

THE LAW IS NOT THE PROBLEM NOR THE SOLUTION
(SUNDAY, APRIL 29, 2012)

Scripture Reading: Exodus 32; Rom. 7:7-12

I mentioned last week that God never promised that understanding His perfect word would be an easy task that demands less than five minutes a day. And while we will never reach a perfect understanding of God's Word in this life, this should not keep you from seeking to be as accurate and as clear as possible in your understanding of God's Word and what He expects you to do.

It is also important to keep in mind that while some details of a particular passage or doctrine might be unclear to us, this does not mean that everything we believe is uncertain or unclear. There is no doubting the Triune nature of God and the full deity and humanity of Jesus Christ even though there might be questions concerning these doctrines that we can't fully answer. In Genesis 1, understanding the exact nature of the firmament is difficult. But this doesn't mean that we need to doubt that God is creator or that He created in six days and then rested.

One of the challenges in Romans 7:7-25 is identifying who is the "I" in these verses. It might seem obvious that the "I" is simply Paul giving his own autobiographical experience. This is not a ridiculous interpretation. The church father Augustine took this position and other significant interpreters like Martin Luther and John Calvin followed in this interpretation.¹ This doesn't mean that this is the only or the best understanding. I have listed in the bulletin a summary of other interpretations. The fact that there are these different interpretations should not lead you to despair.

Especially in verses 7-12, the main point is not affected by our inability to be completely sure of the identity of the "I" in Romans 7. The main point is what Paul says about God's Law. God's Law is not the problem, but it is also not the solution to man's bondage to sin and Satan.

At the end of Romans 11, Paul expresses his praise of God's knowledge and wisdom.

Rom. 11:33 Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable *are* His judgments and His ways past finding out!

There are approximately 4000 years of history from Adam to Jesus. Thankfully we have an outline of this history in the OT. We might ask the question, why did God wait so long to send the Savior? I think the full answer to this question is beyond our ability to understand. God's ways are past finding out, Romans 11:33 declares. But there must be at least some things we can understand. It may sound simplistic, but God throughout

¹ Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 182.

these 4000 years was preparing the way for the coming of Jesus Christ and also making it perfectly clear that the only solution for sin would be found in Jesus Christ and in His sacrifice.

Romans 7:7-12 instructs you to praise God for His Law which is holy, just, and good. It also teaches you to praise God that His Law was not designed to save you.

The Law is not the problem nor the solution.

We will look at Romans 7:7-12 following a basic outline of these verses in 4 parts – a question, an answer, two explanations, and a conclusion.²

1. QUESTION, 7A

Rom. 7:7a What shall we say then? *Is* the law sin?

The two questions that begin verse 7 are a signal that Paul is dealing with a difficult issue where there is the great possibility of misunderstanding. Where else have we seen Paul use questions in a similar manner? You don't have to turn back very far to Romans 6:15 and Romans 6:1.

What might have Paul said in Romans 7 already that might lead to misunderstanding? We noted last week that Paul in verse 4 spoke of being put to death to the law and in verse 6 of being delivered from the law. And in verse 5, Paul stated that sinful passions were aroused by the law. So is God's Law the problem? Is there something sinful or evil about God's Law?

It is very likely that Paul was accused by his opponents and by others who misunderstood him that he believed that the law was sinful.³ There is a very good reason why Paul would ask this question.

2. ANSWER AND CONCESSION, vv. 7B-8A

Romans 7:7b Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "*You shall not covet.*" **8** But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all *manner of evil* desire.

The answer, "certainly not!" is used 10 other times in Romans. Paul makes absolutely clear that God's Law in no way is sinful or evil. It is not the problem!

² Following the basic outline of N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 217.

³ Moo, 432.

This is the easy part of this section of Romans 7. We now face the question – who is the “I” that is used throughout this chapter.

In Romans 1, we find a number of uses of the pronoun “I” which clearly refer to Paul. This is not surprising, because this is part of the introduction to the book of Romans. In Romans 3 there is at least one personal reference and one in Romans 6. But starting with verse 7 through the end of the chapter, there are over 25 appearances of “I.” Romans 15 also contains a number of personal references, but this is again to be expected at the close of this book where Paul discusses his ministry, his future plans, and his desire to visit the Christians in Rome.

So who is the “I” of Romans 7? The easiest answer would be that Paul is speaking of his own experience. This is his personal testimony. As I mentioned earlier this interpretation has very strong supporters both ancient and modern. It cannot be dismissed as being ridiculous. Sometimes the best interpretation is the simplest interpretation.

However, there are reasons to question this interpretation in part because some of what Paul says doesn’t seem to easily fit with what we know about his own testimony. We do have a Paul’s personal testimony throughout the book of Acts and in Philippians. What Paul says here is not in opposition to his other personal testimonies but it is also not identical.

