

JUSTIFICATION

and

Regeneration

Charles Leiter

Justification & Regeneration

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FOREWORD

There seems to be a great abyss separating the biblical theologian and the Christian in the pew. While the theologian is able to climb the Everest of God's truth and be transformed by the vision, he often communicates the vision in a language that is beyond us. Thus, we are left at the mercy of popular Christian literature that is often nothing more than quaint stories, pragmatism, and baptized psychology.

The Church in contemporary America does not need more strategies, steps, or keys to the Christian life. The Church needs truth, and more specifically, the great foundational truths of historical Christianity. In this work, Pastor Charles Leiter has done a great service to the Church in that he has taken two of the greatest doctrines of Scripture and two of the greatest miracles in the Christian life and explained them in simple language without loss of content.

As I read through the manuscript of this book I was amazed at its simplicity and scope. The great doctrines of justification and regeneration can only properly be considered in the context of the other great doctrines of the faith—the holy and righteous character of God, human depravity, propitiation, repentance, faith, and sanctification, to name only a few. Pastor Leiter has not only given us a balanced view of each of these doctrines, but has also demonstrated how they intertwine to form the foundation of the Christian life.

Of particular interest to me was the setting forth of a proper view of regeneration. In modern day evangelism, this precious doctrine has been reduced to nothing more than a human decision to raise one's hand, walk an aisle, or pray a "sinner's prayer." As a result, the majority of Americans believe that they have been "born again" (i.e., regenerated) even though their thoughts, words, and deeds are a continual contradiction to the nature and will of God. Pastor Leiter demonstrates that regeneration is the supernatural work of God whereby the sinner's dead, depraved heart of stone is replaced with a new heart that is both willing and able to respond to God in love and obedience. Secondly, Pastor Leiter deals with Romans 6 & 7 in

a logical and consistent manner, which he then communicates to the reader with profound simplicity. Our brother's views concerning these two great chapters have been a source of great strength, comfort, and joy for me down through the years of my own pilgrimage.

I have read this book many times before its going to press. I have greatly benefited from its teaching and heartily recommend its contents. May the Spirit of God illuminate your heart and mind that you may not only understand the Scriptures explained herein, but that they might become a reality in your life.

Paul David Washer

Romans 7

To attempt to deal with the controversies surrounding Romans 7 would take an entire book. Only a few guidelines for its interpretation can be suggested here:

1. Romans 7 flows directly from Romans 6, continuing and expanding upon the themes that are introduced there. According to Romans 6, Christians have “died to sin”¹ by virtue of their union with Christ and have therefore been “freed”² from it, so that sin no longer has “dominion”³ over them. The result of this death to sin is “service”⁴ to God that brings forth “fruit”⁵ unto sanctification. Paul repeats this pattern of triumph in Romans 7: Christians have “died to law”⁶ by virtue of their union with Christ and have therefore been “freed”⁷ from it, so that law no longer has “dominion”⁸ over them. The result of this death to law is “service”⁹ to God that brings forth “fruit”¹⁰ unto God. In short, Paul has been “soaring” in Romans 6, and he *continues* to soar in Romans 7!

The real purpose of Romans 7 is to explain and expand upon Paul’s statement in 6:14: “For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace.” According to this verse, our deliverance from the dominion of sin is a direct result of the fact that we are no longer “under the law.” The first question to be answered is, “How has it come to pass that Christians are no longer ‘under the law’?” Paul answers this question in 7:1-4. Christians have passed out of the realm of law, having died to it by virtue of their union with Christ. The second question to be answered is, “Why is freedom from law *necessary* in order to secure our deliverance from the reign of sin?” Or, conversely, “Why is freedom from sin’s reign *impossible* for all who are still under law?” Paul answers this question in 7:5-25. All who are still “under law” are also still “in the flesh.” (v.5) But law actually stirs up and *strengthens* sin’s dominion over those who are in the flesh, leaving them in a state of bondage and death. (v.5, 7-25)

¹ Romans 6:2, 11 ² Romans 6:7, 18, 22 ³ Romans 6:14 (Gk. “dominion,” “rule”)

⁴ Romans 6:22 ⁵ Romans 6:21-22 (Gk. “fruit”) ⁶ Romans 7:4 ⁷ Romans 7:6, 2-3

⁸ Romans 7:1 (Gk. “dominion,” as in 6:14) ⁹ Romans 7:6 ¹⁰ Romans 7:4

2. It is absolutely vital to realize that Paul thinks in terms of two and only two groups—those who are “under law” (“in the flesh”) and those who are “under grace” (“in the Spirit”). (pp. 96-98) The characteristics of these two groups are summarized both *before* (7:5-6) and *after* (8:1-4) Paul’s discussion in Romans 7:7-25. This means that in v.14-25, Paul is *not* describing a “carnal Christian” who has not yet “passed into Romans 8,” as the “deeper life” view of Romans 7 would tell us. *All* Christians are “in” Romans 8, just as all Christians are “in” Romans 6 and “in” Romans 7:6.

