

Who's the Wretch?

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, February 8, 2026
PASSAGES	Romans 6–8; Galatians 5; Romans 2; 1 Corinthians 11; John 15
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:06:00 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Romans 7 is a piece of courtroom theater staged to acquit one defendant and convict another: the law is good, sin is the villain, and the man in the middle is weak. Whoever the wretched man is, what he is attempting — keeping the whole law on his own — is not a Christian project. Our identity is Christ's perfect life, not our imperfect one.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ◆ Paul uses marriage law in [Romans 7:1–4](#) for one reason: death dissolves a legal bond. Christ's death is our death, so we are genuinely severed from the law — not because God changed his mind about it.
- ◆ The bond is broken so we can belong to someone. Fruit comes from belonging, never from effort applied to a rulebook.
- ◆ There are exactly three characters in the arena of Romans 7: the person, the law, and sin. The law is good, the person is weak, and sin is the one in the driver's seat.
- ◆ Grace, the Holy Spirit, and any real role for Jesus are conspicuously absent from that arena until the final cry — which is a strange way to describe life in Christ.
- ◆ Galatians 5 is the genuine Christian struggle, and it reads differently: the Spirit is in the room, and Paul says that if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law.
- ◆ Christians do fail, but they do not typically describe their failure as an inability to fulfill the righteous demands of the Torah. Paul's own call was “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”

- ◆ The same logic that puts us in Adam's sin puts us in Christ's obedience — not by title or bookkeeping, but really.
- ◆ Matt offered this as his own reading, not a church position: "I'm not going to make you think that way."

► 1:06:00

Before opening Romans 7, Matt ran a highlight reel of the letter so far — including the history most readers skip. Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome; the church there, likely Jewish at its start, lost that character and refilled with Gentiles; then the Jewish believers came back. The live question in the background of the whole letter is whether a Gentile brought into Christ has to become Jewish, and what to do with the law now.

Where Romans has been

► 1:08:04

Everyone falls short and needs a righteousness received by faith, not earned ([Romans 3:21–24](#)). Abraham was reckoned righteous before Isaac and before circumcision — he believed a promise ([Romans 4:3](#)). And the Adam logic in [Romans 5:12](#) is the hinge of everything that follows.

► 1:09:40

Matt reached for the strange argument in [Hebrews 7:9–10](#) — Levi paid tithes through Abraham, because he was still in his ancestor's loins. You are carried around by the people you come from. And there is one ancestor common to everyone: in Adam, all of humanity was walking the garden. We did not merely inherit the consequences of a stranger's sin; we were there. That feels unfair until you notice it runs both directions. "In the same way that you were in Adam," Matt said, "in Christ there's a real righteousness that is ours. Not in name only or in title or conveyed in some indirect way, but really ours."

Death breaks the bond

► 1:11:16

He read the end of chapter 6 first, and warned against misreading verse 22 as a chore list. Fruit is not the price of eternal life.

“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

ROMANS 6:22–23 ↗

The fruit, the sanctification and the life are all in Jesus — the vine we abide in ([John 15:5](#)), who is himself named as our sanctification ([1 Corinthians 1:30](#)).

► 1:14:17

Then chapter 7 opens with a widow. Matt was blunt that [Romans 7:1–3](#) is not primarily about marriage — Paul is using marriage law to establish that death terminates a legal bond, and then applying it.

“Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.”

ROMANS 7:4 ↗

Jesus died once for all, and that death is ours. That — and nothing we did — is the sole rationale for our severance from the law. Not, Matt stressed, because God reviewed his own legislation and reversed himself. “The circumstances of our baptism aren’t as important as being baptized into the Son of God, and the circumstances of his life and death.”

Is the law the problem?

► 1:16:39

Preaching that Christians are not under law made Paul a target. Matt imagined the heckling: *This is scripture. God gave this. Are you saying God did something stupid? Is he evolving?* So Paul has a tall order — explain why believers are free of the law without conceding that the law is bad.

He does it by naming the actual culprit. The commandment against coveting did not create the coveting; sin seized the commandment as an opportunity ([Romans 7:7–8](#)). Matt read verse 9 as describing any moment a law is first clarified to you — childhood, or a later season of study — not as Paul’s conversion. And he pressed the harder objection: if the law produces bad effects, isn’t it a bad influence?

“Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.”

ROMANS 7:13 ↗

► 1:21:39

Here Matt gave the image the rest of the message hangs on. Picture an arena with three characters: the speaker, the law, and sin itself, fighting it out. Of the three, the law is good and righteous, the person is weak and enslaved, and sin is the domineering force in the driver's seat. That is the whole point of the passage — and it settles who the bad guy is before we ever ask who the wreck is.

Who is the wreck? The options

► 1:24:06

Matt was careful about his footing before answering: “The board didn't commission me to clarify our official Romans 7 position here so that we could put it on hope.org.” There is no scholarly consensus, and the range is wide enough to be funny — Paul before conversion, Paul only as a Christian, all Jews, all non-Christians, all people everywhere, Christians and nobody else, or a Greek-tragedy soliloquy delivered on behalf of Eve.

