

Romans

Romans Chapter Seven

Romans 7: 14

August 1, 2010

This is lesson number 51 in our exposition of the Book of Romans.

The Theme of the Letter

“For I am not ashamed of **the gospel of Christ**, for it is the **power** of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the **righteousness of God** is **revealed** from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’ ” Romans 1:16-17

Title: “Sold Under Sin”

Rom 7:12-25

12 Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good. **13** Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. **14** For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. **15** For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. **16** If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. **17** But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. **18** For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. **19** For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. **20** Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. **21** I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. **22** For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. **23** But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. **24** O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? **25** I thank God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

In Romans 7, verses 12 & 13 serve as a conclusion to Paul’s defense of the law and as an introduction to the rest of Chapter Seven; which as we shall see is a further explanation of the purpose of the law i.e. what the law can and cannot do.

As we have pointed out all through Chapter Seven; and you will not understand the Book of Romans if you have not seen this - Paul tells us in one way and then another that the law cannot justify {make us right before God}; neither can it sanctify {make us holy by law keeping}.

Romans

All that the law can do is to give us the knowledge of sin.

The primary purpose of the law is to show us that sin is exceedingly sinful.

“Sin is so evil that the worst thing you can say about it is to call it by its own name, sinful sin.” John Trapp

Whatever else comes out of this chapter, we must see that the purpose of the law is to expose sin as sin. Chapter Seven, correctly interpreted, will destroy any notion that a man can be justified or sanctified by keeping the law.

We need to have it firmly in our mind exactly what the law can do and what the law cannot do. The law cannot save; the law can only bring the knowledge of sin and thus make sin exceedingly sinful.

In verses 1-6, we learn that the believer is dead to the law. The unbeliever is married to the law. The believer, in Christ, has died to the law. A death has occurred and the believer is now married to Christ. Being married to Christ, the believer should bear fruit to God.

Before the law came to Saul of Tarsus; before God saved this proud Pharisee, he could have written a commentary on the Tenth Commandment and everything that he would write about “You shall not covet!” would have been exactly correct in the “oldness of the letter, or the letter of the law,” because before he was saved Paul did not know the “Spirit of the law.”

But God in His mercy: did you hear that? God did something for this persecutor of the church. God once more justified the ungodly and regenerated a sinner!

In my collection of commentaries on Romans I have no less than thirteen different writers. Each of them can be very convincing of their conclusion as to whom or what Paul is writing about here in Chapter Seven.

The ones that have the most to offer are honest and say that this is one of the most difficult passages in the entire letter to explain.

So I will borrow a caution from Lloyd-Jones. “The preacher who is dogmatic about what this passage teaches is not qualified to preach about it.”

Romans

The question that theologians have struggled with since this epistle was written is: Who is this man that Paul describes in verses 14-25?

There are three views that can be supported to various degrees of certainty.

Is the man in Romans 7?

1. An unregenerate man;
2. A regenerate man and the best that he will ever be;
3. A regenerate man at the early stage before he becomes a “mature” believer; is this man a “babe in Christ.”

In the first three centuries after this epistle was written most of the “church fathers,” including Augustine, held to View Number 1; An unregenerate man. But Augustine later changed to View Number 2, a regenerate man and the best that he will ever be.

The Protestant Reformers and the Puritans almost without exception followed Augustine in Number 2.

Arminians generally held to Number 1. Arminians teach that salvation is possible for everyone and certain for no one. We of the Sovereign Grace persuasion believe that salvation is certain for those chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world.

In the last 150 years, the third view has come into favor. Paul, they say, is describing himself when he was an immature believer who grew to maturity in the faith.

The result of following View Number 3; that this is an immature Christian, says that a believer can actually arrive at a level of spiritual maturity where he is not sinning at all. This is called “perfectionism.” The only way to achieve “perfection” is to redefine sin.

Andrew Bonar dealt with a lady who told him that for six months she had not consciously committed any sin. “And are you not very proud of it?” said Dr. Bonar. “Yes,” she replied, “I am.”

Romans

Douglas Moo, in his commentary on Romans, makes an excellent point that when we interpret Scripture we bring our own baggage to every text and especially to this one. This is how it works. I have a certain perception of myself and when I read this passage I think, "I am a mature Christian, this is my current experience, and so this must be about a mature Christian." The presumption is that I am a "mature" Christian.

