

XIV. The Christian and the Law

March 29/30/31, 2016

Romans 7:1-12

Aim: To understand that while the law cannot save us—in fact, by defining sin it actually condemns us, because we are sinners—the law remains holy, righteous, and good, because it is a reflection of God’s character.

Romans 7 is one of the most famous chapters in the Bible. Scholars, preachers, and laypeople alike are fascinated by Paul’s vivid description of human frustration in vv. 7-25. Along with this fascination has come vigorous debate over the identity of the person depicted in these verses – unregenerate Paul, regenerate Paul, the back-siding Christian, and the like. However, we must start our interpretation of this chapter on the right foot by insisting that anthropology – the identity and situation of the ‘I’ of vv. 7-25 – is a subordinate issue in Romans 7. The main topic is the Mosaic law. Paul makes two basic points. First, using the analogy of marriage, Paul argues that a person’s bondage to the law must be severed in order that he or she may be put into a new relationship with Christ (7:1-6). This, the ‘positive’ teaching of the chapter, gives rise to questions about the origin and nature of the law. These Paul answers in 7:7-25, where he shows that the law is from God, but that it has nevertheless become the unwitting tool of sin, being used to confirm and imprison in death. Despite its divine origin, the law can neither justify nor sanctify.

How does this teaching about the Mosaic law fit into the development of the letter? Three points of contact can be discerned. First, and most generally, Romans 7 provides the extensive treatment and explanation of the negative effects of the Mosaic law that Paul has briefly mentioned several times in the letter (cp. 3:19-20, 27-28; 4:13-15; 5:13-14 20). Second, 7:1-6 repeats with respect to the law many of the same points that were made in Romans 6 with respect to sin. The third point of contact with Romans 7 and the preceding context is with the assertion of vv. 14 and 15 that the believer is no longer ‘under the law.’

Through the years there has been quite a debate among Christians concerning the question of to whom Paul addressed chapter 7 of Romans. Certainly, knowing to whom Paul is writing this chapter would make a great difference in how we understand and apply it. Is it written to the unsaved person, or to the Christian, or perhaps to both? We must assume that the principles Paul will explain in chapter 7 apply to believers and nonbelievers alike. When I have accepted Christ as my Savior, I am born again. I have passed from death to life. There is a future salvation, which Paul will speak of in chapter 8, wherein I will find perfection. But in the present life I am not perfect, and the battle continues. I am still a rational and moral creature. I am called to love God. Sometimes I do love Him, and sometimes I don’t. Therefore, while Paul’s argument in chapter 7 certainly applies to the nonbeliever, it applies to me and to all believers as well.

A. Our Relationship to the Law (Romans 7:1-6)

In the last part of Romans 6, he expounds the first truth of verse 14, namely, that believers are no longer under the law regarding its power to condemn. In chapter 7, he expounds the second truth in that verse, that believers are now under grace. Yet in doing so, he refers to the law twenty-three times in this chapter, eight times in the first six verses.

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1. The Axiom of Release (7:1)

a) Ignorance (7:1a)

¹Or do you not know...

Like Paul's more customary formula 'do you not know?' (6:15), the phrase 'or are you ignorant?' introduces teaching with which Paul assumes his readers are familiar. The phrase implies that Paul is elaborating on a point he has just made. The focus on the law that now begins makes it almost certain that Paul is harking back to his assertion in 6:14b (cp. v. 15) that Christians are not 'under law.' Paul makes this assertion almost in passing, and it cries out for elaboration – which he now gives.

The tactful and rhetorical question 'Do you not know?' indicates the apostle is once again using a self-evident truth as the foundation of his argument.

b) Brothers (7:1b)

...brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—

Before entering into his teaching, however, Paul addresses his readers: 'brothers,' 'those who know the law.' Some think that this address signals a shift in his audience, from the church as a whole to a specific group within the Roman Christian community: Jewish Christians, who 'know' the Mosaic law. But a narrowing of the audience is unlikely. Paul may be using the word 'law' (*nomos*) here to refer to Roman law or to law in its most general sense. This interpretation is certainly compatible with Paul's intention in vv. 1-3 to formulate a general principle. On the other hand, Paul never elsewhere uses *nomos* to refer to secular law, and he certainly uses the word in 6:14-15 and in most of chapter 7 with reference to the Mosaic law. This does not require, however, that his readers be Jewish Christians. Many of the Gentile Christians in Rome were probably 'God-fearers,' or synagogue worshippers, before coming to Christ. In any case, new converts would have been exposed to the OT and the law early in their Christian instruction. It is almost certain, then, that Paul here refers to the Mosaic law, but no implications about the ethnic background of his audience can be derived from that fact.

The term 'brethren' relates to Paul's Jewish brethren ('those who know the law'). He may be emphasizing this term to assure Jewish believers of his sensitivity to their deep concern about his seeming denigration of the Mosaic Law.

c) Principle (7:1c)

...that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives?

His primary point here, however, relates to *any* 'law,' as indicated by the anarthrous construction (the absence of a definite article before a noun, in this case, 'law') in the Greek text. The literal translation is simply, 'to those who know law.' It should be obvious, he was saying, that any 'law' – whether Roman, Greek, or even God-given biblical law – 'has jurisdiction over a person' only 'as long as he lives.' Law is binding only on the living.

What these converts know is a general principle: 'that the law rules over a person only as long as he or she lives.'

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2. The Analogy to Marriage (7:2-3)

a) *The Situation (7:2)*

²*For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage.*

Paul illustrates the general principle of v. 1 with an allusion to the marriage relationship. Contrary to the confusing interpretations of some commentators, the apostle is not presenting a complex allegory, or an allegory of any kind. He is simply making an analogy to marriage law to illustrate the single point he has just mentioned, namely, that no law has jurisdiction over a person after he is dead. This passage has absolutely nothing to say about divorce and cannot be used as an argument from silence to teach that divorce is never justified for a Christian. Paul is calling attention to the fact that marriage laws are binding only as long as both partners are alive.

Paul chose the analogy of marriage to illustrate how we relate to the Law. Whether by Roman or Jewish law, a woman was bound to her husband for life. The only way she could be freed was through the death of her husband. When this happened, she was perfectly free to marry again.

Here Paul gives an extended analogy from marriage. It is very simple: we get married; we take our vows. We promise to honor and cherish each other as long as we both shall live. We understand that if one partner in the marriage covenant should die, then all the obligations incumbent upon the one remaining are now set aside, and the widow or widower is completely free in the eyes of God to be married again. The law that binds us and regulates our marriage is in effect only as long as our partner remains alive.

b) *The Implications (7:3)*

³*Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.*

Law binds a wife to her husband while he is alive. If during his lifetime she lies with another man she is an adulteress, but if the husband dies and she remarries, she is not an adulteress. The power of Law is ended by death.

