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Rick Myatt

DON’T PULL ON THE TOW ROPE

Romans 7

In Shakespeare’s play *Romeo And Juliet*, in the second act at one point Romeo says to Juliet, “Call me but love and I’ll be new baptized. Henceforth I never will be Romeo.” He says if Juliet will tell him she loves him he’ll be a new man. His life will be different from that moment on. We all like the idea of being able to start over. Wouldn’t it be great to have mulligan in life, a do over, a second chance, a new lease on life? How wonderful to wipe the slate clean, forget all the failure and disappointment of the past and start over.

We saw last week that in Christ we get a new life. What has happened before is over. That life ended when we put our faith in Christ. The old life died and we were raised to a new life. What a hopeful, encouraging idea. We are starting all over again with no bad marks against us.

The California League is a baseball minor league at the single A level. Prior to the reorganization of the minor leagues last year, they used to play a split schedule. They would begin play in April and play half the season’s schedule of games. At that point the first half of the season was over. The team with the best record was declared the first half champion. Team records would be reset to 0-0 and they would begin the second half of the season as though it was a totally new season. The team with the best record in the second half would be the second half champion regardless of what their record was in the first half. Then the first half champion would play the second half champion to determine the league champion for the year.

In the minor leagues teams can change significantly during a season due to young players developing and new players being promoted from a lower level. It is conceivable a team could get off to a very bad start, but then dramatically improve during the course of the year. Their bad start wouldn’t eliminate them from post-season play because they might do far better in the second half after getting a fresh start. However, if a team is just bad and it doesn’t get any better, the new start in the second half isn’t going to help. They’ll still be bad. They’ll end up at the bottom of the standings in the second half just like they did in the first.

It’s wonderful to be given a new life, a second chance at life. But it is awfully easy to be the same in the second chance that one was the first time around. We are all too likely to have the same traits, make the same mistakes and have the same flaws that we have always had. So how we can live differently in this new life we’ve been given so we don’t repeat the same failures of the old life?

People typically think the recipe for living a new life means is to do better at living by some law, some set of rules that we have to follow to be different than we were before. If we ca just find the right methods, steps, rules to follow and do better at it, then we will be new. Those are all ways of describing what the Bible calls law, the prime example of it being the Law of Moses. Paul has already said that we find this new life by faith *apart from the Law*. That was a difficult, radical, life-altering realization for him. It would have been nearly impossible without Christ’s shattering intervention in his life. We get that this was a big deal for Paul, but what does that have to do with us today? It actually has a lot to do with us today. That’s because everybody has a law of some kind. You have a law. There is some path you think you must follow in order to have worth, to gain the life that you think you want. We all have rules we must follow in order to live out this new life. In Romans 7 Paul discussed the concept of law. He is going to show us why law cannot be the way we live the new life and in so doing explains what the whole purpose of law is. It turns out to be different than we typically think it is. Let’s look at Romans 7.

THE LAW DOESN’T APPLY TO DEAD PEOPLE

The opening verses of this chapter contain an illustration, an analogy. Many interpreters of Scripture get hung up on trying to understand exactly how this analogy applies to us. The illustration is if a woman is married, she is legally bound to her husband. But if her husband dies, she is no longer bound by that law. That is just common sense. If a person’s spouse dies, that marriage is over. Death ends the contract of marriage. Our sister in law, Connie, was a widow. When she married Jerry, no one accused her of violating her marital vows. The bond of her previous marriage was ended by the death of her first husband.

This is where people get hung up on trying to figure out who is the husband and who is the wife in the analogy. Paul starts in his analogy with the husband dying and the wife being free, then in verse 4 says we died to the law through dying with Christ. That confuses some people. We don’t need to be confused. It’s an analogy intended to help us understand one principle. The principle is that death ends the grip of a law on us. That’s all Paul was saying.

