 Romans: Know Your Enemy
Dr. Richard L. Strauss
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Bible Reference(s):
- Romans 7:1-13
- Romans 3:20
- Romans 4:15
- Romans 6:14
- Exodus 20:17
- 2 Corinthians 11:3
- 1 Timothy 2:14

PURPOSE: To inform us of who our enemy is and to encourage us to be alert to his deceptions.

One of the first rules for waging successful warfare is to know your enemy. First, you have to know who he is, and secondly, you have to know how strong he is.

If you remember, one of the major problems we faced in Vietnam was not knowing who the enemy was. Common villagers, who carried on their normal activities during the day, turned into the dreaded Viet Cong at night. There was no way of identifying them and capturing them during the day. You can't defeat an enemy if you don't know who he is.

In our study of Romans 6, we mentioned the Battle of Gettysburg, a major Civil War victory for the Union, when the power of the South was broken. Did you know that at the end of the first day's fighting, it actually looked as though the South was going to win? But the commanding general made some poor decisions as to how to fight the next day's battle, and he did so because the cavalry unit which was supposed to scout out the enemy's positions had not yet arrived on the scene and he had inadequate information concerning the strength of the enemy forces. Not having accurate intelligence information about the strength of the enemy can be disastrous.

The same is true in the spiritual realm. One of the reasons some Christians fall repeatedly into sin is that they don't know who the enemy is that they're fighting and they have no idea of his incredible strength.

Paul wants to address that subject in chapter 7. Remember, he's been talking about why we as believers can and should enjoy victory over sin. In Romans 6:1-14 we learned that we died to our old life; that chapter of our lives is closed and it would be foolish for us to go back and reopen it. In Romans 6:15-23 we learned that sin leads to slavery and eventually death; we've been freed from that bondage and it would be ridiculous to turn right around and walk back into it.

But right in the middle of the chapter he made this unusual statement: Romans 6:14. "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace."
He knew that raised questions in the minds of his readers. What was the relationship between law and sin? Why are we not under the law any more? What does not being under the law have to do with escaping sin's dominion over our lives? The answers to those questions get us into this matter of knowing our enemy and his strength.

The Real Enemy is Not the Law (Romans 7:1-6)

First of all, he establishes that the real enemy is not the law. Paul has made some pretty strong statements about the law so far in this letter (refer to Romans 3:20, Romans 4:15, and Romans 6:14). Somebody reading those verses might get the idea that the law is our enemy. So he needs to clarify our relationship to the law. Our death with Christ not only freed us from our bondage to sin (Romans 6:6) but also from our bondage to law. We are not under the law. And Paul wants to drive that point home. He does it by restating an established principle.

An Established Principle (Romans 7:1-3)

Romans 7:1. "Do you not know, brothers, for I speak to those who know the law, that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives."

That's pretty obvious, isn't it? That's why it's an established principle, you see. Death frees us from the law. When we're dead, we don't have to worry about obeying traffic laws, or drug abuse laws, or laws against stealing or killing. I never heard of a corpse, a real dead corpse, shooting anybody. And I never heard of a corpse being sentenced and punished for a crime. The law is for the living, not the dead.

And Paul illustrates that with marriage. Romans 7:2-3. "For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is released from the law as her husband. So that if her husband lives and she marries another man, she'll be called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she's free from that law so she is no adulteress though she has married another man."

Now some people get all tangled up trying to identify everybody in the story. Who does the woman represent? Who is the first husband, the second husband, the law? It gets confusing if we try to press every detail. Paul is simply illustrating a point: the law is for the living. God's ideal for marriage is one man for one woman for life. He established that in the Garden of Eden, Jesus reaffirmed it in the gospels, and Paul here assumes it to be true. It should be a part of every marriage ceremony, and we should mean it when we say it--"I will keep myself only for you...as long as we both shall live." But if one partner dies, the other is free from that promise, free to remarry, and no one could possibly consider it to be immoral...because the law of marriage is for the living. That's the point.

