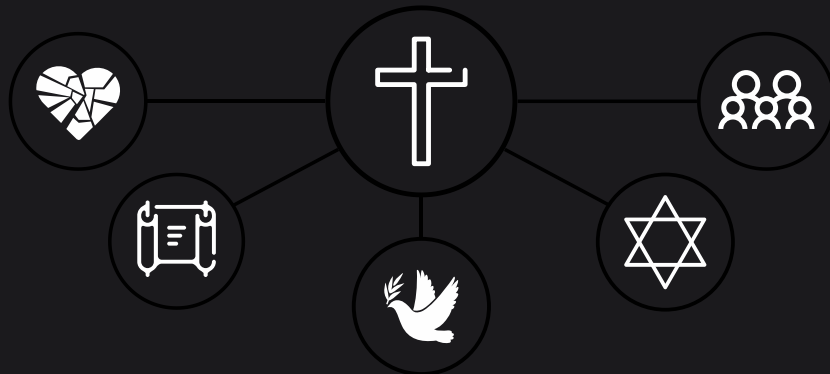




ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



Title: Identity Crisis

Text: Romans 7: 7-25

Date: February 26, 2023

Main Idea: While the law does reveal our sin, the law is unable to save us from our sin.

Personal Study Guide

READ ROMANS 7: 7-25

Highlight – What stands out?

We have a lot of verses to cover this week, and they're packed with truth. So, let's dig in!

1. **Rewind:** According to Romans 7: 4-6; v. 13, why was God's holy law unable to make Paul righteous before God?
2. Paul continues the themes he started in Romans 7:1-6, what familiar words and phrases do you notice? What themes have you read before?
3. According to v. 7, how are we able to recognize sin? Does this verse infer that the Law helps us in our sin, or just makes one more aware of it?
4. What did sin "use" to seize the opportunity to get Paul to produce "coveting of every kind" in verse 8?
5. How does Paul describe the relationship between the law and sin?
6. How does Paul refer to the law in Romans 7:12? How is the law referred to within the Old Testament (Leviticus 18:5, Deuteronomy 4:1, Proverbs 4:4)?

7. Why would God want sin to grow beyond measure (v. 13)?

8. What dilemma does Paul highlight in the closing verses of the chapter (vv. 21-24)?

9. According to vv. 24-25, who rescues Paul from this battle within?

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Why do you think Paul focused on “coveting” while describing this aspect of the law? What is unique about the act of coveting when compared to the other ten commandments (Exodus 20)?

2. Review Romans 7:7-10. Why does Paul say the Law is incapable of saving us from our sin? Why is having the Law not enough to change our behavior?

3. Some commentators have stated that Romans 7:7-11 has similarities to the story of Adam and Eve in the garden from Genesis 3. What similarities do you recognize?

4. In Romans 7:24, why does Paul say “who” not “how”? Why is it important to realize that only Christ can rescue you from the power of your sin?

5. In Romans 6, a Christian is not a slave to sin, yet in another sense the believer is still a slave to sin when referenced in Romans 7:25. How would you explain this?

6. What was the law powerless to do for Paul both before and after he became a Christian (see Romans 6:14; 7:10, 15-18; 8:3)?

7. In Romans 7:25, Paul sums up this passage in stating, “with my mind I myself am serving the law of God but with my flesh, the law of sin.” How can the mind rule over the flesh? (Hint: read ahead in Romans 8:1-4).

8. How can Galatians 5:16-24 help explain Paul’s internal conflict mentioned in Romans 7:15?

Apply – How does this change me?

1. To what extent does vv. 7-11 describe your past experience when you learned that coveting or another sin was wrong?
2. Dr. Smith has asked the question, “Do you sin because you are a sinner or are you a sinner because you sin?” How would you answer this question in light of Romans 3:23 and 1 John 1:8-10?
3. As long as believers are in this world, they will continually face the temptation to sin. How does Paul describe this condition? What does he state is the solution (vv. 21-25)?
4. Paul was transparent about his struggle with sin. Why do you think this is important in the life of a believer?
5. How does God’s desire and plan to rescue us from this dilemma reveal to you God’s character and purposes?

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. **Personal Response:** As Dr. Smith discussed, the **law** serves as a mirror that shows us how dirty we are, yet cannot clean us. It can’t redeem us, but shows us our awareness of sin and our need for Christ to cleanse us from our sins. As we meditate upon this truth, what would the “mirror” of the law reflect about your life today?

2. **Personal Response:** Is there something in your life that you don't want to do but feel really tempted to do? What are some steps you can take to not fall into temptation?

Commentary: Romans 7:7-25 by John Stott

Note to Group Leaders: This commentary as well as the resources can help give you insight as you teach the lesson.

