

Romans 7: The struggle within...

An illustration from marriage (Romans 7 v 1 to 6)

“The law is binding” (v 1) – in Romans 6 v 14, Paul told us that we are not under law but under grace. After the discussion in verses 15 to 23 of that chapter regarding practical implications of this, Paul now explains how it is that we are no longer under the dominion of the law. “The law is binding on a person only as long as he lives” – Paul makes the point that death ends all obligations and contracts. A wife is no longer bound to her husband if he dies because death ends that contract. If her husband dies, she is free from that law...

- Who is Paul speaking to in this chapter (v 1)? In verses 1 to 3 Paul tells the story about a woman with two husbands. Who is the woman? Who is the first husband? (Careful! It is not the law – see Romans 5 v 15). Who is the second husband? Note that the law binds the woman and her husband together. When the first husband dies, the woman is released from her husband, and from the law, and she is free to marry another man.
- In v 4 to 6 how does Paul use his analogy to show us how the ‘struggle within’ can be resolved? Whose death makes us free to belong to Jesus (v 4)? Who died, and to what? See also Romans 6.

“You also have died to the law through the body of Christ” (v 4) – in Romans 6 v 3 to 8, Paul carefully explained that we died with Jesus and we also rose with him, although Paul there only spoke of our death to *sin*. Now he explains that we also died to *the law*. Some might think, ‘Yes, we were saved by grace, but we must live by law to please God’. Here Paul makes it plain that believers are dead to the law – so far as it represents a principle of living or a place of right standing before God. “So that you may belong to another” – we are not free from the law so we can live for ourselves: we are free so we can belong to Jesus and so that “we may bear fruit for God”. “For while we were living in the flesh” (v 5) – under the law, we did not bear fruit for God; instead we bore “fruit for death”, because the law aroused sinful passions within us. Paul will explain this problem of the law more fully in verses 7 to 14, but now we see his point – we only come fully to the place of bearing fruit for God when we are free from the law.

“But now we are released from the law” (v 6) – here Paul summarises the theme of these verses. Because we died with Jesus at Calvary, we are dead to the law and delivered from its dominion over us as a principle of justification, or of sanctification. The law does not justify us: it does not make us right with God. The law does not sanctify us: it does not make us more holy before God. Our freedom is given so that we can serve God “in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code”.

Struggling with sin (Romans 7 v 7 to 25)

In these verses Paul discusses how the law exposes sin and effectively ‘kills’ the believer. In verses 7 to 13 the emphasis is on *explanation* (how it works) and the past tense is used; in verses 14 to 25 the emphasis is on *experience* (how it feels) and the present tense is used...

- How do we know that the law referred to includes the Ten Commandments (v 7)? From v 9 it appears that sin is ‘activated’ by the law. Does that mean the law is bad? What do you think is the purpose of the law? What is it about sin that makes it so insidious, so dangerous (v 11)? Is the law responsible for death? If not, what is (v 13)?
- Twice Paul makes the comment: “It is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it” (v 17, 20). What do you think Paul means here? Are we not responsible for what we do? Which is stronger – God’s law, or the “law of sin” (v 21 to 23)?

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- What dilemma do we face when we try to keep the law (v 15 to 21)? What is the end result of this inner conflict (v 23)? Who can rescue us from the “body of death”, and how (v 24, 25)? See v 4.

The problem with God’s perfect law (v 7 to 12): The law is good because it reveals sin to us. “I would not have known sin except through the law” (v 7) – the law is like an x-ray machine; it reveals what is there but hidden. You can’t blame an x-ray for what it exposes. “I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, ‘You shall not covet’” – we might never know that we are sinning in many areas (such as covetousness) if the law did not show us specifically. “I was once alive apart from the law” (v 9) – children can be innocent before they know or understand what the law requires: this is what Paul means here. “When the commandment came, sin came alive and I died” – when we come to know the law, it shows us our guilt and excites our rebellion, bringing forth more sin and death...

“For sin... deceived me” (v 11) – it isn’t the law that deceives us, but it is sin that uses the law as an opportunity for rebellion. Jesus said, “you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8 v 32). The truth frees from the deceptions of sin. “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (v 12) – we must die to sin (Romans 6 v 2) and we must die to the law (v 4), but that does not mean that the law is bad. The problem is *us*, not the law...

The purpose and character of the law (v 13, 14): “That sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure” (v 13) – first, sin becomes sinful in contrast to the law; second, sin becomes sinful because the law provokes its evil nature. “Sold under sin” (v 14) – Paul is in bondage under sin and the law can’t help him out. He is like a man in jail for a crime: the law will only help him if he is innocent, but Paul knows that he is guilty, and the law argues against him, not for him.

The struggle of obedience in our own strength (v 15 to 23): “For I do not understand my own actions” (v 15) – Paul’s problem isn’t *lack of desire*: he wants to do what is right. His problem isn’t *lack of knowledge*: he knows what is right. His problem is *lack of power* to do what is right, and the law gives him no power. “Now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me” (v 17) – is Paul denying his responsibility as a sinner? No, he recognizes that as he sins, he acts against his nature as a new person in Christ.

“I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand” (v 21) – CS Lewis once wrote, ‘No man knows how bad he is until he has tried to be good.’ “Waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin” (v 23) – sin is able to war against Paul because there is no power in himself to stop sinning. Paul is caught in the powerlessness of trying to battle sin in his own strength.

The victory found in Jesus Christ (v 24, 25): “Wretched man that I am!” (v 24) – the entire tone of this statement shows that Paul is desperate for deliverance; he is overwhelmed with a sense of his own powerlessness and sinfulness. We must come to the same place of desperation to find victory. Our desire must go beyond a vague hope to be better. We must cry out against self and cry to God with the same desperation Paul had. “*Who* will deliver me?” – Paul’s perspective finally turns to *someone* outside himself. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (v 25) – Paul finally looks outside himself to Jesus, and as soon as he looks to Jesus, he has something to thank God for – and he thanks God through Jesus Christ! Paul sees Jesus standing between himself and God, bridging the gap and providing the way through to God. ‘Lord’ means Paul has put Jesus in the right place – as Lord and master of his life...

Prayer – Lord, thank you for these wonderful truths. We echo Paul’s words when he says, “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” We praise you that with Paul we can answer, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Thank you, Jesus, that through the power of the Holy Spirit we can have daily victory over sin! Thank you that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has indeed set us free from the law of sin and death! Amen.