► 1:25:26

He then made the best case for the view he does not hold. Romans 6 through 8 is otherwise about believers, so context favors a believer here. The struggle is painfully relatable, and Christians do sin and hate that they sin. A conscience awake to the goodness of the law looks like the Spirit's work, not a pagan's. Paul invokes Jesus mid-problem and then returns to describing the problem. We live in the already and the not yet. And Augustine read it this way, along with many since.

“For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

GALATIANS 5:17 ↗

That last line is the strongest card in the deck — and Matt agreed it is a real parallel to [Romans 7:15](#).

Why he reads it differently

► 1:29:01

First, history is mixed. The earliest writers, before Augustine, largely drove past this passage, treating it as the sort of thing Jesus delivered us from. Second, and more importantly, Paul's intent here is not a portrait of anyone — it is a dramatic reenactment proving the law innocent. The wretch is called onto the stage to make sure everyone knows the Torah is not the villain.

Third, the argument that only Christians wrestle with conscience forgets Paul's own earlier claim: Gentiles without the law are a law to themselves (Romans 2:14–15). And Paul made that claim while arguing that all humanity needs a savior, so it has to be universal. As for the continuity objection, Matt's reply was that "Romans 6 through 8 is all making the same point" is a better lens than "Romans 6 through 8 is all in the same voice." Paul is more than capable of a bunny trail, and the grammar shifts.

► 1:33:33

The clinching move was pastoral. Someone comes into his office and says they are struggling with temptation, doing what they should not and failing to do what they should. Relatable, every word of it. Then they add: "I'm just completely unable to fulfill the righteous demands of the Torah, even though that's my heart's burning desire." Matt's response — "Wait, what? You lost me at the end there. Why are you doing that?" Paul did not write *be imitators of me as I fulfill the righteous demands of the Torah* (1 Corinthians 11:1).

"It's a legalistic impulse inside of us that automatically gravitates to this being a description of the Christian walk — because that only makes sense in a world in which we are trying to live up to the demands of the Torah."

► 1:35:14

So the Galatians parallel is strong but imperfect, because the cast is different. In Galatians there are more people in the arena — the Spirit is present, and Paul immediately adds that if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law, which parallels Romans 6 rather than Romans 7 (Romans 6:12–14). In Romans 7 the Spirit, grace, and any working role for Jesus are all missing.

"You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love."

GALATIANS 5:4–6 ↗

That is how a Christian describes the walk. Christian failure gets framed as a failure to love, to walk in faith, to desire the Lord — not as a solo campaign to satisfy a code.

The football player and the basketball player

► 1:37:52

Being Super Bowl Sunday, Matt reached for sports. Midfield, a football player is bruised and exhausted. Beside him stands a man in a basketball jersey holding a basketball, saying he has been struggling all game too. They share the moment — until the basketball player explains that the court looks awfully green and the ball will not bounce on it. “We’re both struggling, but I just feel like I’m failing at something completely different than what you’re failing at. I don’t think we’re playing the same game.”

Failure alone is not the tell. If Romans 7 were only about failing, it would fit your taxes or your calculus homework. The man in Romans 7 is failing at a specific thing: living properly under the law.

No condemnation

► 1:42:06

Matt read on into chapter 8, because he thinks 6, 7 and 8 are all making one point.

“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.”

ROMANS 8:1-3 ↗

In the end he held the question loosely. The wretch could be a Jewish person under the Torah, a Gentile unable to satisfy his own conscience, or a believer bewitched into legalism badly enough that some preacher has to labor until Christ is formed in him again ([Galatians 4:19](#)). “The real question isn’t who is the wretch, but what is he trying to do.”

► 1:44:23

Transformation is real, Matt said, but it arrives through a present shepherd who bears fruit in us and “never abandons us to the thunderdome alone” — forming Christ in those who abide in him until we all reach maturity ([Ephesians 4:13](#)). We do struggle against temptation while we wait for resurrection.

“Until then, who you are is eclipsed by who he is.”

He closed by praying that God would clarify anything he had muddled, and put Christ crucified center stage. Then he pointed the room toward the prayer teams standing up front with name tags — “you might need some pastoral care” — and, after that, the luncheon down the hall.

FOR FURTHER STUDY**SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE**

- Romans 3:21–24
- Romans 4:3
- Romans 5:12
- Hebrews 7:9–10
- Romans 6:22–23
- John 15:5
- 1 Corinthians 1:30
- Romans 7:1–3
- Romans 7:4
- Romans 7:7–8
- Romans 7:13
- Galatians 5:17
- Romans 7:15
- Romans 2:14–15
- 1 Corinthians 11:1
- Galatians 5:18
- Romans 6:12–14
- Galatians 5:4–6
- Romans 8:1–3
- Galatians 4:19
- Ephesians 4:13

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Matt said death genuinely severs the bond, and that this is the only rationale for our freedom from the law. Where do you still act as though something you did is the rationale?
2. In the arena of Romans 7 there are three characters — the person, the law, and sin. Which of the three do you instinctively blame when you fail, and why?
3. Before you heard this message, whom did you assume the wretched man was? What is at stake for you in the answer?
4. The football player and the basketball player were both struggling, but not at the same game. What are you currently working hard at that Christ was never asking of you?
5. If your identity is Christ's perfect life rather than your imperfect one, what does that change about how you handle your next failure this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel's senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church's governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope's own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RCA10ZTdar0&t=3960s>

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.