Paul's point is clear enough; but problems arise when we seek to relate the point to the conclusion in v. 4. If we assume that the details of the illustration in vv. 2-3 are parallel to the application in v. 4, then the 'first husband' must represent the law, the 'second husband' Christ, and the woman the Christian. Why, then, does Paul have the first husband dying in the illustration and the Christian (= the woman) in the application? Probably Paul does not intend us to find significance in the details of vv. 2-3. Thus many recent interpreters argue that vv. 2-3 make a single point – death severs relationship to the law. The verses illustrate v. 1 as a preparation for v. 4. This conclusion is basically sound, but it may go to far in minimizing some of the striking parallels between vv. 2-3 and v. 4: the use of 'join to' to express the relationship, respectively, of wife and husband (vv. 2-3) and of the Christian and Christ (v. 4), and the emphasis on the new union that follows 'death.' Not only, then, does Paul in vv. 2-3 illustrate the general principle that 'a death frees one from the law' (v. 1); he also sets up the theological application in v. 4 by citing an example – marriage – in which severance from the law enables one to enter into a new relationship.

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3. The Application in Salvation (7:4)

In this verse, the center of the paragraph, Paul states an inference drawn from vv. 1-3. This inference depends not only on the principle stated in v. 1 but also on the illustration and expansion of that principle in vv. 2-3. We might paraphrase: ‘Recognizing the validity of the principle that “death severs one’s bondage to the law,” you believers can understand that, like this woman, you have through a death been severed from your bondage to the law and been enabled to be joined to another.

Applying the analogy to the believer and his relationship to the Law, the woman is the believer and the Law is the husband. However, because the Law cannot die, Paul has the woman (the believer) die in verse 4. Although Paul’s application of the marriage analogy is not altogether perfect, the meaning is clear. As death breaks the bond between husband and wife, so death—the believer’s death with Christ—breaks the bond which formerly yoked him to the law, and now he is free to enter into union with Christ. Thus, our marriage to the Law has been dissolved by our identification with the death of Christ. As a result we are married to Him and the Law has no claims on us.

a) *Dying to the Law (6:4a)*

⁴*Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law...*

‘Therefore’ (‘Likewise’) marks the transition from Paul’s brief axiom and analogy to his application, and his adding ‘my’ before a second use of ‘brethren’ makes that term even gentler and more personal than in verse 1. It is at this point that Paul begins his spiritual teaching in the passage. ‘Were made to die’ translates the aorist tense of *thanatoō*, which emphasizes the completeness and finality of death. The verb is also passive, indicating that believers do not die naturally or put themselves to death but have been ‘made to die’ by the divine act of God in response to faith in His Son. Paul has already pointed out that God’s grace extended by faith in Jesus Christ brings death to and freedom from sin (6:3-7). He now declares that faith in Him also brings death to ‘the Law’ and consequently freedom from the law’s penalty.

There is a shift here: our spouse has not died, but we have died. Paul does not say that the law has died. We have died and therefore our marriage to the law is over. The law no longer has dominion over us the way it did before we died. We died in Christ, and in Christ the law was fulfilled. Is Paul talking about the ceremonial law or is he talking about the Law of Moses given at Sinai? Or is he talking about law in an even broader sense? I [RC Sproul] am persuaded that he is talking about the whole of God’s moral law, not just that given by Moses or that found in the ceremonies of the Old Testament. Paul goes all the way back to creation. In Romans 5 Paul labored the point that death reigned from Adam to Moses to prove that apart from the law there is no sin, and apart from sin there is no death. Since death entered into the world with Adam and Eve, and people after Adam and Eve died before the Law of Moses was given, sin was in the world before the law. The only way sin could be in the world before the Law of Moses is if another law preceded the Law of Moses, namely, the moral law of God, which He reveals in nature and in our conscience. Therefore, from the very beginning the law of God has had dominion over us. Since the fall the consequences of God’s law have issued in our death. The law has not been removed but in Christ we have died, and Christ has taken the full weight of the curse of the law upon Himself so that we no longer carry that burden on our backs.

This verse is a commentary on 6:14b and describes the act which results in not being ‘under law.’ Those who interpret ‘not being under the law’ to mean ‘not being under the condemnation

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pronounced by the law,’ usually interpret ‘being put to death to the law’ to mean ‘delivered from the law insofar as it has the power to condemn.’ Calvin’s interpretation is representative and becomes virtually the ‘orthodox’ view in Reformed theology. He distinguishes sharply between the law in its ‘office,’ ‘which was peculiar to the dispensation of Moses,’ and the law as ‘rule of life.’ The first, which includes specifically the demand of the law for perfection of obedience, leading to condemnation for the inevitable failure to attain this standard, is, as Paul asserts here, abrogated for the Christian; but the second ‘office’ of the law remains in force.

Paul in 7:4 is viewing the law as a ‘power’ of the ‘old age’ to which the person apart from Christ is bound. The underlying conception is again salvation-historical, as is suggested also by the use of the ‘letter/Spirit’ contrast in v. 6. Just as, then, the believer ‘dies to sin’ in order to ‘live for God’ (ch. 6), so he or she is ‘put to death to the law’ in order to be joined to Christ. Both images depict the transfer of the believer from the old realm to the new. As long as sin ‘reigns,’ God and righteousness cannot; and neither, as long as the law ‘reigns,’ can Christ and the Spirit.

It is this deliverance from the power, or ‘binding authority,’ of the law that Paul describes in this verse. In being released from the law in this sense, the believer is, naturally, freed from the condemning power of the law. For to be ‘dead to the law’ means to be delivered from the ‘power-sphere’ of the law. It does not necessarily mean that the believer ‘has nothing more to do with the law.’ Thus, positively, as a ‘witness’ (1:2; 3:21) the law continues to teach the believer much that is indispensable about God’s holiness and the holiness he expects of His people. Moreover, while this verse implies that the believer is not directly under the authority of the law, this is not to say that individual commandments from the law may not be re-applied as ‘new covenant law’ (see 8:4; 13:8-10). Finally, the law of which Paul speaks here is the *Mosaic* law, not ‘law’ in the Lutheran sense of ‘anything that commands us.’ Paul affirms here that the believer is no longer under the authority of the Mosaic law, not that he or she is under no law at all. In fact, Paul himself makes clear that the believer is still ‘under law’ in the broader sense – still obligated to certain commandments (see. Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 7:19; 9:20-22).

b) Belonging to Christ (6:4b)

...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.

Two things happened when we accepted Christ as our Savior: we became dead to the law, and we became married to Christ. Before we accepted Christ as our Savior, the law had a proper hold over us. But when we accepted Christ, the law’s hold over us was broken—broken as completely as though the husband had died and now the wife is free. Paul presses his illustration only as far as it logically applies. A widowed woman might choose not to remarry. But in terms of our spiritual life, there is no such thing as neutrality. The only way to be free from the bondage of the law is to be ‘married to another.’

