

July 21, 2019
**The Fantasy of the Law
and the Reality of the Christ**
Annette Hill Briggs
Romans 7:1-25

⁷ My friends, you surely understand enough about law to know that laws only have power over people who are alive. ² For example, the Law says that a man's wife must remain his wife as long as he lives. But once her husband is dead, she is free ³ to marry someone else. However, if she goes off with another man while her husband is still alive, she is said to be unfaithful. ⁴ That is how it is with you, my friends. You are now part of the body of Christ and are dead to the power of the Law. You are free to belong to Christ, who was raised to life so that we could serve God. ⁵ When we thought only of ourselves, the Law made us have sinful desires. It made every part of our bodies into slaves who are doomed to die. ⁶ But the Law no longer rules over us. We are like dead people, and it cannot have any power over us. Now we can serve God in a new way by obeying his Spirit, and not in the old way by obeying the written Law. ⁷ Does this mean that the Law is sinful? Certainly not! But if it had not been for the Law, I would not have known what sin is really like. For example, I would not have known what it means to want something that belongs to someone else, unless the Law had told me not to do that.

⁸ It was sin that used this command as a way of making me have all kinds of desires. But without the Law, sin is dead. ⁹ Before I knew about the Law, I was alive. But as soon as I heard that command, sin came to life, ¹⁰ and I died. The very command that was supposed to bring life to me, instead brought death. ¹¹ Sin used this command to trick me, and because of it I died. ¹² Still, the Law and its commands are holy and correct and good. ¹³ Am I saying that something good caused my death? Certainly not! It was sin that killed me by using something good. Now we can see how terrible and evil sin really is. ¹⁴ We know that the Law is spiritual. But I am merely a human, and I have been sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵ In fact, I don't understand why I act the way I do. I don't do what I know is right. I do the things I hate. ¹⁶ Although I don't do what I know is right, I agree that the Law is good. ¹⁷ So I am not the one doing these evil things. The sin that lives in me is what does them.

¹⁸ I know that my selfish desires won't let me do anything that is good. Even when I want to do right, I cannot. ¹⁹ Instead of doing what I know is right, I do wrong. ²⁰ And so, if I don't do what I know is right, I am no longer the one doing these evil things. The sin that lives in me is what does them. ²¹ The Law has shown me that something in me keeps me from doing what I know is right. ²² With my whole heart I agree with the Law of God. ²³ But in every part of me I discover something fighting against my mind, and it makes me a prisoner of sin that controls everything I do. ²⁴ What a miserable person I am. Who will rescue me from this body that is doomed to

die? ²⁵ Thank God! Jesus Christ will rescue me. So with my mind I serve the Law of God, although my selfish desires make me serve the law of sin.

(Contemporary English Version)

Father Richard Rohr says that *bad theology is a lot like pornography. It has all the fantasy of a real relationship without any of the risk.* [*from *The Divine Dance*]

What is the fantasy – that is, the bad theology – at work in Romans, chapter 7? It is that the Law is necessary for righteousness. That’s the Bible talk version. The everyday talk version is that the better we behave – the more we conform to the rules – the more pleased God is with us; that it is possible to be *good enough*.

What is the risk? Finding out the truth once and for all that we are pathetic failures at being good – not because we are weak, not because we are bad, but because we are human. Real relationship with God is grounded in the truth: the truth that God never has loved and God never will love anyone anywhere because they were good. God loves everyone everywhere because God is good.

Let’s pray: *For the truth upon whatever tongue you’ve laid it, O God, may we listen. For a glimpse of your Spirit in the most unlikely places, may we watch. So that our faith might find deeper breath – for this we pray, O God. Amen.*

In Romans chapter 7 the Apostle Paul is still making his case against the fantasy – as he says it, the insufficiency of the Law to accomplish righteousness with God.

Everyone to whom he writes is a Christ follower, many of them from the same rule-loving religion as Paul, who have spread themselves some Jesus over the top of the rule-loving religion they’d always had.

