

Romans

Romans Chapter Seven

Romans 7: 14-20

August 8, 2010

This is lesson number 52 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: “The Law is Spiritual”

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.

As Paul went about preaching the grace of God he was accused of making void the law. The Jews could not imagine that God would accept a man apart from that man’s personal obedience to the law. So when Paul preached righteousness apart from the law they said that he was completely doing away with the law.

Romans 3:31 **Do we then make void the law through faith?**

Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.

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So Paul deals with that charge that the law is made void through faith.

The word “void” katargeo (kat-arg-eh'-o); means:

to be (render) entirely idle (useless), literally or figuratively: KJV - abolish, cease, cumber, deliver, destroy, do away, become (make) of no (none, without) effect, fail, loose, bring (come) to nought, put away (down), vanish away, make void.

If the law is established by faith does that mean that law keeping is the path to faith? Absolutely not! That idea has already been excluded.

Romans 3:20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

So if the law cannot justify a man and the law has not been made void, what does the law do?

In our exposition of Romans Seven we have the Apostle Paul explaining the purpose of the law. He tells us how the law brings the knowledge of sin?

The Pharisees, and Paul was one of the most accomplished of them, believed that the law could bring eternal life. They believed that if a person kept the law perfectly that would be the result. Paul, like all legalists, imagined that he was, in fact, keeping the law. That is, he thought that he was keeping the law, until the law came to him in the power of the Holy Spirit. Then Paul understood that the law is spiritual and that neither he nor any other man could keep the law to perfection and thereby to earn eternal life.

Only the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, not only kept the law but He fulfilled every requirement of the law. Jesus is the only Man who has ever earned personal righteousness through obedience to the holy, just and good law of God.

What we have been laboring with in Chapter Seven of Romans is to understand the purpose of the law. If personally keeping the law cannot justify a man, then what good is the law?

Besides that, sin uses the law to arouse the passions of the flesh {5}.

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Wouldn't we be better off if the law would just go away, become void, and stop bothering us? No indeed, unless the law comes to you in its spiritual nature; you will never know what a great sinner you are. You will never be convinced that you must have the righteousness of Jesus Christ and you will go into hell thinking that you have never done anything all that bad.

The unregenerate man can only think in terms of self, especially when it comes to his thoughts of being accepted by God.

The unregenerate man cannot despise his religious actions and see them as having no merit before God.

And so the unsaved man will cling to any kind of obedience, any law system that he believes that God will accept. He can trust in his "decision" to accept Christ, not in Christ, but that he made a "decision." He can trust that he is a church member, usually that his name is on some church membership list that he isn't interested in enough to attend; he can trust in his baptism, or in his charity to others: any and all of those things, good and proper as they are, are not the basis for acceptance with God.

What the law does, when it is seen as spiritual, is to kill all of those notions of self; it makes sin to be seen as exceedingly sinful, and in pure grace acts as a tutor {pedagogue} to lead a man to Jesus Christ.

That is what Paul here in Romans Seven is telling us about the law. He is telling his readers in Rome and in Hueytown, Alabama how the law does its work. We must see; if we are to understand the law, what it can do and what it cannot do. And so it is my understanding that this entire Seventh of Romans tells us what the law can do and what the law cannot do.

Almost every one of the commentaries in my collection on Romans spend page after page arguing the case for: "Who is this man in Romans Seven?"

Is this describing Paul before he was saved, i.e., an unregenerate man? Is this Paul as a "babe in Christ? Is this Paul as a mature Christian and the best that he will ever be: and by extension the paradigm or model for all Christians?

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There is perhaps some value in exploring that question, but I agree with Dr. Lloyd-Jones. That is not what this passage of Scripture is about. If he were still alive, Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones would be impressed that Jim Gunn agreed with him.

Wm. Hendriksen's commentary on Romans lists 19 other writers and four of the most respected confessions of faith as supporting the interpretation that this is Paul at his best and thus the highest level of Christian maturity, a model for us all.

Lloyd-Jones' interpretation of this passage is that we entirely miss the point of this section by wrestling with the question of unregenerate man or regenerate man: babe in Christ or mature believer. Paul, says Lloyd-Jones, is continuing to argue the purpose and application of the law.