The instrument by which the believer is put to death to the law is ‘the body of Christ.’ He is referring to the physical body of Christ, put to death on the cross for us. The purpose for which believers have been put to death to the law is ‘so that you might be joined to another.’ The phrase echoes the language of v. 3; as death separated the woman from her first husband so that she could be ‘joined to another,’ so the believer has been separated by death from the law in order to be ‘joined to’ Christ. This new relationship, Paul implies, will be a never-ending one. For the ‘other’ to which the Christian is joined is ‘the one who has been raised from the dead’ – never to die again (cp. 6:9-10). This theologically dense verse ends on the practical note that is

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basic to Paul's concern in this section: 'in order that we might bear fruit for God.' Our new relationship with Christ enables us – and requires us – to produce those character traits, thoughts, and actions that will be 'for God's glory.'

'Through the body of Christ,' who suffered the penalty of death on their behalf, believers are freed from their relationship to the law, just as a widow is freed from her relationship to her former husband. And like that widow, believers are free to 'be joined to another' husband, as it were, to Jesus Christ, 'Him who was raised from the dead.' Salvation brings a complete change of spiritual relationship, just as remarriage after the death of a spouse brings a complete change of marital relationship. The underlying emphasis of the book of Romans is that salvation produces total transformation. The purpose of our being joined to Christ is 'that we might bear fruit for God' (cp. Eph. 2:10). The transformed life *will* 'bear fruit for God.'

Since they 'have been put to death to Law,' the natural inference is that these readers are Jews. Previously they had been 'alive' to Law, and, as it were, 'married' to Law. Like the Gentile believers in their baptism (6:5-6), these Jewish believers have also 'been put to death' 'through the body of Christ,' that is, 'through' His death by crucifixion. Like the Gentile believers they too have been raised again to life. But theirs hasn't been the only death; Law has also died. There is a double death. Like the widow in the analogy, the Jewish Christian is now set free to marry again. Because Law is now dead to her, this 'widow' is free to re-marry, and her new 'husband' is Christ who has been raised from the dead. 'Married' now to the risen Christ, the Jewish believer will bear fruit to God.

The point of the analogy as applied to the readers then and now is straightforward. It is that we bear fruit in the Christian life through being joined by faith and trust to our risen Lord. Looking to Law will bear no fruit, but looking to the living Lord will. As we turn to Him, we are indwelt by the Spirit and begin to bear good fruit pleasing to God.

4. The Affirmation in Sanctification (7:5-6)

a) Before (7:5)

⁵For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

With his now familiar 'when...now' (vv. 5-6) contrast between the pre-Christian and Christian situations, Paul explains why it is necessary that believers be freed from the domain of the law. In describing the person outside of Christ as being 'in the flesh (*sarx*),' and hence controlled by, narrowly human, this-worldly principles and values. Paul pictures *sarx* as another 'power' of the old age, set in opposition to the Spirit – with which *sarx* is always contrasted in chapters 7-8. This situation is an objective one in which all non-Christians find themselves and from which all Christians are delivered in Christ.

In verse 5, Paul appeals to his fellow-Jews to remember the days of the 'flesh,' that is, of the time before he and they were united with Christ by faith and baptism. 'Let's be honest,' says Paul the Jew to fellow-Jews. 'To all appearances we were devout Law-keeping Jews. The reality was otherwise. Our sinful passions worked in our members and bore fruit for death.' In other words, Paul is saying to fellow-Jews that having the Law did not make a scrap of difference to their 'sinful passions' and the reality of Death.

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Existence in the domain of the flesh is determined by the three power ‘powers’ of the old age: sin, the law, and death. In a sequence that is determinative for the direction of his argument in vv. 7ff., Paul brings these three together, claiming that ‘sinful passions that were through the law were working in our members, with the result that we were bearing fruit for death.’ In asserting that ‘sinful passions’ are ‘through the law,’ Paul reaffirms the close connection between sin and the law that he has touched on before (3:20; 4:15; 5:20). Here, however, he appears to go further and speaks of the law as not just revealing sin (3:20) or as turning sin into transgression (5:20), but as actually producing sin itself.

The ‘sinful passions’ of this verse are interpreted in v. 7 as the ‘desire’ *that the law forbids*. ‘Sinful passions’ are those desires to disobey God and His law that are, paradoxically, exacerbated by the law itself. As Paul explains more fully in 7:7-11, the law, in setting forth God’s standard, arouses sins by stimulating human beings’ innate rebelliousness against God. In addition – although this idea is not so evident in this verse – the law increases the seriousness of sin by branding sinful failure as violation of God’s positive decree. In the remainder of the verse he continues to characterize sin/sins as an active force: the sinful passions aroused by the law were continually ‘working’ in the ‘members’ of the Roman Christians before their conversion. And death – in all its dimensions – was the result.

In verse 5 Paul reminds his readers of four things that characterized their old lives as unbelievers. First, they ‘were in the flesh.’ The unredeemed, unregenerate person can operate only in the area of the flesh, the natural and sinful sphere of fallen mankind. Second, the believer’s old life was characterized by ‘sinful passions,’ the impulses to think and to do evil that are generated in those who are in the flesh. Third, the believer’s old life was characterized by his sinful passions continually being ‘aroused by the Law.’ The Law, in declaring what is wrong, also arouses evil in the unregenerate person because his naturally rebellious nature makes him want to do the very things he learns are forbidden.

Fourth, the believer’s old life was characterized by the unceasing work of his sinful passions ‘in the members of’ his ‘body to bear fruit for death.’ ‘Work’ is from a Greek verb meaning to operate with power. We get our word *energy* from it. The phrase ‘members of our body’ sums up the whole person in all his components as being the victim of sinful passions energized to produce the fruit of ultimate and eternal divine judgment in death.

b) After (7:6)

⁶But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

All that has changed, says Paul in verse 6. His opening words, ‘But now’ point to the great moment when he and other Jews were baptized in Christ and died and were buried to the old life and raised alive to the new. No longer are believing Jews like Paul in bondage to rules, regulations, and rituals to please God, based on their own self-effort. No longer must he and they be anxious whether their efforts will be sufficient to please God, knowing that His standards are absolute. Now in Christ they are forgiven everything. Now they are free from the otherwise inevitable kingship of Sin reigning in Death over them.

The transitional phrase ‘but now’ introduces the heart of this brief passage, which presents a radical contrast to the description just given (v. 5) of the unregenerate man. As Paul has just pointed out, ‘the law has jurisdiction over a person [only] as long as he lives’ (v. 1). Therefore, when a person dies, he is discharged of all legal liabilities and penalties. Because we, as

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believers, died in Jesus Christ when He paid our sin debt on Calvary, we were thereby ‘released from’ our moral and spiritual liabilities and penalties under God’s Law (cp. Gal. 3:13).