In November 2019 the *Washington Post* had an article about a prison inmate in the Iowa State Penitentiary named Benjamin Schreiber, who is serving a life sentence for murder. In 2015 he collapsed in his cell due to a coronary event. Doctors restarted his heart 5 times. He was in the news because he had filed an unusual legal appeal. He claimed that when his heart stopped, he died, thus fulfilling his life sentence. Therefore, he was being held in prison illegally. The judges didn’t buy it. They called his argument “unpersuasive and without merit.” However, he does demonstrate that he understands the principle. Death ends the law’s hold on a person. If he was dead, then he should be free of the sentence the law.

Don’t try to press every aspect of an illustration, just get the main point. The main point is that when we put our faith in Christ, our old life ended. It was united with Christ on the cross. That death means we don’t need to worry about the law. In grad school I had a professor who was a real stickler for details. He had a style guide that had to be used for the big paper we had to do for him. Failure to follow the details of the of the style guide in regard to margins, format, punctuation, all of it, would result in your grade being lowered or potentially your paper even being rejected. I’ve never been a detail guy. I’ve never understood the necessity of having such nit-picking matters play a role in one’s success in the class. It really bothered me because I was training for ministry. How is making sure my margins are correct according to Strunk and White going to help me minister to people?

I got through that class. I graduated from theology school. So here’s my question. How much effect do you think that professor’s insistence on those details have on me now? The answer is zero. I’m not in his class any more, so I don’t have to worry about the picky little things that he seemed obsessed with. You could say I have died to his law. His rules have no more effect on me at all. That is what Paul was saying about the Law.

Paul’s point is in verse 6. “But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.” We have been released from the law. Do you get that? We are free of it. In my analogy, we are no longer in its class in school, so whatever it demands has no authority over our lives.

There is something important that will help our understanding of the flow of Paul’s thought here. If you cut out everything from the end of verse 6 to the end of chapter 7 the flow of thought into chapter 8 would be quite smooth. Verse 6 connects well with 8:1. In verse 6 Paul said we have been released from the law and its demands so we can serve in the new way of the Spirit. In 8:1-2 Paul says, “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.” This continues the thought of 7:6. That means that 7:7-25 is one large parenthesis.

That parenthesis is there because Paul knew that some would object to his contention that being released from the Old Testament Law, the Law of Moses, was a good thing. So Paul had to explain how that could possibly be true. The heart of his argument is that the law is good but its purpose is not what most of us think it is. His point is that the Law was never intended to make humans truly godly, for it could not do so. He will explain that in this long parenthetical section. It is crucial that we understand this section because we are drawn to the idea of living by some law so powerfully we can’t help ourselves. It’s like law is some powerful electromagnet and we are metal. It draws us irresistibly. We go back to it even when we think we don’t want it. Even people who think they want no part of law but only want freedom actually have a law. And the problem is law always discourages and defeats us. So we seriously need to grasp Paul’s thought.

THE LAW IS A SPOTLIGHT

The knee jerk reaction to the statement that being freed from law is good is, “Wait, didn’t Jesus say that not one letter of the law will ever pass away? Didn’t he say it is important and it all is going to be fulfilled? Is Paul disagreeing with Jesus? Psalm 19:7 says, “The Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.” That says the law is perfect and revives the soul. If that’s true, why would God want us to be released from it? Psalm 111:7-8 says, “All his (God’s) precepts are trustworthy. They are established forever and ever.” God’s law is forever! How can we be released from it?

Paul tells us in verses 7-13 that the problem is we misunderstand what the law is really about. This is true of whatever law you follow, but especially true of the Law of Moses. Yes, the Law is still God’s truth. It will be forever. Yes, the Law will refresh our souls, ***but only when we understand its true meaning and purpose***. What did God intend for it to do?

In verse 7 Paul says, “I would not have known what sin was, had it not been for the law.” What the law does is shine its light on our lives and reveal the wrong that is there. It is there to confront us with our wrong. Consider Paul’s example. In Philippians 3:5-6 he described how he thought of himself before he was miraculously confronted by the resurrected Jesus Christ on a Syrian road. “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law, a Pharisee, as for zeal, persecuting the church, as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.”

