

"CHASING RAINBOWS, SELF-IMPROVEMENT, AND OTHER FUTILE PURSUITS"

(Romans 7:1-25)

(Chuck Swindoll)

Once a believer has died to sin "in Christ," his or her relationship with the Law is forever changed. The new covenant (Jer. 31:31-33) gives us a new rule of life: the Holy Spirit (Rom. 7:1-6). God gave the Law to humanity to confront our unrighteousness and to demonstrate our need for salvation. Once a person abandons his or her futile attempt to keep the Law and then receives God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the Law has served its purpose (7:7-13). The believer's relationship with the Law is then severed.

So, what is our goal in life now that we are saved? Is it not to please God by keeping the Law? Are we not to become like Christ, who is morally perfect? Shouldn't we repay God's kindness by pursuing good deeds and eradicating sin from our lives? Now that we are saved from condemnation by the grace of God, are we to sanctify ourselves through fasting, praying, studying Scripture, tithing, and the other spiritual disciplines?

If Paul's self-portrait teaches us anything, it's that self-improvement carried out in the energy of the flesh is a vain pursuit (7:14-25). You can push yourself to fatigue trying hard to be like Christ, but you'll have an easier time catching rainbows. Some teachers and preachers acknowledge the impossibility of achieving the perfection of God, but they find value in aiming high nonetheless. Others lower the standard of perfection to bring it within easier reach and then claim victory over sin. Most people simply work themselves into a wretched exhaustion and then collapse—sometimes with destructive force.

But God never demanded perfection. (Read that again—aloud!) Untainted morality vanished with Eden. No, we are not saved by grace and then sanctified by our own labors. The work of grace was not half done. The point of Paul's miserable self-portrait was to demonstrate that humanity can no more purify itself of sin after salvation than before. Only God can purify a soul.

So, what is our duty now as believers saved by grace? Our primary purpose is to know Jesus Christ personally with ever-deepening intimacy (Phil. 3:8-11). If we read Scripture, pray, meditate, journal, or fast, let us do it for the sole purpose of knowing His mind. If we worship, serve, partake of Communion, or spend time in the company of believers, let us learn about Him through His transforming work in others. If we feed the poor, defend the weak, comfort the lonely, or proclaim the gospel to a broken and needy world, let our walking in His sandals give us firsthand knowledge of His character. Let every trial or triumph bring us closer to knowing Christ's nature and understanding His purposes.

The spiritual disciplines are not a means to holiness; they are a means of knowing Christ. And as we engage in personal piety, fellowship with other believers, and engage the world at large in the name of Christ—as we come to know Him more intimately—the Holy Spirit will do what only He can do: make us more like our Savior. As the moon reflects the light of the sun, yet has no light of its own, so we will shine with God's radiance as we live in proximity to His Son.

Now, that is a worthy pursuit.

