

Romans 7-the Believer's Relationship to the Law

Romans 7 arises from a continuation of chapter 6:15, "we are not under law but under grace". The old person before Christ had only their moral code or law to guide them and measure their righteousness, but when Jesus came into our lives we were freed or released from the law. We are now judged not by the law, but by the grace of God in Christ. The law was given and demanded that we be perfect and holy, but Christ fulfilled those demands and joined us to Himself, so now we are free—dead to the law, but alive to Christ. Make no mistake, the Bible has a very high regard for God's commandments. Jesus was accused of trying to change or do away with the law, but He made it clear in Matthew 5:17-19 that He had the highest regard for it, "Do not think I came to abolish the law..., I came to fulfill it". Therefore the question arises for the believer in Christ, "What is the relationship between the law and our faith?" In the first six verses of Romans 7, Paul refers to the law 8 times, and in the chapter he refers to the law 23 times. Naturally the question arises about what he means by the law, and since he is writing to a diverse group of Romans, Jews, and Greeks it must refer to a broad concept. In verse 1 he is talking about legal principles in general like a marriage contract, but in verse 4, he probably means the moral/ethical law that we once tried to live up to and would be judged by if we did not have Jesus as our Savior. In verse 7-8, he is talking about the tenth commandment found in the Ten Commandments God gave to Israel in Exodus 20. Therefore we must understand the context of his argument in each passage to ascertain what he means by law.

Jurisdiction

Concerning laws in general, it is a self evident truth that any law only has jurisdiction over the living. There are obvious examples of this like Lee Harvey Oswald. The law was not brought to bear upon him because he was dead. Paul uses the analogy of marriage in verses 2-3 to say that the law of marriage applies only to the living. If a woman's husband dies, she is free to remarry. The application of this logical truth is that spiritually speaking, we were made to die to the law in the sense that we are now joined to a new relationship in which we will be judged for eternal life. We are now new people in a relationship with Jesus, which produces a transformation so "that we might bear fruit for God." The "made to die" phrase is a passive verb meaning it happened to us by an act of God. Since the old person who was judged by the law is in a sense dead, we are no longer under the jurisdiction of the law. In verse 5 and 6, we have a before and after contrast of how the law worked on us before Christ "but now" we have been released from the law, and the difference now is that we serve Christ in newness of the spirit. Before Christ we responded only to our flesh with its

sinful passions, and those passions were “aroused by the law”. Think of the thrill when you were a teenager of breaking free of your parent’s control speeding around in the car breaking all the rules. Our rebellious nature wants to do what is forbidden. In 1919, our country passed the 18th Amendment to the Constitution prohibiting the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcohol. Illegal distilleries, bootleggers, speakeasies (bars), and organized crime exploded. They didn’t call it the “Roaring Twenties” for nothing. Just imagine that the prohibition of something actually increases that activity because of the reaction of our sin nature to a law that we have no heart for. Yet now, in Christ, there is a change, and we are being changed from the inside so that being led by the Spirit of God we develop a heart for God’s law.

We Know that the Law can’t Save us, but what can it Do?

In Romans 7:7-13, we see that the law of God is good, righteous, and holy, but our natural sin nature is only stirred up by it. The law can’t save us, but it can do at least three things: First, the law exposes or reveals sin like a plumb line that can’t straighten a wall, but it can reveal that it’s crooked. Secondly, the law arouses sin as Paul wrote in verse 11, “sin taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me”. By this he meant that it arouses our pride, and deceives me into thinking I can do it. We all can be proud of our self control, our will power, and determination; but in reality we are more like the guy who quit smoking. When his friend asked him if it was hard to do, he said, “Not hard at all, I’ve done it hundreds of times.” Thirdly, the law causes rebellion. Like the Pharisees during Jesus’ time, they just rewrote the law to suit their purposes putting loopholes everywhere, and then boasted about keeping the law and being righteous. Therefore, in verse 13 Paul identifies the problem. The law didn’t condemn me, but it was the sin within me that caused me to break the law that condemned me. Since the law is good but bad things resulted, it is clear that the fault lies with me.

The War Within-Romans 7:14-20

The structure of this section can be broken down into three laments, and each lament consists of three parts. In each lament he states the problem, describes the conflict, and then realizes why the problem exists. These laments describe an internal struggle that all Christians experience to different degrees. Some are by nature calm and self controlled, and seem to be doing very well most of the time, while others like Paul in this passage are feeling a real battle all the time. The great theologian Augustine (circa 400 AD) was one who really struggled with many issues. Before his conversion he had constant contact with concubines (if you know what I mean), and he was a heavy drinker along with a number of other vices. It was hard for him to break all the old habits. He wrote that he actually prayed, “Lord give me

chastity and self restraint, but not yet.” No matter whether you feel very little “war within”, or are more like Augustine, the principle laid out by Paul in Galatians 5:17 is true, “the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”

Before we get into the passage, let me examine a controversy within the church concerning Romans 7:14-24. Part of the church believes Paul was writing about himself before Christ. They cannot imagine how a good Christian could have a battle within with morality and feel like they were losing the battle. I believe they are wrong, and that Paul is talking about his experience as a Christian. Paul was writing that after being saved by Jesus, he felt a real need to live like Jesus, but he was frustrated by his inability to be perfect. In this passage he was identifying the problem, and then in Romans 8 he will solve the problem. I can think of at least four reasons why I believe Paul was writing about his Christian experience. First, in Paul’s distress he is calling out for deliverance from Jesus. What unbeliever would do that? Secondly, Paul is writing in the present tense, “I am doing”, “I am not practicing”, etc. This present tense is a meaningful contrast with the past tense of Romans 6, “having died to sin”. Thirdly, Paul is convicted by the law, whereas an unsaved person is in rebellion against it. All of the great theologians like Augustine, Luther, Calvin believed that Paul was writing of himself as a mature Christian that knew his will power was never enough to overcome sin, but he would need the ministry of the Holy Spirit to change his heart, convict him of sin, and lead him away from it.

In his first lament found in Rom.7:14-17, Paul confides that the law is spiritual but he is fleshly so right off we know there will be a problem. In v.15 he is frustrated because although he knows what he should do, he doesn’t always do it, and he finds himself doing immoral things that he knows are wrong. Therefore in v.17 he is able to see a striking difference between his mental knowledge of right and wrong versus what his body is actually doing. This reminds me of the Yogi Berra story when someone asked Yogi if he found a suitcase with a million dollars would he return it to the owner. Yogi said, “I’d see if I could find the guy that lost it, and if he was poor, I’d give it back.” In the second lament in v.18-20, Paul wrote that the wishing to do good is present, but following through was not. His conclusion in v.20 is that sin (nature) dwells within him. In the third lament he admits that he wishes to do good, but the evil within him is overwhelming his wishes. His dramatic conclusion in v.24 is an eye opener, “wretched man that I am”. Nevertheless, his appeal for help, “Who will set me free?”, and his answer in v.25, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord”, set the stage for his teaching on the ministry of the Holy Spirit in Romans 8.

What NOT to Do.

People usually turn to one of three ineffective ways to deal with the “war within” laid out by Paul. Many go after some easy formula in a “self help” book, like a 3 step recipe for self improvement. Others bounce around to a new spiritual emotional experience to make them feel temporarily successful. Historically the monastics tried avoidance or escapism. They removed themselves from the world and all stimuli by going off to some remote monastery, taking a vow of silence, and living an ascetic life. The problem was that wherever you go, YOU are still there.

We can never achieve victory by ourselves, therefore the Christian’s rule of life is “walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (Gal.5:16)

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