In light especially of Romans 5, there is a context for understanding that although Paul uses the first person, he is not just giving his own personal testimony but is either retelling the experience of Adam in the Garden or Israel in receiving God’s Law. In Romans 5:12-14, Paul refers to Adam, Moses, and the giving of the law. Romans 5:20 declares,

Rom. 5:20 Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more,

The verb **entered** as we noted earlier has the idea of intruding into an already existing situation. God’s Law entered into a situation where sin and death were already present. And this verb entered in Romans 5:20 shares the same root as the verb **came** used in Romans 7:9 – “but when the commandment **came**.”

There is good reason to believe that Paul is not just speaking of his own personal experience but is speaking in larger terms of the history of God’s work of salvation. Paul is included in this as a Jew and as a sinner saved by God’s grace, but that when Paul speaks he is not just giving his own testimony but speaking in union or in solidarity with Israel.⁴ Not surprisingly the situation of Israel can be compared with the situation

⁴ Moo, 431.

of Adam in the Garden of Eden. And some suggest that the “I” in verses 7-12 is the story of Adam, but I think it is better to see Paul speaking in union with Israel.⁵

The law then is not sin. God’s law was not Paul’s problem nor Israel’s problem nor your problem. Rather Paul states that on the contrary the law is what gives knowledge of sin.

Paul uses two different words for knowing in verse 7, but they are essentially synonymous here.⁶ Through the law, Paul, came to an understanding and knowledge of sin – an understanding of sin for what it really is.

I am sure there are times you can relate to where God in His grace allows you to appreciate the true nature and reality of sin, where you realize it is an offense against a holy and righteous God and that it brings pain and misery both to the one who commits sin and to others.

God’s Law gave very clear knowledge and understanding as to the true nature of sin.

Interestingly the specific sin that Paul highlights is the sin of coveting. Why did Paul specifically highlight this sin? Part of the reason might be that many Jewish writers tended to view coveting as the root of all sins.⁷

It is also a sin that many might not think to be sin. There are many sins which sadly are now celebrated in our nation and in entertainment, but coveting or sinful desire must be one of the most popular sins in our nation. Billions of dollars are made promoting this sin in various forms and flavors.

John Calvin wrote:

But coveting is more hidden and lies deeper; hence no account is made of it, as long as men judge according to their perceptions of what is outward. He does not indeed boast that he was free from it; but he so flattered himself, that he did not think that this sin was lurking in his heart.

The law gives a true knowledge of what sin is and its abhorrent nature, and yet Paul presents again the fact that the Law is not the solution to sin in verse 8a,

But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all *manner of evil* desire.

The word opportunity sometimes translated as occasion literally means a starting point or base of operations for an expedition. If you are climbing a very tall mountain, you

⁵ Witherington, 179-181, argues a good case for the retelling of Adam’s story. Dunn also argues that Paul is speaking of Adam and by extension of all men and women. N. T. Wright says there are echoes both of Gen. 3 and of Israel’s plight in 7:7-12 but the primary emphasis of the argument is on Israel. Wright, 197.

⁶ ἔγνων [γινώσκω] and ἤδειν [οἶδα].

⁷ Moo, 435 and footnote 36. See also Dunn, 380.

need a base camp, where you stock supplies and spend time getting used to a higher elevation. Sin, as it were, set up a base camp through God's commandment in order to achieve its goal of producing all sorts of coveting.

Paul already has brought up what might seem to be a paradox concerning knowledge and sin. Ignorance is not the solution but knowledge of sin alone is not salvation or the solution.

Rom. 1:32 who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

In Romans 2, Paul also highlighted the hypocrisy of unbelieving Jews who even taught others the law and yet were guilty of the same sins. We could also again consider Romans 5:20 and 7:5.

Look again at Romans 7:8a. The word translated evil desire is the same word translated as covet in verse 7. God's Law most clearly says, Thou shalt not covet, and yet sin uses the commandment to produce all types of coveting.

Two clear examples of this would be Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and Israel at Mt. Sinai. Sin uses God's perfect law to create desires that God's Law clearly forbids.

I think we can see from this the general futility of programs that promise blessing merely through education and information. We have the authority of God's Word to say that these programs, no matter how well intentioned, will generally speaking be of no help, and yet how many billions of dollars are spent each year in this empty pursuit.

3. TWO EXPLANATIONS, VV. 8B-11.

8b For apart from the law sin *was* dead. **9** I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. **10** And the commandment, which *was* to *bring* life, I found to *bring* death. **11** For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed *me*.

In verse 8b and verse 11, you will see the word **for**. We can say that Paul in these verses is giving two explanations for his answer in verses 7b-8a.

The first explanation again seems almost shocking. Apart from the law sin is dead. If you have a NKJV, you can see that the word *was* is in italics. It has been added to smooth out the translation. Some translations use the past tense – **was** – others use the present tense – **is**. I think the present tense is the better translation. Sin is dead apart from the law.