Those were his credentials. He was as Jewish as it was possible to be. When it came to the Law, he was a Pharisee. Enough said. Nobody, and I mean nobody ever kept the rules the way the Pharisees did. Then look at that last statement. As for the law, he was faultless. He was perfect! He never even stepped a millimeter out of line. You could examine his life with an electron microscope and you wouldn’t find even a molecule out of place in regard to the law. At least, that’s what he thought.

However, he was in for a rude awakening. Paul never, ever, had anything to do with other gods or with idols. He was obsessively scrupulous about keeping all the rules about the Sabbath. He never killed anyone. He would have nothing to do with adultery. He never stole anything in his life. He never lied, not even a white lie. Man, I’ll bet Paul was terrible when a woman asked him, “Do you think this robe makes me look fat?” “I cannot lie. Yes, it does.” And then he thought about that command, “You shall not covet.” Uh oh. The problem there is, he did covet.

Paul had no problem not killing anyone, keeping the Sabbath rules, never stealing. But coveting was a problem, because he did covet. He could hide that from other people and still look faultless before the law because they didn’t know what was in his heart. But he knew, and he realized coveting existed there.

I’m pretty sure it went something like this. Oh no, I realize I am coveting. So I need to try harder to be better. I need to be more disciplined. Maybe I need to have an accountability group and have the guys ask me how I’m doing with my coveting problem. At the end of the day, it boiled down to, “I need to make myself better, whatever it takes.” Paul couldn’t stop himself. He could stop himself from killing people, from stealing, from worshiping idols, from walking too many steps on the Sabbath. But he couldn’t stop himself from coveting. He would decide, “Okay, that’s it. No more coveting. I am never going to covet again.” And then minutes later a covetous thought would pop into his head before he even knew what was happening. He couldn’t stop it from showing up.

What did Paul covet? We don’t know. He doesn’t seem to have been an especially greedy guy, so I suspect he didn’t covet other people’s money or houses or lands. I’m pretty sure he wasn’t a car guy, so he didn’t drool over someone’s Corvette or their hot truck. My guess, and that’s all it is, would be that he coveted the respect and status some other Pharisees had garnered. I wouldn’t be surprised if he wanted that status. I can imagine every time he saw a particularly respected Pharisee being given great respect or be praised by someone, that thought popped up, “I want them to say that kind of thing about me.” That’s coveting. I want what he has.

I’ll tell you why I think that could have been a problem for him. I’ve had the same thing. I’ve been a straight arrow throughout my life. I’m a bit like Paul. I might have made a pretty good Pharisee. When it comes to the big 10, I pretty much ace 9 of them and don’t even sweat that much doing it. But that one about coveting, yeah, it trips me up too. I’ve heard people say to me, “I heard Francis Chan preach on that subject. It was so powerful. His sermon was awesome, and it had a huge impact on my life.” And I’ve thought, “I wish people would say that about me.” The weird thing is, I don’t want to think that. I don’t like it when that thought crops up. But I can’t stop it from happening. Paul had the same problem.

When Paul had convinced himself that he was without fault, as pure as the driven snow, the Law said, “You shall not covet.” And it was like God shined a painfully bright spotlight on the state of his heart. Is coveting a heinous act, an obscene and violent wrong that destroys others? No. Why did it bother Paul so? It’s because it cracked his seemingly impenetrable armor of self-righteousness. Is coveting a sin? Yes, the Law says that as plain as day. Did Paul covet? Undeniably, yes. That meant that no matter how disciplined Paul might have seemed, how faultless he looked, there was sin in his life. That meant that alien force, sin, was at work in his heart. Coveting was the tell tale of a deadly presence in his own heart, and he couldn’t deny it. His self image of the faultless man turned out to be a house of cards, and coveting knocked the whole thing down.

In verse 9 Paul said, “Once I was alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.” Wait, didn’t Paul always live under the law? When was he alive apart from the law? I don’t think Paul was being literal there. I believe in this chapter Paul is describing the human condition in general. Humans can think they’re doing fine as long as there is no law to show what they ought to be. But their image of themselves as pretty good people, falls apart when the law shines its light on their hearts and lives. This is one of the main purposes of the law.

I have related this before, but it illustrates the point here. Many years ago Laurie and I drove up to LAX to pick up someone that was flying in to that airport. The flight was scheduled to land in the evening. On the way up we stopped and go some burritos that we could eat as we were continuing to drive. We hopped back on the freeway and headed to the airport while munching on our burritos in the dark car. This was in the days before TSA when you actually went into the airport to meet people coming off the plane. We parked our car then went into the airport. As soon as we walked into the airport Laurie looked at me and said, “Oh, Rick, look at your shirt.” Apparently my burrito had been kind of greasy. While I was eating it and driving it had been dripping grease down onto my shirt. I had no idea. I couldn’t see it in the dark car. I couldn’t see it when we got out of the car because it was dark outside. As soon as we walked into the building where there was a lot of light you couldn’t miss it. The light revealed that big stain for all the world to see. That’s what light does. It reveals what is there. That is what the light of the Law of God does. It reveals the stains that are there. Here’s a crucial question. Did the light in that airport fix the stain on my shirt? No, of course not. All it did was show it for what it was. It couldn’t fix it. The Law is the same. It shows what’s there, it doesn’t fix it. It can’t.

THE LAW’S WEAK POINT IS ME!

Does this mean that God’s law is not a good thing? Paul says it just confronted him with his sin, and actually just provoked him to sin even more because human nature is like that. Tell us not to do something, and that’s exactly what we want to do. For an example, consider Adam and Eve in Eden. They had an entire world full of foods to eat, things to do. God said there was one thing they should not do. What was the result? They just had to do that one thing.

Robert Cialdini, a professor at Arizona State University, conducted an interesting experiment at the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona. The park had a problem because visitors were taking some of the petrified wood home, to the tune of 14 tons a year. Cialdini and his colleagues scattered loose pieces of petrified wood on various trails throughout the park. They posted signs warning not to take the petrified wood on some trails, but not on others. The results were startling. The trails with warning signs had nearly 3 times more theft than trails without signs. All the warning not to steal apparently did was provoke people to steal.

Verse 14 lays it out for us. “The law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.” The law can tell me a million times to not covet. But that alien force called sin is inside me, and somehow I end up doing what it tells me to do, rather than follow the law when it says don’t do it. In verse 17 Paul says, “It is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.” He says it is like there’s this alien thing that takes control of me.

Verse 19 lays out something that every one of us can relate to. “I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing.” Paul says he wants to do the good thing, the thing the law tells him to do, but instead he ends up doing the opposite, and he keeps on doing it. Doesn’t that feel like he’s reading your thoughts? Perhaps Paul and I are the only two members of this tribe, but I know exactly what Paul is saying. I now have a long list of times when I determined I was going to be different and do things a new way, only to be frustrated when I have to admit that once again I have failed to do what I was absolutely determined that I was going to do.

Actually, I’m certain that Paul and I are not the only members of that unfortunate tribe. I’ve got 3 words for you. New Year’s Resolutions. What is the cliché about those resolutions? This year it’s going to be different. I’m making changes this year. I’m laying it out, setting goals, and I’m going to do it. And by February those resolutions are history. New Year’s Resolutions are like a living illustration of the words Paul wrote in verse 19. The good I want to do, I don’t do, but I do the evil I don’t want to do and I keep doing it. In other words, everyone has gone down the road that Paul described here.

