

Who controls your life?

Text: Romans 8:1-10 for 3/26/2017 by Pastor Bolwerk

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. ³ For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. ⁵ Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. ⁶ The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; ⁷ the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. ⁸ Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. ⁹ You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness.

Control: It's something we struggle for our entire lives. As infants we struggle to gain control of our bodies. Teenagers may feel like they are struggling to gain control of their lives from their parents. Some of us struggle with control of our money. We all struggle for control of our time. School, work, family, and friends: They all want control of some part of our time until we feel like we are out of control. Yet, we keep on struggling for control because we know that it's all about control.

That is the message that the Apostle Paul is trying to get across to us. Paul recognizes that we are dealing with a much bigger struggle than how to control our bodies, our money, or our time. We are dealing with the struggle of who is in control of our souls. Paul knows that whoever controls a person's spiritual life controls that entire person. As we look at this text in the book of Romans it is almost as if Paul were asking us:

Theme: Who controls your life?

1. The mind that leads to death?
2. Or, the Spirit that leads to life?

In Romans chapter seven Paul describes for us this struggle for the control of our souls. It is the struggle between our new Christian nature, what we call our "New Self", and our old sinful nature. When our Christian nature moved in, our sinful nature did not go away. Instead it started to fight with our New Self to regain control of the life that it lost. Paul tells us what that struggle is like: **"For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing"** (Romans 7:19). Paul's Christian nature wants to do good. Yet his sinful nature struggles for control, so that it can satisfy itself by doing evil.

We often think that we know how to control our sinful nature. We see God's law and think, "If I can just get my sinful nature to keep God's law then I would be in control. Then my 'new self' wouldn't have to struggle so much." So we struggle and work to keep God's law thinking that we can somehow control our old sinful nature. But all we do is grow tired and frustrated.

Paul shows us why this approach doesn't work. He says, **"For [...] I delight in God's law"** (Romans 7:22). Paul's Christian nature loves God's law and wants to keep it, yet he goes

on to say, **"but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war [...] and making me a prisoner of the law of sin [...]"** (Romans 7:23).

Why doesn't God's law win out over the law of sin? Paul tells us: **"For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature"** (v. 3). Wait a minute Paul. God's law, powerless? I thought God's word is all-powerful? Yes, God's law is very powerful. It has the power to accuse us saying, "You have done evil in God's eyes!" And it has the power to condemn us. The Law says, "You must be perfect! Any imperfection means you will be condemned to eternal death."

Yet for all of its power to accuse and condemn the Law is also powerless. It's powerless to make us do what it says. Think of a speed limit sign on the side of the road. It can accuse us of doing wrong: "The speed limit is 65 and you are driving 75." It can even threaten us with punishment by reminding us: "You are breaking the law and deserve to get a ticket!" Yet that speed limit sign can't make us do what it says. It cannot jump into our car and pull back on the gas pedal to slow us down. Like God's law all it can do is accuse and condemn. And when you see those red and blue lights flashing in your rear view mirror you soon learn another lesson: The speed limit sign cannot save you from the punishment of breaking the law. God's law is powerless to save us from the punishment we deserve for breaking His law.

The real problem here is not with the law. The real problem is with our sinful mind. Paul points out, **"The mind of sinful man is death"** (6a). The "sinful mind" Paul is talking about is our old, *dead*, sinful nature. Something dead has no power to do anything. The law commands us: "Honor your father and mother!" A dead person can't do that, and our dead, sinful mind can't do that either. God's law cannot give our sinful mind the power to do anything. Our sinful mind is dead when it comes to doing anything good.

Yet there is a strange and rather frightening side to our dead, sinful mind. For as dead as it is it still has the power to rise up and hate God! Like some zombie from a horror movie our sinful mind rises up to fight against God. Paul says, **"The sinful mind is hostile to God"** (7a). It is God's enemy! People don't keep the laws of their enemies, and our sinful mind is no different. It works to purposely break God's laws. Paul says, **"[The sinful mind] does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so"** (v. 7b). God's law is powerless to control our hostile, dead, sinful mind.

