

ROMANS—WEEK 6

SIN'S RESIDUE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Having died in Christ, we're dead to sin, but the residue remains. The law made sin manifest but isn't to blame for our sin.

The constant struggle is painful, but not unexpected.

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Romans, Week 6 — Sin's Residue
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1 Romans 6:20–23 (NKJV)

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

When Paul refers to our having been slaves of sin, it sounds like this “sin” is some kind of external task master—like the dark side of the force or something.

But that’s not it at all. Being a slave of sin is more like being a slave of greed or a slave of lust. We are controlled, but by something inside. It’s still full-blown slavery though, and understanding that is important to understanding the gospel.

Nowadays we talk casually about being a slave of some internal desire, but in Paul’s day this was a radical idea. Everyone knew what slavery was and what a slave-master was. People couldn’t imagine being slaves of themselves or of their personality traits.

Our casual chit-chat about being a slave of greed, or pride, or whatever, desensitizes us. When we speak of being a slave of our pride, we don’t really mean slavery. It’s just a colloquialism—like saying, “My brain exploded.” It isn’t meant to be literal. We think that if we really had to, we could master our sin.

But we can’t. Even if we overcome one specific behavior, we can’t master sin itself. With the right crutches, some behaviors can be mastered. For example, there’s a drug you can take that prevents you from drinking alcohol.

<http://www.drugs.com/antabuse.html>

This fixes the behavior, but not the sin. An alcoholic who takes Antabuse is still a slave, just a sober one.

We can understand and believe this doctrine, but not really believe it. The problem is that it doesn’t feel like slavery. It feels like I can do almost anything I put my mind to and I can surely stop doing anything I put my mind to stopping.

And this feeling never goes away. It still feels like we can just walk off the plantation any time we want. We’re now free from slavery to sin, but that doesn’t mean it has lost all its power. The gates to the plantation are now open, but they’re more narrow than we realize. Overconfidence leads to grief.

We’re in denial, which isn’t surprising given what this is about. No one likes to admit to unpleasant things they wish weren’t true, and our bent toward sin is about as unpleasant as it gets.

This is the foundation of the gospel. Man is his own worst enemy, and helpless to do anything about it.

Thanks be to God for delivering me from this body of sin and death.

2 Romans 7:1–6 (NKJV)

Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.

Notice what Paul is not saying. He's not saying that our new life in Christ enables us to master the law by obeying it. In fact, Paul doesn't say anything about new abilities. Our delivery from the law comes by an entirely different mechanism—death.

And it's not the law that dies; we do. *Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? ... But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.*

Paul is just finishing up the point he started in Chapter 6.

For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, ... Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. — Romans 6:7–8, 11 (NKJV)

Instead of being dead in sin, we're now dead to sin. Just as death ends the marriage covenant, so our death and rebirth into Christ ends our covenant with the law.

The bond is broken. The laws are still there, and they're still good laws, and we're still not good enough to keep them.

But we're no longer in that club. Its by-laws don't apply.

There are two opposite errors to avoid here: paying too much attention to the law and paying too little. Legalism is wrong because it treats the laws as ruling over us, thus denying grace.

But the laws still deserve study and respect. They're not stupid; they just don't own us. God's laws display his will. Praise God for our deliverance, but still honor Him by respecting His will. That means we shouldn't stop trying to obey His laws—and that gets frustrating.

“He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me.” — John 14:21a (NKJV)

3 Romans 7:7–12 (NKJV)

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

Is the law sin? Certainly not! That's obvious. Blaming the law for your sin is like blaming the dictionary for your spelling errors. Sure, if there was no officially correct spelling for words, then you could never spell something "wrong." And if there were no laws, you couldn't be a lawbreaker either.

But remember, Paul brings these questions up when they fit what he just said, then he answers them with, "May genoitaw!" So, what did Paul just say that inspired this one?

For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. — Romans 7:5 (NKJV)

Aroused? The law *aroused* our sinful passions? So, the law does bear some responsibility, right?

No. If the sound of a mockingbird causes me to fly into a rage, is my rage the bird's fault?

