

“We have Met the Enemy, and He is Us!”

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Romans 7:6-25 (ESV adapted)

⁶ But now we have been **released from the law**, since **we have died** to that which held us captive. The result is for us to serve in the **new way of the Spirit** and not in the old way of the written code/letter.

⁷ **What then shall we say? Is the law 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 coveting/desire if the law had not said, “*You shall not covet/desire.*” [Exod. 20:17] ⁸ But sin, taking a starting point through the commandment, worked in me all kinds of desire.

For apart from law, sin is dead. ⁹ I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. ¹⁰ The very **commandment that promised life** proved to be **death** to me. ¹¹ For sin, **taking a starting point through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.**

¹² **So the law is holy**, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

¹³ **Did the good, then, become death for me? By no means!**

But **it was sin** – in order that sin may become **clearly visible** by working death in me through what is good, in order that **sin might become sinful beyond measure** through the commandment.

¹⁴ **For we know** that the **law is spiritual**, but **I am of the flesh**, sold under sin's rule. ¹⁵ For what I am working, I do not understand. For **I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.** ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who work it, but sin that dwells in me.

¹⁸ **For I know** that **nothing good** dwells in me, that is, **in my flesh**. For to will the good is right there with me, but to work the good, no! ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the bad I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who work it, but the sin dwelling within me.

²¹ **So I find with regard to the law** that when I want to do the good, the bad is right there with me. ²² For **I delight in the law of God**, in my inner person, ²³ but in other parts of myself I see law as something very different waging war against the law that my mind delights in and taking me as a **prisoner** under the law as it is used by the sin that dwells in those parts of myself.

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! **Who will deliver me** from the body caught in this death?

²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Messiah our Lord! So then, on my own, I in my mind am a servant of God's law, but in my flesh I serve a law wielded by sin.

Genesis 2:16-17

¹⁶ ... “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

Exodus 20:3-4 The first two of the Ten Commandments

³ “You shall have no other gods before me. ⁴ You shall not make for yourself a carved image...”

Exodus 32:1

¹ ...The people gathered ... to Aaron and said to him, “Up, make us gods who shall go before us”

Exodus 20:17 The tenth of the Ten Commandments

¹⁷ "You shall not covet/desire (*epithumein*) your neighbor's house; you shall not covet/desire your neighbor's wife, or ... anything that is your neighbors."

Who are We in the Story We're in?

We want to be heroes in our own story. We like victory. But sometimes it's not so simple.

Oliver Hazard Perry's naval victory over the British on Lake Erie, 1813: "*We have met the enemy and he is ours!*" Echoed in a Pogo cartoon of 1971 (2nd Earth day, Vietnam war): "*We have met the enemy and he is us.*" Paul's analysis of the human situation is closer to Pogo than Perry. But also more complex than either. God steps into that complexity.

This text poses challenging questions. It starts from us "*released from the law*" to live "*in the new way of the Spirit.*" That raises serious questions about the whole story of scripture and the Law of Moses. What are you saying? Is God's Law sin!? If it's good, did it bring about evil, even death? Paul writes to a community of Jewish and Gentile believers, but only the Jews in their identity share as he does in Israel's story and in the Law/Torah.

Paul tells three stories in one: (1) Humanity seen in the first chapters of Genesis. (2) Israel and the Law/Torah at Sinai. (3) Every person ("I") living without God's Messiah and Holy Spirit. God has always been dealing the brokenness and alienation of all humanity, but he did it through Abraham, Israel ... the Messiah. When Paul uses "I" he is not sharing his own personal struggles, but describing every person's weakness and brokenness, a state that becomes clear, however, only through the work of the Law in relation to our sin.

The two great scripture stories share a pattern: A fundamentally good warning command is given (about the tree of knowledge; about no other gods), but the command becomes the starting point for temptation, transgression, alienation, death. Both Eve and Adam and Israel share the same human weakness – flesh. So does everyone individually – "I." The only hope (Rm 8) is for God to intervene, give his own life for us, his own Spirit to us.

Desiring, Coveting, Lusting, Delighting

To prepare us for that answer, Paul leads us on a journey through the Law/Torah, using not an obscure regulation but one of the Ten Commandments: "*You shall not desire/covet*" (*epithumein*). He chooses one that strikes at the heart of so many of our problems. Not obviously wrong, like murder. Desire, lust, greed, coveting, wanting – our society couldn't work without it. He keeps it broadly applicable. The Torah calls for a discipline of the heart that we find impossible. The prohibition itself adds a tang to the desire.

But the law is good (spiritual, promising life), and we can see the good, so why don't we just do it? The Law is like that "tree of knowledge." It marks a boundary but also identifies a vulnerability. We are weak, limited in time and space, all too easily deluded – we're flesh. We're also complex, with many parts that can be in conflict with each other.

Sin – our deep brokenness, self-centeredness, "*dwelling in us*" – shows its evil (like the serpent) by using our delight in the good to foment war within us and take us prisoners for death. It makes us a mystery to ourselves. It works using the best and worst in us. The story of Israel and the Law shows that we by ourselves have no strength to oppose ourselves.

Who will Deliver Us?

Paul's lament looks toward what he will say next. Something new must be added to our human situation if there's going to be hope: Jesus Messiah Lord. The Spirit of God!