But if the law is powerless, where does that leave us? It leaves us right back with the Apostle Paul who said, **"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"** (Romans 7:24). Thinking we can control our sinful nature on our own using God's law only leads us to frustration and despair.

So who is in control of our lives? Is it this wretched, sinful mind that only leads to death!? No. Paul reminds us who is in control of our lives: **"You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, [...]"** (9a). We are people who have had the name of Christ placed on us. We are Christians: People who have been given Christ's Holy Spirit. Who controls our lives? The mind that leads to death? No, the Spirit that leads to life!

God has given us something far greater than our sinful minds; something even greater than His law. Paul said, **"For what the law was powerless to do [...]"** (3a). The law is powerless to help us keep it. The law is powerless to save us. But what the law was powerless to do, **"God *did* by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering"** (3b). God sent Jesus to be just like the rest of us, yet he did not have a dead,

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sinful nature like we do. Don't misunderstand me; Jesus really was a human being. He was just like us in every way, except he did not have any sin. He's perfect.

Jesus perfectly kept all of God's laws for us because we couldn't keep any of them. Jesus lived a perfect life, so he did not deserve to die. Yet Jesus gave up that perfect life for us, as Paul says, **"to be a sin offering."** God said there is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood (Heb 9:22). So Jesus allowed his flesh to be ripped open, he allowed his head to be punctured with thorns, and he allowed his hands and his feet to be pierced with nails. He allowed these things to happen all so that his perfect blood could flow out to wash away all our sins. God's Son faced the wrath of God's law for all the times we thought we could control our sinful nature with that law. Jesus suffered the condemnation of the law that we deserved, so he could pay for all our sins. Christ paid that price in full.

"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," (v. 1). Why? **"Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death"** (v. 2). How could this law of the Spirit of life set us free? I thought we said the law was powerless? This law is different. A law is a standard we are measured against. God's standard for entering his heaven is perfection. God says, "You must be holy and perfect just as I am perfect." On our own we don't measure up. But Paul tells us that when we believe in Jesus we receive a new law – the "law of the Spirit of life". This Spirit of life is the Holy Spirit. Working through God's Word, the Spirit creates a faith in us that trusts Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins. Through that Spirit-given faith we receive a new life: Jesus perfect life. So the "law of the Spirit of life" does not lower God's standard so we can try to meet it. Instead, the Spirit raises us up in Christ to meet God's standard. With the Spirit of life in control, everything we do as Christians God sees as perfect. Perfect, because it is covered with Jesus' perfection.

So what happens to our old, sinful mind? Paul tells us, **"But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness"** (v. 10). That old, dead, sinful self is now nothing more than an unwanted intruder who just keeps hanging around. It is true that we still live *with* that sinful nature, but that sinful nature no longer has to be in control. Now the "Spirit of Life" is in control. That means we are no longer dead and powerless. We now have the power and ability of the Holy Spirit who lives in us.

And what awesome power that is. Listen to how Paul describes the power that the Holy Spirit gives, **"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."** (Galatians 5:22-23). That's power. It is power to produce what is good in God's eyes. Notice how Paul describes that power as "fruit". You do not have to tell a fruit tree to produce fruit, it just does. You don't have to tell your new Christian nature to produce good works, it just does. Our new Christian life wants to do good. It wants to do everything it can to thank Jesus for saving us from an eternity in hell.

Now, it's true, our old, sinful nature is still hanging around causing trouble. Often the good that we try to do won't look so good to us. But as long as the Spirit of Life is in control, when God looks at us He will be looking at us through that robe of Christ's perfection. So God won't see just 'good' works. He will see perfect works. And when he does he will say to you, "Well done my good and faithful servant".

Perhaps now we can see a little more clearly that it really is all about control. Not the control of the law, which is powerless to control our sinful mind. It's about the control of the

Spirit of life who points to Jesus. It's about the loving and gracious control of Jesus whose sacrifice paid the price for our sins. It's about Jesus who gives us the Spirit of life, and works through that Spirit to give us the power we need to live for God. Thanks be to God that Jesus is in control! Amen.