May genoitaw! *On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire.*

Sin is a state of rebellion. As soon as God gives us something specific to rebel against, we react accordingly.

But blaming deliberate disobedience on the rules is ridiculous.

This rebellious nature is what child psychology is all about. If you want a child to do something, just telling them to do it can backfire. But if you trick them into thinking you want the opposite, they'll often do what you want.

<http://mamiverse.com/reverse-psychology-on-children-68821/>

But the truth is that this isn't just about children. Adults are better at hiding it, but we're far from cured.

The key is repentance. Don't just ask God to help you conquer your sins. For every one you quit, another one will just pop up anyway.

Pray for help learning to see the sin that lurks within.

4 Romans 7:13 (NKJV)

Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.

The third sentence contains two Greek purpose constructions. Expanding them, it could be translated as, “*But sin, for the purpose that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, for the purpose that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.*”

In other words, God’s purpose in creating the law is to make sin more visible, for the further purpose of making it more sinful.

This weaves sin and the law together in a grand plan of redemption. God had it all planned out from the beginning and making sin totally, undeniably obvious was part of that plan. This leads to some pretty blunt questions.

What in tarnation is He up to? Why did He do it that way? Man’s fall into sin is ugly. The law deliberately makes it uglier. Why would God want that?

And His plan of redemption is tremendously unpleasant—for Him! He could have avoided all this nastiness in the first place. What possible set of priorities could He have that would lead him to deliberately create this sequence of events?

No one can fully understand God’s priorities, this side of eternity anyway, but His glory is obviously a big part. That’s clear from Jesus’s prayer in the garden of Gethsemane.

I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was. — John 17:4-5 (NKJV)

Somehow, rescuing us from our sin—at great personal cost—glorifies Him. We may not understand how, but we have to admit it’s anything but boring. He’s up to something.

This is the great sticking point for some unbelievers. The plan of redemption strikes them as completely crazy. And if pain avoidance is your thing, it is crazy, but then again so is the existence of carnivores.

The creator of this universe is obviously okay with pain.

There’s no guarantee that we’ll ever fully understand this, even in eternity, but we’re promised that we’ll understand a lot more.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. — 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV)

5 Romans 7:14-20 (NKJV)

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

This is a uniquely chilling passage. Paul had just said, in verse 13, “*But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.*” Now he’s giving a blow-by-blow description of what *sin producing death* looks like.

This has a, “Manchurian Candidate,” or, “Invasion of the Body Snatchers” feel to it. He can’t stop his body from doing things he hates, and he doesn’t understand it. *For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.*

That’s slavery. Something else owns him and that something else is sin.

Note that this does not contradict Romans 7:1. *Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives?* The legal effect of sin has been voided, but the physical effect is still there.

But it gets worse. This passage also has a, “Hey, that’s me!” feel to it. That’s why it’s so chilling. Paul’s struggles with sin are my struggles. His vivid description of his slavery to sin is a portrait of my slavery. The horrors of war within Paul are my horrors too.

But that’s also why this passage is so encouraging. If Paul had the same struggles I have, maybe I’m not so defective after all.

Christians need to understand this to be healthy. New converts who expect to be suddenly rid of their sins are in for a world of hurt. The contradiction between what’s “supposed to happen” and what actually happens can break their spirit. After a while, they’ll either quit or live in denial.

When we confess Jesus as Lord we die to the law and to sin, but the individual sins linger on. We do get better at seeing our sin, and that’s useful, but it also makes the battle more depressing.

When you can see the cockroaches in your house, you can fight them better, but it feels worse.

Take heart. If it feels like you’re seeing more and more sins in your life (especially past sins) that means your vision is improving. Your ability to avert your eyes and live in denial is draining away.

That’s one of the key symptoms of growing in Christ.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Are you frustrated by yourself?
2. What about the ceremonial laws (like keeping kosher)? Is there any benefit to obeying them?
3. Do you remember your defiance as a child?
4. What is the point of John 17:4–5?
5. Are you haunted by your past sins?

Items for prayer: