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The Battle Belongs to the Lord

BY KELLY CARTER

This article is the text of a sermon Kelly preached at the Pepperdine Bible Lectures in May, 2000.

It is a wonderful blessing to be with you people. The years I spent in Southern California I would not trade for anything. Working with the 37th and Atlantic church in Long Beach was exactly what I needed, and I don't see how the experience could have been better. The relationships that were fostered there, including my relationship with Pepperdine and those who serve here, remain immensely important to my family and me. I can't name this morning all those who have positively affected me and my ministry through this place, but please know that you are loved and appreciated. Every year for the last nineteen, except one, I have spent this week at Pepperdine University, and, Lord willing, I will keep returning each year to be blessed. And that's because you are family. I was not raised in the church. I became a Christian through the ministry of Camp Yamhill and the Hill Street Church of Christ in Albany, Oregon. When I was fourteen years old, a friend shared with me the best news I had ever heard—that at Bible camp the ratio of girls to boys was three to one. I didn't know anything about Jesus, but three to one sounded like heaven. I, of course, found something far more significant that week in August 1973, and for the churches of the Pacific

Northwest and the West Coast, I give God praise and thanks. By the way, I did meet a girl at Camp Yamhill in August 1973. In August 2000 we will celebrate our twenty-first anniversary. One could say that going to Camp Yamhill, with its ratio of three to one, was the best thing that ever happened to me.

When I became a Christian, a cycle was broken. A cousin of mine, a recovering alcoholic, explained to me a few years ago that his research into our family tree had uncovered a dependence on alcohol that included a minimum of five generations of Carters, so that each generation since my great-great-great-grandfather had not been all that great. In fact, my great-great-granddad died when he and his drunken brother got into a brawl at the top of some stairs, and the resulting injuries from the fall of my great-great-grandfather down the stairs contributed directly to his death, which came shortly thereafter.

And I remember with a dull ache, that is still present, the pain of watching my father night after night drink himself into a fog while Matt Dillon chased outlaws, Jackie Gleason threatened to send Alice to the moon, and Archie Bunker argued politics and segregation with his "Meathead" son-in-law. My two sisters couldn't take it. One of them married at age sixteen, has been involved with drugs her entire adult life, and four years ago overdosed on PCP. Her boyfriend found her sitting in her own

vomit at a friend's house and was able to get medical assistance for her before it was too late. She lived through it, but she has otherwise made little progress. My other sister is on her fourth marriage --she specializes in shattered relationships.

Please don't misunderstand me. My father would have done anything for me that he could. Life was not easy for him, or fair. My mother died when I was nine, leaving dad to raise three kids on his own. I understand why he went the way he did, even if I disagree with his choices. But please listen to what I just said about Dad: "He would have done anything for me that he could." That was where the problem lay -- *there was too much my dad couldn't do*. He couldn't be a good man. He couldn't overcome an alcoholic lineage. He couldn't have lived a holy life, even if he had tried. And while you and I may have different problems than my father did, we know, if we reflect on the matter from a biblical point of view, that in and of ourselves, we're no better. Neither can we do "good." The undeniable fact is that God is *just* when he judges. It would be just for God to judge you and me. We, too, have a lineage, one that stretches back to a place called Eden and to a fall that has left all of us influenced by that which is not good. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is no one righteous, not even one. And we cannot free ourselves from being who we are.

But, thanks be to God, we have been made righteous; we are justified; we are saved; we are reconciled; we are redeemed; we are set free and have died to sin through the Lord Jesus Christ. This is absolutely -- *great news*.

And for me and the Carters who will follow in my lineage, starting with the two boys sitting over there and the girl being cared for elsewhere, *a cycle has been broken*. We have been saved from a destructive heritage. For this I praise the Lord. Praise you, Lord Jesus.

You would think that this would be about as good as it could possibly get. But there is more. As wonderful as God's merciful forgiveness is, there remains more to say.

