on this point in detail. Here he merely notes that eternal life remains “God’s gift.”

We many note in passing that Paul seems to imply that we cannot serve sin with our whole being. At several points in his argument Paul draws parallels between serving sin and serving God. Yet, he never says that we can serve sin with our “heart.” Here “heart” refers to the hidden core of who we are. Many of Paul’s readers were slaves and must have known from experience that they could not serve an abusive master with their hearts. At most they could render external obedience. So too Paul suggests we can serve God with all that we have and are because we know that God gives us life. We can be “obedient from the heart.” But we cannot serve sin in this way; at most we offer sin our “parts.”

Questions for reflection:

Do you agree that we must serve God or serve sin? Or do you believe people can lead their lives without doing either? Do some people serve God or serve sin without realizing what they are doing? What are the benefits of being uninhibited? What are the dangers? Do you feel that eternal life remains a gift even when we have made great sacrifices to serve God? Do you agree that we cannot serve sin with our whole being, whereas we can serve God in this way?

22. Romans 7:1–6

Or do you not know, brothers and sisters (I am addressing those who know the Law) that the Law regulates a person for as long as they are alive. For a married woman is bound by the Law to her husband while he is living. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law concerning a husband. So, therefore, while the husband is alive, she will be labeled an adulteress if she marries another man. But if the husband dies, she is free from
the Law so she will not be an adulteress if she marries another man. Accordingly, my brothers and sisters, you too have died to the Law through Christ's body so that you might belong to another, to one who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God. When we were unspiritual, sinful passions aroused by the Law were at work in our component parts to produce death as the consequence. But now we have been released from the Law, since we have died to what held us back so that by God's Spirit we might serve in a new way and not in the old way under the written regulation. (7:1–6)

To explain to his skeptical Jewish readers why Christians are not subject to the Mosaic Law, Paul uses its own legal regulations concerning marriage. Paul probably could take it for granted that his Gentile readers would be sympathetic to his claim that the Mosaic Law was not necessary for Christians. By contrast, Jewish Christians who were loyal to their ethnic regulations would resist. Consequently, Paul now explicitly speaks to "those who know the Law." To soften their resistance, he addresses them as his "brothers," thereby reminding them that he himself is a Jew. Paul then uses the Law's own regulations to show that once we die we are no longer subject to it. Just as the death of her husband frees a woman from the legal limitations of her marriage to him and entitles her to marry someone else, so too the spiritual death of a Christian at baptism frees the Christian from the Law.

Indeed, Paul contends that following the Law was slavery because in practice the Law led to sin. Here Paul mentions an idea he will soon explain at length: The law stirs up in us wicked desires. As a result, we lose control of our own selves and sin takes over. Of course, as Paul has repeatedly insisted, sin leads to death.

Through baptism we have entered Christ's body and have escaped the realm of sin and law and can serve God in a new way. For Paul, Christ's body is both the physical body which died on the cross and rose from the dead and also the Church, since it looks to Jesus as its model, and it is the place where his
Spirit dwells (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12–30). Of course, through our solidarity with the suffering and triumph of Jesus and through being in the sacred community where Christ’s Spirit is present, Christians are able to do what is right and do it with all our heart. We commit ourselves to such solidarity and enter the Christian community through baptism, and, as Paul reminded us in 6:1–4, baptism involves dying and rising.

In keeping with the overall structure of the letter, Paul here primarily addresses his Jewish readers. In the first half of the letter, Paul addresses the Jews and tells them that there is only one way to salvation and that, consequently, they should not despise Gentiles. In the second half, Paul addresses Gentiles and insists that the Jews continue to have a special place in God’s plan. Here we are still in the first half of the epistle and, accordingly, Paul addresses “those who know the Law” (i.e., especially the Jews) and emphasizes that thanks to Jesus Christians have died to the Mosaic Law.

**Questions for reflection:**

Do people sometimes do things (e.g., vandalism) precisely because they are forbidden? Does telling people not to do something sometimes cause them to do it? Why do people enjoy doing what is forbidden? Do we gain the freedom to do what is right through surrendering our lives to Jesus in the context of the church?