The Practical Application (Romans 7:4-6)

And here's the application to us: Romans 7:4a. "Therefore, my brothers"--and sisters, that term brethren--"you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ that you may be married to another, even to Him that was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God."
Remember the great truth of chapter 6? When we trusted Christ as Savior we were identified with Him in His death. We died to our old sinful life and arose again to a new life. Now Paul is teaching us that we when we died with Christ, we not only died to sin but we also died to the Old Testament Mosaic Law. The law no longer has a hold on us as it once did--making stringent demands, threatening harsh punishment--just as the law of marriage no longer bound that woman whose husband had died. The law is for the living. But we died--with Christ. We're dead, so the law is not for us. Paul keeps making the same point, you see. It's important to him that we get it. We're not under the law.

So what's the implication of that? Is it so that we can now go off and live as we please and freely gratify every desire? Absolutely not! Romans 7:4b--It is so that we can be married to Somebody else, the One who was raised from the dead, the Lord Jesus Christ. Our first husband, the Law, was a harsh taskmaster. But now through death we've been released from our obligation to him and we have entered into a new relationship with a new and perfect husband--one who is loving, caring, considerate, compassionate and kind.

And why did God do that--release us from our marriage to the law and bring us into this new relationship with Christ? We've been united with Him. Why did He do that? Just so we can be pampered and provided for? No! He is going to take care of us--far better than any human husband has ever taken care of his wife. But there's another reason: verse 4c says "that we should bear fruit to God." Our new husband is willing and able to reproduce His own character in us--His love, His joy, His peace, His longsuffering, His kindness, His goodness, His faithfulness, His gentleness and His self-control. Godly fruit!

That isn't the way it was in our first marriage. Romans 7:5. "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."

"In the flesh" means in our unregenerate condition, before we met Christ. Back then we would hear something about God's law, and all it did was make us want to try the things it told us not to do. It would be like putting a large box here on the platform with huge letters on it--"WARNING: DO NOT LOOK IN THIS BOX." What does that do to you? It makes you want to look, doesn't it? And the more you think about what it says, the more you want to steal a peek. And if you thought nobody was looking, some of you would. And Paul insists that the law does the same thing: arouses our sinful passions so that we bear fruit unto death--rotten fruit, sinful fruit, rather than Christ-like fruit.

And that's why God had to deliver us from the law. Here it is again. Romans 7:6. "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."

"We are indeed free from the law--but free to serve, not to sin" (Stott, Men Made New, p.65). And it is not slavish service to a cold, hard code of law, in the weak energy of our sinful human nature, but rather joyful service to a loving Lord in the power of His indwelling Spirit. We serve Him, not because we have to--or else. We serve Him because we love Him and appreciate all He's done for us out of His marvelous and abundant grace.

Have you gotten the point? The real enemy in this battle is not the law. We're no longer under the law. We're not married to the law any more. We died to all that, so that we might enter into an exciting new relationship. Well, who is our enemy then? Who is it that uses God's holy law to arouse our desires and lead us into sin? Every believer who has studied the Word for any length of time knows that the believer's enemy is three-fold: the world, the flesh and the devil. Paul wants to zero in on number 2: the flesh.
The Real Enemy is Our Sinful Human Nature (Romans 7:7-13)

The Obvious Question (Romans 7:7)

Romans 7:7. "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.'"

The Jews reading this letter would inevitably ask this question. Since we died to sin and we died to the Law, is the Law then to be classified with sin? Since the law arouses our sinful passions, is it therefore inherently sinful? The answer is, "Of course not." The law exposes my sin, and anything that exposes sin is not itself sinful.

Paul chooses one of the Ten Commandments to illustrate his point—the last one, "You shall not covet." To covet is to want something intensely that somebody else has, to long for it. The law says that we are not supposed to covet our neighbor's house, his wife, his servants, his animals, or anything else that is his (Exodus 20:17). That would include his BMW, his boat, his camper, his cottage on the beach, or anything else he might have.

Let's talk about his BMW. That's reputed to be a very nice automobile, which costs considerably more than the average car. And I can't afford one. So I look at my neighbor's and I think, "It sure would be nice to have a car like that. Boy, I'd like to have that car. I'd give almost anything to be able to have one." I could think that, and maybe even feel a little uneasy about it, but it isn't until I read God's law that I realize it is sin. The BMW itself is not sin, but my attitude is sin. To want that thing so intensely is to elevate me and my wishes to a supreme place, and that is the height of egotism and pride. Furthermore, it places my love for myself, my comfort and my pleasure, above my love for God, and that's idolatry (refer to Colossians 3:5). God's law takes my covetous attitude, which didn't bother me all that much, and exposes it for what it is: sin.