And yet, I have wondered over the last seven months, in thinking about Paul's letter to the Romans, if many of us have missed something. There

are signs that we have. There is a certain feebleness about our efforts both in being Christian and in building the kingdom that betrays a lack of understanding of what all was entailed in what we received from Jesus.

Let me give you an example. In Vancouver, British Columbia, just across the water from where I live, 99.98 percent of the people are absent from Churches of Christ on Sunday mornings. One in every 5,700 persons in the Vancouver area attends a Church of Christ. This wouldn't be so bad if we were making great strides to overcome the problem. But instead, our numbers in the Vancouver area in the last fifteen years have been cut just about in half. That's a lot when you start with only 600. Think about it, now. There are 1.7 million people in the greater Vancouver area, and we have claimed about 300 of those for Christ. In almost one hundred years! I don't know about you, but I am not sure what to think about the gates of Hades standing against the onslaught of the church when in a city of 1.7 million people, we are statistically nonexistent. Churches of Christ have been in Vancouver for about one-twentieth of the time the church has been in existence on the earth at all, and statistically, it is as if we aren't even there. I'm thinking that something needs to change!

We could point to several factors that might contribute toward making things much better than they are, but I want to get at something that goes in a different direction from what we do when we try to rekindle evangelistic fervor, or when we teach church-growth methods, or when we work at developing spiritual disciplines, or when we tackle the revival of our worship, or when we work toward the revival of prayer -- all of which are so badly needed. These all have a place in the church's evaluation of itself. But I'm convinced that at least some of the difficulties may run along a different path, and that they are inherently *theological*. We need to understand better what God has been up to. It's going to make a huge difference in our churches and in the future of the kingdom of God if God's people can completely understand what Paul says it is that we have received in Jesus Christ. Last night Rick talked about the need for the church to be before the world with less sin -- the need for us to sin less. I have the

blessing of seeing with you how Paul says this will happen for us. Romans was a great choice to start the millennium, Jerry. We need Romans. Please open your Bibles to Romans 7.

Now, there is a lot we could talk about in going through Romans 7 and the first half of chapter 8 if we could move at a snail's pace. We could talk about grammatical syntax or textual criticism or historical context, but by the time we finished, you might all be asleep – which actually might not be all that bad. Abraham Lincoln once said that if you took all the people who sleep during sermons and laid them out end to end, they would all be a lot more comfortable.

Or we could talk about this text's history and the interpretations of texts like it in our fellowship. We could talk about the way Luther's – or Calvin's – reading of these verses has influenced us. We could talk about how Alexander Campbell saw this section. Or we could refer to 1966, when a rather large controversy erupted in the *Firm Foundation* and *Gospel Advocate* over a sermon preached at the ACC Bible Lectures by Dwain Evans, a sermon in which he talked of the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit in his ministry. The question in 1966 was, In what sense are we indwelt by the Spirit, and does God work by his Spirit only through the words of scripture or in some other direct way? Many of you will remember that controversy. Reuel Lemmons, Guy N. Woods, J. D. Thomas, and many others had much to say. And those who stressed the indwelling power of the Spirit didn't come off all that well. J. D. Thomas was the one who spoke most positively about the Spirit's indwelling power. Was he right? In 1966 our brother Reuel Lemmons didn't think so. But times change, don't they? And in many ways, Reuel changed his personal views as time went on, perhaps because he saw a cycle being broken.

Look with me at Rom 7:4. I will read from the New International Version, since I think that's what most of you likely have – even though I think the New Revised Standard probably does a better job.

Read Rom 7:4–6.

Starting, then, after the marriage analogy, Paul says in verse 4 that, just as a widow is free from her marriage commitment, *we* are free from the law.

Mix our free hearts together with the laws of God, and a poisonous combination results.

Through Christ we have *died* to the law, in order that we might finally bear fruit for God. This is important for what we shall see shortly: *we are free from the law*. We have died to it and its effects, with no more specific interest in following it, and *we now belong to Christ* – making it possible for the first time for us to do what God wants, to bear fruit for him.

