

Session 8: The Law Is Holy

Romans 7 · Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Tonight has two summits. First, the sealed guesses open: the group measures their Session 1 answers to "what must a person do to be saved?" against seven weeks of text. Second, chapter 7: the law is holy, and yet the self that meets it is divided, willing the good and doing the evil, until the only exit from the war is a cry answered by a Person. The chapter names the problem that makes chapter 8 the best news in the Bible.

Catholic Touchstone. Two Catholic precisions govern the night. The law is good: Scripture's own verdict (7:12) rules out every version of faith that despises the commandments. And the struggle is real without being sin: the inclination that remains in the baptized, which Tradition calls concupiscence, "is left for us to wrestle with" and "cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ" (CCC 1264). Feeling the war of Romans 7 is not losing it.

Opening the Sealed Guesses: How to Run It

Run the ritual first, before any new material; it needs fresh minds and unhurried time (20 minutes). Everyone takes back their own sealed sheet, opens it privately, and rereads their one-sentence answer in silence. No one is required to read theirs aloud, ever; invite volunteers only. Then ask the two ritual questions printed in the Discussion Guide, and after the sharing, present the study's composite answer, built entirely from passages the group has already discovered. Keep your summary to what has been found; do not preview chapters 8-16.

The composite answer, for your own preparation: Salvation begins entirely in God's grace; nothing done before it earns it (3:24; Gen 15). It is received through faith in Jesus Christ, put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification (3:25; 4:24-25), and that faith is met and sealed by God's own act in Baptism, the sacrament of faith, where we die and rise with Christ and the heart is circumcised (6:3-4; Col 2:11-12). And the faith that receives it is the obedient, living, growing kind: the obedience of faith (1:5), faith completed by works (Jas 2:22), walking in newness of life (6:4). If a guess said only "be a good person," chapters 1-3 have answered it; if a guess said only "just believe," Abraham and the font have filled it out. Expect some guesses to be surprisingly close and some to sting; both are the exercise working. Close the ritual by noticing aloud that the question said do, and part of the answer turned out to be receive, and then pivot: tonight's chapter is about what happens when we know the good and still cannot do it, which means the answer is not finished yet.

What You Need to Know

Chapter 7 answers a hanging question. Chapter 6 said the baptized died to sin; 7:1-6 adds: and died to the law. The marriage analogy makes the point legally: death dissolves the bond, and the one who has died with Christ "may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God" (7:4), serving "not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (7:6). File that phrase; the Spirit then disappears from the chapter, and the disappearance is the key to reading what follows.

Then the defense of the law (7:7-13). If the law stirs sin up, is the law sin? "By no means!" The law is light, not disease: "if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin" (7:7), and Paul's example is the tenth commandment, the one that targets desire itself. Sin, personified, "finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me" (7:11): language your group should hear as an echo of a garden (the discovery

will take them there). Verdict: "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (7:12). The problem was never the diagnosis; the problem is the patient.

Then the famous war (7:14-25): "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (7:15); delight in God's law in the inmost self, and another law in the members waging war (7:22-23); the cry, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" and its answer, not a technique but a Person: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:24-25). Who is the "I"? Be honest with your group that the Church has never defined it and her greatest readers divided: many Fathers, St. John Chrysostom among them, read it as humanity under the law without grace, dramatized in the present tense; St. Augustine read it that way too at first, then changed his mind in his *Retractations* and heard in it the spiritual man still wrestling. Both readings guard something true. The chapter's own strongest clue: the Spirit, named in 7:6 and then absent for nineteen verses, floods chapter 8. Whatever else the "I" is, it is the self described without the Spirit's power, and every believer knows the experience whenever they fight in their own strength.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 20:17. Paul's chosen example is "You shall not covet" (7:7), the only commandment of the ten that legislates desire rather than deed. The choice is surgical: any commandment about actions can be outwardly kept while the heart rebels; the tenth exposes the interior, which is exactly where the war is. A discovery passage; keep it back.

Genesis 3:13. "Sin... deceived me and by it killed me" (7:11) is widely heard replaying Eden in the first person: "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate" (Gen 3:13), and death followed. Read so, the "I" of Romans 7 is, at its widest, Adam's story told from inside every descendant. A discovery passage; keep it back.

