

Homiletics Analysis: Romans 7

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Romans 7 is Paul's sustained argument about the relationship between the Mosaic Law and sin, structured in two movements. The first (vv. 1–13) establishes the Law's proper role and proper limit through two analogies: the marriage law illustration (vv. 1–6) demonstrating that death dissolves legal obligation, so that believers who have died with Christ are freed from the Law's binding claim and now serve "in the new way of the Spirit"; and the autobiographical account of Paul's own encounter with the commandment (vv. 7–13), which demonstrates that the Law is holy and good but that sin used the Law as a beachhead to produce death — the fault lying not in the Law but in indwelling sin. The second movement (vv. 14–25) is Paul's famous "wretched man" passage: a first-person, present-tense account of inner conflict between the mind's desire to obey God and the flesh's relentless drive toward sin, culminating in the agonized cry "Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?" and the immediate answer: "Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord."

This Text — Intent:

God is seeking to accomplish two closely related effects through Romans 7. First, He is defending the holiness and goodness of the Law against any charge that it is the source of the believer's bondage — the Law is not the problem; sin is the problem; and the Law's great service is to make sin's problem unmistakably visible. Second, He is preparing the reader to receive the full liberation of Romans 8 with proper weight — by pressing the reader deeply into the reality of the believer's ongoing war with indwelling sin, so that the "therefore no condemnation" and the Spirit's liberating work in chapter 8 land not as a doctrinal statement but as a personal rescue. Romans 7 is the crisis that gives Romans 8 its force. Without the depth of chapter 7's lament, chapter 8's "no condemnation" is merely a proposition. With it, it is a rescue.

Subject Sentence: The Law is holy and good, but only Christ rescues from sin's dominion.

Primary Claim: God is pressing the reader into the full horror of indwelling sin's dominion — not to produce despair, but to drive every hope away from self-effort and law-keeping toward the only deliverer: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity of the “wretched man” (vv. 14–25) — the central interpretive question:

The most contested question in Romans 7 is the identity of the speaker in verses 14–25: Is Paul describing (a) an unregenerate person under the Law, (b) his own pre-conversion experience looked back on from a Christian vantage point, (c) a mature Christian’s ongoing struggle with indwelling sin, or (d) Israel’s representative experience under the Mosaic covenant? This is not an idle academic question — the answer determines whether the passage describes normal Christian experience and thus whether the believer should expect ongoing inner conflict or progressive victory.

The unregenerate or pre-conversion reading (historically held by Origen, many Eastern fathers, and adopted by many Wesleyan/Arminian and some Reformed interpreters) argues that the person in view cannot be a believer because believers have the Spirit (8:9), and no one under the Spirit’s power could say “I am sold as a slave to sin” (v. 14). This reading has grammatical support in that the shift from the past tense in vv. 7–13 to the present tense in vv. 14–25 marks a retrospective description shifting to a description of something ongoing — but if Paul is describing pre-conversion experience, the present tense is odd and unexplained. More importantly, the unregenerate reading cannot account for the speaker’s delight in God’s law (v. 22 — “I delight in God’s law after the inward man”) nor the genuine willing of the good (v. 18). Unregenerate persons do not delight in God’s law; Romans 8:7 states explicitly that “the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.”

The Wesleyan/perfectionist reading accepts a regenerate referent but argues the passage describes an *immature* or *carnal* Christian — one who has not yet entered the fullness of Spirit-filling or entire sanctification. On this reading, Romans 8 describes the “victorious” Christian life available to those who press through chapter 7’s bondage. This reading is exegetically strained: Paul does not signal any such distinction in the text, and the division between chapter 7 as “carnal Christian” and chapter 8 as “Spirit-filled Christian” imports a two-tiered sanctification structure foreign to Paul’s argument.

The Reformed reading — argued by Augustine (in his mature period), Calvin, Luther, Owen, and most Reformed exegetes — is that Paul is describing the mature Christian’s genuine, ongoing experience of the inner war between the renewed mind and indwelling sin. This reading best accounts for: (1) the present tense, (2) the delight in God’s law, (3) the genuine willing of the good, (4) the “I myself” who serves God’s law with the mind (v. 25), and (5) the structure of the argument, where 7:14–25 sets up the “no condemnation” of 8:1 as a rescue for a struggling *believer*, not merely an announcement for someone not yet struggling. The cry “who will rescue me?” is a Christian’s cry — one who knows the Rescuer exists — not an unregenerate person who has no such hope.

