

Good News for the Downcast

Romans 7:7-25

Introduction: Am I Normal?

Am I normal? It's a question we all ask ourselves, at all stages of our lives isn't it, school, work, retirement. And although we're told to embrace our uniqueness, deep down we secretly want to know that we're just like everyone else.

Nowhere is that more true for the Christian than with our struggles with sin. I think partly to blame for that are Christian biographies. I've been reading a Christian biography of William Booth. Now, I've got a lot of respect for William Booth and the work he did with the Salvation Army, but to read the book that I'm reading at the moment, you'd believe that the man never did anything wrong! There's no mention of any sin in his life, no shortcomings whatsoever. Whenever he preaches, there's always people saved. When he's accused of being overly authoritative, they're wrong. When people criticise his evangelistic technique, they're mistaken. The man never seems to set a foot wrong!

The technical term for this kind of tosh is hagiography! I say tosh, because that's what they are. Books like that don't leave you inspired to live for God - they leave you crushed, downcast, and despairing, believing that you're abnormal, that the norm is basically sinless perfection for the Christian.

But can't we be equally as guilty of that in our conversations and relationships in church? The impression that we give is that we are perfect and never sin. In fact, I imagine if someone did something like swear at church, there would be gasps. But I bet that's what a lot of people do at home, or in their own heads! I'm not suggesting we start swearing at church, but this situation where we make out that we're perfect is not healthy!

In the Bible, Christians confess their sin **to** one another; in churches nowadays, Christians hide their sin **from** one another. The result is that everyone feels that they are the only one, "I'm the only one who's struggling with sin. Everyone else is fine, it's just me. I'd better pretend that I'm not, otherwise I won't fit in!" And so the cycle continues!

But Paul is having none of this in our passage this morning. As he continues to explain about the role of the law in the life of a Christian, he's going to be open with us about his own struggles. He's not going to whitewash it, but give it to us straight.

Paul has been telling us that,

Jesus' death on the cross + faith = life.

But he's also been explaining the flipside,

sin + law = death

He's told us how faith unites us to Christ so that his death was our death, our death to sin and to the law.

But we're left with the possible impression that the law is a bad thing. I mean, we had to die to it! But isn't this supposed to be God's law? Wasn't it supposed to be for our good? So

Paul is going to tell us about his own experiences with the law and sin and show us what the normal Christian life is like.

The Law is Not The Problem.

The law is not the problem. That's our first point. Look at verses 7-12:

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. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

So, looking at those few verses there, Paul is saying that the law is like a candlestick. But it's a candlestick in a game of Cluedo, or for those of you watching from overseas you might know the game as 'Clue'. It's a candlestick in the sense of, "Professor Plum, with the candlestick, in the kitchen".

Except in this case it's "sin, with the law, in the human heart". What Paul is saying is that the law is not bad, it's sin that is so bad it will use something good to destroy us. Sin is pictured like a murderer who would use God's good law to murder us. It doesn't show the sinfulness of the law, it shows the utter sinfulness of sin. And I don't think we grasp this as generations before us did.

Forget the candlestick, for a second; it's as perverse as electrocuting someone with a defibrillator. It's as twisted as drowning a man dying of thirst. What is supposed to bring life, becomes an instrument of death in the hands of sin. It's like the kiss of Judas in the garden, turning something beautiful, a kiss, into something that betrays us. Sin is not some cuddly, religious version of the cookie monster. Actually, it's a cold-blooded killer. It is responsible for more deaths in history than anything else: one out of one.

If only we took the same precautions against sin as we do against the virus. If only we had the same hatred for sin as we do of war. If only we took it as seriously as we do things like climate change. Sin destroys us. Sin is a killer. Even good things in its hands become instruments of death - that's what Paul is explaining here.