That the law referred to here is the Tenth Commandment is obvious because he quotes it in verse 7. But I do not think that he is then restricting his use of law to a single commandment. I believe that he is teaching his readers how to think about the spiritual nature of the law. Again:

Romans 3:20 Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

The best argument that Romans 7:14-25 is primarily dealing with the law is that the context of 7:12 ff to a summary in 8:1-4 seems to argue that Paul is still talking about the law.

This section is about what the law can and cannot do and not so much about Paul's experience before or after he was saved.

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

The law is spiritual. Now neither the legalist nor the antinomian understands that the law is spiritual.

To the legalist, the law is a set of rules to be followed in order to gain God's acceptance. The modern legalist says, "Obey the gospel," and by that they mean what you do, not what you believe, not faith alone!

To the antinomian, the law is not relevant to him because, he says, "he is not under law but under grace." The modern antinomian continues in sin and goes to hell saying, "Once saved; always saved."

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Both the legalist and the antinomian completely fail to understand the spiritual nature of the law.

Now to try to explain our text, vs. 14-20.

The preacher's job is simply to explain the Scripture.

Peter said that Paul wrote some things, "hard to understand." 2 Peter 3:16

The law has come to Paul and what he once believed would produce eternal life has brought death. "We know that the law is spiritual," says Paul, "but I am **carnal**, and not only carnal, but **sold under sin**."

"Carnal" is used only two ways in Scripture. To be carnal is to be either an unsaved, unregenerate man, or a saved man who is acting like an unsaved man, a "babe in Christ."

It doesn't matter whether you understand this man to be unregenerate or regenerate; you cannot reconcile these two phrases:

"We know that the law is spiritual,"

"but I am carnal...."

We will deal with the phrase "... sold under sin," in just a minute.

This is perhaps one of the most difficult passages in the entire Bible to explain. If I have some grasp of it pray that I will not mangle it and confuse anyone. You must pay close attention or you will lose the point of the argument and what I say will sound like an absurd contradiction.

What I want you to see is that this man is neither unregenerate nor regenerate as far as the point of the passage is concerned. Of course, Paul must be one or the other, but that is not the point. That is not what we are to learn from Paul. This is "hard to understand."

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Try to follow this argument or what I am saying will sound absurd.

This cannot be an unregenerate man who is carnal and sold under sin. Why? Because the unregenerate man is not conflicted about sin. The unregenerate man does not see the spiritual nature of the law. The unregenerate man would never condemn sin in this manner. The unregenerate man does not hate sin. He hates the consequences of sin but if he could sin without any adverse consequences he would be quite happy to continue in sin.

So it cannot be an unregenerate man.

But neither is this a description of a regenerate man. A regenerate man is no longer a slave to sin, Cf. 6:16-18. A regenerate man is not perfect but he is not continually in this state of high conflict over sin. A regenerate man is no longer a slave to sin.

So it cannot be a regenerate man.

Okay, he is not unregenerate nor is he regenerate: but he must be one or the other! And to strive over that question is how we miss the entire point of this passage.

The point being; the relationship between law and sin.

“but I am carnal, sold under sin.”

We have already explained what “carnal” means. It means either to be an unsaved person or a saved person acting as though he were unsaved.

Now let’s look at “sold under sin.”

There are examples in the Bible where men and nations have “sold themselves under sin.” Naboth’s vineyard:

1 Kings 21:20 Then Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" And he answered, "I have found you, because you have *sold yourself* to do evil in the sight of the LORD: 21'Behold, I will bring calamity on you. I will take away your posterity, and will cut off from Ahab every male in Israel, both bond and free.

1 Kings 21:25 But there was no one like Ahab who *sold himself* to do wickedness in the sight of the LORD, because Jezebel his wife stirred him up. 26 And he behaved very abominably in following idols, according to all that the Amorites had done, whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel.

Ahab sold himself under sin!

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Then:

2 Kings 17: 16 So they left all the commandments of the LORD their God, made for themselves a molded image and two calves, made a wooden image and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. **17** And they caused their sons and daughters to pass through the fire, practiced witchcraft and soothsaying, and *sold themselves* to do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger. **18** Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight; there was none left but the tribe of Judah alone.

Israel sold themselves under sin!

But this is not the case in verse 14. Paul says he is “sold under sin.” Paul did not sell himself; he is sold.

We all come into this world “sold under sin.” One of the great lessons of Romans 5:12-21 is that we were sold under sin in Adam.

