' Verse 9, '*I* was once alive… and *I* died.' Verse 14, '*I* am of the flesh.' Verse 15, '*I* do not do what I want'.

And scholars have argued, that *can not* be the apostle Paul. He can't be talking about his personal experience. I mean, Paul struggling with sin, wanting to obey God but sinning anyway?! No. He must be using this *ego* as a literary device. And he's taken on the character of Adam, because when Adam disobeyed and ate the fruit he died. Or he's personifying Israel, because they received the law at Sinai, only to find they were powerless to keep it - and died for their failure. Or, maybe he's talking for humanity as a whole.

The one person he can't be talking about is himself. A great Christian struggling with sin? Surely not! Now, Paul probably is drawing on the themes of Adam and Israel. And yet, as Tom Schreiner, Professor of New Testament writes, this passage is so 'agonisingly personal' and so clearly 'confessional' it *has* to be Paul. And he's in good company because Augustine was the first to break ranks, and the Reformers followed. Because it takes a man who's wrestled with his own sin and his own desires, to understand just how personal what Paul writes here is.

And I'm going to argue that in v7-13 he recounts his experience before he became a Christian; and in v14-25 his ongoing experience *as a Christian*.

You see, growing up in a good Jewish home, there would never have been a time when Paul was *not* surrounded by God's law. And he would have known that he was to love God and his neighbour. And we know from his other letters that he could look at the Old Testament laws and tick them off: that he was a good man. The kind of guy you'd want as a neighbour, the kind of guy God would be pleased to have on his team. And before he became a Christian, he was *alive* - brimming with self-confidence. And as he pursued his career as a conservative academic theologian, he could write, 'I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age' (Gal 1:14). Amongst his peers, he was *the most likely to succeed*.

Until he got hit by a bus. Verse 9, 'I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.'

'When the commandment came'?? The law had come a thousand plus years before, and Paul had been raised knowing the law. And he'd memorised the law, and could quote the law, and teach the law.

And yet, it hadn't come home *to him*. The *weight* of it, the seeing what it *really* required of him - what it really means to love God with *all* your heart and your neighbour *as yourself* - that had not yet done its work on his heart.

Until it did. And when it did it was like a sword thrust to his heart. It was like a lightening bolt knocking him off his feet. It was like being hit by an express train. And v9 again 'I died.' Died to his self-confident belief that he - or you and I - could keep God's law and make the grade. Died to his hope in his moral record. Because if this law was the standard God required, and this was Paul's life, there's this vast chasm between the two.

I wonder - has that chasm dawned on you yet?

You see, far from the law *being* sin, Paul is saying, firstly, that **the law reveals,** *it exposes,* **sin** *in us*: Verse 7 again, 'If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."'

And 'do not covet' is number ten in the Ten Commandments. And somehow, that was the one that broke him personally - and he saw it, for the first time, 'Man, *I covet*. I think I'm this good guy; everyone else thinks I'm this good guy - but I see what others have and I resent it, and want it, and I'm not happy unless I have it.'

And that realisation crushed him. Why? Because his whole identity was tied up in being that good guy - in obeying the law. But now, the law exposed him for the lawbreaker he was. And for the first time he didn't just know the commandment *intellectually*, he knew it, felt it in his heart.

Ok, but why *this* commandment? Well, as one commentator (Schroeder) writes, it's the only one of the Ten that gets to the unseen world of our hearts. The rest Paul could tick off by obeying *externally*. And as a Pharisee he loved externals. But this one 'zeroes in on the *desires* of the heart'. Because that's what the word coveting here means: to want, to desire - to *over*-desire - to want *too much,* in ways that *you've just got to have it*.

Elsewhere Paul writes, 'Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, *and covetousness, which is idolatry*.' (Col 3:5). Covetousness which is desiring some thing more than you desire God.

What was that thing for Paul? What brought it home for him? He doesn't tell us. But it might be instructive to speculate.

I mean, maybe Paul was going through his usual morning 10 Commandment checklist: honour father and mother. Check. Do not murder. Check. Do not commit adultery. Check. Do not steal. Check. Do not bear false witness. Check. Do not covet… And his pen is poised, but in that moment his conscience, or the Spirit of God, takes that commandment and floors him.

'Before you check it off, Paul, what about the way you want the applause and recognition of others and when you don't get it - but others do - you don't like it? Or what about your academic work - and you look at the papers others are writing, or the books they're publishing, or the grants they're getting, and you resent it - you want what they've got; or you see that position opening up in the Sanhedrin, and you've got to have it?'