Whatever *good* the law may have done in showing sin to be sin or in making sin utterly sinful (as down in v. 13), nonetheless, the law also worked in concert with our flesh (v. 5) to arouse sinful passions in us, even though we wanted to serve God.

It seems, then – and this is a startling thing – that the sinful passions of the flesh, mixed with the law, make for a deadly combination. Verse 8 tells us that sin actually *seizes an opportunity* offered by, or afforded by, the commandment, *producing* sin in us. Verses 9 and 10 tell us that with the arrival on the scene of the commandment, sin sprang to life, so that the commandments of the law, which promised life, ended up producing death. In verse 11 it is clear that sin takes advantage of the situation and, in combination with the law, ends up killing us. Verse 13 simply reiterates the role the law has in our death.

Granted, Paul goes to great lengths to explain that the law itself is not evil, but is really good. God did not give to us an evil thing when Moses ascended and then descended the mountain. But when it comes to conquering sin, the law is ineffective. There is sin when fleshly human beings and written commands are brought together. Death ends up as the result. It is like mixing ammonia and chlorine. Either one by itself serves a fairly decent purpose. But mix them together, and they form a combination that will kill. God created human beings in his image, and Gen 1:31 says that there was something very

good about us. But mix our free hearts together with the laws of God, and a poisonous combination results. The letter kills, Paul says in 2 Cor 3:6, but it's not because the law is evil. The law is good. It is just that in combination with fallen human nature, death is the result.

Our conclusion from Rom 7:1–13, then, must be that we are very fortunate that Christ not only set us free from slavery to sin but that he also set us free from the law. The law's effect on us isn't neutral; it is deadly when applied to the human condition. Humankind, through the law, could not conquer sin, but was consistently overwhelmed by sin under the legally oriented covenant God had established with Israel. We need to understand this, church. A legally oriented covenant means our death. It forms a bad mix with our sinful natures, leading us to sin, and so it can't be fulfilled by our efforts. There is simply no such thing as *legalistic* righteousness. That's an oxymoron. You can't have legalistic *righteousness*. You can't call what we have in Christ "victory" or say that we are "more than conquerors" when our faith includes a legalistic orientation.

How bad does it get, this living by law?

Bad. So bad that it sometimes feels as if we're going crazy trying to do what is right, all the while seeing little of anything in our actions but failure and our consistent violation of the instructions that we would so like to keep. I am reminded at this point of Martin Luther, who, in total frustration that he did not see in his life the moral progress, the fruit of the Spirit, the purity of mind and thought that he wanted to see, inflicted on himself brutal whippings to purge his life from sin. At least that's what he did until he read Rom 1:16–17. I am reminded of Augustine, who consistently failed in his moral life and wept bitterly because he could not live righteously – until he read Rom 13:13–14.

And it isn't surprising they would be reading Romans, since Paul talks about this very struggle himself. That's what this famous conflict in Rom 7:14–25 is all about – a man who wants to do right but knows nothing besides his failure at keeping the law. We often read verses 14–24 as if they are referring to the Christian Paul, the converted Paul. But I think the evidence falls on the side of this being a

man who *wants* to fulfill the *law*, and who through his efforts is trying to do so. Does he want to do right? Without a doubt! He wants to keep the law, as he says in verses 15 and 18, a fact that actually speaks to the goodness of God's law, as he says in verse 16. In fact, in verse 22 he says he *delights* in God's law in his inner being, even as he sees a war going on between his external actions and what his mind knows is right. In verse 25 he concludes that in his mind he is a slave to God's law. But the one who delights in God's law is – according to Paul's words, and according to Paul's experience as a Jew who knows so well what it is to try to keep the law – a failure, a prisoner to sin, a wretched man, Paul finally concludes in verse 24, because although a man may wish to

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keep the law, he will fail. His fleshly nature will every time overcome his desire to do what's right, so that there is no possibility at all for victory.