Voices of the Church

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

No one has written the divided will more honestly than St. Augustine, because he lived it: on the edge of conversion he found himself praying, "Give me chastity and continence, but not yet" (*Confessions* VIII.7): one man, two wills, each undermining the other. And his relationship to tonight's chapter has its own history: he tells us in his *Retractations* that he had once understood the "I" of Romans 7 as man under the law without grace, and came later to hear in it the spiritual man still at war with concupiscence. The Church has kept both of St. Augustine's readings on the shelf, which is itself instruction: the chapter is a mirror, and more than one face appears in it.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

St. John Chrysostom, in his homilies on Romans, teaches in substance that the wretched "I" of this chapter is humanity before grace: Paul, he holds, is dramatizing in the present tense the helplessness of man under the law, precisely so that the rescue of chapter 8 lands with full force. On this reading the chapter is a before picture, painted by a man who remembers. St. John Chrysostom's instinct guards something the text supports: the contrast between "sold under sin" here (7:14) and "set free from sin" three chapters earlier (6:18) is too loud to be an accident.

VOICE OF THE CHURCH: ST. FRANCIS DE SALES

St. Francis de Sales, in his Introduction to the Devout Life (Part III, chapter 9, on gentleness toward ourselves), teaches in substance that the soul that falls should be lifted up quietly and set back on the road without rage or drama, because bitterness toward our own weakness is pride wearing a hair shirt: it despairs at imperfection because it expected better of itself than of grace. His counsel is the pastoral application of tonight's chapter: the war is long, the falls are real, and the fighter who learns to lose without despair and rise without delay has understood both Romans 7 and Romans 8.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1963. The Catechism's verdict on the law of Moses tracks 7:12 and 7:14 explicitly: "According to Christian tradition, the Law is holy, spiritual, and good, yet still imperfect," a tutor that shows what must be done without giving the strength to do it. Paul's whole chapter in one sentence.

CCC 1264 with 405. The precise teaching on the war that remains: an inclination to sin, concupiscence, remains in the baptized; it "is left for us to wrestle with" and "cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ" (1264, quoting Trent); it "is not itself sin" but inclines to it (cf. 405). This distinction rescues half your group from a scruple: temptation and inclination, even violent ones, are the war, not the defeat.

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

Sealed guess: RESOLVED tonight. The ritual comes first. After it, one quiet seed for the rest of the study: the group's composite answer still lacks the power to live it, which is tonight's cliffhanger and next week's chapter.

The Spirit's absence. Named at 7:6, then gone until 8:2. Do not point it out until the steelman press; then let it do its work. Chapter 8 mentions the Spirit more than any chapter in the letter, and the contrast is the sermon.

The law upheld (3:31): developing. 7:12 vindicates the law's goodness; 8:4 (next week) will show faith fulfilling what the law intended. Hold the thread one more week.

Eden replayed. 7:11's echo of Gen 3:13 quietly links tonight to Session 6's Adam. One sentence in session; no more.

Session Goals

1. Every participant opens and privately evaluates their own sealed guess against the study so far, and hears the composite answer assembled from discovered texts.
2. The group can defend the law's goodness (7:7, 12) and explain why Paul chose the coveting commandment.
3. The group discovers Exodus 20:17 and Genesis 3:13 and can say how Eden echoes in the chapter.
4. The group can state the two classic readings of the "I" honestly, and the Catholic teaching on concupiscence that pastors both.

Timed Plan (75-90 minutes)

- Opening prayer and the sealed guess ritual: 20 min
- Win question (one only tonight): 5 min
- Build questions 1-2 with the Exodus discovery: 22 min
- Build question 3 with the Genesis discovery, and the steelman chain: 23 min
- Send questions, Live It This Week, memory verse, closing prayer: 15 min

If time runs short, pre-chosen cuts: drop the Dig Deeper box, and compress 7:1-6 (the marriage analogy) into a two-sentence bridge you supply. Never cut the ritual, a discovery, or the steelman answer; if the ritual runs long, borrow from Send.

Session 8: The Law Is Holy

Romans 7 · Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, seven weeks ago we wrote what we thought we knew. Tonight we open our own handwriting in your presence. Thank you for every inch of ground your word has moved us. Be gentle with what we got wrong, confirm what we got right, and finish the answer in us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Opening of the Sealed Guesses

Hand back the sealed sheets. Each person opens their own, alone, and rereads their one-sentence answer in silence: In one sentence: what must a person do to be saved? **Allow a full quiet minute. Then ask the two questions below. No one is required to read their sentence aloud.**

Ritual question 1. Without necessarily reading your sentence, tell us: what would you keep from your answer, and what would you change after seven weeks in this letter?