Or maybe he was single, but he saw his friends getting married and he resented it.

Or think about his involvement in the trial and execution of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Because scholars have argued that Paul and Stephen were likely members of the same synagogue - same peer group. So did Paul hear Stephen's impassioned biblical defence to the charges against him and found himself wanting to preach like that? And why should this heretic be so good at public speaking and I'm so bad? Or did he see the way the Christians he was persecuting were willing to give up their possessions - possessions he wanted?

Whatever it was God's law brought Paul's sin home to him: 'Paul, you're not the person you think you are. Look into your heart, and see how you covet. Look how you want this thing more than God.'

What would that thing be for you? If you're not yet a Christian, or even if you are: do you recognise something you want more than God? Because that's idolatry. Whatever it was for Paul, the law revealed it.

Secondly, Paul says, **the law provokes sin**. Verse 8: 'But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.'

When Su and I were at Uni, our college had/has this beautiful, immaculate lawn in the centre of Old Court. And it has a sign at the edge: 'Do not walk on the grass.' The tutors and lecturers and professors could walk on the grass, just not us plebs.

What does such a rule do? It incites you. And one winter, it snowed and the lawn was covered in a blanket of white. And here at last was our chance: not just to walk on the lawn, but to leave our footprints. And so a couple of mates and I set our alarms for the middle of the night and under cover of darkness, and under the bedroom window of Maria, one of our friends, we wrote in the snow, with our hiking boots, in large letters, 'We Love Maria.' And included a love heart for good measure.

And in the morning, when everyone opened their curtains, there it was for Maria and the whole college to see. And because the snow would soon melt we reckoned we'd got away with it. The perfect crime. Except when it did melt, it became obvious that we had burnt 'we love Maria' into the turf. Where it stayed for days to come.

Now, why did we do it? Obviously, for the sheer fun of it! But also because there was this sign telling us not to.

And Paul's saying, we don't just do that to college authorities, we do it to God. As Tara Isabella Burton writes in her book, *Strange Rites: new religions for a godless world* - we've all written our own 'Declarations of independence: my life, my liberty, my pursuit of happiness' (p49). And any rule telling me how to live is there to be broken.

Look how that worked for Paul. Because, v8, the commandment 'produced in me all kinds of covetousness.' In other words, the more he understood the law against coveting, the more coveting took hold of him. Why? Well, maybe he now saw he wasn't as good as he thought he was, but boy did that make him want to be even more: to be better than others, more respected than others, more in control than others, morally head and shoulders above others. 'But that's coveting Paul' - 'yes, but I want it! My identity depends on it.'

Thirdly, Paul says, ***the law condemns sin.***
Verse 9, 'the commandment came… and I died.' Verse 10: 'The very commandment that promised life proved death to me.' And v11, 'Sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.'

So the law showed him his sin, and how much he wanted his sin, but it also sentenced him. Because as Paul wrote back in chapter 6, 'the wages of sin *is death*' (6:23), and Paul got paid his wage. And the thing that promised to be a source of life if he obeyed it, became the standard of his - and our - condemnation.

So, is the law sin? Absolutely not! Paul says. Verse 12, 'The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.'

But that begs another question, doesn't it? Verse 13: 'Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?' Answer: v13, '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.'

I mean, imagine a burglar, who breaks into the home of an elderly man, but that man resists him. But in the fight, the burglar grabs a metal-framed photo of the man's wife and uses it to batter him. Is it the picture's fault? Is the frame guilty? No! It's the burglar who's guilty.

And our sin is that burglar, Paul says. The law is not the problem. It's our sin that rises up against God that's the problem.

And yet, on the road to Damascus the Lord Jesus didn't just hit Paul with the law, he physically knocked him off his horse. And in the days that followed Paul was totally converted and his life was never the same again. And all the old struggles were gone.

Or were they?

The Inner Conflict

And in v14-25 Paul moves to describing his *post*-conversion, '*now* I'm a Christian' *present*-day experience. And how do we know that? Because he changes his verb tenses. Before, in v7-13, it's all *past* tense. Now it's all *present* tense.

You see, before he became a Christian he boasted 'as to [my] righteousness under the law, blameless' (Phil 3:6). But now, can you see how his opinion has changed? Verse 14, 'I am of the flesh, sold under sin.' And v18, 'I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.'

