

Romans 7:1–8:4

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Session 8

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Abstract

This lecture explores the contrast between the weakness of human effort under the law and the transformative power of the Holy Spirit. Dr. Craig Keener argues that while the law is fundamentally good and holy, it lacks the ability to change the human heart because it is limited by the passions of the flesh. Using the rhetorical device of *prosopopoeia*, Paul depicts the frustration of those who possess the moral information of the Torah but remain enslaved to sin, emphasizing that mere intellectual knowledge cannot produce righteousness. The lecture concludes by celebrating the new identity found in Christ, where believers are no longer subject to condemnation but are empowered to live through a mind set on the Spirit.

Outline

- **I. Introduction to Romans 7:1–8:4**
 - **A.** Chapter 7 as a less pleasant but crucial section of the epistle
 - **B.** Placement between Romans 6 and Romans 8 to show the mathematical and narrative flow of thought
- **II. The Meaning of "Flesh" (*Sarx*)**
 - **A.** Linguistic and theological connections between flesh (*sarx*) and body (*soma*)
 - **1.** Distinctions in Hellenistic/Diaspora Jewish thought versus Judean thought
 - **2.** Interchanged usage of the terms in Pauline letters (e.g., 1 Corinthians 6:16)

- **3.** The physical body itself is not inherently evil, but its members must be yielded for righteousness
- **B.** The role of bodily passions
 - **1.** Passions are created good and are necessary for physical survival (e.g., hunger, procreation)
 - **2.** Moral danger arises when physical passions rule the individual rather than reason and righteousness
- **C.** Semantic range of "flesh" in scripture
 - **1.** Outward existence and physical ancestry (e.g., Abraham, Jesus according to the flesh)
 - **2.** Weakness, finiteness, and mortality (connoted by the Old Testament concept of *basar*)
 - **3.** Vulnerability to temptation and sin (an expansion of the concept found in the Dead Sea Scrolls)
- **D.** Rejection of Gnostic self-annihilation and Platonic escape
 - **1.** The body is meant to be plugged into a larger purpose and yielded to serve God (Romans 12)
 - **2.** The contrast between unregenerate humanity left to themselves and those empowered by the Spirit
- **III. Freedom from the Law (Romans 7:1–6)**
 - **A.** Marriage and widowhood illustration
 - **1.** The legal death of a husband frees the wife to remarry without committing adultery
 - **2.** Analogy: Believers died to the law and are united to Christ to produce fruit for God
 - **B.** Historical and legal context of divorce and widowhood in Judean law
 - **C.** Transition from serving the "oldness of the letter" to the "newness of the spirit"
 - **1.** The "letter" focuses on minute grammatical details, outward performance, and human capability

- **2.** The Spirit transforms from within, writing the law in hearts (Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36)
- **3.** The new covenant is rhetorically and spiritually greater (*synkrisis*), providing empowerment to obey

- **IV. Is the Law Sin? (Romans 7:7–13)**

- **A.** The goodness, holiness, and spiritual nature of the law (Romans 7:12, 14)
- **B.** The law's critical limitation: It informs of sin and limits it, but cannot transform the human heart
- **C.** Paul's use of ancient rhetorical shock value, hyperbole, and provocative statements
- **D.** Academic and grammatical study of the law versus the actual transformative experience of God

- **V. Life Under the Law (Romans 7:14–25)**

- **A.** The structural contrast between "in the flesh" (Romans 7) and "in the Spirit" (Romans 8)
- **B.** The debate over the present tense verbs in verses 14–25
 - **1.** Rhetorical elaboration used to add vividness and an "inside view"
 - **2.** Greek verb aspect (historical presents) rather than literal chronological timeline
 - **3.** Historical divisions: Latin church fathers (present Christian struggle) vs. Greek church fathers (past state / persona)
- **C.** Rhetorical devices of *Prosopopoeia* and *Aethopopoeia*
 - **1.** Adoption of a personal or corporate voice (Israel under the law) to represent humanity
 - **2.** Comparison with Greek philosophical views on overcoming passion through reason (e.g., Medea, Socrates)
 - **3.** Comparison with Jewish diaspora and Judean thought on overcoming the evil impulse (*Yetzir*) through Torah study
- **D.** The Commandment "You shall not covet" (Exodus 20 / Deuteronomy 5)

- **1.** Reaching the internal heart of desire rather than merely limiting external actions
- **2.** Structural comparison with Jesus' internalizing of the commandments in the Sermon on the Mount
- **E.** The cry of frustration ("Who will free me?") answered by thanks to God through Christ (Romans 7:24–25a)
- **VI. The Mind of the Flesh vs. The Mind of the Spirit (Romans 8:1–4)**
 - **A.** Declaration of no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus
 - **B.** Liberation from the law of sin and death by the internal law of the Spirit of life
 - **C.** God's definitive action: Sending His Son as a sin offering to condemn sin in the flesh
 - **D.** Worldviews and mindsets of the flesh and the Spirit (Romans 8:5–7)
 - **1.** The fleshly mind: Hostile to God, incapable of submission, and leading ultimately to death
 - **2.** The Spirit-led mind: Involves life, peace, and an eternal, heavenly perspective
 - **E.** The outpouring of the Spirit on all believers as a widespread, unique empowerment
 - **1.** Contrast with contemporary elite Jewish expectations regarding the Spirit's availability
 - **2.** The Bible pointing beyond mere academic study to direct relationship and active empowerment by God