Acknowledgment: The unregenerate reading rightly insists that Romans 8 describes Spirit-enabled Christian life and that the Spirit’s work is genuinely liberating. This should be retained as a homiletical caution: the passage should not be preached in a way that

normalizes passivity toward sin or denies the Spirit's power. The struggle is real and normal; but so is the Spirit's progressive sanctifying work in chapter 8. The two chapters are not a before/after portrait of two types of Christians — they are a simultaneous portrait of the same Christian: lament and deliverance, war and “no condemnation,” existing together.

The Law as villain reading:

Some traditions, particularly those with strong Law/Gospel antithesis, treat Romans 7 as primarily a polemic against the Law — with the believer's freedom from the Law being the primary message. This over-reads the passage. Paul is at pains to *defend* the Law: “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (v. 12); “the law is spiritual” (v. 14); “I delight in God's law after the inward man” (v. 22). The problem Paul identifies is not the Law but sin using the Law. The believer's freedom is freedom from sin's dominion through the Law's condemnation — not freedom from the Law's moral claim. This distinction matters significantly for application: preaching that frames the chapter as “the Law is the problem” produces antinomianism; preaching that follows Paul's actual argument frames the Law as the good diagnostician whose verdict falls on sin, not on the Law itself.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 6:1–14** — Establishes the believer's death to sin and new life in Christ, providing the covenantal foundation for the “death to the Law” argument in 7:1–6; the two chapters must be read together.
- **Galatians 2:19–20** — “I through the law died to the law so that I might live for God... I have been crucified with Christ”; Paul's compressed statement of what Romans 7:1–6 argues at length.
- **Galatians 5:16–17** — “The flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other” — the same war Paul describes in Romans 7:14–25, confirming the conflict is ongoing and normal for the believer.
- **Psalms 119:97, 103** — “Oh, how I love your law!... How sweet are your words to my taste” — the Psalmist's delight in God's law that the regenerate speaker of Romans 7 echoes in verse 22, connecting the believer's love for the Law across the Testaments.
- **Romans 8:1–4** — The immediate sequel: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” — Paul's answer to chapter 7's lament, grounding deliverance in the Spirit's work rather than the believer's law-keeping performance.

Aim: To drive every false confidence in self-effort and law-keeping to its breaking point, and to locate every hope of deliverance exclusively in Jesus Christ, so that the reader receives Romans 8 not as doctrine but as rescue.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
7:1	Paul addresses those who “know the law” — the Law’s authority holds over a person only while that person lives	Sets up the marriage analogy; audience is Jewish Christians or those familiar with Torah
7:2–3	Marriage analogy: a woman is bound to her husband by law while he lives; if he dies, she is free to remarry without adultery	The analogy is not pressed at every point — its function is to establish the principle that death dissolves legal obligation
7:4	Application: believers have “died to the law through the body of Christ” so they belong to another — the risen Christ — and bear fruit for God	The death is the believer’s death, accomplished in union with Christ’s death; note “bear fruit for God” — freedom is not from fruitfulness but from bondage
7:5	“When we were in the realm of the flesh” — sinful passions aroused by the Law were at work, bearing fruit for death	Past tense; pre-conversion state described retrospectively
7:6	“But now” — released from the Law, dead to what once bound us, serving in the new way of the Spirit, not the old way of the written code	Pivot point: the contrast is Spirit vs. written code, not obedience vs. disobedience
7:7	Objection anticipated: “Is the Law sin?” — Paul’s emphatic denial: “Certainly not!” The Law gave knowledge of sin: “I would not have known what coveting was if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’”	“Covet” (epithumeō) is the tenth commandment; Paul may be evoking Adam’s sin or his own pre-conversion experience
7:8	Sin “seizing the opportunity” (aphormē — a military	The Law does not produce sin; it gives sin its occasion