The question before us is who is the man of Romans 7?

Is this Paul's experience with sin and the law as he is being saved, or is it during the time that he matured in the faith, or is this what we should expect to experience as long as we live?

The Bible does not tell us the exact time when this revelation of the exceeding sinfulness of sin came to Paul. Of course, Paul met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus and that is the time when he realized who Jesus is.

Acts 9:1-19

9:1 Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest 2 and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. 3 And as he journeyed he came near Damascus, and suddenly a light shone around him from heaven. 4 Then he fell to the ground, and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" 5 And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And the Lord said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. It is hard for you to kick against the goads." 6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, "Lord, what do You want me to do?"

And the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do." 7 And the men who journeyed with him stood speechless, hearing a voice but seeing no one. 8 Then Saul arose from the ground, and when his eyes were opened he saw no one. But they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. 9 And he was **three days** without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

10 Now there was a certain disciple at Damascus named Ananias; and to him the Lord said in a vision, "Ananias." And he said, "Here I am, Lord." 11 So the Lord said to him, "Arise and go to the street called Straight, and inquire at the house of Judas for one called Saul of Tarsus, for behold, he is praying. 12 And in a vision he has seen a man named Ananias coming in and putting his hand on him, so that he might receive his sight."

13 Then Ananias answered, "Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. 14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on Your name." 15 But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel. 16 For I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake." 17 And Ananias went his way and entered the house; and laying his hands on him he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you

Romans

on the road as you came, has sent me that you may receive your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." 18 Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. 19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

But Paul doesn't tell us when the spirit of the Tenth Commandment was made real to him. This could have been at the moment of his conversion and then the rest of Chapter Seven describes the three-years Paul spent with the Lord in Arabia.

Galatians 1:11-18

11 But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ. 13 For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. 14 And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers. 15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace, 16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

18 **Then after three years** I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days.

It is not likely that Paul spent three years in this agony of conviction, although we really can't say. And it still does not answer the question about whom Paul is describing in verses 14-25.

At least twice, maybe three times, I have pointed out the shift in verb tenses from past tense in verses 7-13, to the present tense in 14-25. That may be a case of "proving too much." The answer as to who this is man is not as simple as: "he was unregenerate when the past tense is used" and "he is regenerate when the present tense is used."

While that is true in a grammatical sense it does not actually prove anything.

Speakers and writers often use the 'dramatic' present tense to make a point.

E.g., if I am discussing a matter with someone and want to make my case in a dramatic way I may say, "All right, here I am in this situation and this is what I am doing." I am using the present tense in a dramatic sense but not necessarily describing my actual situation as I am speaking.

Romans

So we cannot dogmatically say that Paul, when he uses the present tense, describes his continuing experience and thus the continuing experience of every believer.

The difficulty then is to know if this is a continuing experience for the Apostle and therefore the “norm” for all believers. “**For we know,**” indicates that this is associated with all believers. “**For we know....**”

It may be helpful to look at an overview of the entire passage before we break down each verse. This outline is from Lloyd-Jones.

Verse 14 is a general statement about the **position** and **condition** of the man described, whoever he may be.

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

Verse 15 describes that **position** and **condition** in daily life.

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do.

This is how the man in verse 14 **behaves**.

Verses 16 & 17: If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. 17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Romans

There are two conclusions:

The first conclusion is that if I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good.

The second conclusion is that it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Verses 18-20 reads: **18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. 19 For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. 20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.**

Verses 18-20 is a fuller explanation of verse 17

Verse 21 is another general statement about the man that almost repeats verse 14, but he adds **I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.**

Verses 22 & 23 expound verse 21.

22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. 23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

Verse 24: O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Here is a cry of despair, and at the same time a cry for deliverance from the realization that he is in the terrible **position** that he has been describing.

Verse 25: 25 I thank God--through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

This is an exultation of relief and summarizes what he has been saying about the man in the entire section.

Romans

This overview suggests that in verses 14-25, Paul continues to deal with the defense of the law. The law is holy and the commandment is holy and just and good. **For by the law is the knowledge of sin.**

We greatly abuse the purpose of the law when we try to use law keeping as a means to be accepted by God: either to be justified or to be sanctified.