Go back to Paul's experience. He thought he was doing fine. He may have wanted a few things, but he didn't think that was any big deal. Until he read God's law: "You shall not covet." And then all of a sudden he realized how many things he wanted, and that exposed how sinful he was, how far short he fell of God's holy standard. Why did the law do that? Because it is so bad.

The Real Culprit (Romans 7:8-11)

Here's the real culprit. Romans 7:8a. "But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire."

Isn't that interesting? Paul here pictures sin not as something we do, but as something that itself acts. When Paul uses the word "sin" like this—a singular noun—he is often referring to our sinful human nature. And it does something. What does it do? It seizes the opportunity afforded it by the commandment not to covet, and produces in us all kinds of coveting. Everywhere Paul turns, he sees something he wants. See that word "opportunity." It's a military word that refers to a base of operations, a springboard for offensive action. Our sinful human nature is pictured as a powerful enemy who takes God's holy law and uses it as a military base from which it launches powerful and devastating attacks on us that stir us up to sin. Here's the real enemy: our own sinful human nature.
I wouldn't put much stock in Mark Twain's theology, but he did have a good deal of insight into human nature. He insisted that one feature of the human make-up is plain mulishness. If a mule thinks he knows what you want him to do, he'll do the very opposite. And Twain admitted that he was the same way, along with most others. "The point of it all is that until the command not to do an evil thing comes we may not feel much urge to do it, but when we hear the command our native mulishness takes over. But the fault is not in the command. It is in the mulishness, in the sinner" (Morris, p. 280).

Paul goes on to explain how this sin principle operates in our lives. Romans 7:8b-10. "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."

By being alive, Paul didn't mean he was spiritually alive. Only that he was living his life totally oblivious to his guilt before God and his separation from God. But then he became aware of God's law--probably a reference to his Bar Mitzvah, when at age 13 he became a "son of the commandment" and promised to obey the law. No sooner had he made the promise, than he realized how impossible it was to keep, how sinful and guilty he was before God, and how worthy of God's punishment, which is death. In other words, when he confronted God's law, sin sprang to life, and the result was death.

Romans 7:11. "For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me."

There's the real culprit again, sin, our sinful human nature, doing what it does best: using God's holy law as a "base of operations" (same word as verse 8) from which to launch a powerful military attack against us. And notice the weapon it uses: deceit ("deceived me"). That's the same word that occurs in two other places in the New Testament to describe what the serpent did to Eve (2 Corinthians 11:3; 1 Timothy 2:14)--he deceived her. How? He made her believe that God's command was intended to keep her from enjoying something wonderful, never reminding her of the horrible consequences of disobedience.

Our sin natures do the same thing to us. They convince us that God doesn't want us to have any fun. That's why He gives us all those commands. He's just a cranky old cosmic kill-joy. Do you see the deceit? Our human natures use God's commandments to deceive us into thinking that we're missing something good, and by that means they actually use God's holy law to lure us into sin. They never remind us of the misery which our disobedience will bring us, and the ultimate consequence we will suffer: death.

It's the same old story, over and over again. We want to do what we're not supposed to do. There's a fascination and allure in what is prohibited. Forbidden fruit tastes sweeter.

There's a hotel in Houston, Texas (The Flagship Hotel) built right next to the water, and guests would often fish from the balconies of their rooms. Located on the lowest level of the hotel was a restaurant, adorned with large plate-glass windows overlooking the water. Sometimes a guest's fishing line would be a little too short, and when he would cast it out, the heavy sinker would come crashing back through the expensive restaurant window. And you can imagine how the unsuspecting diners would react to that. The management finally discovered how to solve the problem. They removed the "NO FISHING FROM BALCONY" signs from the rooms. And the fishing stopped.