Ritual question 2. Which single passage we have discovered together did the most work on your answer?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

After the sharing, offer the study's composite answer, assembled only from what the group has found. Salvation begins in God's grace, free and unearned: "justified by his grace as a gift" (3:24), reckoned to a man under the stars apart from circumcision, law, or wage (Gen 15:6 with 4:4-5), whose earlier setting-out was itself grace-led faith. It is received through faith in Jesus Christ, "put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (4:25), at the place of expiation God himself provided (3:25), the mercy-seat resonance the group explored. That faith is met and sealed by God's own act in Baptism, the sacrament of faith, where we were buried with Christ (6:4) and raised with him (Col 2:12), and the heart was circumcised without hands (Col 2:11-12; Deut 30:6). And the faith that receives all this is the living kind: the obedience of faith (1:5), completed by works (Jas 2:22), walking in newness of life (6:4), judged real at a judgment according to works (2:6). Then say plainly: our question asked what we must do, and half the answer turned out to be receive. But notice what our answer still lacks. Knowing the good, even receiving the gift, is not yet the daily power to live it. Tonight's chapter is about exactly that gap, and it ends on a cliffhanger the size of heaven.

Win

1. Tell us about a resolution you truly meant and still broke. What did it feel like from the inside?

Build

Read Romans 7:1-6 aloud.

1. In the marriage analogy, what does death do to a legal bond, and who died in our case? What are we released for (7:4, 6)?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Death dissolves the bond: a widow is free to belong to another. In our case, we died: "you have died to the law through the body of Christ" (7:4), in the baptism-death of chapter 6. And the release has a purpose on each end: to "belong to another," the risen Christ, to "bear fruit for God" (7:4), serving "not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (7:6). Freedom from the law is not freedom from goodness; it is a change of husbands, from a code that commands to a Person who empowers. Underline "the new life of the Spirit" and ask the group to keep count of how often the Spirit appears in the rest of tonight's chapter. (The count matters next week.)

Read Romans 7:7-13 aloud.

Discovery moment. Say: "Paul defends the law by quoting one commandment: 'You shall not covet' (7:7). Find it among the ten, and as you look, ask why he picked this one and not murder, theft, or adultery. What is different about it?"

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Exodus 20:17, the tenth: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife..." It is the only one of the ten aimed at desire itself rather than an outward deed. You can refrain from stealing with clenched teeth and a covetous heart, and the seventh commandment's court could not touch you; the commandments against coveting (the ninth and tenth, in the Church's numbering) reach inside. Paul chose the commandment that exposes what outward compliance hides, the one that proves the law's business was always the heart (2:29 again). And that is why the law, though holy, cannot save: it can name the disease at its interior root; it cannot cure it. "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (7:12): the light is good; the light is not the healing.

Read Romans 7:14-25 aloud, slowly. Let the repetitions land.

2. Put 7:15-23 in your own words. What are the two laws at war, and where does each operate? Has Paul described your Tuesday?

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (7:19): the will endorses one thing and the members execute another. The two laws: "the law of God, in my inmost self" (7:22), delighted in; and "another law at war" in the members, "making me captive to the law of sin" (7:23). Every honest person recognizes the description; that is the passage's power and its trap. Let the group sit in the recognition, then ask them to hold it against 6:14-18 ("sin will have no dominion over you... having been set free from sin") and admit the tension out loud. The steelman is about to make that tension an argument.

Discovery moment. Say: "Paul says sin 'deceived me and by it killed me' (7:11). He is quoting, almost, the oldest excuse in the world: someone in Genesis 3, asked what happened, says nearly the same sentence. Find it."

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Genesis 3:13: "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." Deceived, then death: the sequence of Eden is the sequence of 7:11. Paul has been telling Adam's story in the first person singular, which is one reason the "I" fits every mouth that reads it: it is the species' autobiography (Session 6's chapter said so: one man, and death spread to all). The commandment came, sin seized it, I died: Eden, Sinai, and your own history, laid on top of each other in one grammar.

Steelman: Is Defeat the Normal Christian Life?