Now, you and I may wish that Paul weren't talking about his former struggles to live righteously under the law in Rom 7:14–24. It would be of some comfort to us to think that Paul the Christian, who has been saved by Christ, who has died to sin, who has the Spirit living within him, still struggles in his own spirit with sin the way he describes in these verses. We would like to think that Paul shares our lot, that in Christ he, too, still fails miserably.

The problem is that this doesn't really fit the context. Paul's point in chapter 6 has been that we have died to sin, not that we struggle with it constantly. He has said back in Rom 7:6 that we *died* to the law, not that we delight in it. And he also says in verse

Jesus came to do something more than just forgive sin. He came to eradicate it. He came to destroy it. *Through his Spirit* sin is defeated.

6—in what I think is a key verse for this whole section—that we have been released from the law, freed from the old written code, serving in the *new way of the Spirit*. Does this sound to you like the unspiritual man of verse 14 who is sold as a slave to sin, a prisoner of the law of sin? Does serving in the new way of the Spirit sound like a man who has no ability to do what he wants (v. 15), who does what he doesn't want to do (vv. 15, 19), who has no good living in him (v. 18), who has sin living in him (vv. 17, 20), who doesn't do the good he wants to do (v. 19), whose body wages war with his mind? Is this the guy who in a few verses is going to tell us that he is more than a conqueror? My thought is that it is not, and that the slave to sin of verses 14–24 is a different man from the one who serves in the new way of the Spirit. The man in verses 14–24 is not Paul the Christian, but the old Paul—or any law-serving man, for that matter—whom the *new* Paul of Romans is describing as being trapped in sin without Jesus Christ.

That's why there is such thanksgiving in verse 25. "Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Being slaves to God's law in our minds but slaves to the law of sin in the flesh is a vicious, deadly trap from which we cannot free ourselves. But Christ can! We died to the law through the body of Christ! (7:4). We are dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus (6:11). The cycle has been broken! The chains have been removed. Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! He is the one to rescue me from the body of death.

But—and I must tell you that I feel a bit like I am selling knives on TV—*that's* not all! There's even

more! You and I know Rom 8:1 so well—"Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus"—but I don't know if we really get it. The way I have always taken this verse—and perhaps you have, too—is to read something in it that isn't there. I have always applied *forgiveness* to Rom 8:1. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," and then it is as if we add in, "because we are forgiven in Christ and our sins and our sinful, wretched condition are not held against us." But I want to ask you if verse 1 is specifically talking about forgiveness. Look at it. Is forgiveness of sin the context? Verses 2 and 3 read:

Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so *he* condemned sin in sinful man.

The closest Paul comes to talking about forgiveness, as far as I can find, is here in verse 3 where, specifically in the New International Version, he refers to Jesus' coming as a sin offering. But, while these words occur in verse 3 in the New International Version, the words "sin offering" aren't in the original. In my opinion, to include the words "sin offering" in verse 3 is a dubious interpretation at best. To my mind, Paul more likely is just making the general comment in verse 3 that Jesus came to *somehow* deal with sin, which is exactly the way the New Revised Standard Version translates it. His point does not seem to be forgiveness, which raises the question, of course, Just what is it that Jesus came to do with sin?

That is exactly what our portion of chapter 8 is all about. The whole context of this discussion tells me that Jesus came to do something more than just forgive sin. He came to eradicate it. He came to destroy it. *Through his Spirit* sin is defeated. In verse 2 Paul says that we are free from the law of sin and death, which means that we are free from the *control* sin has over us, especially the control exercised over us when we try to live by the law but find the power of the law weakened by—overrun by—our fleshly

nature (v. 3). Here is the beauty of what Paul says. Rather than our being condemned, it is *sin* that is condemned in verse 3, so that the law is fully met in us, who no longer live according to the flesh, but who live *by his Spirit*.

And do you see that Rom 8:1 begins to take on new meaning? “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” But this is not *just* freedom from being judged because we have been forgiven. This is freedom from the *control* of sin. Sin’s *power* has been broken. Do you hear these words? There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus! There is no condemnation because we are set free from the rule of sin, emancipated from the power of the flesh, and are lifted by Christ above the weakness of the law! Sin in sinful man is condemned. Whereas before, the law was weakened by the sinful nature, now its obligations are *fulfilled* in Christ when we live by the Spirit.

