

I. Review

A. In Romans 7:1-13, Paul provides the theological reason why we are no longer under the Law, how sin uses the Law to tempt us into sinning, and how the Law is holy and righteous and good.

B. In the second half of Romans 7, Paul continues to deal with the law and its relationship to Christians, or we might say, to post-Christ believers. And in these verses, he shows that without Christ and without the empowering work of the Holy Spirit, the struggle between our good intentions and the power of sin is a losing struggle – with sin consistently winning. And he supports this truth by showing that the Law cannot protect us from the power of sin or enable us to do what is holy, righteous, and good, in spite of our good intentions.

C. Prayer

II. The powerlessness of the law to overcome our propensity to sin.

A. Romans 7:14-25 . . . For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. [15] For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. [16] But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. [17] So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. [18] For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. [19] For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. [20] But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. [21] I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. [22] For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, [23] but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. [24] Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? [25] Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

- B. As I stated before reading these verses, Paul is showing us the inability of the Law to protect us from the power of sin, in spite of our good intentions. And his purpose is to show us the extent of our need for the daily empowerment and assistance of God, through the various workings of the Holy Spirit, to live the Christian life.
1. But before looking at the specifics of Romans 7:14-25, I want to explain why I believe this passage is often misinterpreted and misused among Christians today, and I want to lay an historical and a Biblical foundation for what I believe Paul is saying.
 2. When I say this portion is often misinterpreted, I am referring to those who believe Paul is talking about his seemingly helpless struggles with sin as a born again, Spirit filled, Christian.
 3. When I say this portion is often misused, I am speaking of those who use it to prove – from God’s word – that they are no more able to stop their sinful ways than Paul – according to their use of what Paul says in vs 14-25 about his losing struggle against sin.
 4. Now I want to turn to church history – both past and recent – to explain my position. There is no question that godly, well-educated, and respected Christians have lined up on both sides of this issue, with some supporting the understanding that Paul is speaking about the normal Christian life, and others supporting the understanding that Paul is talking about life under the law, apart from faith in Christ and the new birth.
 - a. It appears from early church history that very few well-known, well-respected Christians held the view that this portion represents the normal Christian experience. In fact, the majority held the view that Paul was speaking about life under the law, apart from the new birth and the enabling work of the Holy Spirit.
 - b. For example, Augustine (354-430) is the only one we know of who interpreted this portion as the normal Christian experience. John Cassian (360 – 435) also said this portion represents the Christian’s struggle against sin, but he believed Paul was not teaching helplessness against sin, but rather exhorting us to daily and diligently fight against sin and pursue righteousness. Later on, Luther and Calvin supported Augustine’s view. Today, however, the majority of bible scholars hold Romans 7:14-25 to be Paul’s testimony of the normal Christian life.
 - c. Returning to the early church, the list of those who taught that Paul is speaking of life under the Law apart from faith in Christ

and the filling of the Holy Spirit, is much longer and includes such prominent, Christians as Irenaeus of Lyons (120-202), Clement of Alexandria (150-220), Tertullian (150-240), Origen (185-254), Macarius (300-390), Basil the Great (330-379), John Chrysostom (347-407), and Pelagius (350-420?). Admittedly, some of Pelagius' teachings are controversial. Nevertheless, he was a respected Christian, and he is recorded as saying, "all Church writers assert that [Paul] spoke in the person of the sinner, and of one who was still under the law." Today, however, only a minority of the well-known biblical scholars interpret Romans 7 this way.

- d. So why point to church history? Because, in my opinion, where there is a difference, we should give more weight to what the majority of the early church teachers taught than to what the majority of the church teaches today.
5. Finally, I want to use scripture to support my belief that this portion is about the losing conflict between good intentions and the power of sin under the Law – apart from the new birth or being under grace.
- a. Here in Romans 7, from the first verse to the last, Paul uses the Greek word "nomos" 16 times. It is translated "law" 15 times and "principle" once. In vs 1-13, where Paul is explaining why we are dead to the law, he uses the word "law" 10 times. In vs 14-25, where he is talking about the losing battle between good intentions and the power of sin, he uses the word for "nomos" 6 times, with one of those times translated as "principle". My point is that throughout Romans 7, Paul is speaking about our relationship to the law, in one form or another, and he makes no discernable move away from this emphasis when he gets to vs 14-25. Therefore, the context makes it reasonable to understand Paul as referring to life under the Law, not under grace.
 - b. In Romans 6, Paul teaches that we have died to sin and risen to newness of life (vs 1-4).
 - (1) He says that we are to stop presenting the members of our body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but we are to present ourselves to God, and our members as instruments of righteousness to God (vs 12-14). And he says this as if we can do it, that is, stop sinning and start living righteously.
 - (2) Paul goes on to say that just as we presented our members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now we are to present our members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification (vs 19).

- (3) If these statements in Romans 6 are true, and if we can do what Paul says, then it is hard to make sense of the conclusion that Paul is telling us in chapter 7 that the normal Christian experience is that of helplessly losing the battle against sin, in spite of our good intentions.
 - c. In Romans 8, Paul teaches that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death (vs 1-2). The new birth leads to and produces a new life.
 - (1) Paul goes on to say that God sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and as an offering for sin He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (vs 3-4). The new birth leads to fulfilling the Law, not helplessly sinning.
 - (2) Finally, Paul says if the Spirit of God dwells in us, then we are no longer under obligation to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if we are living according to the flesh, we must die; but if by the Spirit we are putting to death the deeds of the body, we will live (vs 12-13).
 - (3) If what Paul says in Romans 8 is true, then we are stuck with a glaring contradiction if we interpret Romans 7:14-25 as Paul saying that losing the battle against sin is the normal Christian experience.
 - d. Therefore, taking into account the two chapters surrounding Romans 7, and concluding they are important to the context of Romans 7, and taking into account the 16 references to the Law in Romans 7, I believe Paul is talking about losing the battle against sin as one living under the Law, not as one under grace.
- 6. Going outside Romans, we have scriptures that exhort us to holiness and do so with the assumption we can live up to the exhortation.
 - a. 2 Corinthians 7:1 . . . Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.
 - b. 1 Peter 1:14-15 . . . As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior.
 - c. 1 John 3:2-3 . . . Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He