Paul gives us his own experience of this. He explains how for him,

sin + law = death

Now, there's a big debate here about whether Paul is speaking as himself (Paul) here, or whether he's using 'I' rhetorically for someone else or something else: Adam or Israel or someone who's not yet become a Christian. I am going to take it this morning that when Paul says 'I', he means 'I'- himself. The thing with Paul's experience though is that it mirrors everyone else's experience. It mirrors what happened to Adam. It mirrors what happened to Israel. It mirrors what happens to us, indeed any sinful human being when we come into contact with moral rules. So we shouldn't find it surprising that we see echoes of the Bible

nation of Israel's experience. We shouldn't be surprised when we see echoes of Adam and Eve. We shouldn't be surprised when this sounds a lot like our experience.

Paul knew sin when he heard the command "do not covet" - that's what he's saying here. Now, coveting is desiring what someone else has, lusting after someone else's things, wanting them. Now it's clear from this that what's in mind here by the word "law" is all law, not just the so-called "ceremonial" parts of it. This is a quote from the ten commandments, given on Mt Sinai to Israel. Paul says that he heard the commandment, but instead of that helping him obey it, sin took hold of it and made Paul want to disobey it. Now, sin is something deeper than just wrong things. It's an inner rejection of God. It's an inner rebellion that has hold of our hearts. It shows itself in different symptoms in different people, but all those people have the same sin problem. All of them have the same sinful heart - all of us do. And when the law met Paul's sinful heart, it produced more sin!

It's the "Don't walk on the grass" syndrome. You know, when you see a sign that says "Don't walk on the grass". You hadn't thought about walking on the grass until you saw the sign, but now suddenly it's all you want to do. At the moment, it's "Don't go out" syndrome. People who have wanted for years to do everything online, just sit behind a screen, now that they've been told to stay inside, what do they suddenly want to do? They find themselves driving to the Lake District, all of a sudden, even though they've never done that before!

Sin is so perverse that it used the command as an opportunity for Paul to break it. Instead of fleeing from covetousness, it infects his mind. And he dies - spiritually speaking, Paul is now dead.

This is where some people have had problems. The Bible teaches that we're all born in a dead spiritual state; that we inherit from Adam, so to speak, this "deadness" that we start with. So the only person who was ever 'alive' to start with was Adam. But Paul here is speaking from his own experience of this - this is what he's expressing, his experience. This is how he knew sin - so there, second part of verse 7, *Yet 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.'*

What he's saying is his experience of it. When covetousness hit, he knew for the first time his spiritual state. He knew sin, and he knew death- and it was due to sin. So, we might want to nuance what Paul is saying here as, "Paul became conscious of sin at this point". Before that, perhaps he thought he was a good person. But now he knows that he's not, so perverse are his insides that they've taken something good like God's commands and twisted them into an opportunity to sin. He's dead-meat and deep down, he knows it.

Perhaps you've had a similar experience? I can't remember my first convictions of sin. But I can think of times when I've been really struck by the sinfulness of sin in me. Times when I should have been a help to friends, but instead, I've hurt or taken advantage of them. Times I've let down my wife down, times I've let down my children down, times I've let down God. And then afterwards it just strikes you like a mallet, just how sinful my own sin is. How sinful I am deep down.

That's what struck Paul here. If this law hadn't been there, there would have been no opportunity to sin, so to speak, in this way. The law prompted him to sin in a new way. Not

that there's no sin if there are no rules. Paul's already looked at that in Chapter 2. There are, and we are judged for them. But law turns sin into transgression, so that not only are we doing wrong, we're actually breaking rules! We become law-breakers.

So, for example, until a few days ago there wasn't a law against spitting at nurses. It doesn't mean it was "right" before - the difference is that now it's not just wrong, it's an offence!

So the law seems to make things worse! Does that mean the law is just an instrument of death?

The Law Makes Things Worse, but for the Better

Have a look 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.