What has Paul already said that is similar to this statement?

Romans 4:15 because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law *there is* no transgression.

Rom. 5:13 (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

These two earlier verses are important for understanding what Paul means by sin being dead part from the law. It is not that sin has no existence apart from God's Law, but that it cannot be truly identified without the law and that sin uses the law to increase its power and activity.⁸

Then in contrast to the lack of activity of sin apart from the law, Paul says that he was alive also apart from the law.⁹ But when the commandment came, sin revived or came to life and I died. Further, the commandment which was to bring life, Paul says, he found brought death.

These verses can be understood in terms of Paul giving his own testimony about realizing that apart from Christ he was spiritually dead, but again I think it is best to see Paul speaking in terms of his union with Israel.

The meaning of **I was alive** cannot mean spiritually alive if it is speaking about Paul before his conversion or that of Israel before the law was given. Here the meaning can simply be that of existing or living. In any case the main emphasis is the second half of verse 9 and verse 10. When the law came, death also came. God's perfect law which was to bring life instead brought death.

This we can see in many ways on the individual level but especially we can see this looking at the history of God's people throughout the period of the OT.

God's Law was perfect and so perfect obedience would have been rewarded with the blessing of eternal life. But the reality first for Adam and later for Israel was that the commandment led to their death. Adam died spiritually after he disobeyed. For Israel, God's law exposed their pre-existing spiritual death we can say and even led to their physical death through the judgments that God brought to His people.¹⁰

The second explanation of verse 11 explains how this happened. Paul again uses the word occasion, the same word used in verse 8. Sin used God's commandment as a base of operations. Sin used the commandment to deceive and to bring spiritual death.

There is here what seems to be a reflection of the situation of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Paul in fact in 2 Cor. 11:3 speaks of the serpent deceiving Eve through his craftiness. But if the interpretation that Paul is speaking mainly of the experience of his

⁸ Moo, 437.

⁹ The same improper preposition is used - χωρίς – in verses 8 and 9.

¹⁰ Moo, 438.

own people, then the focus would be that Israel fell under the deception that obedience to God's Law would lead to their salvation.

This interpretation is confirmed at least in part by examples in both the OT and NT of those who boasted merely in their external privileges they enjoyed as God's covenant people. A very specific example would be the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18.

A more general application could be seen in the millions of people around the world who feel that they are good enough to enter heaven based on their very subjective feeling that they have done more good than evil. They have been deceived by sin into thinking such to be the case rather than considering their helpless condition before a holy and righteous God.

4. CONCLUSION, v. 12.

Romans 7:12 Therefore the law *is* holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

The main function of verses 7-12 is to make clear that Paul in no way believes God's law is in anyway evil or the problem. This Paul has done carefully through identifying with his own people and in summarizing part of the history of salvation.

God's Law is holy in that it comes from a holy God. It defines perfectly the nature of true holiness and what God expects.

The commandment is holy. Paul has referred specifically to the 10th commandment which stands for all the individual commandments that God has given. According to Jewish tradition there are 613 commandments.

The commandment, all the commandments God has given are holy. Further they are just. No fault can be found in them; they can be charged with no wrong.¹¹

Further God's commandments are good. The nature of God is good and so what He commands is also good. All men should desire to do what God has commanded. There is nothing that God asks that is not for your good.

CONCLUSION:

The Law is not the problem nor the solution.

Next week, Lord willing, as we continue our study of Romans 7, we will look again at whether Paul in the following verses is describing the struggle of a Christian or the conflict present in one who is still apart from Jesus Christ. There are some difficult

¹¹ Moo, 440-441.

details that still need to be carefully considered. But what can be said in looking at the first half of Romans 7?

I closed last week by reflecting on how you are called to live in light of God's triune nature. In Christ you die to the curse of God's Law. By the Spirit you can truly serve. Your goal is to bring fruit to God the Father.

In Christ you also now can truly say of God's Law it is holy, just, and good. Though it does not give the power to obey, through the Holy Spirit you do have the power to obey God. What God demands of you may be difficult. It may be unpleasant. But what God commands you to do is good. Maybe there is someone with whom you need to seek forgiveness or reconciliation. This rarely is an easy task, but God commands that you seek for this restoration.

For all of us here, there is no doubt some aspect of sin that still can easily ensnare us. We know what God expects. He expects that we confess this sin and seek to turn from it.

My final encouragement is that you seek this repentance in light of the goodness of what God demands not just focused on God's command but in constant light of what Christ has done for you and His continued presence with His people so that they might continue to abide in truth.

John 15:5 "I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. **6** If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned. **7** If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. **8** By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

Prayer

Hymn 95

BENEDICTION – HEBREWS 13:20-21

Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.