Psalm 51:5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me.

Another place says “I spring from the womb speaking lies.”

So keep in mind that in verse 14 we have a man who has seen that the law is spiritual, but he is carnal, sold under sin.

Verse 15 presents a man who has come to see the **spiritual character** of the law. Here is a man who desires to keep the law but finds that he cannot keep it at all. Here is a man who hates what he does. Notice that it is not only what he thinks, but what he does.

Verse 16 If I do that which I do not approve of, and the law forbids it, thus I agree with the law. If I know what I am doing is wrong and the law says it is wrong, then I am agreeing with the law.

Why not just throw out the law, wouldn't that solve the problem? Well, you can't establish the law by making void the law or getting rid of the law.

Paul concludes that the law is in no way responsible for his failure to keep the law. The law is good and Paul is making the case for what the law can and cannot do.

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The law cannot justify a man and the law cannot sanctify a man. That should be obvious because while he violates the law he agrees that the law is good.

If a man is to have acceptance with God through the law, he must keep the law and he cannot keep the law.

In verse 17 he concludes that it is the **sin that dwells in him** that is doing the things that he does not will to do.

This man sins and hates sin and agrees that the law is good.

“There is a total difference between surviving sin and reigning sin, the regenerate in conflict with sin and the unregenerate complacent with sin. It is one thing for sin to live in us: it is another for us to live in sin.” John Murray

Sin dwells in us; sin makes its home in us. It is the sin in us that compels us to sin against what we know to be good. Sin is stronger than your will power. Sin is even stronger than the man who sees the spiritual character of the law. He agrees with the law, but sin dwells in him.

Therefore the law cannot justify and the law cannot sanctify. Why?
Because of sin that dwells in us. A man at his personal best is altogether sin.

Verses 18-20 further explain verse 17. Notice that verse 17 and verse 20 are almost identical and end with the phrase, “but sin that dwells in me.”

Lloyd-Jones makes the point that this is not a part of the man who is carnal and sold under sin. He says “**I**” am carnal, sold under sin. This is not only the sinful nature; this is the whole man.

Will you indulge a personal illustration? There are two “me’s.”

There is the “me” that arises before dawn and reads the Bible in quiet meditation and rejoices in the goodness and mercy of God. This “me” can prepare sermons and delight to see truth unfold. This “me” can listen to the preaching of the Gospel and love what I hear. This “me” can listen to hymns and songs of praise and be lifted up in my soul. This “me” would delight to be always in this state of mind.

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But even as I am at my spiritual best, even as I meditate on the Scriptures, sin dwells in me. Even while singing Amazing Grace, my mind can wander off to entertain some evil desire. There is another “me” that can be drawn into thinking lustful thoughts, to not quite tell the unvarnished truth, to be discontent at some inconvenience, to become angry without a cause. There is a “me” that is absolutely no good, with nothing good in my flesh.

Which is the real “me?” BOTH! And at the same time!

Verse 17 may sound like an excuse for sin.

Let me expand on this. Vs. 16 says that if I agree with the law I hate sin. I hate what the law condemns therefore I hate sin. How then do I continue to sin? I do not desire to sin, I hate sin, but I still sin! Why? How?

Paul's conclusion is astonishing!

Only a Christian can say, “That is not me who sins and still accept full responsibility for his sin. This is not license to sin it is an explanation of why a Christian still sins. A Christian does not “continue in sin,” as being characteristic of his life, yet he still sins. The pleasure of sin is greatly diminished and he hates that he sins, but he will continue to sin.

17 But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

There is the “me” that is spiritual and that “me” loves the law. But there is a “me” that is “carnal, sold under sin.” That “me” finds that sin is more powerful than my best intentions. This is not a “split personality,” not a “Dr. Jeckle and Mr. Hyde” change of personality. This is the same “me” that is at the same time spiritual and carnal. That is not saying that a man is saved and lost at the same time. What it says is that the power of sin is so strong that the spiritual man is always under attack by sin.

Notice that sin **dwells** in us. Sin is not an occasional visitor to your house, sin is a force that has great power and it lives in you.

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Verses 18-20 explain verse 17.

What he says in verses 18, 19, and 20 is that the reason that **I do** what I do not desire to do is because sin dwells in me [Cf. 17 & 20].