Why is that? Why do we so often fail what we have even resolved we are going to do, and do the things that we are totally determined we will never do again? Is the problem with those things we resolve? Are they bad things, evil things? No, they are good. The problem isn’t in those things we resolve. The problem is in us. The law is not the problem. Something in us fouls up our attempts to do better. Paul calls that something sin. In verse 20 he says sin, “is living in me.” It’s this living thing that exerts a force, a powerful influence on us. It seeks to ruin every single good thing that we want to do. It is there always in us. That doesn’t mean we can never change. People do sometimes change. It means that we can never change enough to make ourselves as good as we know we should be.

Sometimes people get hung up on whether Paul is talking about his experience before Christ or after Christ, or whether he is talking about Christians who aren’t following Christ. I don’t think any of those is the point. I think he is saying, “This is the human condition. This is why the Law will never work, because that perverse thing living in us will always short-circuit our efforts to follow the law.” That is true no matter what your law might be.

Unfortunately, in the church, there is a curious tendency to have a message and a program that essentially says to people with a new life, “Do better. Try harder. Be different than you were before.” Follow the steps to discipleship and living the life God wants you to live. The program comes down to working harder and being more disciplined to do the right things. That is a doomed approach.

When I was a teenager we had some friends who loved to water ski. They had a boat and they wanted to get me involved in their pastime. So they took me out and taught me how to water ski. I went skiing with them on 3 different occasions. The first time it was on a river, the second time it was on a lake, and the last time it was in the ocean. As they were teaching me they warned me about something I would want to do and told me I absolutely must not try to do. They positioned me in the water wearing a life vest so I floated. They instructed me to get the tips of my skis up out of the water and keep them there. They told me to hold on to the tow rope, and when the boat started forward to just let it pull me up out of the water. This is where the warning came. They told me, “You’re going to want to pull yourself up to get out of the water. Don’t do it. Let the boat do the work.” I got all set. They revved the boat’s engine, it pulled me through the water, and wanting to get up and ski, I tried to pull myself up. Back down into water I went. They reiterated before we tried again, “Don’t try to pull yourself up. The boat has plenty of power. It will get you up if you just let it.” Second try I couldn’t help myself. I wanted to get up. So I pulled myself up again and instead went down. Finally on the third try I got it. I actually water skied.

I tell you that because an awful lot of church programs and discipleship plans pretty much come down to “pull yourself up.” We don’t have the power. When we try to do that, all we do is repeat the failures of the past. We find ourselves with Paul saying, “The good that I want to do, I don’t do, and I keep doing the evil I don’t want.”

In his book, *From Guilt To Glory*, the late Ray Stedman wrote, “The law does help us, but only up to a point. It will help us to define the problem. But (it) is no help at all when it comes to delivering us…The effect of the law invariably, is to discourage, to produce a sense of defeat and ultimately a sense of despair.”

GOD DELIVERS ME ANYWAY

In verse 24 Paul sums up the dilemma. We want to prove that we are righteous, to be declared approved. We want to live a new life in which we are able to do better, but we find ourselves always somehow falling short in all of that. Paul says, “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?” That’s the defeat and despair Stedman mentioned.

The answer comes in the next verse. “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” We cannot fix ourselves. We can’t grab on to a law that will show us the steps to take, the rules to follow to make ourselves better, to finally defeat the alien that has taken up residence inside of us so we can become what we want to be. But God delivers us through Jesus Christ.

The point of all this is not to get us to beat ourselves up because we can’t seem to fix our problems. It is not to say we are horrible because that alien force called sin resides in us. It is to get us to the place where we stop trying to fix ourselves. It is to get us to this very place, where we humble ourselves and say, “Who will rescue me?” Then it is to rejoice that God has done for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We can’t deliver ourselves, but God can and has in Jesus Christ.