is. And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

- d. 1 John 3:7-10 . . . Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; [8] the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. [9] No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. [10] By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.
 - e. Here again, if these scriptures are true, then they are part of the larger context or foundation of truths which must be considered when interpreting Romans 7:14-25. This is another reason why I understand Romans 7:14-25 to be speaking about life under the law apart from faith in Christ and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.
7. Therefore, we will examine vs 14-25 from the perspective that Paul is speaking about life under the Law, a law which has no ability to save us from the penalty of sin or to free us from the enslaving power of sin – which is why those under the Law, as opposed to those who are under grace, continue to sin in spite of their good intentions.
- C. Romans 7:14 . . . For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.
1. In vs 12, Paul tells us that the Law is holy and righteous and good. Here in vs 14, he uses that truth to show his true condition under the Law by comparing himself to the Law. And so Paul says that in comparison to the Law – which is spiritual, he is of flesh, sold into slavery to sin.
 2. Now we know from vs 5, that the flesh houses the sinful passions which lead us into sin and bring upon us the penalty of sin.
 3. There is one more point I want to make here. Paul, in using himself as the model or example of living under the law instead of under grace, speaks as if he is divided into two parts – that part that is given over to sin as a slave of sin, and that part that wants to do good. He refers to the part that is given over to sin as his flesh. And he refers to the part that wants to do good as his mind. This distinction is important to understanding the rest of the chapter.

- D. Romans 7:15 . . . For what I (*in my flesh*) am doing, I (*in my mind*) do not understand; for I (*in my flesh*) am not practicing what I (*in my mind*) would like to do, but I (*in my flesh*) am doing the very thing I (*in my mind*) hate.
1. This is a picture of what is going on in the life of the Law-keeper. He believes in the difference between good and evil. He has some knowledge of what is good and what is evil. And he hates some of what he knows is evil. Yet he finds himself doing the very things he knows are wrong, and even hates.
 2. How can this be, he wonders? And because he cannot find a logical or reasonable answer, he is left in a state of confusion.
- E. Romans 7:16 . . . But if I (*in my flesh*) do the very thing I (*in my mind*) do not want to do, I (*in my mind*) agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.
1. In other words, if there is something I don't want to do because I know it is wrong, yet end up doing it, the fact that I did not want to do it, because I knew it was wrong, shows that I agree that the Law is right and good for telling me not to do it.
- F. Romans 7:17-19 . . . So now, no longer am I (*in my mind*) the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me (*in my flesh*). [18] For I (*in my mind*) know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing (*in my mind*) is present in me, but the doing of the good (*in my flesh*) is not. [19] For the good that I (*in my mind*) want, I (*in my flesh*) do not do, but I (*in my flesh*) practice the very evil that I (*in my mind*) do not want. [20] But if I (*in my flesh*) am doing the very thing I (*in my mind*) do not want, I (*in my mind*) am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me (*in my flesh*).
1. Here again, Paul separates himself into two parts, the part that knows right from wrong and wants to do what is right (*his mind*), and the part that is given over to serve sin (*his flesh*), so that in spite of what his mind wants, sin (*his flesh*) wins the battle and has its way.
 2. Does this mean we are not responsible for our sinful ways? No! The Bible says, in various places and ways, that we are responsible and ultimately we will be held accountable for our sinful choices and behavior.
 3. Does this mean we are helpless against the power of sin? Yes and no. We are helpless to win the battle against sin apart from Christ and the empowering and assisting work of the Holy Spirit. But we

are not helpless to look inward at the law of God written on our heart, or to look outward at nature and see the glory of God, or to listen to our conscience and the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, or to read God's word. These things we can do, and we can make the proper response to them – a response that leads to repentance, to faith in Christ, to dying to sin and rising to newness of life, and to receiving and relying on the enabling work of the Holy Spirit so that we can begin doing what we could not do apart from Christ – and that is to pursue and live a godly life.

- G. Romans 7:21-23 . . . I find then the principle (*Gk: nomos – law*) that evil is present in me (*in my flesh*), the one who (*in my mind*) wants to do good. [22] For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man (*my mind*), [23] but I see a different law in the members of my body (*my flesh*), waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members (*my flesh*).
1. Paul has been leading us to the truth that in spite of what we wish to do, we cannot live the Christian life apart from faith in Christ and the empowering and assisting work of the Holy Spirit.
 2. And in these two verses, Paul reminds us that sin, imbedded in our flesh, makes us a prisoner of sin so that in spite of what we know is right and in spite of wanting to do what is right, we consistently lose the battle to sin and do what is wrong.
 3. After painting this picture of hopelessness, Paul cries out for help.
- H. Romans 7:24-25 . . . Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? [25a] Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! [25b] So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.
1. Who sets us free from the power of our sinful passions? God, through Jesus Christ. This means we no longer have to lose the battle against sin. We can win! In fact, we never have to lose again.
 2. Does this mean the struggle within us is over? No. We will continue to struggle against our sinful passions – a lot a first, and less as we grow toward Christian maturity. But the struggle will continue until death parts us from our flesh. However, in spite of the struggle, the hopelessness is over, for victory is assured.
 3. May we, as those under grace, fight the good fight, gaining victory after victory, until we see Christ face-to-face, for only then we can enter His rest and enjoy true rest from the struggle.