So this section is not so much about who this man is as it is about what the law can and cannot do.

This conclusion seems to be supported by Chapter Eight, verses 2 &3:

2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. 3 **For what the law could not do** in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh,

Because of sin, the law has become a 'law of sin,' a law that aggravates sin, a law that leads to death. And so Paul tells us what the law could not do, and why. Chapter 8:1-4 is a summary of this section in Chapter 7.

So, I repeat, this section seems to be more about what the law can and cannot do and not primarily about Paul and his experience at a particular time in his life.

With that said, we will begin to examine verse 14.

14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

The law is spiritual because it comes from God and is therefore holy, and just, and good. He has already established that.

2 Corinthians 3:4-6

4 And we have such trust through Christ toward God. 5 Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, 6 who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant {The New Testament}, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

This is what Paul learned and this is what the Jews had stumbled over. The non-spiritual view of the law is the "letter of the law," only external actions matter. But

Romans

the spiritual view of the law is concerned with motives, desires, imaginations, and not just actions: “You shall not covet!”

To hate another person is to be guilty of murder.
To look on a woman to lust after her is adultery.

The spiritual view of the law is concerned with motives, desires, imaginations, and not just actions.

Plummer writes that, “According to Scripture no obedience is acceptable to God, unless it is rightly intended. God may accept the will for the deed, but He will never accept the deed for the will.”

For we know that the law is spiritual,

Then Paul writes: ... **but I am carnal, sold under sin.**

This may be the key to the entire section. “Carnal!”

The word ‘carnal’ means fleshly, pertaining to the flesh. It is a man as he is by nature in contrast with the life of the spirit. The contrast is always ‘flesh’ and ‘spirit.’ ‘Carnal’ describes a life lived apart from God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Cf. verse 5, “when we were in the flesh...”

And verse 6, the ‘oldness of the letter’ is the same as ‘under the law.’

Lloyd-Jones points out that Paul does not say that something **in him** was carnal, but he says, **“I am carnal.”**

Romans

The Bible uses ‘carnal’ in two ways.

The **first** way ‘carnal’ is used in the Bible is what we have been saying, a man who is unregenerate, Cf. 8:5-9.

The **second** way ‘carnal’ is used in the Bible is found in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

3:1 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; 3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? 4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?

In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul is writing to believers who are acting like unbelievers. Their behavior was ‘carnal.’ They are ‘born again,’ but they are ‘babes in Christ.’

This may help us to see what Paul is getting at in this section.

Paul, as a mature Apostle who wrote this epistle, cannot be saying to the Romans, ‘I am carnal,’ if he means by ‘carnal’ what he says in Chapter 8, which describes an unregenerate man.

But neither can it mean what the second usage of ‘carnal’ means, that the Apostle is a ‘babe in Christ.’ He told the Corinthians that they are babes and that he could not give them the spiritual teaching, which only a spiritual man could give them. So the Apostle cannot be using the meaning of ‘carnal’ to mean that he is an immature Christian.

So we have somewhat of a dilemma because Paul cannot be describing himself as an unregenerate man and neither is this man as mature in the faith as a Christian can be. The unregenerate cannot say the ‘law is spiritual’ and the Apostle could not possibly be in the same condition as the Corinthians.

If we have learned anything, we should now see that this passage is not easy to explain. There is more to be said about verse 14.

‘Carnal’ is not the only thing we know about this man, he is ‘sold under sin.’

If God is willing, we will take up this passage the next time. If I have confused you, that was not my objective. I want you to think about this passage. Try not to

Romans

close your mind to an interpretation that does not fit what you have already decided to be the only correct way to understand this passage.

What I want to leave with you today is that I have come to understand that this section is more about what the law can and cannot do than it is about whom this man is and by extension the 'normal' Christian experience.

Over the centuries scholars have wrestled with the question as to who this man is that Paul describes in verses 14-25, when the point of the passage may be that the law cannot clean you up, that is you cannot be sanctified by law keeping any more than you can be justified by law keeping. If a saved person tries to find acceptance and assurance in his or her obedience they will be totally frustrated.

Finally, keep before your mind that the conclusion in verse 25 is:

'Through Jesus Christ our Lord!'