Build it at full strength. Say to the group: "Here is the Reformed reading of this chapter; hear it at full strength, and note that it carries a sober pastoral realism, not complacency: the regenerate really fight sin and really grow, yet remain simul justus et peccator. Paul writes in the present tense, as an apostle: 'I am carnal, sold under sin' (7:14). Not 'I was.' If the greatest Christian who ever lived remained sold under sin, then real inner transformation in this life is a fantasy; the divided, defeated self of Romans 7 is simply what a Christian is. And that, the argument runs, is why justification must be a legal standing outside us, credited, not worked in: Luther's simul iustus et peccator, at once righteous and a sinner. The chapter, on this reading, is the strongest proof in Scripture that God counts us righteous while we remain as we are. Doesn't the present tense demand it?" Let it settle; many will feel its comfort. Then press.

3. Press: Two tests, both from inside the letter. First: set 7:14 ("sold under sin") beside 6:17-18 ("set free from sin"). Can both describe the same baptized person in the same sense at the same time? Second: how many times did you count the Holy Spirit in 7:7-25? Now scan the first four verses of chapter 8.

ANSWER: SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

First test: they collide head-on. Paul cannot mean that the baptized are simultaneously "set free from sin" (6:18) and "sold under sin" (7:14) in the same sense; one of the two descriptions is of life somewhere else. Second test: the Spirit's count in 7:7-25 is zero. Named at 7:6 as the new way of serving, he then vanishes for the whole war, and chapter 8 opens with him: "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (8:2). The war of chapter 7 is the self fighting sin without the Spirit's power: as history, life under the law; as experience, every believer's condition whenever we fight in our own strength, which is why the present tense rings so true. So the honest verdict on the steelman: it is right that the war is real and lifelong, and the Church says so, concupiscence remains in the baptized, "left for us to wrestle with" (CCC 1264), and St. Augustine himself came to hear the regenerate in these verses. But it is wrong to make defeat the definition: the inclination "cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ" (CCC 1264), and the letter's own answer to "who will deliver me?" is not a ledger adjustment but a rescue: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:25). Whether transformation is real is exactly what chapter 8 announces, and it is next week. End the argument on the cliffhanger, not the resolution.

DIG DEEPER

Scruples and the war. Some in every group suffer the opposite error from presumption: they read every temptation as proof of damnation and every recurring struggle as unforgiven sin. The Church's distinction is medicine: involuntary temptation and inclination are not sin; deliberate consent is, in the measure of knowledge and freedom. A violent temptation resisted is a victory, not a stain, and a grave fall repented belongs in Confession before Communion, and venial falls are welcome matter there too: peace, not despair. St. Francis de Sales commended rising quickly and gently. If tonight's chapter has described

someone's interior life to the point of pain, the takeaway is not "you are losing" but "you are in the fight everyone baptized is in, and the power you are missing has a chapter."

Send

1. Where in your life is 7:19 most true right now: the good you want and do not do, or the thing you hate and do anyway? (Name it to yourself even if not to us.)
2. Your sealed guess has been opened. What is one sentence you would write now, and what would it cost you to live it?

Live It This Week

- Rewrite your one-sentence answer on tonight's Take-Home, dated, as your Session 8 answer; keep both versions to the end of the study.
- Each time the war of 7:19 flares this week, pray the chapter's own prayer, all of it: Who will deliver me? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.
- If a recurring fall has been carrying shame, take it to Confession this week, and receive the sacrament as chapter 6 taught you to receive water: as God acting.

Memory Verse

"Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

Romans 7:24-25 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Lord, your law is holy and our hearts are divided; you have heard tonight what we could not do. We do not ask you for a better code; we ask you for yourself. Deliver us from this body of death, and next week, Lord, show us the life. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Session 8: The Law Is Holy

Leader Reference Card · Every Passage, In Order

- The sealed guess ritual (uses: Rom 3:24-25, 4:25, 6:3-4, 1:5, 2:6; Gen 15:6; Col 2:11-12; Deut 30:6; Jas 2:22, all previously discovered)
- Romans 7:1-6 (read aloud: the marriage analogy; new life of the Spirit)
- Romans 7:7-13 (read aloud: is the law sin?; the commandment that kills)
- Exodus 20:17 (discovery passage: the tenth commandment; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 7:14-25 (read aloud slowly: the war; wretched man; thanks be to God)
- Genesis 3:13 (discovery passage: the serpent beguiled me; do not reveal in advance)
- Romans 6:14, 6:17-18 and 8:2 (steelman press: dominion contrast and the Spirit's return; 8:2 preview only within the press)
- CCC 1963, 1264, 405 (Catechism Connection)
- Memory verse: Romans 7:24-25