Is the law then the author of death? No, says Paul. The law exposes sin, it brings it out into the open. It shows us just how sinful sin is, it makes it break its cover, it exposes it. So it shows us that we can't keep it. The law is like a set of instructions for Ikea furniture (other Swedish furniture stores are available, though perhaps not at the moment!). But the instructions that we get, imagine this for a moment, are correct. The problem is that we've thrown away the little Allen key that came with the instructions. What should have been possible, has now become impossible, not because the instructions are bad, but because before we even started we've thrown away the very thing we need to make it possible. We were told how to build life, if you like, but instead we build death. We have condemned ourselves to frustration, and ultimately hell.

What happened? Our first fathers had the Allen key, but they threw it away, so to speak. They spiritually maimed themselves, they let sin enter the world and now we are unable to do what the law commands. And I would love to say that all generations after them have been looking for the key, but they haven't. They've done one of the three things: They've either ignored the instructions altogether, they've come up with their own instructions, or like Paul they've carried on regardless with the instructions, even though they didn't have the key, and even though that's only producing death. They stubbornly believe they can do it without God's help. So trying to obey the law only brings frustration. The function of the law **here** is to show up sin for what it is. Now, originally, I was going to say that the law is like an x-ray, showing up sin - but that's not really what this verse has in mind. If we want to follow the medical line, the law is like a treatment that makes us worse.

Now, I don't know if you've ever seen the medical drama, House. My wife and I quite enjoyed that a few years ago. In it, Hugh Laurie plays a doctor who is basically a "Sherlock Holmes" character, who likes puzzles more than patients. One of his favourite techniques when they're at a loss as to what the condition is, as to the illness, is to make the patient more ill. The symptoms come out more clearly as they get more ill, and then he can treat them knowing what they have.

The law works a bit like that; it shows us the perversity of our sin. That not only that we would do wrong things, but that we would do illegal things, so to speak. That we would

break the rules. It exposes the state of our hearts, by making us worse. Without the rules we can plead ignorance to a certain degree - not totally because we all have a conscience that tells us right from wrong - but with the rules, with the law, that excuse is taken away. We knew it was wrong and we did it anyway.

If you like military analogies, it makes the enemy give away their position and it shows you their strength. That's what the law does. It's like a rouse that makes the enemy give you "intel". The bad news is the enemy is big and it brings them out against you. But it's good news, because at least now you know what you're fighting! Sin is shown for what it is. There's no mistaking how deceitful and cunning your enemy is. And knowing your enemy is half the battle, isn't it? And it is a battle that we're engaged in, as Paul goes on to explain in our last point.

The Life of a Christian is a Battle

For we know that the law is spiritual, 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. 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 what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Paul again brings us to his own personal experiences from his life. And his experience of the Christian life is one of frustration and fight! In the tongue twisting section here, Paul describes the frustration he still feels with the law: he wants to do what God wants, but he's still not capable of doing it as he would like. Sin still lives in him, and still is a powerful foe. It's been dethroned, but it hasn't been removed from him - it has been removed from authority within him, but it still exerts an influence on every area of his life.

You see, sin is a bit like a rhino. G.K. Chesterton wrote: "If a rhinoceros were to enter this restaurant now, there is no denying he would have great power here. But I should be the first to rise and assure him that he had no authority whatever."

Or as John Owen wrote in his classic "Indwelling Sin in Believers",

"It does not have the right to rule over them, yet it will still exercise dominion in them in some respects. It has been weakened, but its nature remains unchanged. It is still a law, and still powerful."

Paul here is writing as a Christian. He is writing of his present experience in the present tense. Some people have found verse 14 troublesome because of this, because it seems to

speak of slavery, almost, "sold under sin". Haven't Christians been freed from sin? Hasn't our slavery ended? Romans 6:18 and 22 both speak about us having been freed from sin!

Jim Packer puts this well in "Keep in Step with the Spirit". He says verse 14 is, "stated categorically and without qualification, not because it is the whole truth about Paul the Christian, but because it is the only part of the truth about himself that the law can tell him."