Sin is so powerful it is as though the sin itself has taken over and **it is not I but the sin that is acting.**

I do not mean to make this point trivial. But it is as though I am standing here and watching the sin that dwells in me do something that I do not want to do. “Can you believe what I just did?” “That is not me, that is the sin that dwells in me!”

Then when we come to verses 21, 22, and 23 he says that the reason that **I do not do** what I desire to do is because there is “another law” in my members that is warring against the law of God.

In one instance [18-20] I do what I do not want to do.
And then [21-23] I do not do what I want to do.
I do what I do not want to do because sin dwells in me.
It is not the “me” that I want to be, but it is ME!

Not only do I do what I do not want to do:
Why can't I do what I will to do?

Verse 21 “For I find then a law....” [Lit. the law].
But this is not the “law of God” that I delight in, it is “another law.”

There is sin dwelling in me that is so strong that it **operates as a law.**
It seems to control what I do and what I don't do.

When I would do good there is always evil present with me, the sin that lives in me. Literally, it is the evil that is always “lurking and ready to assert itself.”

Verse 19 almost repeats verse 15 and verse 20 nearly repeats verse 17.

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Sin dwells in us. Evil is present and ready to pounce. So we always must be aware of the power of sin. The slightest accommodation to sin can lead to sin having dominion over you. A believer in Jesus Christ can lapse into sin, but the Holy Spirit will make him miserable if he is a real Christian.

Let's take a practical example. I don't believe that a Christian man will sit around and deliberately plot: "I believe I that will commit adultery one day next month." No they put themselves in a position to fail and sin and evil is lurking and ready to take over. A little harmless flirtation; you have no intention of being unfaithful to your wife. As a man you are flattered that a younger woman would find you attractive. Sin can and will lead you much further than you could imagine. Does the power of sin give the man an excuse to cheat on his wife? No it simply explains how it can happen.

Solomon warned his son about the adulterous woman in Proverbs 5:

**Proverbs 5:8 Remove your way far from her,
And do not go near the door of her house, Cf. 6:13**

Such is Paul's pattern; just as vs. 18-19-20 explain vs. 17; even so, vs. 22-23 further expounds verse 21.

"For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man."

Notice the progression in his esteem of the law.

In verse 14, he says, I know that the law is **spiritual**.

In verse 16, he says, I agree that with the law that it is **good**.

In verse 22, he says, I not only know that the law is spiritual and agree with the law that it is good, I **delight in the law**.

Psalm 1:1-2

Blessed is the man

Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,

Nor stands in the path of sinners,

Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;

2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD,

And in His law he meditates day and night.

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Also in verse 22, “the inward man.”

Most commentaries say that this is the renewed man but verse 23 seems to say otherwise. “But I see another law in my members warring against the law of my mind...” The “inward man” seems to correspond to “the mind.”

Again, I cannot be dogmatic here but I believe this is the correct understanding.

The “inward man” or “the mind” is the understanding, the seat of reason, and the place where I know the truth about Jesus Christ.

This cannot be the mind of an unregenerate man. An unsaved man does not “delight in the law.” It is a mind illuminated by the Holy Spirit.

The term “my members’ means the same as did in 6:13.

Our members involve our body parts with which we express ourselves, but it also involves the thoughts. You cannot see my mind. You can take my brain out of its skull case and physically examine it but you can’t see my thoughts. You can read my body language and facial expressions but you can’t see what I am actually thinking.

The “inward man” is that thinking part of a man that comes to see the truth of Jesus Christ.

Verse 23, “But I see another law in my members...” “Another law.”

There is the law of God in which the inward man delights. But there is another law in my members. Essentially he is saying there is a different law. “Another law.”

There is the law of God in the inward man and there is another law in my members “warring” against the law of God.

The word “warring” means to “render service in a military campaign.” Also, we get the English word “strategy” from the Greek word for “warring.” Here it means to be anti-strategy, to war against a strategy.

There is the law of God. Then there is another law in my members that has a strategy against the law of my mind. There is another law that is warring against the law of my mind.

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What can this law called “another law” do?

It can bring me into “captivity” to the “law of sin” that is in my members.

“Captivity” here means, “taking a prisoner.” But it is stronger than that; it is “taking a prisoner and pointing a spear at his heart.” The man is not only a prisoner he is under an immediate threat.

What can we learn?

First that this is not an excuse to sin. If you come to that conclusion it is because you have not understood Chapter Six.