Now maybe you hear that and think, 'hang on, previously Paul's been arguing that in Christ we've been freed from the power of sin… and now he's saying he's sold under sin?' Correct. Because the fact that in Christ we have been freed from sin's power does not mean we won't face daily temptation, or the pull of remaining and indwelling sin.

The difference is that *before* his conversion, Paul came to realise, 'I was dead' in the face of sin But now that Christ has set him free - there's a fight to be had.

But sometimes he fails in that fight. Verse 15, 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.' Why? Because, v17, of the 'sin that dwells within me.' And v18. 'I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.'

And so Paul knows that at the deepest level of his desires he's conflicted. He wants to obey God but he also realises that on his own he just can't do it. And you and I can hate our sin, but at times we still give in.

And yet, from Paul on, that recognition of sin and failure is one of *the* hallmarks of true conversion, that you *are* a genuine Christian. Some time back I was talking to someone who, for various reasons, I would not have thought was a Christian, but they told me 'Oh I am.' So I asked, 'Ok, what does that look like for you - why do you think you are?' To which they said, 'Oh, anyone who really knows me, and how moral I am, would know I'm a Christian.'

And I was sat there thinking 'but if you really knew me, and the temptations and sins I struggle with, you'd seriously question whether I was a Christian.'

You see, when I was a student I shared a house with some friends, but the behaviour of one of them really began to irritate me. So I went to see an older couple from church and said, 'guys, I just seem to be getting more and more sinful. I see my frustrations and anger and resentment. And am I even a Christian.' And the husband basically said, 'welcome to the battle brother.' And he said something that's stuck with me: 'the more you mature as a Christian the more aware of your sin you'll become.' And Paul would add, and the more you'll hate it.

And Paul is saying that what's true for us, was true for him. And all the time we're in this body, this struggle with sin is a reality. Verse 23, '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.' Which means, we never get to say 'I've got this sin thing licked.' Sin is ever present, Paul says, and ready to strike.

The difference is that now sin and failure are not what defines him. Verse 20: 'Now if I do what I do not want, *it is no longer I who do it*, but sin that dwells within me.' Because now his identity is not in his law-keeping, it's in Christ. So, when he sins, it's going against who he really is in Christ.

It's why he cries out in v24, 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?'

Ok, great, but is that all Christianity has to offer? Is the normal Christian life simply one of constant warfare marked by frequent failure which we just need to suck up? And the answer's, no! It's not the *normal* christian life but it is a normal experience for Christians *in this life*.

You see, the previous passage ended with, v6, 'Now… we serve in the new way of the Spirit.' But throughout this passage, there's been no mention of the Spirit. What there's been plenty of mention of is the law, and 'I' and 'me'. It's only when we get to chapter 8 that the Holy Spirit comes back into view.

Why does Paul write it like that? Because this life will always be marked by the struggle against sin. But try and fight it in our own strength and we'll fail. What we need is a power from *outside* us.

Christ our Deliverer
Verses 24-25: 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*'

Because the law is holy and good, but it can't make us holy or good. It can't give us the power to defeat sin, what it can do is tell us we need a powerful deliverer from sin.

So ultimately the law points us to Christ - because it's him we need. It's why Paul says, 'thanks be to God' because that's where our deliverance comes from: through Jesus Christ - the only one who perfectly obeyed the law.

You see, in v21 Paul says, 'I want to do right, [but] evil lies close at hand.' And the Lord Jesus knew that better than anyone. Because no one was assaulted by or endured temptation more than him. No one has ever resisted temptation, and seen it through to the bottom, like him. On our good days we fail, but when he was at his weakest - in the wilderness and on the cross - and the enemy came for him, he never caved.

And Paul says, he's 'Jesus Christ *our Lord*.' Our Lord who to the fight and to the rescue came. The king who in the heat of battle stepped into the firing line, to draw the fire upon himself. And at the cross he took the curse of the law that was ours to bear. And the wages - the just desert of sin is death, so he died the death that was ours to die. And he became the ultimate fulfilment of the law by becoming the perfect sacrifice for sin.

And Paul is saying: thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord, because it's in him that we find deliverance from sin *and, through his resurrection,* this body of death. *And* as we'll see, in Romans 8, it's through him we receive the Spirit.

So this week, if you're not yet a Christian but your conscience nags you about something - lean in. It might be God pointing you to Christ.

Or if you are a Christian, and the battle gets hot - don’t despair. But also, don’t look at yourself. Look to Christ. He’s your hope and your deliverer.