Paul’s point is not simply that the redeemed person is *able* to do what is right but that he *will* do what is right. In response to their faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, God releases men from their bondage to the law so that they will ‘serve.’ Many English renderings of *doouleuō* (‘serve’) are somewhat ambiguous and do not carry the full force of the Greek term. This verb does not describe the voluntary service of a hired worker, who is able to refuse an order and look for another employer if he so desires. It refers exclusively to the service of a bondsman, whose sole purpose for existence is to obey the will of his master.

Because Paul’s focus is on the law, he ‘postpones’ what would be the expected contrast between being ‘in the flesh’ and being ‘in the Spirit’ until chapter 8 in order to emphasize once again the Christian’s deliverance from the law (v. 6) and to explore the implications of his teaching for the law itself (vv. 7-25). While, however, still preoccupied with the law, Paul knows where he wants to go eventually in his argument, and so he announces it in the last part of this verse. This is the second time in Romans that Paul has used the letter/Spirit contrast (cp. 2:27-29). As in this earlier text, the antithesis is not between the misunderstanding or misuse of the law and the Spirit, but between the Old Covenant and the New, the old age and the new. The essence of the old, or Mosaic, covenant, is the law as an ‘external,’ written demand of God. ‘Serving’ in the old state created by the ‘letter’ meant not, as the Jews thought, a curbing of sin, but a stimulating of the power of sin – and ‘death’ is the end-product of sin (v. 5). Now, though, the believer, released from bondage to the law, can serve in the new condition created by God’s Spirit, a condition that brings life (2 Cor. 3:6) and fruit pleasing to God (cp. 6:22-23). Before Paul goes on to develop the nature of ‘serving in the Spirit’ (chapter 8), he pauses to explain further the condition of ‘serving in the oldness of letter,’ and of being ‘in the flesh’ where the law arouses sinful passions (7:7-25).

Service to the Lord ‘in newness of the Spirit’ rather than ‘in oldness of letter’ is the necessary fruit of redemption, not an option. A fruitless Christian is not a genuine Christian and has no part in God’s kingdom. The law is still important to the Christian. For the first time, he is *able* to meet the law’s demands for righteousness (which was God’s desire when He gave it in the first place), because he has a new nature and God’s own Holy Spirit to empower his obedience. And although he is no longer under the law’s bondage or penalty, he is more genuinely eager to live by its godly standards than is the most zealous legalist. As believers, we are dead to the law as far as its demands and condemnation are concerned, but because we now live ‘in newness of the Spirit, we love and serve God’s law with a full and joyous heart.

We are not saved just for the sake of being saved, not just to be somehow neutral. We are saved so that we might become one with Christ, and that He might bring forth fruit through us. We are saved to serve, ‘not in the oldness of the letter...but in newness of spirit.’ If we are going to bring forth fruit, we can’t do it in the old way. We can’t save ourselves by keeping the law; and as Christians, after we’re saved, we can’t bring forth fruit to God merely by keeping the law. We can’t do it in our own strength, but only ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord.’

The result of the dissolution of our marriage to the Law is ‘that we serve in the new way of the Spirit.’ Instead of despair, there is joy! Instead of bondage there is freedom! Instead of death, there is life! We no longer belong to the Law but to Christ.

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B. The Function of the Law (Romans 7:7-12)

The second pillar of wisdom is our understanding of how the Law and sin interact in our experience. Here Paul becomes very personal. The marriage analogy was a hypothetical illustration, but now the apostle turns autobiographical. This paragraph has two purposes: to exonerate the law from the charge that it is sinful and to delineate more carefully the true relationship among sin, the law, and death.

1. Introduction to the Rest of Romans 7

a) Overview by Barnett

In this chapter Paul seeks to drive home to Jewish believers that the Law has failed to rescue Jewish people like them from the power of Sin, both prior to but also subsequent to baptism into Christ. In Romans 7:1-8:4, Paul teaches the great theology of fulfillment by Christ and the Spirit by telling his own story of moral failure under the Law. (According to D. Moo, there are four possible ways of identifying the ‘wretched man’: 1) Paul, writing autobiographically; 2) Paul writing as Adam; 3) Paul personifying Israel under Law; and Paul writing existentially, as if everyman. Moo favors 3), incorrectly in my [Barnett] view. Most likely, Paul is writing autobiographically, though with some allusions to Israel’s story as well.

This passage is a scholars’ and preachers’ battleground. ‘Forget the message of Romans overall,’ people often say. ‘Just tell us *who* is the “wretched man” in chapter 7!’ Is he Paul before conversion? Is he the ‘carnal’ Christian prior to the ‘victory’ of the ‘higher life’? Or is he just the ordinary Christian struggling with ‘continuing’ sin? Barnett suggests that the third option is closest to Paul’s intention, but with a difference. Paul is first and foremost speaking as a Jew, that is, as a man who had been ‘under Law.’ Gentile believers can have little appreciation what this meant. In this passage Paul is autobiographically pointing up the futility of relating to God by Law. Is there an application to Gentiles, to those who have never been ‘under Law’? The answer is ‘yes,’ and that answer is that any attempt to approach God other than ‘by grace’ brings the same sense of futility, even to those who have never been subject to the Mosaic Law.

Paul’s immediate pastoral concern was twofold. He did not want Jewish believers to attempt to relate to God through Law and he did not want Gentile believers to be brought under Law. Let both Jew and Gentile understand that knowing God depended on believing in Christ crucified and risen for one’s righteousness before God. This – and only this – brings the strong Spirit of God to enliven and empower men and women to know and please God. Paul’s experience under Law falls into two parts: a) when he came under Law as an adolescent Jew (vv. 7-14); and b) in the period since, when he lived under the Law as an adult, both as a Jew but also as a Christian (vv. 15-25). This would perhaps explain why he speaks in the past tense for the earlier period and in the present tense for the later period.

b) Overview by Moo

In 7:1-6 Paul teaches that people must be released from the bondage of the Mosaic law in order to be joined to Christ because life under the law brings forth only sin and death. Verses 7-25 bring to a climax the negative assessment of the law that is such a persistent motif in Romans 1-6 and thereby also raises with renewed urgency perhaps the most serious theological issue with which Paul (and early Christianity generally) had to grapple: How can *God’s* law have become so negative a force in the history of salvation? How could the law be both ‘good’ and an instrument of sin and death?

