

July 2, 2023 – Romans 7:1-13

Power is a tricky thing. We, as Americans, are well aware of that. This week, we celebrate Independence Day. A memorial of an event that was largely about the desire and abuse of power. The abuse of Great Britain's power over the colonists. The desire for more power by those same colonists. We fought an entire war over who would have power over whom.

And then, once that war was over, we kept fighting over power. The power of government. The power of taxation. The power to write, enforce, and judge our laws. We have an entire tenet of constitutional law called the separation of powers.

We were terrified that if we created a strong central government that it would simply lead to yet another king. And yet, oddly enough, once George Washington became president, there were actually those who said he should become king. He was a good and trustworthy man, so why not let him have power over us?

For centuries now, America has used and abused power. Given and taken power. Argued and debated over who should have power. It's an important part of our culture. And after several years of lockdowns, vaccine mandates, and emergency measures, it's still a topic that can provoke heated reactions, to say the least.

Our Epistle lesson this morning discusses power as well. But not the power of kings, presidents, or governments. It's the power of God. The power of Jesus Christ. In fact, the power of Christ is a theme throughout Paul's letter to the Romans. Consider how he opens the letter: *"Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus... [who] was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead."*

Here, Paul introduces himself in language ordinarily used by servants of the Roman emperor. It's as if that's the only language Paul can think of to express anything close to the kind of power that Christ wields. Caesar was the ruler of the known world, declared by the Senate and the people of Rome to wield the power of the Roman Empire. Jesus is the ruler of all creation, declared to be the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead.

A few verses later, Paul states the main theme of his letter: *"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."* Paul's letter is all about power. The power of Christ to save. And the power of the gospel to bring that salvation to the ends of the earth. The power of Christ to be resurrected from the dead. And his power to resurrect us from the dead.

And why wouldn't it be about this resurrection power? Paul himself had met the resurrected Christ and, in that meeting on the Damascus road, Paul discovered Jesus to be also the resurrecting Christ. For he had spiritually raised Paul from the dead.

Paul, who was responsible for the deaths of so many Christians, was now made alive through Christ Jesus. He had felt the power of God in his life. And he could not help but to proclaim this power to all people, to the church at Rome and to us today. Paul spends his entire letter telling us that if you want to see power. True power. Power greater than Caesar's. Power greater than kings and presidents. Look to Jesus, for Jesus raises us from the dead. And, in the end, that's the only power that matters.

Sometimes, however, Jesus is hard to see. For the Roman church, Paul was concerned that people were looking to the law as a source of life. The Jews believed in God's law. The Jewish converts to Christianity believed in God's law. Because God's law was good. It laid out how they should live their lives. How they should have a relationship with God. They saw the law as a power for life. Unfortunately, many of them were so focused upon the law that they lost sight of the good news of Jesus Christ.

It's not much different than the moralism we often see today. "Oh, Jesus was just a good teacher. He wants me to be a better person. He came to bring social justice and concern for the poor." Well, yes. But that's far from all he brought. If you think of Jesus only in those terms, you're not looking at Jesus' power to raise you from the dead. You're not looking at Jesus at all, in fact.

You're looking only at the law. At your own good works. At your own self-righteousness. At your own power to keep the law.

Paul writes this letter to be sure that no one sees the law without seeing Jesus. And Paul does this because he knows something. Paul was trained as a Pharisee. And he knows the terrifying power of the law. It has power, all right. The power to condemn. Because, the power that the law holds over you is so much greater than your power to keep the law.

The Romans may see life in the law, but Paul knows that eventually they will see death. As a hymn that we will sing later rightly confesses, God's law is good and wise, but we are not. Holding on to the law without Christ is like holding on to the blade of a sharp knife. It's a good tool. But the harder you hold onto it the faster it cuts straight down to the bone. The faster it only condemns you to hell.

On top of that, our sinful nature likes to twist the law. Deceive us through the law. Paul writes that the Law arouses "*our sinful passions.*" Simply put, when you hear what you are not supposed to do, you end up wanting to do it. Paul didn't know what coveting was until he was told not to covet and then sin awakened and created all kinds of coveting within him. Sin comes alive and we end up dying. Dying a sinners death while holding tight to the good law of God.

For this reason, Paul points us to Christ. We may foolishly hold onto the law, but Jesus holds onto us. And as a result, we are no longer sinners in the hands of an angry God but, instead, sinners in the hands of a gracious Savior. As Paul writes, "*Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ.*"

Christ saw us in our sin and offered his life for our salvation. He died under the condemning power of the law for you. He let the cold, hard steel of the law pierce his hands and feet and side. Through his dead body Jesus Christ sets you free.

Which is a little odd to hear, isn't it? I mean, Paul doesn't speak at all about freedom in this passage. In fact, if anything, he talks about belonging to Christ like a slave. About being a servant to the Spirit of God. These are the opposite of freedom, aren't they? I mean, that's what Independence Day is all about, right? Democracy is, by definition, the freedom to write your own laws.

It is. And it's a good thing in the civil realm. But we have to be so very careful. Because that attitude often foolishly leads us to believe that it also means freedom to rewrite God's laws.

To rewrite his good design for the world. Don't like what God has to say about marriage and sexuality? Redefine it. Don't like what the Jesus says about care for the poor and helpless? Ignore it. Don't like what the Bible says about living righteously? Reinterpret it. Say only that God is loving and good, and ignore everything that is says about sin and punishment and the law.

But I have to think that Paul would find this attitude very strange. The law of God is not something you can redefine. The law is God's. It belongs to him, not us. It is part of God's design. It's been built into creation. You can delude yourself into thinking that it doesn't exist or that it doesn't matter to God. But in the end, you will be held accountable for it.

Just as you could pretend that laws don't exist in our community. You could go into a store and simply walk away with merchandise taken from the shelf. You could go into a home that isn't yours and just start living there. In the end, however, you would discover that you are not alone. You do not make your own laws. You are part of a larger community and you live under its laws. And they will be enforced whether you like them, agree with them, obey them, or not.

So, too, Paul wants you to know that you are not alone in God's kingdom. And it is not a democracy. God does exist and rules over all creation. He has set his law in place and everyone will be held accountable to it before him.

He has claimed you in the death of Christ, to free you from the condemning power of the law. But he has also raised you in the life of Christ to live and bear fruit for him. So in the end, it all boils down to this: freedom from the law means service to Christ. And service to Christ means keeping the law.

That too is the power of Christ. It's the power not just to raise us to new life. But it's the power to keep us walking in newness of life. What good is it to raise a man from the dead if he's just going to turn around and walk off a cliff? What kind of life is that?

No, Christ has come that we may have life and have it abundantly. And so even as he saves us from his law, he also keep us in his law. Bound to it not by the chains of death, but by the power and the freedom of the cross. To Jesus we for refuge flee, who from the curse has set us free, and humbly worship at his throne, saved by his grace through faith alone. Amen.