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## **MINISTRIES, INC.**

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### **Wretched Man That I Am!**

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Romans 7:14-25

We gave birth to a son who just didn't understand gifts. We would get him what we thought was a wonderful gift; he would open it up, and in a few minutes be playing with the box.

I can remember one Christmas when we were determined we were going to find the ultimate gift, the one that surely he would love. We shopped extensively; we found the gift; we had such excitement. We were surely much more excited about that gift than he was.

We pulled it out from underneath the tree; you could feel the tingle. He opened the gift and actually played with it for a little bit - I was quite delighted. I went into the kitchen for a moment, came back into the living room, and he was playing with the box.

I think, sadly, there are many believers who are in that place, just like my son. We have been given the most awesome gift that could ever be given: the grace of God, in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's a gift of awesome beauty, it's a gift you could never earn or never deserve. There could be no gift more appropriate, there could be no gift more essential. And yet, there are many of us who seem quite content to play with the box.

Oh sure, we'll involve ourselves in Sunday service attendance. We'll give a bit of our money. We may even give ourselves to occasional person or family devotions. We may actually volunteer to go on an occasional summer missionary trip.

But if you'd examine our lives, if you'd watch us carefully, we're not holding on to that gift of grace with a deep sense of personal need. We're actually playing with the box. Our Christianity lives most in episodic moments of ministry, or on Sunday morning.

You see, here's what needs to be said: there is surely a direct relationship between how you view yourself, between what you say to you about you, and the way you receive and hold on to that gift of grace.

Think about this with me: there are surely two questions that every human being would ask, and that every human being would answer. The first question is this: what is my deepest, most abiding problem? What is my big life dilemma? Maybe you'd say, "Well, Paul, have you met my neighbors? Have you talked to me about my children? Have I shared with you about my friendships, my marriage, my boss?"

You see, it's very tempting to locate that deepest abiding problem outside and not inside ourselves; it's tempting.

The second question is this: how will it ever be solved? What is the solution to the dilemma of my life? That's why I'm deeply persuaded that we need to arrive at Romans 7 again and again and again.

Would you turn there with me? I want to read for you, beginning with verse 14, through the end of the chapter:

"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 with in 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." (ESV)

Now if you're really going to understand the power and importance of Romans 7, you have to understand where the teaching of Romans 7 sits in the discussion of the gospel in the letter to the Romans.

In Romans 1-3, we read Paul building this devastating argument that everyone is a sinner. It reaches that crescendo with these words, "There is none righteous, not even one."

In the end of Romans 3 and Romans 4 and 5, Paul demonstrates how it's impossible by the keeping of the law to be justified, that righteousness is a free gift of grace, appropriated through faith.

Romans 6 is that wonderful passage that teaches the glory of our union with Christ, that when Christ died, we died, and when Christ rose, we rose to newness of life. And it ends with those wonderful encouraging words, "For sin will not have dominion over you because you're not under law; you're under grace."

Just when you think you've arrived, just in the moment of celebration, you hit Romans 7. It is the ultimate spiritual reality check. Because in Romans 7, Paul is want to remind us

of remaining sin and of the struggle with sin that still goes on in the hearts of each one of us.

And, in fact, the passage is shockingly autobiographical. There are those who question whether Romans 7 is describing the life of a believer. Well, it's hard to escape that conclusion - Paul's talking about Paul. In fact, those first-person pronouns, "I, my, me" are used some 40 times in this passage.

You have indications like, in verse 22, if you want to look there with me. Paul says, "But for I delight in the law of God in my inner being." Only a believer would ever say that of himself. It's only a believer who would ever delight in God's law.

So clearly, what Romans 7 is about, is the struggle of sin that is still going on in the life of a believer. And I would encourage you this morning to look humbly into the mirror of Romans 7, to accept that what Romans 7 is showing you - are you ready for this? - is you, because we need this reminder.

Now I'm not capable, in the moments that we have, of covering this whole chapter for you. In fact, I'm going to look with you at the last few verses. I thought that was a good choice to just pick this brief passage until I realized that John Piper had done the same and preached five sermons on them. So we will be here a while.

Well let's look again, beginning with verse 21:

"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."

Now what I want to do this morning is direct you to four descriptive words that really capture the reality of our remaining struggle with sin. Look at verse 21 - "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand"

Sin is a law. Now in this particular verse, when Paul uses the word law, he's not talking about God's law. He's using the word "law" in this way - it's an inescapable life principle. It's a reality that you can't escape by an act of your will.

Probably the best example of this is gravity. You don't have a vote. You can't, by an act of your will, decide that you're tired of gravity. You know, held to the ground, held to the ground every day - foot to earth.