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The law, Paul affirms, is ‘God’s law’ (v. 22) and is ‘good’ (vv. 12, 17), ‘holy’ (v. 12), ‘just,’ (v. 12), and ‘spiritual’ (v. 14). How, then, could the law come to have so deleterious an effect? How could the good law of God ‘work wrath’ (4:15), ‘increase the trespass’ (5:20), and ‘arouse sinful passions’ (7:5)? This Paul seeks to explain in 7:7-25, pointing to sin as the culprit that has used the law as a ‘bridgehead’ to produce more sin and death (7:7-12) and to the individual ‘carnal’ person, whose own weakness and internal division allows sin to gain the mastery, despite the ‘goodness’ of the law (7:13-25). Romans 7:7-25, therefore, has two specific purposes: to vindicate the law from any suggestion that it is, in itself, ‘sinful’ or evil; and to show how, despite this, the law has come to be a negative force in the history of salvation.

We may divide this section into two major parts. Both major sections of 7:7-25 (7-12; 13-25) follow the dialogical style with which we have become so familiar in Romans: question – emphatic rejection (‘by no means!’) – explanation. In 7:7-12 Paul uses a narrative to show how sin has used the law to bring death. Verses 14-25, on the other hand, use present tense verbs to describe the constant battle between the ‘mind,’ which agrees with God’s law, and the ‘flesh,’ or the ‘members’ which succumb to ‘the law of sin.’ The result, then, is that the law of God, which aroused sin, is impotent to break the power of sin.

The identification of the ‘I’ in 7:7-25 affects dramatically the interpretation of individual verses. In the history of interpretation, four main identifications of the *egō* (‘I’) in this passage have been proposed. In describing these directions, I will included an ‘expanded paraphrase’ of v. 9 because it is crucial for the correct identification of this *egō*.

(1) The Autobiographical Direction

Most interpreters throughout the history of the church have agreed and concluded that Paul uses *egō* simply because he is depicting his own experience. Most, however, would quickly add that he describes his experience not because it is unique, but because it is also typical – the experience of ‘every person.’ Those who defend an autobiographical interpretation differ over what experience in Paul’s life he may be describing in vv. 7-12.

The first possibility is the awakening of the sinful impulse at the time of Paul’s ‘coming of age’ or ‘bar mitzvah.’ ‘I was living without understanding the real power of sin at one time, but when I became responsible for the commandment, sin sprang to life and I perceived myself to be under condemnation.’

The second possibility is the realization of condemnation just previous to Paul’s conversion. ‘I thought myself to be “alive” in the days when, as a self-satisfied Pharisee, I thought I was fulfilling the law. But when the Spirit began to make clear to me the real, inward, meaning of God’s law, I saw that I was far short of its demands and was, in fact, under condemnation.

In vv. 14-35, then, defends of the autobiographical view think that Paul is describing his experience as a Jew under the law, his immediate post-conversion struggle with the law, or his continuing struggle to obey the law as a Christian.

(2) The Adamic Direction

While few have thought that Paul describes the experience of Adam throughout the section, many, from the earliest days of the church, have thought that vv. 7-12 can be applied directly only to Adam. ‘I was fully alive [spiritually] before the “law” not to eat of the fruit of the tree came. But when the commandment was given, sin [through the serpent] sprang to life and

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brought upon me spiritual condemnation.’ Interpretations of vv. 14-25 by proponents of this view differ widely. Perhaps the most attractive is the proposal that after using the idea of corporate solidarity with Adam in vv. 7-13 – ‘I in Adam’ – Paul goes on in vv. 14-25 to describe the continuing effects of that solidarity – ‘Adam in me.’

(3) The Israel Direction

Since Chrysostom, some interpreters have understood the *egō* in at least parts of 7:7-25 (usually vv. 8-10 especially) to be a representation of the people of Israel. ‘We [the nation of Israel] were, relatively speaking, spiritually ‘alive’ before the giving of the law at Sinai. But when that law was given, it gave sin its opportunity to create transgression and so to deepen and radicalize our spiritual lostness.’ Most of these interpreters, then, think that Paul in vv. 14-25 describes the continuing situation of Jews under the Mosaic law. This is often called the ‘salvation-historical’ view.

(4) The Existential Direction

Convinced that vv. 7-12 cannot be identified with any particular person or experience, many interpreters identify the *egō* as nobody in particular and everybody in general. Paul, they argue, is using figurative language to describe the confrontation between a ‘person’, *qua* person, and the demand of God. Paraphrase of v. 9 in this case is both impossible and inappropriate.

Moo considers a combination of views 1 and 3 yields the best explanation of the text. Paul is describing his own, and other Jews’, experience with the law of Moses: How that law came to the Jewish people and brought to them not ‘life,’ but ‘death’ (vv. 7-12); and how that law failed, because of the reign of the flesh, to deliver Jews from the power of sin (vv. 13-25).

The topic of Romans 7 is the law; and not just ‘law’ in general, but the *Mosaic* law. This is clear both from Paul’s general usage of *nomos* and from the context. If Romans 7 is about the Mosaic law, two conclusions follow. First, it is unlikely that Paul describes in vv. 7-12 the situation of ‘everybody’ – because ‘everybody’ has not been given the Mosaic law – and still more unlikely that he describes the experience of Adam – because Paul insists that the law was given through Moses (cp. 5:13-14). But there is a second, positive conclusion to be drawn from the fact that Romans 7 is about the Mosaic law. This is that ‘the coming of the commandment’ in v. 9 is most naturally taken as a reference to the giving of the law at Sinai.

We have reason to think that Paul alludes to the giving of the law to the people of Israel in vv. 9-10. But could he use *egō* to represent the nation? I suggest that Paul in vv. 7-11 is describing his own involvement, as a member of the people of Israel, with the giving of the law to his people at Sinai. In vv. 14-25, then, Paul describes what the coming of the law meant for himself and other Jews. And since this situation was one consciously experienced by Paul, autobiographical elements are more strongly in evidence in vv. 14-25 than in vv. 7-11. We conclude, then, that *egō* denotes Paul himself but that the events depicted in these verses were not all experienced personally and consciously by the Apostle. It is in this sense that we argue for a combination of the autobiographical view with the view that identifies *egō* with Israel. *Egō* is not Israel, but *egō* is Paul in solidarity with Israel.

[DSB: All other sources consulted treated this *egō* question as pertaining to the apostle Paul (option 1 above), which is the simplest and most logical explanation of the four. Because of Moo’s particular interpretative slant, I have indicated his contributions to the notes below that deal with identifying Israel as the subject of Paul’s teaching.]

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2. The Law Is Not Sin (7:7a)

⁷What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!

‘What then shall we say?’ brings us back to the dialogical style of 6:1-23. As there, the question raised here reflects a criticism of Paul’s gospel that he must often have heard. If Paul teaches that the law ‘increases the trespass’ (5:20) and ‘arouses sinful passions’ (7:5), he must believe that the law is by its nature evil and sinful. Should Paul hold such a view, he would effectively destroy any continuity between the law and his gospel, between the OT and the NT, between Moses and Christ. Indeed, many Jews and Jewish Christians accused Paul of holding such an opinion. So he seeks here to dispel any such apprehensions. ‘Is the law sin? By no means!’ But Paul’s rejection of the equation between law and sin does not mean that he is taking back what he has said earlier (e.g., 5:20; 7:5) – the law *has* become allied with sin. This relationship he reaffirms and further explains in what follows.

