

6pm HC Sunday 5 July 2026

Zech 9:9-12, Romans 7:15-25a, Matt 11:16-19, 25-end – **How the Law shapes the parameters of our struggle against sin, until Jesus brings the resurrection**

"Ruby Gillis thinks of nothing but beaux," said Anne disdainfully. "She's actually delighted when anyone writes her name up in a take-notice for all she pretends to be so mad. But I'm afraid that is an uncharitable speech. Mrs. Allan says we should never make uncharitable speeches; but they do slip out so often before you think, don't they? I simply can't talk about Josie Pye without making an uncharitable speech, so I never mention her at all. You may have noticed that. I'm trying to be as much like Mrs. Allan as I possibly can, for I think she's perfect. Mr. Allan thinks so too. Mrs. Lynde says he just worships the ground she treads on and she doesn't really think it right for a minister to set his affections so much on a mortal being. But then, Diana, even ministers are human and have their besetting sins just like everybody else. I had such an interesting talk with Mrs. Allan about besetting sins last Sunday afternoon. There are just a few things it's proper to talk about on Sundays and that is one of them. My besetting sin is imagining too much and forgetting my duties. I'm striving very hard to overcome it and now that I'm really thirteen perhaps I'll get on better."

That is an extract from L.M. Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*; the story of the orphaned girl who comes to live with elderly brother and sister Matthew and Marilla, and who ends up stealing everybody's hearts with her optimistic outlook on life.

I chose that extract because I think it provides a good way in to one of the most interesting and important passages in the apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. Anne and Paul are actually very much in agreement on what it is like to struggle with sin in everyday life.

- They both know how they ought to be living
- They both really *want* to live well, in all that they think and say and do,
- But there's a constant struggle between what the theory and the reality.

I think we all know that feeling that Paul is describing in v15: ***I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate***. And again in v18: ***I can will what is right, but I cannot do it***. And again in v19: ***For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do***. And Paul (and Anne) know what is at the root of the problem, and we see it in v20: ***...if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me***. As Paul says in v21: it happens so often, and so consistently, that it always feels inevitable. Or as Paul puts it, ***I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand***. I suspect we can all identify with Paul when he says, in v24, ***wretched man that I am***.

In this passage Paul explains to us not just how Christians are to recognise sin, but also why all Christians find it so difficult, in our everyday lives, to resist sin. As Anne observed, there is nobody, not even the minister, who is immune to sin, although what Anne described as “besetting sins” will be different for each person. But in our reading from Romans, Paul also tells us how we’ll be rescued from our struggle against sin.

If you’ve ever done a garden design course, or have read about, or visited, or seen on tv, the gardens that work, you’ll know that the best gardens all have a structure. A framework that tells you what should be where. That fundamental need for a structure – a framework - is where God’s law comes in.

The law of the Old Testament is not, and could never have been, the route to salvation, because, since we’re only human, we were always going to fall short of the standards that the Old Testament law sets out for us. We can’t even manage to keep to our *own* standards of behaviour, let alone to God’s standards, no matter how determined we might be to be patient with our families, or to be a dependable friend. That’s why God sent us Jesus, to be the one who’d take our place and would pay the penalty for our sin.

But Jesus himself said that he didn’t come to abolish the law. And so the law still sets out the framework for how we are to love God, and how to love our neighbour. In the Ten Commandments, and in the working out of those broad principles, we can see the character of God, and we can have a clear understanding of the attitudes and behaviours that should be shaping our lives.

It might help us here to remind ourselves that *knowing* the Law, and *keeping* the Law, are two different things. The Law is a little bit like one of those plaque-revealing liquids which can *disclose*, but will not itself *dispose* of, the plaque that allows the bacteria that will rot teeth and gums to find a home in the mouth. Knowing the location of the plaque has the potential to help with the task of cleaning your teeth, but cleaning your teeth is down to you.

We can know what the Law requires of us. But when it comes to committing ourselves to do what the Law requires of us, we seem to go in exactly the opposite direction. As Paul says in v22, **why** is it, if I know the Law, that I am still struggling with sin? Given that I acknowledge, and even, as Paul says in v22, **delight in the law in my inmost self**, **why** do I still do what I don't want to do? God has shown to us the goodness of living in God's way, but as Paul says in v23, it is as if I can't stop myself, as ***I see in my members (his body) another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.***

And this is where I come to my second point. Because, paradoxically, although the law itself is good, our sinful nature actually takes the law and uses it *against* us, exploiting the very fact that we know full well where the boundaries lie, to tempt us into behaviours that fall on the wrong side of the law. Whatever it is we might be tempted to do, whether it is speeding; or overstating the value of something on an insurance claim; or spotting something has been missed off the bill but not pointing it out ... the fact that we are fully aware that it is wrong doesn't stop us trying to get away with it. We just tell ourselves that everybody does it; or that what we're doing now is just making up for the other time, when we were ourselves done down.

But before we get too discouraged about our sinful natures, it is surely helpful to remember that it is only when we **have** started opening ourselves up to Jesus; when we **have** begun to **delight in the law of God** in our heart of hearts; that we find ourselves struggling with sin. So don't be disheartened. It is the Christian who *wants* to submit to God's authority who feels weary from the constant temptations and by the seemingly endless battle to keep sin under control. Of course, seeking to please God by kicking out the old bad habits and

replacing them with good habits is hard work. We need to be honest with one another about the challenges of doing this, and to be helping and encouraging one another. Our small groups, and the men's group, and Soul Space... these are all good places to be doing this.

But, and this is my third and final point, the good news comes with the realisation that there is somebody who will rescue us from the ongoing struggle; somebody who will rescue us ***from this body of death***. We, too, will one day be resurrected to live with Jesus. And meanwhile the Holy Spirit is at work in us, helping us to live in, and with, the grace that God has shown to us in Jesus. Helping us in the everyday struggle with sin, in which it is good that we should say, every day: ***Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!***