



When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

“The Corpse Bride of Christ”

Romans 7:13-25

If you’ve ever read *The Aeneid* by the first century Roman poet Virgil you’ve come across this gruesome passage:

*The living and the dead at his command,
Were coupled, face to face, and hand to hand,
Till, chok’d with stench, in loath’d embraces tied,
The ling’ring wretches pin’d away and died.¹*

It is a description of a form of torture in which they fastened a dead body to the victim, tying shoulder to shoulder, face to face, thigh to thigh, arm to arm

According to another source,

Cicero cites from Aristotle... the torture [was] inflicted by... Etruscan pirates.²

The gruesome details of the pirate-punishment are given in an essay by Jacques Brunschwig.³

A living man or woman was tied to a rotting corpse, face to face, mouth to mouth, limb to limb, with an obsessive exactitude in which each part of the body corresponded with its matching putrefying counterpart. Shackled to their rotting double, the man or woman was left to decay. To avoid the starvation of the victim and to ensure the rotting bonds between the living and the dead were fully established, the Etruscan [pirates] continued

¹ Virgil, *The Aeneid*, VIII 483-88

² For more details on Aristotle and the fragment on the psyche see A.P. Bos, *The Soul and its Instrumental Body: A Reinterpretation of Aristotle’s Philosophy of Living Nature*, (Leiden: Brill, 2003)

³ *Aristote et les pirates tyrrhéniens*, 1963

to feed the victim appropriately. Only once the superficial difference between the corpse and the living body started to rot away through the agency of worms, which bridged the two bodies, establishing a differential continuity between them, did the Etruscans stop feeding the living. Once both the living and the dead had turned black through putrefaction, the Etruscans deemed it appropriate to unshackle the bodies, by now combined together...⁴

There are historical reports of this form of torture lasting into the sixteenth century.

The *Aeneid* by Virgil was written in the late first century BC. The Etruscans had been around for a long time before the first century.

The apostle Paul, well-read and well-traveled, would have been familiar with this practice of the body of death as a literal torture carried out upon persons.

That being the case, we can see that he used it as an illustration in verse twenty-four.

Romans 7:24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this **body of death**?

Paul pictured himself, and every believer in Jesus Christ, as needing to be “deliver[ed] from **this body of death**.” He was depicting the Christian as if he were tied securely to a rotting corpse.

What is “the body of death,” the rotting corpse, that we find attached to ourselves? It is what we call “the flesh.” The flesh is *not* the physical body itself. No, it is something different. It is a principle at work within me that demands I use my physical body in sinful ways to fulfill its lusts.

Even after I am saved and have received a new, spiritual nature, I find the flesh at work in my body. And as long as I remain in my current physical body I will have the flesh to contend against.

⁴ for more information see http://www.urbanomic.com/Publications/Collapse-4/PDFs/C4_Reza_Negarestani.pdf

Spiritually speaking, you're carrying around "the body of death." It's a very good if graphic illustration of your life as a believer this side of Heaven.

As chapter seven closes Paul devoted a great deal of time to talking about "the body of death" and its effect upon you as a believer. First he needed to button-up his discussion about God's Law.

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.

Obviously we are in the middle of a longer discussion. Paul had been talking about God's Law. He had answered an objection that if the purpose of the Law was to expose my sin, was the Law sinful? His answer was "No!"

Now he answered another objection about God's Law. If God's Law reveals my sin, "has [it] become death to me?" In other words, *Is my condition hopeless - leading only to eternal death?*

The answer is "Certainly not!" The Law shows me the exceeding sinfulness of my indwelling sin so that I will understand I cannot be saved by works I might perform, **but that I might and can be saved through God's intervention on my behalf.**

Romans 7:14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

This verse serves as a conclusion and a segue. "For we know that the law is spiritual" concludes what he's been saying about God's Law. Exposing my sin, and showing me its exceeding sinfulness, is important because it prepares my heart to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

"But I" - meaning Paul and every believer - "am carnal, sold under sin."
"Carnal" literally means *fleshly* or *made of flesh*. It's referring to what we're calling **the** flesh.

“Sold under sin” is in a present verb tense that means it is ongoing. In fact, throughout these remaining verses Paul used the present tense in his verbs. **This was his ongoing struggle and it is ours, too.**

If I am saved, how is it I am “sold under sin?” With regards to the flesh, it still seeks to bring you into slavery to sin as it demands you fulfill its lusting appetites.