Paul has made the bold statement that as a Jew who is in Christ he is ‘discharged from the Law’ (v. 6), a statement he knows may rankle some fellow-Jews among the Christians in Rome. So, in verse 7, he articulates their anticipated objection, namely – ‘So, Paul, you are saying that the Law is Sin.’ This point reply, ‘By no means’ is his answer. ‘The Law is not Sin, indeed not, but...’ Yes, there is a ‘but.’

Paul knew that this question would arise among the believers in Rome, and we hear the same question today. There are those who teach that, after we have accepted Christ as our Savior, we are completely done with the law. Paul does not say this. The law has its place. The law isn’t bad; the law is good, but in its place.

Paul knew the next question his readers would ask would be, ‘What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?’ They would wonder, ‘Was the Law given by God through Moses actually evil? And can Christians now disregard the standards of the law and live as they please?’ Paul responds by again using the strongest Greek negative, *mē genoito* (‘May it never be!’; see 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:13). ‘Of course not! Of course not!’ is the idea. The law not only is not sinful but continues to have great value for the Christian by convicting him of sin.

Again we find Paul giving an emphatic response. Just because the law may stir up hostile feelings toward God’s righteous law—that by hearing and understanding the law we may be provoked to greater sinning than we would had we not known the law—we cannot come to the conclusion that something is wrong with the law, that it is evil or sinful. Paul is saying that we need to keep in front of our eyes a clear distinction between the righteousness of the law and the sinfulness of our response to it. The law is not the culprit; it is our fallen corruption.

3. The Law Reveals Sin (7:7b)

Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’

‘On the contrary,’ Paul says, just the opposite is true. It is outrageous and blasphemous even to suggest that anything God commands could be deficient in the least way, much less sinful. By being perfect itself, however, God’s law does *reveal* much imperfection. Because God has disclosed His divine standards of righteousness, men are able more accurately to identify sin, which is failure to meet those standards. Paul is not speaking of humanity’s general awareness of right and wrong. In the present passage the apostle is speaking about knowledge of the full extent and depravity of man’s sin. Throughout the rest of the chapter, Paul uses the first personal

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singular pronouns *I* and *me*, indicating that he is giving his personal testimony as well as teaching universal truth.

Although the law is not itself sin, the law and sin do have a definite relationship. Specifically, according to v. 7b, the law brings ‘knowledge’ of sin. Paul first states this relationship in a general assertion – ‘I would not have known sin except through the law’ – then adduces a specific example – ‘I would not have known covetousness if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”’ But what kind of ‘knowing’ is this? Perhaps the most obvious possibility is that Paul is talking about the laws as *defining* sin: through the law, the revelation of the righteous standard of God, ‘I’ come to know that certain acts are sinful, that, for example, my inner desire to ‘possess’ is nothing but a ‘coveting’ that is prohibited by God. This is no doubt true, but Paul implies earlier that such knowledge is available even to those who do not have the (Mosaic) law (1:32; 2:14-16). We should probably go further, and conceive this ‘understanding’ of sin not in a purely noetic way but in terms of actual experience: through the law, ‘I’ have come to experience sin for what it really is. It is through this actual experience of sin, then, that ‘I’ come to understand the real ‘sinfulness’ of sin.

Paul is again making the point that the revelatory character of God’s law is a mirror by which we see not only the glory and radiance of God’s perfection but also ourselves, warts and all. The law is not sin, but the law makes known to us our sin. We will not come to the gospel or beg for the mercy of God until the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, and the instrument that the Spirit uses to bring us to the cross is the revelation of law.

Paul’s choice of the commandment he cites in v. 7c, ‘You shall not covet, or desire,’ is often thought to reflect his personal history. It may still be that Paul cites this commandment because he himself had experienced the full force of the law through it. But this is certainly not the only explanation. The citation of the prohibition of coveting in general (without naming the objects of the coveting) has Jewish antecedents, where it stands as a representative summation of the Mosaic law. This, rather than any personal reasons, may be why Paul cites this commandment.

This is the language of personal experience. We ask, who is the speaker? Clearly it is Paul, and Paul is writing as a Christian. But *about whom* is he writing? There are two main options: 1) Paul the *Jew* prior to his baptism in Christ; or 2) the post-baptismal *Christian* Paul. Most likely, option 1 is to be preferred. This is Paul as a Christian looking back on his life as a Jew, a man under Law. The passage appears to reflect his life as a Jewish boy and adolescent who is coming to understand the impact of Law in his conscience. Later, he continues that story as an adult (vv. 15-20). His reference to the ‘commandment’ probably refers to the time when as a thirteen-year-old he was instructed in the commandments so as to be publicly initiated as a ‘son of commandment’ (*bar mitzvah*). These words speak of the effects in his conscience of the new awareness of the Law as an emerging adult. The command revealed Sin and inflamed Sin, so that Paul ‘died’ in the sense of lost innocence.

Paul’s first point here is that *the Law reveals sin*. Scholars suggest Paul’s personal experience of this may have taken place at about the time of his Bar Mitzvah when he became, as the term translates, ‘a son of the Law.’ Whether before or after that time, he began to seriously reflect on the Ten Commandments, and he found that he did pretty well until he came to the Tenth, which says, ‘You shall not covet...’ (Ex. 20:17). As his sharp young mind grappled with the concept, he began to see that his inner life was filled with coveting. Moreover, he saw that the rest of the Ten Commandments are broken through sins that originate in coveting. As a result, young Saul

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began to see himself as he really was. The Scriptures witness that this is indeed what the Law does (e.g., Rom. 3:20; James 1:22-25).

Paul is apparently telling of his own pre-conversion experience. It is interesting that, in giving this personal example, Paul quotes the only one of the Ten Commandments that deals exclusively with an internal manifestation of sin. It was this Tenth Commandment that showed Paul that he was a sinner. Whenever he thought about that commandment, he realized he was a sinner who needed salvation. The law is useful as a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ (Gal. 3:24). However, if we try to live in our own strength in the light of the law, we've missed the whole point.

It is significant that the apostle chose the most obviously *internal* injunction of the Ten Commandments to illustrate his personal experience that the law reveals sin. It may have been the growing awareness of his own covetousness that finally broke his pride and opened his heart to the transforming work of the Spirit. The real battle with sin is internal, in the heart and mind. But only the transforming power of the Holy Spirit can take a sinful heart and make it pure and acceptable to God. The law's part in that transformation is to make a person aware of his sin and of his need for divine forgiveness and redemption and to set the standard of acceptable morality.