In the sermon on the mount Jesus began by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Living this new life totally relies on that truth. It is about us admitting to ourselves and to God and to everyone else that we cannot solve the problem through our discipline, our efforts, our best intentions, no matter how hard we try. It is then to throw ourselves entirely on God’s grace in Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

I have what I have come to consider a learning disability. You know how if someone seems to be having difficulty understanding what they are being asked to do a person might say to them, “Do you need me to draw you a picture?” In my case that would not help at all. My disability is that if I’m looking at some instructions that are mostly pictures of how to put something together or make it work, my brain kind of goes blank. It’s kind of weird, but the pictures don’t help. If anything, they confuse me. Something apparently isn’t wired right in my brain, that thing that makes normal people able to see from pictures how things go together.

Laurie played a kind of mean trick on me for my recent birthday. She gave me a new guitar strap. I need one for my acoustic guitar and one for my bass. Because I’m playing bass this week I figured it was time to put the new strap on the bass. This is where it started getting ugly. I am very familiar with guitar straps. They are simple affairs, basically a strap with a hole in each end you attach to knobs on the guitar. But this strap wasn’t like that. It came in 2 pieces. I saw it and immediately thought, “What in the world is this? Why are there 2 pieces, and how is it supposed to work?” I’ve never seen anything like it. Not to worry. It came with instructions. It was a strip of paper with a series of 8 pictures on it. 8 steps to assemble a guitar strap? This is pure evil. And all I had were pictures that made zero sense to me. It might as well have been instructions written in those goofy Chinese characters. My wife had pulled an April Fool’s joke on me in the middle of March. This was just cruel. I think she wants to rub my nose in my inadequacy.

I feebly tried to figure out how to make it work by following the pictures. Epic fail. Do you know how inept it makes you feel when you are unable to make a guitar strap work? Dude, are you able to feed yourself or is that also too difficult for you? I gave it a valiant effort, but got nowhere. I realized I could refuse to admit my inability, put the strap back in the box and pretend it never happened, or I could keep trying to figure it out on my own which would lead to frustration, wasted time and more humiliation. My other option was to call for reinforcements. Humble myself, tell my wife she had proven again how superior she is to me and ask her to fix the problem. She looked at the pictures for a minute, then said, “Okay, I see how this is supposed to work.” Of course she did. She had it all done in 2 minutes. Don’t ask me how. I personally believe it was some sort of minor miracle. I am using that guitar strap today because I admitted my own inability and let her handle it. If I hadn’t I wouldn’t be using that strap today, or any other day. That’s the message of Romans 7. Living the new life will never happen until we admit our inability and let God handle it.

Paul stressed this point so heavily because there is something in human nature that is totally convinced that the answer for us, the way to fix ourselves and live a new life, is to just try to do better at keeping the law, whatever law we think is the right one. We keep going back to that idea the way a compass needle always settles on pointing north. It’s as natural and insistent as our need to breathe. So Paul had to use a boatload of theological explosives to blast us loose from it, knowing even as he did so that after being freed from it, we would have a natural tendency to go right back to it. And believers in Jesus still do. Maybe we need Will Smith to smack us in the face to wake us up to the reality that the law approach does not work.

Imagine you are standing on the shore of the Pacific Ocean. You are about to embark on something you really want to do. You want to go to Bora Bora in the South Pacific. How are you going to get there? I hand you detailed instructions for proper swimming technique. Along with that are directions. Swim a course of 214 degrees for 4097 miles. Then I pat you on the back and say, “Have a great trip.” The instructions and directions are the law to follow to get where you want to go. There is another option. Go to the airport, board an airplane bound for Tahiti, sit in your seat, and trust the airplane to get you where you want to go. The law, any law, is going to give you instructions and directions, but you’re never going to get there. The message of this chapter is, you are going to drown long before you ever get anywhere near your destination. The gospel of grace is trusting in the airplane, in this case God’s grace given to you by Jesus Christ. Living by the law is failure and death. Trusting in Jesus Christ is success and life. Live the new life in him by humbling yourself and relying every day on what he has done for you. Then come back and let’s look at Romans 8 together, because there Paul shows us the way to live out this new life. Chapter 7 shows us what won’t work. Chapter 8 shows us what does work.