---

23. Romans 7:7–25

So what shall we say? Is the Law sin? Certainly not; rather, I would not have recognized sin except through the Law. I would not have perceived coveting if the Law did not say, “You shall not covet” [Exod. 20:17]. But sin taking an opportunity through the commandment produced in me all covetousness. Without the Law, sin is impotent. Formerly, I was alive when I did not
have the law, but when the commandment came, sin came to life, and I died. The commandment which was supposed to lead to life, this commandment turned out to be death for me. Sin taking an opportunity through the commandment deceived me and through it killed me. Accordingly, the Law is holy and the commandment holy and righteous and good. So did what was good become fatal for me? Certainly not. But sin, in order that it might be exposed as sin, produced death in me through what was good, that sin might become utterly sinful through the commandment. (7:7-13)

We know that the Law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold into slavery under sin. I do not understand how I behave. For I do not do what I wish; rather, I do what I hate. But if I do what I do not wish, I agree to the Law that it is good. But now I am no longer the one who am doing it; rather it is the sin which resides in me. Because I know that no good resides in me (that is in my unredeemed self), for it is within my ability to wish to do good but not to accomplish it. I do not do the good which I wish but the evil which I do not wish, this is what I perform. Now if what I actually do is what I do not wish, I am no longer the one who is accomplishing it but the sin which resides in me. Consequently, I discover that it is a rule that when I wish to do good, evil is present in me. I delight in God's Law in my inner self, but I see another law in the rest of me, battling against the law in my mind and making me a prisoner to the law of the sin that resides in the rest of me. Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this deadly self? Thanks be to God, it happens through Jesus Christ our Lord! Therefore, on my own, I serve God's Law with my mind, but with the rest of me I serve sin's law. (7:14-25)

From Paul’s argumentation so far, it would be easy to conclude that the Mosaic Law itself is evil. Paul has already claimed that there are two competing realms, the realm of sin and death and the realm of salvation and eternal life. He has indicated that the mosaic regulations belong to the first. Indeed, the Law causes sinful desires to increase and thereby
drives us to sinful actions. Consequently, the reader could easily assume that Paul holds that the Mosaic Law is wicked.

Such a conclusion, however, would be deeply offensive to Jewish Christian readers whose support Paul was courting. As Paul himself has already noted, the Jews felt that the Mosaic Law was the very embodiment of truth and virtue (2:18–20).

Of course, Paul was a Jew himself and believed that God had given the Mosaic Law, and, hence, it formed an important part of the divine plan. The mosaic code was the central element in the Jewish Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament), and these scriptures were an important way to learn who God is and how he plans to save the universe.

Nevertheless, as a Christian, Paul believed that God had saved the world through Jesus and, hence, salvation could not be through the Mosaic Law. God had saved the world by sending his Son, and Jesus primarily accomplished this work through the crucifixion, resurrection, and the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Consequently, Paul concluded that the primary role of the Mosaic Law was to prepare for Jesus. If the Law was undeniably part of God’s plan and if that plan had culminated in God saving the world through the crucifixion, resurrection, and the gift of Christ’s Spirit, then the primary role of the Mosaic Law must be to make people ready to receive Jesus.

Elsewhere in his writings Paul emphasizes how the Law (i.e., the books of the Bible) prophesied the coming of Jesus and thereby helped people recognize him. For example, in the opening verses of Romans Paul insists that the prophets in the holy scriptures promised the gospel beforehand (Rom. 1:2–3). As we have seen, “Law,” was an ambiguous term in first-century Judaism and could mean the regulations of scripture or the scriptures themselves.

In the passage we are presently considering, Paul stresses how the regulatory law prepares us psychologically to receive Jesus by making us aware of our need for Christ’s grace. Paul emphasizes that the moral regulations of the Mosaic Law teach us to distinguish right from wrong. Consequently, before we know the Law we are not aware that we are committing sin. By
contrast, once we learn the Law, we recognize that we are sinners. Yet, the Law, which reveals our sinfulness, does not itself give us the power to extricate ourselves from the evil that enslaves us. Hence, the Law makes us aware that we need another spiritual power, and, as Paul will argue in the next section, that power is the Spirit of Jesus. Accordingly, the Law prepares us to receive Christ.