4. The Law Arouses Sin (7:8)

a) *Sin and the Law (7:8a)*

⁸*But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.*

The first sentence in v. 8 elaborates v. 7c. The law is not 'sin,' nor the originator of sin, but the occasion or operating base that sin has used to accomplish its evil and deadly purpose. Paul again personifies sin, picturing it as a 'power' that works actively and purposefully. Paul uses 'commandment' instead of 'law' (*nomos*; cp. v. 7) because he is referring to the single commandment he cited in v. 7, but the commandment represents the Mosaic law as a whole. Paradoxically, what sin produces by taking advantage of the commandment is just what the commandment prohibited: 'all kinds of coveting.'

Paul once again (cp. v. 7) makes clear that the law itself is not sinful and is not responsible for sin. It is the sin that is already in a person's heart that takes 'opportunity through the commandment' of the law to produce 'coveting of every kind' as well as countless other specific sins. *Aphromē* ('opportunity') originally was used of the starting point or base of operations for an expedition. Sin uses the commandment, that is God's law, as a beachhead from which to launch its evil work.

Rather than the commandment turning us from sin, restraining us from covetousness, our sin, in response to the law of God, was stirred to even greater sinfulness and covetousness. Sin took opportunity by the commandment, and it produced in us all manner of evil desire. The little phrase 'evil desire' is translated in a variety of ways. The Latin text uses the word from which the English term *concupiscence* comes. This word was involved in one of the great disputes between the Reformers of the sixteenth century and the Roman Catholic Church. Rome said that man was created with concupiscence, not with evil. They defined concupiscence as being *of* sin; it *inclines* to sin, but it is not sin. The Reformers replied that an evil desire that gives birth to an evil action is already sin. Our sinful deeds flow out of our sinful desires, so we cannot excuse those evil desires as being less than sin. The Greek word used here is *epathumia*, which is the

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word for ‘passion’ or ‘desire’ with a prefix that intensifies it. Our specific sins make plain the root of those sins, which is our fallen nature. We are not sinners because we sin, but we sin because we are sinners. Actual sin, specific violations of the law of God, is rooted in a passion of sin, a sinful inclination or disposition.

Poor young Saul. Once he realized what covetous was, all he could do was covet! Other Scriptures also attest to sin’s active power (e.g., Rom. 5:20; 1 Cor. 15:56). Even human law’s prohibitions are to us like shaking is to a can of cola. Saint Augustine, in his *Confessions*, describes how this principle worked in his life:

There was a pear tree near our vineyard, laden with fruit. One stormy night we rascally youths set out to rob it and carry our spoils away. We took off a huge load of pears...not to fest upon ourselves, but to throw them to the pigs, though we ate just enough to have the pleasure of forbidden fruit. They were nice pears, but it was not the pears that my wretched soul coveted, for I had plenty better at home. I picked them simply in order to become a thief. The only feast I got was a feast of iniquity, and that I enjoyed to the full. What was it that I loved in that theft? Was it the pleasure of acting against the law, in order that I, a prisoner under rules, might have a maimed counterfeit of freedom by doing what was forbidden, with a dim similitude of omnipotence? The desire to steal was awakened simply by the prohibition of stealing.

In his rich allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan paints a vivid word picture of sin’s arousal by the law. A large, dust-covered room in Interpreter’s house symbolizes the human heart. When a man with a broom, representing God’s law, begins to sweep, the dust swirls up and all but suffocates Christian. That is what the law does to sin. It so agitates sin that it becomes stifling. And just as a broom cannot clean a room of dust but only stir it up, so the law cannot cleanse the heart of sin but only make the sin more evident and unpleasant.

b) Sin without the Law (7:8b)

For apart from the law, sin lies dead.

It is not that sin has no existence apart from the law, because that is obviously not true. Paul has already stated that, long before the law was revealed, sin entered the world through Adam and then spread to all his descendants (5:12). Paul’s point in v. 8b is that ‘sin is dead’ in the sense that it is somewhat dormant and not fully active. It does not overwhelm the sinner as it does when the Law becomes known.

Throughout chapter 6 and into chapter 7 Paul uses images of death and life. Until the law came, sin was dead. It was not active. It was dormant until it was awakened by the presence of the law. Sin, for the most part, was sleeping until the law came along and awoke that sleeping giant and filled us with the horrible resolve of wickedness.

The last sentence of the verse initiates a sequence of clauses (vv. 8-9) in which Paul explains the way in which the law has become the ‘occasion’ for the activity of sin. Paul constructs this sequence in a chiasmic pattern, in which he portrays ‘dead’ sin coming to ‘life’ at the same moment as the ‘living’ ‘I’ ‘dies’:

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‘Apart from the Law’ (v. 8b)	‘When the Commandment came’ (v. 9b)
‘sin is <i>dead</i> ’ (v. 8c)	‘sin sprang to <i>life</i> again’ (v. 9c)
‘I was <i>alive</i> ’ (v. 9a)	‘I <i>died</i> ’ (v. 9d)

Moo has argued above that this sequence portrays the effect of the coming of the Mosaic law for the people of Israel and that *egō* (‘I’), while referring to Paul, refers to him in solidarity with the Jewish people and therefore with the experience of the coming of the law at Sinai. Accordingly, ‘apart from the law’ will not mean ‘before I became aware of the true meaning, or real force, of the law’ (as in the autobiographical view) or ‘before the law was given to Adam in the Garden’ (an interval of time for which the Genesis account does not, in any case, appear to allow), but, as in 5:13, ‘before the Mosaic law existed.’ In the years before Sinai, Paul asserts, sin was ‘dead’ to Israel. That sin was ‘dead’ does not mean that it did not exist but that it was not as ‘active’ or ‘powerful’ before the law as after.

5. The Law Brings Death (7:9-11)

a) *The Law Quickens Sin (7:9)*

⁹*I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.*

Moo. In this time, ‘apart from the law,’ the *egō* was ‘living.’ Only if *egō* designates Adam can this verb be given full theological meaning – ‘spiritual’ life—but the identification of *egō* with Adam is unlikely. Therefore ‘was living’ must be given a milder meaning: either a relative theological sense – compared to the seriousness of ‘my’ situation after the law, I was ‘living’ before it – or a purely prosaic meaning – ‘I was existing.’ In either case, this clause will depict the situation of Israel before the giving of the law at Sinai – when sins were not yet ‘being reckoned’ (5:13). Paul describes the giving of the Mosaic law with the word ‘commandment’ under the influence of the paradigmatic significance of the tenth commandment cited in v. 7: ‘When the commandment came’ ‘sin sprang into life again.’ Even as sin gained new life, however, *egō* ‘died.’ ‘I died’ will describe that situation according to which the law, by turning ‘sin’ into ‘transgression,’ confirms, personalizes, and radicalizes the spiritual death in which all find themselves since Adam. Israel, in this sense, ‘died’ when the law was given to it.