3. Paul has already described in detail the state of every Christian in Romans 6 and in Romans 7:1-6. We cannot ignore this description when we come to the last half of Romans 7. According to Romans 6 and Romans 7:1-6, all Christians have been “freed from sin” and have become “slaves of righteousness.”¹ “Sin shall not be master over” Christians, for they are “not under law, but under grace.”² Christians have been “joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that they might bear fruit for God.”³ They are “alive from the dead.”⁴ They are no longer “in the flesh.”⁵ They “serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”⁶

The view that Romans 7:14-25 is a description of “the Christian at his best, even of Paul at the time of writing” thus flies directly in the face of everything Paul has said up to this point. How can we read Romans 6 and 7:1-6 and still contend that all true Christians are actually “*of flesh, sold into bondage to sin*”⁷!

It is highly significant that this view of Romans 7 has led to the “wretched man” concept of the Christian life, where “wretchedness” and spirituality are almost equated, and the more holy we become, the more “wretched” we are. In the words of one writer: “This moan, ‘O wretched man that I am,’ expresses the normal experience of the Christian, and any Christian who does not so moan is in an abnormal and unhealthy state spiritually. The man who does not utter this cry daily is either so out of communion with Christ, or so ignorant of the teaching of Scripture, or so deceived about his actual condition, that he knows not the corruptions of his own heart and the abject failure of his own life.”⁸

¹ Romans 6:18 ² Romans 6:14 ³ Romans 7:4 ⁴ Romans 6:13 ⁵ Romans 7:5

⁶ Romans 7:6 ⁷ Romans 7:14 ⁸ A. W. Pink, “The Christian in Romans 7”

“The one who is truly in communion with Christ, will...emit this groan...daily and hourly.”¹

It is true that in this day of glib “easy-believism” and shallow repentance multitudes of professing “Christians” desperately need a revelation of their own inner depravity and corruption. In the case of many, this would lead to bitter weeping² and genuine conversion. But any true child of God who has traveled very far on the pilgrim pathway already knows quite a bit about his own wretchedness and vileness apart from the transforming power of Christ. Instead of praying that God would give us “such a view of [our] own depravity and unworthiness that [we] may indeed grovel in the dust before Him,”³ would it not be more Scriptural to ask God for such a view of *Christ’s resurrection life in us*⁴ and *our new nature in Him*⁵ that we might soar in the heavenlies and joyfully serve Him in newness of life?

Some theologians have tried to escape this “wretched Christian” view of Romans 7 by saying that even though Paul is speaking here of his own present experience as a believer, he is merely describing the fact that “no Christian is as holy as he wants to be.” Romans 7, according to this view, teaches only that “the Christian’s reach always exceeds his grasp” and that during this lifetime the Christian “cannot arrive at perfection.” All these statements are undoubtedly true, but they do not do justice to the degree of failure and misery evident in this passage. Paul is clearly describing here (to use his own words) a state of “wretchedness,”⁶ a state of “bondage,”⁷ and a state of *inability*⁸ to “do good.” In other words, the man of Romans 7 is not just battling with sin but utterly defeated by it, in stark contrast with Paul’s description of all true Christians in Romans 6 and Romans 7:1-6.

4. Romans 6 & 7 are structured around four questions and their corresponding answers. At the end of Romans 5, Paul makes two shocking statements that require defense and clarification. The first is that “the Law came in that the transgression might increase,” and the second is that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” (v.20) Paul expects these statements to be misunderstood and distorted by others, so he sets out to clarify and defend them

¹ Pink ² Zechariah 12:10 ³ Pink ⁴ Ephesians 1:18-23; Ephesians 3:14-21

⁵ Colossians 3:9-13 ⁶ Romans 7:24 ⁷ Romans 7:14, 23-24 ⁸ Romans 7:18-19

in chapters six and seven. He does this in terms of four questions and their corresponding answers. (6:1; 6:15; 7:7; 7:13) Each of these question-answer sections follows a very specific pattern. First, Paul poses the anticipated misunderstanding or distortion of his position. He then follows with a strong denial (“May it never be!”) and a brief summary answer to the misunderstanding. This brief answer is then clarified and expounded in the verses that follow. This pattern is invariable throughout Romans 6-7:

Romans 6:1—Question: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase?” Strong denial: “May it never be!” Brief answer: “How shall we who died to sin still live in it?” Fuller explanation of brief answer: v.3-14.