In verses 5–7 we are given new spiritual *minds*, set on what the Spirit desires. Before, in our unregenerate minds, we were hostile to God, but now, controlled by the Spirit, we enjoy life and peace—something the man of Rom 7:14–24 can never know!

And then there is Rom 8:9–11, which I want to read from the New Revised Standard Version:

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Do you see how the dwelling of the Spirit in us brings life? Do you see that if the Spirit of God lives in us, we are *controlled* by the Spirit? This doesn’t sound to me like just a *hopeful* sentence. It sounds to me like *promise*. It’s a fact.

That’s why he says in verse 12 that we have an obligation to live a certain way, not—and you need to get this—not as a requirement, but as a fulfillment of what we are. Because if the Spirit is in us, we’re

alive! In verse 13 Paul specifically says that it is *by the Spirit* that we put to death the misdeeds of the body. *Righteous living comes in direct connection with, not our attempts to carry out legislated code, but with and by the Spirit. Living by the law, we will die. But if the Spirit dwells in us, we will live, conquering sin.* Do we have the Spirit of Christ living in us, church? If we do, sin is a conquered enemy.

Do we have the Spirit of Christ living in us, church? If we do, sin is a conquered enemy.

I’m going to finish up with Rom 8:14–17, but before I do, let me say this—and I say it with joy. We are in the process of overcoming a kind of legalism in our theology, and our text speaks directly against legalism. Legalism is, after all, self-centered, self-dependent, self-gratifying, self-promoting, and self-defeating. It does not lead to the holy life we all wish to have in Christ. Do you hear Paul? The law leads to death, not the holy life we all wish to have in Christ. Nothing *we* can do is efficacious. That’s because the battle against sin is not ours; it is the Lord’s. Christ’s spirit in us is what defeats sin and releases the death grip with which sin has wrapped us up. I praise the Lord for the changes happening among us, which are ridding us of a legalistic posture. If I could go back and change one thing about my experiences in Churches of Christ, it would be that they would have taught me about the Holy Spirit from the beginning. It didn’t happen then, but it is happening now; a cycle is being shattered by the Spirit of God. Praise the Lord.

Now let me put your minds at rest, at least some of you—an avoidance of legalism is not some kind of excuse on my part for viewing our world with less than the highest moral purposes. In no way am I simply accommodating our culture. “Sin” must not be an empty term; we must not cling to a cheap grace. We must not relax our high calling because grace abounds. The standard to which the character of God

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calls us is lofty indeed, and God's holiness must be given its due as the foundation for doing what is right. Understand that divorced from the holiness of God, our gospel becomes indistinguishable from any host of alternative self-fulfillment doctrines. Divorced from the holiness of God, our public morality may flow with the whim of competing private interests. Divorced from the holiness of God, our worship becomes entertainment. Divorced from the holiness of God, our salvation is identified too closely with feeling good, with self-esteem, with laughter and play, without the requisite concern for truth, justice, freedom, and righteousness. Today, we praise God that he gives us the solution to human sinfulness through the indwelling character of his Spirit. We can conquer sin! We are alive in Christ by his Spirit! This is a *decisive* move toward holiness, not away from it!

A Spirit-grounded, God-fostered holiness is not easy for us to accept. We are just so *action* oriented. We want to know that we can *do*. As a friend said to me recently, "Give me something that will work overnight, something I can quickly *do* to defeat sin once and for all." She wants to orchestrate through *her actions* control over sin. Now, I believe with all my heart that God can give her control over sin through his Spirit. But I don't think that I can give her what *she* wants. The key to righteousness for her is not in her *doing*. We can't just push a few buttons or insert a disk and download righteousness. The biblical teaching is that there is something dynamic, intangible, mysterious, and spiritually transcendent about