Therefore, Paul can insist, especially for the benefit of his Jewish readers, that the Mosaic Law is itself good. Paul makes the point emphatically. The commandment is "holy and righteous and good." In our inner selves we delight in the Law. His Jewish readers would have found these sentiments most congenial.

In keeping with the teaching of Jesus, Paul especially emphasizes the psychological demands of the Mosaic Law. Paul illustrates the negative effects of the Law by referring to the only one of the Ten Commandments that forbids thought. The other commandments (e.g., "You shall not steal") primarily prohibit actions. Paul, however, refers to the commandment not to covet which orders us to overcome obsessive desires (Exod. 20:17). This emphasis on the inner demands of the Law would not have been typical of the Judaism of Paul's day but was faithful to the teaching of Jesus. The Judaism of Paul's day stressed the importance of external action and held that a person should restrain evil desires through self-discipline. Jesus, by contrast, concentrated on the "heart" (i.e., the hidden inner core of a person) and claimed that an evil heart would inevitably produce evil acts (e.g., Luke 6:43–45). Hence, there had to be inner transformation. Because Jesus focused on the heart, he held that the Law not only forbids evil actions but also the destructive feelings that motivate those actions. The Law against murder also forbids anger; the law against adultery also forbids lust (Mat. 5:21–22, 27–28). Writing for a Christian audience, Paul here simply assumes that the Law demands not only righteous actions, but also pure thoughts.

Paul's argumentation implies that one reason the Law cannot itself make us inwardly pure is that it stirs up psychological resistance. Experience teaches us that we can often control our
actions by mere willpower; we cannot control our thoughts. On the contrary, telling us not to think about something causes us to think about it. Trying to force ourselves to think differently provokes even deeper resistance. The Law, Paul writes, stirred up covetousness in him. By telling us not to lust after other people’s possessions, the Law inspires lust. Of course, elsewhere in the letter Paul has indicated that sinful desires inevitably lead to sinful actions (Rom. 1:24–32).

Another reason that the law cannot by itself make us righteous is that the Law orders us to do things which we cannot do on our own now that we have been weakened by sin. Paul notes that the Law is “spiritual” but that he is not since he is under the dominion of sin. In other words, if sin had not already corrupted our lives, we would have the self-control to do what the Law requires. Now that our lives are already burdened by the sins of the past, however, we cannot simply by willpower act in a radically better way. On the contrary, when we try to keep the law and inevitably fail, we become ashamed, and this shame further undermines our ability to resist sin.

Worse still, the law in practice makes us focus on ourselves. When we are struggling to keep the law, we are constantly looking at ourselves to see how well we have measured up. Indeed, to the extent that we can actually keep the law on our own power, we become proud. For Paul, however, goodness consists in focusing on God in love and praise, and the beginning of human sin is to become self-preoccupied, especially when this self-preoccupation results from pride (see the discussion of Romans 1:18–23 above). Of course, the Mosaic Law condemns the self-preoccupation it produces. The first and great commandment is to love God with all the heart (e.g., Mark 12:29–30; Deut. 6:4–5).

Consequently, the law alienates us from ourselves. On the one hand, part of us—Paul calls it the inner self—recognizes that the demands of the law are just. Nevertheless, the rest of us cannot meet these demands. Hence, even though we wish to do what is good—even though in some sense we even choose to do what is right—we do not accomplish the good. Instead, what
we end up doing is the very evil which the law condemns. Consequently, we end up being separated from ourselves.

Of course, this alienation from self makes us sin even more. We feel keenly that we are enslaved to sin and destined for destruction, and the resulting despair further weakens our ability to resist evil.

It is noteworthy that here Paul writes in the first person singular. Instead of referring to human beings in general, Paul keeps writing about “me.”

Nevertheless, it is probably a mistake to assume that Paul is primarily discussing his own experience because he implicitly assumes that what he is saying is relevant to his readers. Naturally, what he is writing must be true for Paul personally, but he assumes it is true for his audience as well.