This is Paul speaking about his experience with the law. This is all the law can tell him. It offers no solution - it only restates the problem. It just gives the same answer over and over again. It's the Bible's version of 'Computer says no'.

Paul wants to do good; Paul wants to do what God wants. But even in his best moments, sin is there right alongside him, right inside him, like an enemy within. Just like an unwelcome guest, who will not leave! Don't we know that feeling as Christians? In our best moments we want so desperately to please God. We start off with such lofty and high ideas! I'm not going to gossip anymore. I'm not going to look at that website anymore. I **am** going to pray for 30 minutes today. I **am** going to speak to that person about Jesus. But how often do those things so quickly amount to nothing? Or even when we **do** do those things, how quickly does our pride inflate! Even at our best, sin is right there. As we have mentioned in our previous point, we are simply unable to perform perfectly what is right.

But there are some major differences between then and now. The one that's highlighted here is that now, as a Christian, we actually want to do what is right. Our desires have changed - we now actually now want to please God. That may sound like something small, but it is huge. It's huge because it points to a change on the inside, in the "inner being" or the "inner man" as Paul calls it. Our inner spiritual life has been changed. We are now not just frustrated by our inability to do what is right, but it seems alien to us when we do that, that's what he's getting at here in 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.

He's not absolving himself of responsibility for sin; he's explaining now that it's against what he wants to do, whereas before he wanted to do it. It feels to him like another power operating in him, against his will; but he is still responsible, and deep down he knows that, but it's no longer what he wants to do. And so because this change has taken place inside but our sinful nature remains, that means we are disappointed in ourselves. The change has taken place, but sin continues, and so we're disappointed. We echo with Paul in verse 18 that "nothing good dwells in us". We shout with Paul, "Wretched man that I am" in verse 24 and cry out for rescue. And yet those very statements are a clue that inside we are not what we were. This inner man is called 'the mind' in verses 23 – 25. But it's that same idea: Sin has a man inside, but God has a man inside too! A renewed part of you, a new self, a new heart, an inner man. One that is now at war with sin, that is in open warfare with sin in your life.

Part of being a Christian is being at war with sin. And that war is waged inside each of us. You see, the Christian's war is not with sinners out there, it's with sin in here. It's not a war against unbelievers, it's a war against unbelief in our own hearts! And it's a daily struggle.

Remember though, it's the ones who are living after a shipwreck who thrash about in the water, who battle with the waves and the tides. The ones who aren't struggling are still, and

that's not because they're better than you; they're still because they're dead, floating with the tide, unconcerned about their fate. If you are struggling with sin, it is a sign of life, not death. It might be a sign that you are very aware of the grip it has on your life. Perhaps those who don't struggle as hard, are actually not as aware of the effect of sin in their life.

Brothers and sisters: if you are struggling with sin, that is normal. You are normal, so normal that even the great Apostle Paul is in your company! So normal that every Christian through history is in that group: from Augustine who struggled with lust, to John Newton who struggled with his old life in the slave trade. Even John Wesley who wrongly taught that a Christian could become sinless in this life, never claimed that for himself (no, he actually left that to his followers in Otley, who were the first ones in the whole world to claim that for themselves!). But Wesley was struggling with sin until the day he died!

The people who should be worried this morning are those who are **not** struggling with sin. Could it be that as John Owen calls it you have made a "false peace" with sin? You've done a Neville Chamberlain, from World War Two. The enemy's still there, but you've decided to leave it alone. After all isn't that easier?

"Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you" - how do we do that with some degree of success in this life? Well Paul is going to tell us in chapter eight. And there is hope for us - after crying out for rescue, in verse 24, he gives thanks to Jesus, his rescuer. He is sure that one day the battle will be over, and no sin will be dwelling in his flesh.

But for now, we need to be encouraged! We are not alone in the battle. You are not alone in the battle; all believers are in the battle with us. You are in the battle; I am in the battle too! So don't be downcast: you really are normal, I really am normal (in that respect anyway). Let's trust God to go before us in the battle.