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	beachhead) in the commandment, produced every kind of coveting; “apart from the law, sin was dead”	and makes it recognizable as sin
7:9	“Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died”	Either pre-Sinai Israel, childhood before moral awareness, or Adam — likely Paul’s representative use of “I” for human experience generally
7:10–11	The commandment intended to bring life but instead brought death — sin deceived and killed through the commandment	Echoes Genesis 3: the serpent’s deception through God’s word; sin is cast as the deceiver, not the Law
7:12	“The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good”	Paul’s explicit defense of the Law — must control any application that might pit law against grace
7:13	Did the good (Law) become death to me? No — sin did this, so that sin might be “utterly sinful” — its true nature exposed	The Law’s work: making sin’s nature unmistakably visible; the Law strips sin of disguise
7:14	“We know the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual (sarkinos — of flesh), sold as a slave to sin”	Shift to present tense; “sold as a slave” is the diagnostic statement — the depth of the problem
7:15	“I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do”	The will/act disjunction — not moral confusion but moral impotence; the speaker wills good but cannot perform it
7:16	“If I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good”	Even the inner conflict confirms the Law’s goodness — the regenerate person’s resistance to sin vindicates the Law
7:17	“It is no longer I who do it, but sin living in me that does	Not moral irresponsibility but ontological diagnosis:

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	it”	sin as an indwelling power distinct from the “I”
7:18–19	“I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing”	The repetition intensifies the point — this is not an occasional struggle but a persistent, structural war
7:20	Repeats v. 17 — “it is no longer I who do it, but sin living in me”	The doubling of this statement is rhetorical emphasis, not theological evasion of responsibility
7:21	“I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me”	“Law” used in the sense of a governing principle or observable pattern — sin’s proximity to every good intention
7:22–23	“I delight in God’s law after the inward man; but I see another law at war with the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work in my members”	The war is between the renewed mind (the law of God) and the indwelling sin (the law of sin) — this is the believer’s ongoing civil war
7:24	“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?”	The lament is the turning point — the cry of a desperate but not despairing person; the question presupposes a Rescuer exists
7:25a	“Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”	The answer comes before the summary — rescue through Christ, not through effort or law-keeping
7:25b	“So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin”	Summary of the war — the believer simultaneously serves God’s law in the mind and remains embattled in the flesh; both are true at

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		once; this honest summary prepares for chapter 8

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	7:1–6	Death Dissolves: The Believer Has Died to the Law’s Binding Claim
2	7:7–13	The Law Is Not the Problem: Sin Used the Law to Produce Death
3	7:14–20	The War Within: Indwelling Sin and the Believing Mind in Conflict
4	7:21–25	The Lament, the Cry, and the Deliverer

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The Law is holy and good, but only Christ rescues from sin’s dominion.

Primary Claim: God is pressing the reader into the full horror of indwelling sin’s dominion — not to produce despair, but to drive every hope away from self-effort and law-keeping toward the only deliverer: Jesus Christ our Lord.

Applications (Five)

1. [Mind/Belief] Stop blaming the wrong things for your bondage.

Paul’s argument is a sustained defense of the Law precisely because it is natural to blame the wrong source for sin’s dominion. Legalistic Christians blame the Law itself — thinking that if they could only live more freely, with fewer rules, they would finally be free. Moralistic Christians blame insufficient effort — thinking if they could only try harder, pray more, discipline themselves more rigorously, they would break through. Paul will not allow either escape route. The problem is indwelling sin — a power that uses good structures against their design, that turns even good desires toward wrong ends, and that will not be overcome by trying harder or trying less. Until a person correctly diagnoses the source of their bondage, they will keep applying remedies that cannot cure the disease. This passage

calls the reader to stop blaming the wrong things and to name the real enemy: sin dwelling in me, awaiting the only deliverer who can do what neither effort nor law-keeping can.

2. [Affections/Worship] Let the lament of verse 24 become your own before you move to verse 25.

Contemporary Christianity is deeply uncomfortable with sustained lament. We want to rush from the problem to the solution, from diagnosis to victory, from darkness to light — without sitting in the middle long enough for the darkness to do its necessary work. Paul does not rush. He builds the case for fourteen verses before the cry breaks open: “What a wretched man I am!” That cry is not a failure of faith — it is the evidence of it. Only the person who has genuinely felt the weight of indwelling sin, who has willed the good and done the evil, who has hated in themselves what they did not hate in themselves before — only that person will receive Christ’s deliverance as deliverance rather than as a doctrinal statement about someone else’s rescue. The application is not to wallow in despair but to stay in honest lament long enough for hope to arrive with its full weight. Do not move from chapter 7 to chapter 8 until you have felt what chapter 7 is saying about you.