God's defeating sin in our lives. As we make our way down to Rom 8:12-17, we see that victory comes through relationship at about the same time that we are on our knees crying, "Abba!" Victory comes when out of desperation we look upward because there is nowhere else to look; when we realize that the last are the only ones who have a snowball's chance of being first, *and* we can admit that we are *truly* last; when we recognize that at our weakest we are at our strongest; when we understand our sinful nature for what it is. Victory comes when we accept the fact that we cannot do anything ourselves; that it is not only by grace that we are forgiven but also by grace that we are being sanctified, made holy, strengthened by his power; and that because *he* does this, there is no room for boasting. And somewhere in the process of the recognition of our bankruptcy, if we believe that "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," that he has not left us alone but has sent his Comforter to be with us and to live in us forever, there will be a transformation. Our sinful nature will become his holy nature. Praise the Lord!

So much so, in fact, will this happen that we are said to be his children, his heirs following in his footsteps. "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God," Paul says. "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Rom 8:14-16).

And this is the culmination, I believe, of the process of sanctification. We become through the Spirit like our Father. Coheirs with Christ, able even to share in his glory. All this by his Spirit, for the battle against sin is his. He breaks the cycle.

In 1993 Robin and I were blessed by God with the opportunity to fly to Zambia to pick up a little girl to become our daughter. She was born about two hours' drive from the nearest little burg, inside a hut that overlooks a valley that during a rainy year is green and plush, but in a dry year is parched and hostile. She was the eighth child born to the family, and the last, because her mother died within a few hours of giving birth. Two things made life untenable for little Meghan. One was that her father had

nothing to feed her. The second was that the family, including the extended family, no doubt influenced by the witchcraft that is rampant in their culture, decided that this precious little bundle was a bad omen for the future of the family. Based on these two circumstances, the family made a decision that families like them often make: they decided to bury the baby alongside her deceased mother, in the same grave—a move that I think, from their perspective, was calculated to be merciful both to them and to the little girl. But a family member had heard about a friend of ours, a missionary named Kathy Kumalo, now Kathy Merritt (Forest and Beth Moyer's sister-in-law), who was willing to take in children like Meghan, and who has now taken in thirty or so such children over the years. And so they bundled Meghan up and took her to Kathy, and two years later Meghan became ours.

When we got off the plane in the Lusaka, Zambia, airport and walked out into the main waiting area, Kathy was there with Meghan. The two of them had driven seven hours to pick us up. And when we stepped into the lobby and Kathy came close, by what seemed to be intuition, Meghan reached out for Robin, quickly and with definitiveness, as if she knew exactly what was going on and who this woman was. For the next seven hours, all the way back to Namwianga Christian School, where Kathy lives, Meghan sat on Robin's lap and wouldn't let go of her. That was just the start. A few days later, we went out to Siancope, just a small cluster of huts, and met Meghan's birth father, several of her siblings, and her grandmother. The grandmother was the first to arrive. When this elderly, gray-haired

matriarch crested the hill with her ragged shirt, leathery feet, and sore-covered legs, she sat down in the dirt and asked that her granddaughter come to her. And then, through the translator, with Meghan on her lap, she told us Meghan's story—about how the family had decided to bury her, and how now the grandmother could see that our taking Meghan for our own was giving her granddaughter life. And then she said this, through the translator—and this is exactly where you and I are today. Meghan's grandmother said that now, through adoption, Meghan, once scheduled to die, had become a person. She had become someone's child and was therefore alive, because she had been given a spirit by means of her new relationship.

You and I have been given a Spirit. He is the one who replaces our sinful nature, our flesh, transforms who we are, and makes us persons, alive in him. And we have a Father, whose children we have become. And with definitiveness we reach out to him, and he embraces us, and in his arms we are slaves neither to sin nor to fear. To us our new Spirit testifies that we are God's children, spiritual orphans no more. In this is life, the complete conquering of death. In this is power that sets us free from the law of sin and death. And for us, who live in Christ Jesus with God's Spirit living within, there is no condemnation. For sin has been overcome. May God empower us to live before him as children enlivened by his Spirit, conquering death, living free.

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