Still recounting his own experience before salvation, Paul confesses that he had long been ‘alive apart from the Law.’ When a true understanding of the commandment came, he began to see himself as he really was and began to understand how far short he came of the law’s righteous standards. His sin then ‘became alive,’ that is, he came to realize his true condition in its full evil and destructiveness. On the other hand, he ‘died’ in the sense of his realizing that all his religious accomplishments were spiritual rubbish (Phil. 3:7-8). His self-esteem, self-satisfaction, and pride were devastated and in ruins. Paul died. That is, for the first time, he realized he was spiritually dead.

We were at peace. We were happy. We were getting along fine without the law. Paul says he was feeling great, without guilt, and then he died when the law revived sin in him. If we think back to our pre-Christian days, were we overburdened by a sense of sin and guilt? Not until the Holy Spirit brought His conviction on us, quickened our consciences, and made us alive to the law did we feel for the first time the weight of our guilt. That is what drove us to Christ and gave us a new life.

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b) The Law Promises Life (7:10)

¹⁰*The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.*

Moo. The notion that the law has life-giving potential is asserted in the OT itself. While God never intended the law to be a means of salvation, the law did come with promises of life for obedience (cp. Lev. 18:15; Ps. 19:7-10; Ez. 20:11; Luke 20:28). From these verses, it seems fair to conclude that the law would have given life *had it been perfectly obeyed*. In this sense the law ‘promises life,’ even though God did not give it with this intention – for he, of course, knew that the power of sin made it impossible for any human being to fulfill the law and so to attain the promised life. Thus, although the commandment was ‘unto life,’ this same commandment ‘proved to be’ a cause of death for Israel.

What Paul had considered to be a means of gaining eternal life had turned out to be the way of spiritual death. The law, the commandment, cannot produce blessing and peace in the unbeliever, because he cannot fulfill the law’s requirements and therefore stands under its sentence of death. The law cannot produce the life it was meant to produce because no man is able to meet the law’s perfect standard of righteousness. If it were possible, perfect obedience to the law could bring life. But because such obedience is *not* possible for fallen, sinful man, the law brings him death rather than life.

The commands perfectly kept would bring life (cp. Lev. 18:15), but broken they bring death, ‘...for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’ (2 Cor. 3:6). The law is good because it shows us how far short of perfection and goodness we fall. But precisely because it does show us how imperfect and sinful we are, when we seriously look at the law, we cannot honestly think of our selves anymore as basically good. In that sense, the law ‘kills’ us (see v. 11).

c) The Law Results in Death (7:11)

¹¹*For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.*

Moo. Paul now returns to the language of v. 8a. Again he claims that sin has used the commandment as a bridgehead and through that bridgehead has brought evil to the *egō*. In v. 8, however, Paul spoke of the law as instrumental in creating sinful impulses; here he shows it to have been used to ‘deceive’ and to ‘kill.’ Probably Paul thinks of the way that the ‘promise of life’ held out by the law ‘deceived’ Israel into thinking that it could attain life through it. But the attempts of Israel to find life through the law only brought death – not because obeying the law itself is sinful, or worthy of death, but because the law could not be fulfilled. So sin, through the law, ‘killed’ Israel.

Repeating what he has just said about sin in verse 8, Paul says that sin also ‘deceived’ him. A person who is deceived into thinking he is acceptable to God because of his own merit and good works will see no need of salvation and no reason for trusting in Christ. It is doubtless for that reason that all false religions—including those that claim the name of Christ—in one way or another are built on a deceptive foundation of self-trust and self-effort.

What is so attractive about sin? Why would any creature made in the image of God be tempted to sin? We are tempted because in the temptation is the offer of happiness, and the pursuit of happiness is given to us as a constitutional guarantee. The Devil never says, ‘Do this and suffer’ or ‘Do this and die.’ The passions are so excited by sin that we come to believe that unless we act on our passion, we will be denying ourselves fundamental happiness. Sin is attractive

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because it brings us pleasure. It brings pleasure but never happiness. That is the monstrous lie of the father of lies. It is impossible for sin to bring happiness to a child of God, yet we do not believe it. The biggest moral justification in the secular culture for all kinds of monstrous evil is that we have the right. ‘I have the right to do what I prefer to do. I have the right to destroy my baby.’ Where did you get that right? ‘I have a right over my own body.’ Says who? Does God give us the right to do those things? We know better. Every person in the world knows better than that, but they say, ‘If I do not do this, I will not be happy.’ If we do evil things we destroy all hope of happiness.

6. The Law Remains Holy (7:12)

¹²*So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*

Paul introduces this verse as the inference to be drawn from the true role of the law in the history that he has sketched in vv. 7b-11. Paul brings together as essentially parallel terms ‘law’ and ‘commandment’; both refer to the Mosaic law, the former as a body, the latter in terms of the specific commandment that Paul has cited in v. 7 as representative of the whole. In calling the law ‘holy,’ Paul is not describing its demands for holiness but its origin – it was given by the one who is in His nature ‘holy. Again, the description ‘just’ may allude to the function of the law, in that it prescribes ‘just’ conduct, or perhaps to the nature of the law, as demanding no more than what is ‘right.’ ‘Good,’ finally, also denotes the nature of the law, attributing to it that ‘goodness’ which is characteristic, ultimately, of God alone (cp. Mk. 10:18).

The apostle again answers the question, ‘Is the law sin?’ (7:7). Now he declares that not only is the law not sin but that the law is, in fact, ‘holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.’ Throughout the remainder of the chapter Paul continues to praise and exalt God’s law, calling it spiritual (v. 14), good (v. 16), and joyfully concurring in his ‘inner man’ with its divine truth and standards (v. 22). The fact that the law reveals, arouses, and condemns sin and brings death to the sinner does not make the law itself evil. When a person is justly convicted and sentenced for murder, there is no fault in the law of with those responsible for upholding it. The fault is in the one who broke the law.

The law is holy, just, and good, but what happens when a holy and just law is delivered to unholy creatures? They do not think it is very just. When God puts a restraint upon our desires, we say it is not fair, as if there were some hint of injustice in the character of God, but the law of God is good because He is good. The law of God was designed to bring life, but we turn it into an occasion of death.

Moo. Although it is the experience of Israel with the Mosaic law that Paul describes in vv. 7-12, their experience, as we have seen, is symptomatic of that of all people, who, in various ways, are confronted with God’s ‘law.’ Thus the failure and ‘death’ of Israel should serve to remind all of us that salvation can never be earned by doing the ‘law,’ but only by casting ourselves on the grace and mercy of God in Christ. Augustine says, ‘God commands what we cannot do that we may know what we ought to seek from Him.

For next time: Read Romans 7:13-25.