3. [Mind/Belief] Recover the Law’s right function — diagnosis, not salvation.

A consistent pastoral failure in preaching Romans 7 is either to turn the Law into an enemy (antinomianism) or to treat it as a mechanism for achieving righteousness (moralism). Paul refuses both errors. The Law is holy, righteous, and good — its purpose is to expose sin as utterly sinful, to strip sin of disguise, to make the problem unmistakably clear. A person who has genuinely encountered the Law’s convicting work does not leave saying “I need to try harder to keep it” — they leave saying “Who will rescue me?” The Law drives the soul to Christ by showing what Christ alone can accomplish. This means the Christian does not relate to God’s moral law with either contempt (“I’m free from all that”) or with leverage-seeking (“If I keep this well enough, God will be pleased”). The Law is the physician’s chart that confirms the diagnosis — the cure is elsewhere. Let the Law do its right work: show you the depth of the problem; then let Christ do His right work: rescue.

4. [Will/Behavior] Identify specifically where your inner war is most active, and stop pretending it isn’t there.

The “wretched man” passage is not a general description of a vague spiritual unease — it is a specific account of a specific war: I will the good; I do not do it. I do not will the evil; I do it. For most believers, this war has a specific address. There are specific sins that follow the pattern Paul describes: the person who genuinely wants to speak kindly and consistently speaks with contempt; the person who genuinely wants to pursue sexual purity and consistently fails; the person who genuinely wants to be generous and consistently protects his money; the person who genuinely wants to be free from bitterness and consistently nurses it. Paul’s analysis means that the believer who wills the right thing and does the wrong thing is not a hypocrite — they are a battlefield. The application is not to make peace with the war but to stop pretending there is no war, to name it specifically, and

to stop managing sin quietly in private where it cannot be brought to the light that precedes deliverance.

5. [Affections/Worship] Make “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” the answer to every failed effort at self-rescue.

Paul’s answer to the lament arrives not as a formula but as a cry of gratitude: “Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!” The structure matters: lament produces the cry; the cry is answered by the Deliverer; the response to the Deliverer is worship. This is not the worship of a person who has finally gotten their act together — it is the worship of a person who has stopped trying to rescue themselves and received Someone else’s rescue as their own. The affectional application is this: every time the inner war produces the cry “What a wretched man I am?”, the next word should be gratitude, not renewed self-effort. Not “I will try again” but “Thanks be to God.” This reorientation — from self-effort after failure to gratitude toward the Deliverer — is the specific movement of affection that chapter 7 is designed to produce. It is the affectional bridge between the lament of verse 24 and the “no condemnation” of 8:1.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance:

Romans 7 makes three irreplaceable theological contributions. First, it establishes the Law’s honor — Paul’s sustained defense of the Law as “holy, righteous and good” and “spiritual” guards against any reading of grace that diminishes the moral weight of God’s commands or treats the Law as a mere stage in redemptive history now safely set aside. The Law still speaks; it still convicts; it still exposes. Second, it establishes sin’s nature — sin in Romans 7 is not merely a category of wrong actions but an indwelling power that uses good structures against their design, deceives (echoing the serpent in Genesis 3), and produces death through the very commandments given for life. This is a far more serious anthropology than contemporary Christianity commonly preaches, and it is the necessary foundation for understanding what salvation actually rescues the believer from. Third, it establishes that the believer’s rescue is exclusively external — it comes through Jesus Christ, not through the believer’s own moral improvement. The “I” of Romans 7 does not get better — it gets a Deliverer. This is the theological logic that makes Romans 8 intelligible as genuine liberation rather than merely moral encouragement.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance:

Romans 7 is one of the most contested passages in Reformed theology — specifically around the “wretched man” passage and its bearing on the doctrine of sanctification. The

Reformed reading (Augustine, Calvin, Owen, Packer) that vv. 14–25 describe the mature believer’s genuine ongoing experience is not a counsel of despair but a counsel of honesty: the believer is simultaneously justified before God and warring within against indwelling sin; both truths are held together, with the war being real and the verdict being settled. This is the Reformed doctrine of *simul iustus et peccator* — at the same time justified and sinful — understood not merely as a forensic statement but as a description of the believer’s actual ongoing experience. Critically, the passage also demonstrates the Reformed understanding of the Law’s threefold use: here Paul is deploying the Law’s second use — its convicting, exposing, sin-revealing work — in service of driving the reader to Christ. The Law does not save; it shows the need for the One who does. Finally, the “thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” of verse 25 is a model of the Reformed *ordo salutis*: lament → cry → Christ → gratitude; not self-improvement → eventual victory → gratitude. The structure of rescue is entirely external and entirely Christological, which is the heartbeat of Reformed soteriology.