“No,” Paul says, “no.” The Law must be removed, not because it is useful for its own purposes but, rather, simply because it is no longer necessary now that we have risen with Christ. Paul’s first example is marriage. Note: this is not a text on biblical gender roles in marriage. It is an analogy of those early believers’ relationship to Jewish law, with some use for the church’s understanding of the difference between doctrine and faith.

You are no more bound to the Law, Paul says, than a widowed woman is bound to her dead husband. The Law by its own design says that dead husband has no legal hold on her. The Law is no more use to you as a follower of the Christ than her dead husband is to her. Can he provide for her? Can he protect her? Can he give her any affection, any comfort? He cannot. Neither can the Law, Paul says. Only the risen Christ can do that for us.

New Testament Professor Luke Johnson's illustration of Paul's illustration goes like this: *The Law is like a prescription from the doctor. Sick people who go to the doctor and get a prescription generally don't carry the scrip around believing the slip of paper will cure them.* * [from *Reading Romans*]

The Law and the prescription are good for what they were meant for: putting a name to our trouble. But neither has any power to cure us or keep us well. Are you with me? The Law is dead as a widow's husband, Paul said – this week and last – and we are dead to it. Which isn't to say the church hasn't been propping our own version of the Torah up in a pew and treating it like royalty for the last many hundred years – “Nobody's perfect” – and quoting Paul in the teaching of it (verses 14 - 20): *I don't understand why I act the way I do. I don't do what I know is right. I do the things I hate.*

The church affirmed that nobody is perfect while at the same time emphasizing that the closer we get to that perfection, the more pleased God is with us – until we didn't know the difference between bad theology and good, what the Bible teaches and what it absolutely does not.

At five years old I could have told you, specifically, what sorts of children please God most: children who share; children who are kind; children who obey; children who don't talk back; children who are helpful. My brother said he heard a bad word and said it. My mother asked, “Do you think Jesus likes it when he hears you say words like that?”

That is such bad, and it can be dangerous, theology. For all kinds of reasons, not the least of which is the conflation of the *legal* with the *good*; the result being – even church people struggle to know what the word “*sin*” really means. When I enter the phrase “*remember their sin no more,*” Grammarly always wants to make it “*sins*” – plural. Sin is not singular or plural. It is ontological, a state of being, a form of existence. Again, friends, God doesn't love us because we are good. God loves us because God is good. Our ontological condition, if you will, is beloved. We are loved.

“Faithful” is the state of living in conformity to our belovedness; “sin” the state of living in resistance to our belovedness. Sin is related to Law coincidentally. This is a point Paul makes strongly in verse seven, teasing apart the Law from sin. What makes something legal? Powerful people get it written down, codified. Generally, what is legal is what serves the interests of the powerful. What makes something *right* or *good*? It serves the interests of the whole creation; it conforms to the very nature of God.

To be legal does not make something right or good. Our country legally has children in prison camps, remember. Does anyone believe that reflects the nature of God? Slavery was legal in our country for a long, long time. Forms of it are still legal around the world. It has never been right. Discrimination has never been right. It was legal for a

long, long time and, again, still is in many places. My colleague Reverend Dr. William Barber, who leads the Moral Monday movement, says that voter suppression laws currently on the books are THE greatest moral threat to American democracy. Wrong – and perfectly legal. Sin is related to Law only coincidentally.

It's possible to sin by obeying the law and to be good by breaking it. Sin is not calculated by our failure to keep our lives legal. Sin is calculated by our decision to resist our God-given status as beloved; to act, to live, in harmony with, at peace with, God's goodness in all of creation; to swim in that river, to breathe that air. Are you with me?

That we might conceive of redeeming ourselves by so cumbersome and unwieldy an instrument as the Law is a fantasy we've held on to for too long, especially given the alternative. *If I let go of this useless thing that never worked anyway*, Paul asks – to no one in particular, it seems to me, or maybe in a prayer – *then who will rescue me?* And it is as if he suddenly remembers, “Oh yeah!” – verse 25 – “Thank God! Jesus Christ will rescue me.”

And that is what he goes on and on and on about in chapter eight. We will follow him there next week. Would you pray with me?