

The Goodness and Impotence of the Law – Part 1 Romans 7:7-25

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Review

- Chs 5-8 The gospel and _____
- 5:2 “...we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”
 - 5:4 “...and character produces hope”
 - 5:5 “...hope does not put us to shame...”
 - 8:20-21 “For the creation was subjected to futility...in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”
 - 8:23-24 “And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved...”
- 5:1-11 Blessed results of justification
- 5:12-21 The superiority of the reign of God’s grace in the second Adam over the reign of sin through the first Adam
- Ch 6 The triumph of grace over the power of sin
- 7:1-8:17 The triumph of grace over the power of the law

The main points in 7:1-6:

1. The Christian has died to the law through union with Christ in his death, meaning the Christian has been legally released from the law’s dominion (4a, 6a). Thus, the Christian is free from the law’s condemnation (8:1) and its power to arouse our sinful passions (7:5; cf. 5:20)
2. The purpose of being released from the law was that the Christian would come under Christ’s authority and be joined to Him forever, and in turn bear fruit for God (4b)
3. Before being joined to Christ, when we were living in the flesh, the law aroused our sinful passions which bore fruit for death (7:5)
4. Having been released from the law and joined to Christ, we serve God in the New Covenant way, the way of the Holy Spirit, not in the Old Covenant way, the way of the written code (6)

The purpose of this section

Chapter 7 is connected to **6:14**

Having explained in 7:1-6 why the sinner must be released from the law in salvation, Paul proceeds in the rest of the chapter to...

1. Affirm the goodness of the law (cf. **7:7a**)
2. Explain the law's impotence to justify the sinner and to sanctify the believer
 - **8:3a** "For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do."

Paul explains these things by speaking of his own experience as representative of the experience of others.

The meaning of this section

Question: In verses 14-25, is Paul speaking of his life before becoming a Christian or after becoming a Christian? What leads you to this conclusion?

Paul is speaking of his own experience, not the experience of Israel at Mt. Sinai

1. Douglas Moo interprets this as the experience of Israel
2. Moo's interpretation is incorrect for the following reasons:
 - Verse 9a would not make sense
 - Paul writes very personally throughout this section, especially in vv 24-25a
3. The straightforward interpretation is that Paul is speaking of something he experienced personally

In verses 14-25, the straightforward meaning of the present tense (in contrast to the past tense in vv 7-13) is that Paul is speaking of his life at the time he writes this epistle

What makes these verses hard to interpret is the following statements that can appear to contradict what Paul teaches elsewhere about the new condition of the Christian:

1. **14b** “but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.”
 - cf. **6:6–7** “We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would **no longer be enslaved to sin**. For one who has died **has been set free from sin**.”
 - cf. **6:11** “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”
 - cf. **6:17–18** “But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”
2. **23** “but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.”
 - cf. **8:2** “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”

These difficulties lead some to interpret these verses to speak of Paul’s life before being converted,¹ or after being convicted by the Holy Spirit while yet unconverted,² in spite of the present tense. But such misinterpretation creates bigger difficulties, including the following:

1. **7:22, 25b** “For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being.... So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind...”
 - How could an unconverted person do so when the following statements are true of the unconverted?
 - **3:11** “no one understands; no one seeks for God.”
 - **3:18** “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”
 - **8:7** “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.”
2. **7:18** “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”
 - This does not match the confidence that Paul put in the flesh before being converted
 - **Phil. 3:3–7** “For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.”

¹ An example of such an interpreter is Thomas Schreiner.

² Martyn Lloyd-Jones gives this interpretation.

3. The words “no longer” (17, 20) speak of a change that has happened in Paul’s life. Paul speaks of powerful but conflicting desires now within him. On the one hand he has the desire to do what is truly right, and a corresponding hatred of sin (15, 18, 22). On the other hand, he does the very thing he hates (15, 19).
 - Such inner conflict does not exist apart from the change of heart brought about by the Spirit, and is a conflict within the Christian.
 - **Gal. 5:17** “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”
4. The deliverance Paul needed is identified in verses 24-25a as the deliverance that is received, not at conversion, but at glorification
 - **8:10-13**
 - Justification does not deliver us from struggling with the “body of death” (**6:12**)

Keeping the purpose of 7:7-25 in mind helps us interpret the meaning of the parts.

1. In verses 7-13, Paul speaks of the effect that the law had upon him before he was joined to Christ

Paul reinforces the truth previously taught that the law, though it is good, is powerless to justify

2. In verses 14-23, Paul speaks of his life as a Christian, and his inability in and of himself to obey the law, even with a new heart that truly delights in it

Paul shows that the law, though it is good, is powerless to sanctify

3. In verses 24-25, Paul voices the cry of the Christian to his Savior, to deliver him from this condition, and expresses confidence that God will do so in glorification.

4. Paul’s focus in chapter 7 is not on the Christian’s condition, but on the law’s goodness and impotence

5. Chapter 7 sets up for **8:1-17**

6. 7:7-25 should not depress us, but be coupled with the rest of chapters 5-8 which gives great hope

- Every Christian can relate to the experience of 7:14-23.
- This is part of the Christian struggle that continues throughout the Christian life.
- But the Christian’s life is not characterized by the defeat of this section, because of his union with Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

7. 7:7-25 should humble us and lead us to put our trust and hope in God alone