Main Takeaway

You will never try hard enough. You will never be disciplined enough. The Law is not the problem, your effort is not the solution, and the war inside you is more real and more serious than you have allowed yourself to admit. But here is what this passage will not let you miss: the question “Who will rescue me?” already has an answer, and the answer is not you. Thanks be to God, who delivers through Jesus Christ our Lord. Stop looking for another rescuer. Stop staging another self-improvement campaign. Look to the One who has already done what you cannot — and receive the rescue that is already prepared.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls:

- **Resolving the “wretched man” too quickly.** The most common homiletical failure with this passage is rushing through the lament to reach the victory — spending fifteen minutes on the “no condemnation” of Romans 8:1 and thirty seconds on the “wretched man” of 7:24. The passage is structured to make the lament *productive* — it should be allowed to do its work in the listener. A congregation that has not genuinely felt the weight of verse 24 will receive verse 25 as a pleasant affirmation rather than a rescue. Resist the evangelical instinct to make everything feel better immediately.
- **Making the “wretched man” passage a diagnostic category rather than a personal claim.** It is easy to preach Romans 7 as a description of “a type of Christian” — the struggling Christian, the immature Christian, the carnal Christian — rather than as Paul’s first-person, present-tense, personal account of what is

true of the believer in his or her own ongoing experience. When this happens, the listener categorizes themselves (“Am I a chapter 7 or a chapter 8 Christian?”) rather than confessing (“This is me — this is what I am”). The application must land as *this is you*, not *there are people who experience this*.

- **Turning the passage into a warrant for moral passivity.** Paul’s point that “it is no longer I who do it, but sin living in me” (vv. 17, 20) is frequently misappropriated as a removal of moral responsibility — “I can’t help it; it’s the sin in me.” This is an abuse of the passage. Paul is making an ontological observation about the nature of indwelling sin as a power distinct from the regenerate “I,” not providing an excuse for not fighting sin. The Reformed tradition’s response (Owen, *Mortification of Sin*) is precisely the opposite: recognizing indwelling sin as a serious power demands *more* vigilance, not less. The passage calls for honest lament and dependence on the Deliverer — not passive acceptance of ongoing defeat.
- **Preaching the Law as villain.** Any exposition that sets up the Law as the thing believers need to escape — as if freedom in Christ means freedom from moral demands — misreads Paul’s argument. Paul writes three times that the Law is good (vv. 12, 14, 16), and the speaker’s delight in God’s law (v. 22) is one of the markers of genuine regeneration. The believer’s freedom is freedom from the Law’s condemning power through the Law’s impossible demands — not freedom from the Law’s moral guidance. Applications that imply “you no longer need to concern yourself with God’s commands” are anti-Pauline.
- **Ignoring the christological resolution in favor of a spiritual-discipline resolution.** It is very easy to preach Romans 7’s lament and then pivot to “here are five spiritual disciplines that will help you in this war” — turning the passage’s answer (“thanks be to God through Jesus Christ”) into an invitation to renewed self-effort. The passage’s actual resolution is entirely Christological and Spiritological — chapter 7 drives to Christ; chapter 8 delivers through the Spirit. Spiritual disciplines have their proper place (mortification is real), but that is not what Romans 7 is arguing. The Deliverer is Christ, not a better quiet-time regimen.
- **Resolving the interpretive question about the “wretched man” without engaging the text.** Preachers who have inherited either the Wesleyan (“this is the carnal Christian, not the mature believer”) or the Reformed (“this is the mature believer’s ongoing experience”) reading often assert their position without engaging the textual evidence that the opposite tradition finds compelling. The congregation deserves to see why the text, read carefully, leads to the Reformed conclusion — because the honest wrestling with the text itself is part of what models serious, trustworthy exposition.