Romans 6:1 What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?

The antinomian has twisted this idea and taught, “I am now saved, but my body sins, therefore I am free to sin.”

First John and also Jude deal with the Gnostic heresy that the body is sinful and so it doesn't matter what the body does. The Gnostics even denied that Jesus had “come in the flesh,” because they taught that flesh was inherently sinful. Since the flesh is sinful, they taught that the Christ could not have been a man; He only seemed to be a man.

That is heresy.

In the **second** place, Paul wants to show us the power of sin, Cf. 13.

Sin dwells in us. Sin has awful power even when we have the knowledge of the spiritual character of the law.

A **third** lesson is the complete and utter inability of the law to free us from sin.

That is the **main point** of all of this psychology about two “me's.” Even the holy, just, and good law cannot deliver a man from the power of sin.

The law is altogether good but it cannot deliver a man from sin. The purpose of the law is to show the exceeding sinfulness of sin. So do not try to use the law for a purpose for which it was never intended.

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When the grace of God is at work:

The law will come to a Pharisee like Paul once was and show him the spiritual nature of the law. It will take away any confidence that a man may have in his personal righteousness.

The law will convince a man of his just condemnation by a holy God who must punish sin. Then the law will lead that man to see the perfection in Jesus Christ as the righteousness of God. He will now understand why he must have the righteousness of God instead of his own personal righteousness.

Even after he is saved, every time a spiritual man thinks he is going to make progress in law keeping the sin that dwells in him will derail him.

The law is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. All of this section is about the law. The more we can learn about the law and the power of sin, the more we will glory in Jesus Christ and the knowledge of what Jesus has done for sinners.

We must not end today's lesson with the idea that we must live in a continual state of conflict. This is a depressing state of mind. Rather understand what the law can do and what the law cannot do. That is what the Apostle wants us to know.

Do not be sidetracked about whether this man is saved or unsaved because that is not the point. This is meant to give us an understanding of the law and indwelling sin. This is meant to keep us from having any confidence in the law as far as being justified or being sanctified. The law cannot help you get saved or to stay saved, but the law is not void.

Paul concludes this argument about the law and sin.

He will lament:

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

And then exult:

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.

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Do we have some personal sense of verse 24?

**“O wretched man that I am!
Who will deliver me from this body of death”?**

“Wretched” is to be exhausted as a result of hard labor.

The fight against sin is hard work. If you don’t know that fighting against sin is hard work it is because you have never gotten serious about fighting sin. Has sin ever made something you know to be wrong seem extremely desirable to you? So desirable that you begin to rationalize and think “I know this is wrong, but God will understand that my situation is an exception.” No, the spiritual character of the law says, “do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness...”

The “body of death” is the same as the ‘law of sin.’ The “law of sin” which can bring us “into captivity” is a “body of death.”

Now I do not want you to come to the conclusion that real Christianity is a hopeless and frustrating experience.

Do not feel defeated by sin.

This is not the minute-by-minute experience of a believer. This is not the experience of our every waking hour. This is the **explanation** of why I do what I do not want to do and why I do not do what I want to do. If we can understand sin and its power we are in a much better position to resist sin.

And besides this is not how the letter ends. As we preach through Romans it is not the same as when you read the entire letter at one time. It did not take the saints in Rome two or three years to listen to this letter being read and explained to the church.

Chapter Seven tells us about the purpose of the law and the power of sin.

Chapter Eight will raise you to the highest level of assurance in Jesus Christ because it is God that justifies and it is Christ that died. That should produce joy and assurance that even though sin is great that grace is greater than sin.

Do you see why the law is not made void by faith?

Do you see how the law brings the knowledge of sin?

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Do you see why any attempt to keep the law can never be a means of justification or of sanctification? Why?

Because that is not nor never has been the purpose of the law.

Do you see the awful power of sin?

Sin is not to be trifled with and toyed with as something harmless. If we do not continue to resist sin, the law of sin will bring us into captivity.

But do not despair! Read verse 25.

Here is the grand relief for the believer who anguishes over sin!

Knowing the spiritual character of the law and knowing the awful power of indwelling sin will not lead a Christian to lawlessness. He will grow in his appreciation {glory} of what Jesus Christ has done for him.

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.

God willing we will continue in Chapter Seven the next time I teach on Romans.