We all know the power of the flesh to bring us back into slavery to sin. Many of us have experienced it firsthand. Christians can and do sin - sometimes severely.

Romans 7:15 For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

There should be no controversy over this statement. *Every honest believer can say this!* It summarizes very poignantly the struggle we find within our hearts between the flesh and the spirit.

I know we don't go by experience, but isn't this exactly how you feel sometimes as a Christian? As if no matter how hard you try, your flesh clings to you like a rotting corpse, making it difficult for you to do the things you want to do in your heart of hearts and encouraging you to do the things you do not want to do?

Romans 7:16 If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good.

It's very important you hear what Paul was saying. He was describing a struggle against sin. While he might do what he didn't want to, he simultaneously consented with God's Law about what he wanted to do.

His struggle proves something! One of the commentaries I read puts it better than I can:

The very struggle with evil shows that it is not loved, or approved, but that the Law which condemns it is really loved. Christians may here find a test of their piety. The fact of struggling against evil, the desire to be free from it, and to overcome it, the anxiety and grief which it causes, is an evidence that we do not love it, and that therefore we are the friends of God.

Perhaps nothing can be a more decisive test of piety than a long-continued and painful struggle against evil passions and desires in every form, and a panting of the soul to be delivered from the power and dominion of sin.

I NEVER had this struggle before I got saved. It is a mark of the Christian, of having received a new nature and a renewed mind, to recognize the awful, evil nature of the flesh, and the fact you are in a conflict against it.

Romans 7:17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Paul was not blameshifting. He was still talking about the conflict within. As a believer, with a new nature, he desired to serve the Lord heart, mind, and soul. But he found, **as we do**, that “sin” still “dwells in me.” The flesh is still there.

I know he’s talking about the flesh because he says so in verse eighteen.

Romans 7:18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells...

The “flesh” is there, dwelling within you. It is no “good.” It is altogether evil and bent on fulfilling its own lusts.

The remainder of verse eighteen and all the way through verse twenty-three can be tough to navigate. It’s a spiritual version of *Who’s on First?*

That’s why I think Paul gives the illustration, in verse twenty-four, of “the body of death.” It simplifies what he was saying by illustrating it. I have the new, spiritual nature of God but I find that tied to it is a rotting corpse, the flesh.

Everyday, and every moment in every day, I am face-to-face with the flesh in my walk with the Lord. It’s not going away until I am with the Lord either at my death or in the rapture.

Let’s read the verses all at once with the illustration in mind.

Romans 7:18 ... for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.

Romans 7:19 For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice.

Romans 7:20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Romans 7:21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.

Romans 7:22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.

Romans 7:23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

Paul mentioned some 'laws.'

1. There is "God's law," meaning His perfect standard of righteousness.
2. There is a "law, that evil is present within me" (v21) ... called "sin" (v23) ... that dwells "in my members" (v23), i.e., my physical body. It's the flesh.
3. There is the "law of my mind," which I take to mean my mind that is spiritually renewed when I receive Christ and am given a new, spiritual nature.

So I am born-again and have my mind renewed. I desire to walk in such a way that I would be pleasing to God and I desire to live according to His righteous standards as revealed in His Law. But I am face-to-face with the flesh - an evil presence and principle within me seeking to use my members to fulfill its lusts.

Romans 7:24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

As long as I am alive, in this physical body, I will carry around with me "this body of death." It is a "wretched" condition to be in.

But I can and I will be "delivered!"

Romans 7:25 I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

The first half of the verse looks to the fact that I **will** be delivered. One day I will be with my resurrected and exalted Lord for all eternity in my own new body. When that day comes I will be free forever from the flesh.

What about now? Quite honestly, while awaiting freedom from the presence of sin, I still face conflicts between my renewed mind and the flesh.

- The new 'me' "serve[s] the law of God."
- But at any given moment the flesh "[serves]... sin."

There is an ongoing sense that I am face-to-face with the flesh.

But I **can** be delivered - even now - from yielding to the flesh. Unlike in the physical torture, I need not become corrupted by my flesh.

I can look my flesh in the eye and say "No!" to its urges and impulses.

But I cannot do it on my own, in any strength of my own. It requires my yielding to the Spirit of God... And that will be explained and expounded in chapter eight!