Romans 6:15—Question: “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” Strong denial: “May it never be!” Brief answer: “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey...?” Fuller explanation of brief answer: v.17-23.

Romans 7:7—Question: “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?” Strong denial: “May it never be!” Brief answer: “On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” Fuller explanation of brief answer: v.8-12.

Romans 7:13—Question: “Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me?” Strong denial: “May it never be!” Brief answer: “Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.” Fuller explanation of brief answer: v.14-25.

This is the setting of v.14-25! Verse 14 does not begin a new and entirely unrelated theme, as some have supposed. The subject being dealt with in this section is not “the immature Christian’s failure to walk in the Spirit” or “the mature Christian’s continuing struggle with remaining sin.” Rather, the subject here is “the goodness of the Law, in spite its effects upon those who are in the flesh.” In this connection, it is very significant that v.14 begins with the word “for” and is immediately followed (twice!) by the word “for” in v.15.

5. Romans 7:14-25 flows from and is a continuation of Paul's discussion in v.7-13 of the "man to whom the commandment has come." In v.5 Paul describes the condition of those who are "in the flesh" and "under law": "For while we were in the *flesh*, the *sinful* passions, which were aroused by the *Law*, were at work in the *members of our body* to bear fruit for death." The key words here are "Law," "sin," and "flesh." *These three words from v.5 will form the heart of Paul's discussion throughout the rest of the chapter.*

In v.7-12 Paul begins to explain his statement in v.5 by reference to his own experience prior to conversion. There was a time when Paul lived in a state of complacent self-satisfaction: "I was once alive." (v.9) He thought he was doing fine in keeping the Law: "As to the righteousness which is in the Law...found blameless."¹

But then a major turning point came in Paul's life. By the working of God's Spirit, "the commandment came" to him. He began to realize how deep and exacting the Law's requirements really are and how impossible it was for him to fulfill those requirements. "Sin became alive," and Paul "died" under the terrible conviction of his sinfulness. (How long this went on, we do not know, but we do know that before he ever met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, it was already "hard" for Paul to "kick against the goads."²) The Law, which promised *life*, thus resulted in *death* for Paul, not through any fault of its own, but because of the utter sinfulness of sin.

Up to this point in his discussion (v.13), Paul has described only the relationship between "*Law*" and "*sin*," showing how the Law actually stirs up sin and leads to death. But he has not yet explained *why* Law should produce such effects. This he can do only by a discussion of "*the flesh*"!

This is the setting of Romans 7:14-25! Verse 14 begins with the word "for" and *continues* and *advances* Paul's discussion of "Law, sin, and flesh" by dramatically describing in the present tense the *place* of sin's reign—"the flesh": "*For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.*" (Notice that the transition to the present tense takes place quite naturally since Paul could hardly say, "We know that the Law *was* spiritual.") Paul then continues in the present tense until the end of the chapter,

¹ Philippians 3:6 ² Acts 26:14

giving a firsthand account of the “bondage to sin” experienced by those who are “in the flesh.” He does this from the vantage point of one who has now become a Christian and can see clearly the nature of the conflict that was formerly taking place in his life. For this reason the terminology that Paul uses in these verses shows much Christian influence, though it is descriptive of his pre-Christian state.