You see, the sign was the thing that put the idea in their mind; it lured them to do the thing they shouldn't do. There was nothing wrong with the command not to fish from the balcony. But human nature used the command to prompt people to do what they weren't supposed to do. Human nature. Sinful human nature. That's the real culprit, you see, the enemy we struggle with day in and day out: our sinful human nature. It just keeps using God's law to lure us into sin, and then makes us pay the consequences. Don't underestimate its strength. Don't underestimate its power.
The Power of Sin (Romans 7:12-13)

Back in Romans 7:7 Paul asked a question, "Is the law sin?" Now he answers it more directly. Romans 7:12. "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good."

The law is holy, like the One who gave it. It's just; it makes no unfair demands, and the punishment it prescribes is deserved. And it's good; it has our welfare as its aim, not our harm.

Romans 7:13. "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."

There it is again--our enemy, sin, our sinful human nature. And what power it has! It can take God's good law, which reflects His awesome holiness and justice, and use it to produce death in us. It prompts us, against our better judgment, to do what the law tells us not to do, and that demonstrates how utterly sinful and deserving of God's judgment we really are.

So there's nothing wrong with God's law. The fault lies with us. As Pogo used to say, "We have met the enemy and he is us."

Don't be like the criminal who was apprehended, tried, found guilty, sentenced to prison, and then sat around in his cell all day blaming the law for his plight (Stott, p. 69-70). He himself was to blame. He made his own choices. He was his own worst enemy.

We need to know who our true enemy is--not the law, but our own sinful human nature. We need to know that it is incredibly deceitful and extremely powerful. Jeremiah said it: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). And one of the reasons we fall into sin is that we have not acknowledged how weak and sinful our human nature really is. We keep telling ourselves we can do it: "Tomorrow, I'll start. And I'll really do it. I will do it!"

But we can't--because we have this powerful enemy that seeks to use God's holy law to destroy us. Not until we acknowledge it--admit it to be true--will we be willing to depend fully and completely upon the indwelling Spirit of God, lean upon Him, draw on His power, and allow Him to bring victory into our lives.

It begins by knowing the enemy. Knowing our enemy is absolutely essential to a life that pleases God. Do you understand it: how weak you are? How powerful your sin nature is? How much you need to develop a relationship with the Lord Jesus, learn to live in His fellowship, learn to consciously depend upon His power? That's the key to victory.

Trusting Jesus as Your Savior

Now, God's law establishes one fact indisputably: We are all sinners who deserve God's wrath. You cannot read the law and miss that. Jesus summarized it by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength; and your neighbor as yourself." And there isn't one of us who measure up. You see, it leaves us saying, "Guilty. Guilty before God." Undeserving of God's favor.
But that's why Jesus came. He said it Himself: He didn't come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners. He wasn't implying that there were some people that didn't need to repent. He was simply saying, "If you think you're OK, you'll never enjoy God's eternal salvation." You must recognize your need and cast yourself upon His mercy and His grace. And then He forgives and imparts His gift of eternal life.

Will you trust Him as your Savior from sin? Let's bow together prayerfully in His presence.

If you haven't made that decision to put your trust in the Lord Jesus as your Savior, we'd like to ask you to do that right now. God's law makes it clear that you need to do that, and God's grace provides the means for your eternal salvation. Will you trust Him right now? In the quiet of your own heart, you commune with Him, will you?

   Lord, I'm a sinner. I believe Jesus died for my sin. Lord Jesus, I'm trusting You and receiving You right now as my eternal Savior.

Don't put that decision off.

Christian, did you think you could do it in your own strength? Experience has taught you otherwise, hasn't it? It's been one failure after another. Will you acknowledge the power of this enemy and purpose before God that you're going to spend time with Him and feed your spiritual life? Get into the Word. Spend time in prayer. Consciously depend upon God's power and grace. That's what makes the difference.

**Closing Prayer**

Father, be at work in our lives, I pray. Bring the unbelievers to faith in Christ. And I pray for every Christian in this room right now. Oh, God, how I pray that we may learn to lean upon You; recognize that we are not adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but that our adequacy is from you; and allow your Spirit to take control of us, and live His life through us, and bear the very character of Christ in us. For we ask it in His name. Amen.