Hence, Paul is probably discussing what he believes every person who tries to live by the power of the law will experience. Indeed, the various statements Paul makes seem especially appropriate to the story of Adam and his fall in Genesis 2-3. Adam, for example, was once alive without the law and subsequently died. Thus, God created Adam before giving him the command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Then after Adam received the commandment and violated it, God punished him with death. Of course, Adam was the first human being; as such, he is also the archetypal fallen human being. To live by the law is to live the way Adam lived and inevitably to become enslaved to sin and death as Adam also did.

Nevertheless, Paul was especially directing his remarks to his Jewish Christian readers, since it was they who had the Mosaic Law. Paul illustrates his remarks by discussing the commandment not to covet (Exod. 20:17), and since that commandment is the last of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:2-17), it inevitably calls to mind the Mosaic Law as a whole. A few verses earlier Paul remarked that he was now addressing “those who know the Law” (7:1) which, at the very least, was especially true of Jewish readers, and here he continues addressing them.
To them this passage is a reminder that the possession of the law does not make them superior to Gentile Christians. The Law itself may be “holy and righteous and good,” but it does not make people that way, and, hence, Jews have no claim to boast. There is only one path to virtue, accepting the grace that comes from knowing Jesus, and that path is equally available to Gentiles and Jews.

By switching to the first person singular, Paul reminds his readers what it feels like on the inside to be enslaved to sin through the law. It is one thing to analyze the problems of others. It is another to experience those problems in the core of one’s own person. When Paul writes, “Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this deadly self?” he is expressing the frustration and terror that all decent people feel when they realize that they have lost control of their lives and are doing the very evil they abhor.

Of course, by reminding his readers of how frustrating it is to be enslaved to sin through the law, Paul invites us to re-experience the joy of being set free. His discussion of the anguish of spiritual slavery is the dark backdrop against which he will now portray the glory of new life in Jesus. Already he has exclaimed in thanksgiving that liberation is “through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Now Paul will develop this insight.

It must be admitted, however, that the Christian reader feels that the slavery Paul describes continues to exist even after conversion. Paul may be confident that he has been set free from the paradox of willing one thing and doing another, but his readers down through the ages have found that they were often living this way even though they were already Christians. Indeed, some readers have assumed that, therefore, Paul must be describing Christian experience.

Paul’s argumentation suggests, however, that we experience this slavery when we fall back into trying to do what is right through our own efforts rather than the power that comes from Christ. As Brendan Byrne, S.J. points out, Paul stresses that such slavery occurs when we try to do good on our “own.” Hence, whenever we experience such bondage, the
passage invites us to focus anew on the power that comes from knowing Christ. Of course, much of that power comes from God’s love for us despite our brokenness and sinfulness.

Questions for reflection:

How do we normally react when someone tells us not to do something we like to do? How do we normally react when someone tells us the uncomplimentary truth about ourselves? Do we sometimes decide to do what is right but somehow end up doing what is wrong? Do feelings of guilt and failure over not living up to some standard make it easier or more difficult to abide by that standard in the future? When we try to live up to difficult regulations, do we keep noticing how we are doing and end up focusing on ourselves rather than on God?

24. Romans 8:1–11

Hence, there is now no ruin in store for those who are in Christ Jesus, because in Christ Jesus the Spirit’s life-giving rule has liberated you from sin’s and death’s rule. What the Law could not do, since it was weak due to our outer self, God did by sending his own Son in a form similar to our sinful outer self and to deal with sin. God passed judgment on sin in the outer self so that the just requirement of the Law might be performed in us who act not by the leading of our fallen self but by the Spirit. Because those who are in their fallen nature set their minds on fallen things, but those who are in the Spirit set their minds on the promptings of the Spirit. The thoughts of our fallen nature produce death, but the thoughts of the Spirit produce life and peace; because the thoughts of our fallen nature are hostile to God for they do not submit to God’s law; nor can they. And those who are in their fallen nature cannot please God. But you are not in your fallen nature but in the Spirit, if indeed God’s