Remember again Paul’s controlling statement: “For while we were *in the flesh*, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were *at work in the members of our body* to bear fruit for death.” “Flesh” is controlled by “sin,” and *in the presence of Law* the sinful passions of the flesh will always culminate in “death.” The fact that “flesh” is Paul’s emphasis throughout this section is clear from the terminology that he uses: “of flesh, sold into bondage to sin,”¹ “a law in the members of my body,”² and “the law of sin which is in my members.”³ This bondage to “sin in the members” leads to the desperate cry, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from *the body* of this death (margin: “this body of death”)?”⁴

Paul’s answer to this cry is given in v.25, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” and more fully in 8:1-4, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. *For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.* For what *the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh*, God did...in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, *who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.*”

Notice Paul’s summary here of what he has just said at length in 7:14-25: “...what the *Law* could not do, weak as it was *through the flesh*...”! And notice again his description of those who are Christians: “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus *has set you free* from the law of sin and of death...that the requirement of the Law might be *fulfilled* in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit”! The man of Romans 7 cries, “Who will set me free?” The Christian replies, “The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus *has set me free.*”

Isaac Watts sums up Paul’s teaching in Romans 7 in a hymn entitled “Conviction of Sin by the Law—Romans 7:8, 9, 14-24”:

¹ Romans 7:14 ² Romans 7:23 ³ Romans 7:23 ⁴ Romans 7:24

*Lord, how secure my conscience was,
And felt no inward dread!
I was alive without the law,
And thought my sins were dead.*

*My hopes of heav'n were firm and bright;
But, since the precept came
With a convincing pow'r and light,
I find how vile I am.*

*My guilt appear'd but small before
Till terribly I saw
How perfect, holy, just, and pure,
Was thine eternal law.*

*Then felt my soul the heavy load;
My sins reviv'd again;
I had provok'd a dreadful God,
And all my hopes were slain.*

*I'm like a helpless captive, sold
Under the pow'r of sin:
I cannot do the good I would,
Nor keep my conscience clean.*

*My God! I cry with every breath
For some kind pow'r to save;
To break the yoke of sin and death,
And thus redeem the slave.*

Three Final Observations

In closing, three things should be noted:

1. In spite of superficial resemblances, Galatians 5:16-25 is *not* parallel with Romans 7. Romans 7:14-25 describes the struggle and defeat of a man who is still “in the flesh” and “under the Law.” The Holy Spirit is notably absent from the language and thought of this man. In fact, the Holy Spirit is not mentioned anywhere in the entire passage.

Galatians 5:16-25, on the other hand, describes the inevitable conflict that the *Holy Spirit* has with the *flesh* in the life of a true

believer. A note of victory is sounded throughout this passage: The Christian is “not under the Law.”¹ He has already definitively “crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” through repentance and faith in Christ.² The power of the Spirit in his life effectually prevents him from following the natural inclinations of his flesh—he cannot do “as he pleases.”³ Since he *lives* “in the Spirit,” he is able now to “*walk* in the Spirit.”⁴ And as he “walks in the Spirit,” he is assured that he “*will not* carry out the desire of the flesh.”⁵ These verses are not a statement of “wretchedness,” but an assurance of victory!

The real parallel to Galatians 5:16-25 is Romans 8:12-14, where “flesh” and “Spirit” are similarly contrasted: “So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” According to these verses, the Christian is under no obligation to live according to the flesh. He is able, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to “put to death the deeds of the body.” In fact, being thus “led by the Spirit” is one of the distinguishing characteristics of all who are truly “sons of God”! Notice the parallel here between being “led by the Spirit” (Romans 8:14) and “walking in the Spirit” (Romans 8:4; Galatians 5:16).

2. The man described in Romans 7:7-25 is not the typical lost “man on the street,” who knows nothing of the spirituality or real desirability of the law. The man in Romans 7:7-25 is the man to whom “the commandment has come.” He makes statements that the typical unbeliever would never make. The state of misery that he is experiencing *eventuates in his coming to Christ*: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”⁶ From this it is evident that this man is being “taught by God” and is “hearing and learning from the Father.”⁷ *Everyone* who has thus “heard and learned from the Father” *comes to Christ*.⁸

3. There is no doubt that every true Christian has felt at times as if he were “in the middle” of Romans 7. Even the truly *righteous* man “falls seven times”!⁹ Christian experience always

¹ Galatians 5:18 ² Galatians 5:24 ³ Galatians 5:17 ⁴ Galatians 5:25

⁵ Galatians 5:16 ⁶ Romans 7:25 ⁷ John 6:45 ⁸ John 6:45 ⁹ Proverbs 24:16

involves excruciating defeat as part of the process of learning to “walk in the Spirit.” Like Peter, we often have to learn by bitter failure the insufficiency of our own resolve.¹ The question before us, however, is not, “What do Christians often experience?” but, “What is Paul teaching in Romans 7?”

(Those interested in reading further on this subject are referred to: Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Appendix F, 1127-32; Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *The Law: Its Functions and Limits*; and Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 126-30.)

¹ Luke 22:31-34