And you decide, "Well, I'm tired of gravity - I'm going to spring free of gravity this morning." And you decide, rather than walking to your car, you're going to go to the

second-story window and launch yourself to your vehicle, because you're just tired of gravity.

If you live with somebody, they will hear a thud. It will be your body hitting the roof of your vehicle, because you do not have the ability, just by an act of your will, to escape the reality of gravity.

Brothers and sisters, that's the law of sin! There is operating in you a devastating moral gravity, and if you're humble enough to look back, it really does magnetize you in every situation and every location of your life. We are deeply needy people.

And Paul grabs it here so powerfully. He says, "What I want to do, I don't do. But what I hate to do, I do again and again." Who of us could not relate to those words? Sin is a law.

But Paul's not done in his description. Look at verse 22, "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."

Sin is not only a law; sin is a war. It's an internal conflict; it's a war that's fought on the turf of my heart; it's a war that's fought for control of my soul. Sin is a war that rages within me.

What is it a war between? It's a war between God's will and my will; it's a war between God's kingdom and my kingdom; it's a war between God's law and my law. Oh, I wish I could stand before you this morning and say, "I've only ever been motivated, since I came to Christ, by zeal for God's kingdom," but I can't say that.

There are times when my words, my actions, my choices are much more about my claustrophobic little kingdom of one than it is about the kingdom of God. And I forget his kingdom, and I forget his righteousness, and I'm after what I want, and I want to co-opt the people in my life to deliver it for me.

If you're a parent here, and it's 10 o'clock at night, and your little ones that you put to sleep in yesteryear are once again fighting in their beds, and you're stomping down the hallway about to say words that you should not say, that will not be helpful to your children – brothers and sisters, please understand this: you are not motivated because they've broken God's law; you're motivated because they've broken your law.

Because zeal for God's law will go in a different direction, it'll be a righteous indignation, the indignation of grace and the indignation of compassion and the indignation of instruction and the indignation of wisdom. You see, I'm angry because according to my law, my children don't need my parenting after 10 o'clock. And I'm actually angry that, in God's redemptive purpose, a redemptive opportunity is going to take place after 10 o'clock.

Wow – how powerful. You see, there’s a war going on inside us. Don’t be fooled to think that your major battles are the battles with circumstances and the battles of relationships. Your mind goes, when you hear “war”, to that boss who never seems satisfied or that child who will not comply or that neighbor who seems so anti-social. Listen – those wars that we all fight are the fruit of a deeper war for our hearts. It’s about my desire to be king when there is king. And that war rages in my life; there’s evidence of that.

I determined today that I would give you mundane little examples, because I didn’t want you to think that these things just exist in those grand big moments of your life because you don’t actually live in those moments very often. You live in little moments. And perhaps, that’s where we should see this war take place.

You know, maybe you’re in one of those moments where you know you’re going to have to have a difficult conversation with somebody, and you begin to be armed by the motivation of love and unity and understanding; you really do want to experience the peace that you’re meant to experience with God’s people. You really want to be an instrument in God’s hands.

And, you know how before you have one of those conversations, you rehearse the conversation in your mind, and you play both sides of the conversation, and it’s sort of like “choose your own adventure.” You finally feel prepared; you’re ready for the conversation. You’ve thought about all the possibilities. And you’re in that conversation now, you’re quite expectant, you have good purposes.

And in the middle of that conversation, that person says something hurtful or dismissive to you. You can feel the emotional temperature begin to change. And all the sudden, you no longer want unity; all the sudden, you want to win. You want that person to say, “You’re right! You’re the rightest person I ever met. I bow at the feet of your right-ism.”

You see, there’s the war. All the sudden, it’s no longer about God’s way; it’s my way. It’s no longer about God’s kingdom; it’s my kingdom. Brothers and sisters, who hasn’t been there?

I know you probably wish he was done, but Paul’s not done yet. Verse 23, “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.”

Sin is a law; sin is a war; sin is a prison. Sin takes you captive. There is a scary, addictive, enslaving quality to sin. It’s not just that I sin, but sin is addictive, it’s magnetizing, it draws me, it seductive and alluring. And isn’t it interesting that although all of us sin, we don’t all sin the same? There are things that will hook you that don’t hook me, but I get hooked too.

What is a captive? A captive is one held against his will. What a powerful word this is, what a humbling word this is. Do you not see the enslaving, addictive quality of sin in your life?

Let's say you just become aware by the convicting grace of the Lord that you're just too hooked to pleasure. You really do spend too much of your time, too much of your energy, too much thinking about pleasure. And you feel the call to deal with that idolatry in your life.

And so, you determine you're going to start with something very concrete and very specific. You're going to start with your eating habits, because you've realized that you carry around evidence that you're addicted to pleasure. And so, you say to yourself, "Tonight, at the end of the evening meal, I'm only going to eat one piece of chocolate cake instead of my normal two, two and a half, three."

