

Romans 7 – The Good The bad and the ugly is not just an old, western, Clint Eastwood movie. It is also a pretty decent description of our relationship with the Law of God. Paul has been, for a couple chapters now, explaining this relationship and I think a few points are clear. The Law is good. It is God's holy will for his creation, loving your neighbor, not coveting, not committing adultery and so on. That is good. The bad is, actually not the Christian – though we sin, yes, but no Paul attributes the bad to sin. Sin the disease we are all infected with, seizes God's command, rebels against it, and brings about all sorts of evil. The ugly then, well, congratulations, that's you. Yes even in your Sunday best, sorry about it. It's not me saying it, its Paul! I swear honey, your hair looks great!

Romans 7 is Paul's depiction of the struggle in the Christian life between the fact that we have entirely been set free from the Law's consequences. It is no longer our master we are free in Christ we need not fear his judgment because it has been poured out on the cross. Between that redeemed and justified and sanctified nature that knows that God's law is good and it comes butting heads with our sinful nature that we still have in this broken world that is unable to keep the law, doesn't want to keep the law, and rebels against the law of God – even though we know better. And I am sorry, but that is an ugly picture. Isn't it?

You, Christian, know better! You, Christian, every time you sin are being a hypocrite and going against what you confess is true. Every time a Christian sins

they are, in effect, saying, “I know Jesus had to be whipped for this, but I just want to do it anyway.” And I think that makes us ugly. I think Paul thinks the same thing about himself, “Wretched man that I am!”

And we might think then, “Oh man, what hope is there now? We should be doomed most of all! We did not just ignore the King, we confessed his name then turned away and we do it all the time!” But have you forgotten Romans 3 and 4 – where Paul clearly teaches that we are saved by grace through faith, through a merciful God who died for us while we were still sinners? So rejoice in that Gospel for you, even as you fight, and often lose, against sin.

This chapter is so confusing, it’s a split personality disorder, except it isn’t, and it almost sounds like we are ping-ponging back and forth between despair and life our whole lives. He talks of the good he doesn’t do, and the evil he doesn’t want to do that he does - that deserves judgment. But he is also quick to point out that in the Christian, who wants to do the law of God but doesn’t, that it is Sin in him who does it. Which doesn’t absolve us or get us off the hook, because he is clear to point out it is still him that is doing it. Which ultimately means he needs someone to save him from his ugly fallen human nature – he needs Jesus.

We do too, I imagine.

In the good the bad and the ugly, there is a famous standoff scene. A bunch of guys with guns pointing at each other. And I feel like, we as Christians, can often feel surrounded, like that at times too. If you step too far one way, you are a pharisee, and you think you are doing such a good job at keeping God's law that he must like you, or at least like you more than that person who doesn't do God's law as well as you. But Paul mentions that already in Romans, sin will use the commandment to kill you – and it's sneaky, it will use that pride of yours. And if you don't think so, well consider the fact that Paul, the apostle, here admits, present tense, this is how he is now, that he struggles with sin! Are you better than Paul? Does Paul need to shape up and get on your level if he's a "real" "committed" "disciple" of our Lord? Or perhaps is it possible you don't view your sins as darkly or honestly as you should? Are those thoughts in your head as pure as you think? Are the grudges and prejudices really non-existent, or do you have blind spots? And if you are still so convinced you are so good, well then are you robbing God of his glory by claiming your good works for yourself? Take heed – "if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves."

So we confess our sin and we step away from pride, but do we go too far into lawlessness? "I can do whatever I want, because God will forgive me anyway." Paul has answered this already in Romans – "by no means!" But it shows up again here, doesn't it. It is one thing to want to do the law and not be able in your fallen

nature to follow through, it is entirely another thing to disagree with that law entirely. “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 in me.” See the difference? If you agree with the law of God, but sin stops you from carrying it out, that’s one thing – it’s another to say “I don’t think that verse about sexuality, or prejudice, or greed, is a sin! It’s out of touch, It’s different for me, It doesn’t apply.” Careful. Don’t step too far toward that barrel, you put yourself over the word of God and you might find you don’t quite measure up.

So, in our standoff we step away from that gunbarrel, and confess that God’s Word is true and good. But maybe that brings us to “Well if it’s just sin doing it in me – then it’s not really my fault!” Woah, partner! Paul still says it’s him who does it. It’s “I” who sinned he said. Still guilty. Still ugly. Still trapped.

And so Paul, infected with Sin, his sin which needs payment, cries out in frustration that he is an ugly, ugly man. But he doesn’t say just shoot me and get it over with! No, he runs for shelter, for refuge, in the mighty fortress, the sinless one, the one who takes our sin upon himself, the one whose blood washes us clean. He runs to Jesus.

And don’t miss this. He doesn’t run to “just buck up and do the law better you lazy bums.” The antidote for the judgment of the law is not doing the law better. It

already condemns you, just one sin. So run to the one who washes them away. And then, washed clean, free from fear of sin and death and western standoffs, maybe then we can see the law as what it is: good. And we can rise each day, fight the good fight until the Lord calls us to rest.

And if that seems exhausting, or if it is driving you to despair, again, again, and again, go to Jesus. Who takes your yoke of sin, and gives you his, a yoke, yes, but one that is light, because it is free from having to earn his love, it is free from having to earn salvation. It is a Gospel that says, because of the blood that has washed you clean, in the sight of the Father you are not ugly at all, you are his beautiful spotless child. This is how God's love expresses itself, it takes things that are not beautiful and makes them something beautiful.

So which is it, ugly or beautiful? Saint or sinner? If it is just us staring down the barrel of the law, its ugly, and only ugly. But if a Champion fights for us, if he lifts the yoke of the law on our behalf, if he washes us clean, if he then puts a yoke of discipleship and freedom in the gospel and joyful, thankful observance of the law that is good, well that picture has a bit more beauty in it doesn't it? And so now in this fallen world, you are a both, but take heart, fight the fight, we know who wins the victory – a risen Lord, and we know he will see us to a brighter day where conflicts cease, where there is rest, and there is nothing but beauty evermore.

Amen.