And you actually feel good that you've made that commitment, and you actually do it. At the end of the meal, you're grateful for the ability you've been given. Except the phone rings, and the phone is in the kitchen, and you go into the kitchen, and there's a single piece of chocolate cake sitting on the counter. You say to yourself, "Another quarter won't hurt. It's still a victory." And you cut the cake into quarters and you take a quarter.

You go down to watch the news and you pass through the kitchen again, and you think, "Well, one more quarter's not that big; it's only a quarter." Somebody in the house and you walk through the kitchen and as you're exiting the kitchen you notice that there's chocolate on your fingers, you don't even know how it got there. And that evening, as you go to bed, you go to turn the light off in the kitchen, you grab the last quarter of that piece of cake. You go upstairs feeling defeated. You've been hooked once again.

Sin is a law; sin is a war; sin is a prison. But there's a fourth word. Verse 24, "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."

Hear this brothers and sisters: if sin is a law, if sin is a war, if sin is a prison then you and I are people in deep need of rescue. We need a deliverer. Here's what the Apostle Paul is arguing; this is humbling to confess but vitally important – you and I need the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ this morning as much as we needed it the day we first believed, because the law still operates, the war still rages, the prison still holds us. And so, we should say with Paul, "Oh, wretched person that I am! God, will I ever get it right? Will I ever be free?"

But we don't stop there. We can say, "Thanks be to God" because into that law and into that war and into that prison came the person and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. There's a deliverer that you have been given. And what is that deliverance?

Well, it's first the deliverance of forgiveness. Isn't it an amazing thing that Romans 8 starts with the reality that there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus; what sweet words. In all of my dirtiness, in all of my struggle, in all the times when I'm losing the war, I can stand before a holy God utterly unafraid because I've been fully and completely forgiven. Praise him!

And I don't need to deny my sin, I don't need to cover my sin, I don't need to explain it away, I don't need to shift the blame. I can come into the light and say, "Oh, won't you please help me!" Because I'm not afraid of his wrath, because it's been satisfied in Christ. Praise him.

But I'm not only forgiven; by that deliverer, I'm empowered. Paul says there's another law that wars with the law of sin. It's the law of the spirit of life. Literally, God knew that my need is so profound that I needed him to dwell within me, and Jesus Christ has come to live inside of me in the person of his spirit.

I love what Paul says in Galatians 2:20 – "It's no longer I who lives, but it's Christ who lives in me, and the life I live, I live by faith in the son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." Listen – Christ now lives in us. We have new potential because of Christ.

Not only forgiveness; not only power; but deliverance. The deliverer is a deliverer, and he's in the process of delivering me from the hold of sin. Brothers and sisters, there will be a day when the war will be over. There will be a day when the law will be broken of its power. There will be a day when we will no longer be captives, and your deliverer will not relent until that day comes.

Now I want to invite you with me this morning to stand before the mirror of Romans 7 and to look at yourself as you actually are and to receive the message of the mirror. I know it's tempting to look into carnival mirrors. You know, a carnival mirror shows you you but it shows you you with distortion.

The carnival mirror of your own view of your track record; the carnival mirror of family values; the carnival mirror of cultural values; the carnival mirror of the opinion of a friend. And I would call you away from those mirrors to look again into the mirror of Romans 7 and say humbly, "Yes, Lord, this describes me."

Because I would propose to you there can be a scary and deadening complacency in the body of Christ. It is possible for us to forget who we are, and it's possible for us, because we forget who we are, because we forget the description of the struggle that yet goes on inside of us, to be content with playing with the box, even though we have been given the most wonderful, the most beautiful, the most essential gift that could ever be given – the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now I would ask you this question – are you holding onto that gift of grace with both hands? Are you getting from it everything that you were meant to get? Do you pursue it in every place where that grace is available to you? Do you live with a motivating sense of privilege that out of the mass of humanity, you have been chosen to receive this gift?

Or are you actually playing with the box, content with the accoutrements of Christianity, without a deep sense of personal need that says, “I want all that grace was meant to give me because I recognize how profoundly I need it.” May that control our hearts this morning. May we hold tightly onto the gift of grace and the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let’s pray: Lord, we can be complacent people. It is quite easy for us to forget who we actually are. It is tempting for us to live with assessments of arrival. We pray that you would protect us from these things. Help us to see ourselves in the mirror of your word. And Lord, as much as we would be grieved by that, help that to lead us to a point of celebration, because no matter how profound our need is, your grace is sufficient. And you have come to us with wonderful forgiveness, with an amazing gift of power, with promises of complete and full deliverance. And so we run to you and we say, “What you have offered us is what we deeply need.” Oh Lord, hold onto us as we hold onto you. In Jesus’ name, amen.