2. A defence of the law: a past experience (7-13)

We have seen how negative most of Paul's references to the law have been in the letter's early chapters. Further, verses 1-6 of Romans 7 celebrate our release from the law. These verses contain three outspoken expressions of this theme. First, we died to the law through Christ's body in order that we might belong to him (4). That is, it is impossible to give our allegiance to the law and to Christ simultaneously. Just as a first marriage must be terminated by death before a remarriage is permissible, so death to the law must precede commitment to Christ. Secondly, the law aroused our sinful passions, so that we 'bore fruit for death' (5). And this sequence of law-sin-death will have given Paul's readers the distinct impression that he thought the law responsible for both. Thirdly, we have now been released from the law in order to serve in the newness which the Holy Spirit brings (6). And this new Spirit-controlled life was impossible until we had received our discharge from the law.

All this is strong meat and strong language. The law is apparently characterized as barring marriage to Christ, arousing sin, causing death, and impeding life in the Spirit, so that the sooner we gain freedom from it, the better. It must have sounded to some like full-blown antinomianism. Indeed, the Romans' anticipated reaction prompts Paul to ask the ultimate antinomian questions: *Is the law sin?* (7), and *Did that which is good (sc. the law) ... become death to me?* (13). That is, is the law responsible for both sin and death, and therefore so deleterious in its influence that we should repudiate it altogether? Is that what Paul is teaching? To both questions Paul immediately responds with his violent negative: *Certainly not!* (7). *By no means!* (13).

We note that this is the second objection to his teaching to which Paul responds. The first was 'Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?... Shall we sin because we are ... under grace?' (6:1, 15). The second is 'Is the law sin?... Did the law become death to me?' (7:7, 13). The first is a question about grace, whether it encourages people to sin. The second is a question about law, whether it is the origin of sin and death. So the apostle defends both grace and law against his detractors. In Romans 6 he has argued that grace does not encourage sin; on the contrary, it renders sin inadmissible, even inconceivable. In Romans 7 he now argues that the law does not create sin and death; on the contrary, it is our fallen human nature which is to blame for them.

More fully, in his treatment of the law (to which he has at last come) he performs a skilful balancing act. For he is neither wholly positive towards the law, nor wholly negative, but ambivalent. On the one hand the law is indeed the law of God, the revelation of his righteous will. In itself it is *holy, righteous, good* and spiritual (12, 14). On the other hand, it is unable to save sinners, and its impotence is a major reason for every continuing inner conflict. This, then, is his double theme in the rest of the chapter: first our present section, 'A Defence of the Law' (7–13), followed by 'The Weakness of the Law' (14–25).

a. The identity of the 'I'

As Paul develops his thesis, we are immediately struck by the prominence of the personal pronoun. Both this paragraph (7–13) and the subsequent one (14–25) are full of the first person singular, 'I' and 'me'. Indeed, the debate about Romans 7 is reduced in essence to an enquiry into the identity of this 'I'.

Our first and natural reaction (confining ourselves now to verses 7–13) is that this is a page from Paul's pre-conversion autobiography. What he writes seems too realistic and vivid to be either a purely rhetorical device or the impersonation of somebody else. At the same time, his references are not so personal as to apply to him exclusively. They are general enough to include others. Consequently, from the early Greek Church Fathers onwards, many commentators have interpreted Paul's experiences as being not only autobiographical but also typical, representative either of human beings in general or of the Jewish people in particular. The options are, then, that 'I' in this paragraph is Paul or Adam or Israel. And the key question is how the four events of verse 9 apply to each: (a) *Once I was alive apart from law*; (b) *... the commandment came*, (c) *sin sprang to life* (d) *and I died*.

If Paul is describing stages of his own experience, then two reconstructions are possible. The first is that he is alluding to his boyhood. In childhood innocence he was *alive apart from law*; 'the commandment came' at his bar mitzvah when aged thirteen, in which he became a 'son of the commandment' and assumed responsibility for his own behaviour; then with his 'dawn of conscience' *sin sprang to life*; and adolescent rebellion caused his separation from God. That is, he 'died'. It is a plausible scenario, except that a Jewish boy,

circumcised on the eighth day and brought up as 'a Hebrew of Hebrews', could hardly be described as being 'apart from law'. On the contrary, it will have been inculcated into him almost from birth. Perhaps therefore we should understand 'alive apart from law' as meaning that he had not yet come consciously under the law's condemnation.

The second possible reconstruction is that Paul is referring to his pre-conversion life as a Pharisee. In this case he was 'alive' in his own estimation, and untroubled by the law, since in regard to legalistic righteousness he was 'blameless'. 'He is speaking', writes John Murray, 'of the unperturbed, self-complacent, self-righteous life which he once lived before the turbulent motions and conviction of sin ... overtook him.'²¹ In order to describe what happened then, he set his pre-law and post-law situations in dramatic contrast. Apart from law sin was dead and he was alive, but when the commandment came, 'there was a complete reversal', for sin sprang to life and he died (8b, 9a). It was the tenth commandment which opened his eyes to his inner sinfulness, and so brought him to conviction of sin and spiritual death. The main difficulties with this suggestion are that 'alive apart from law' is not the most obvious description of self-righteousness, and that we have no independent evidence of a spiritual crisis in Paul before his Damascus road encounter with the risen Lord.

So is Paul's 'I' in reality Adam? Although many ancient commentators have understood Paul's experience as typical of human beings, it is modern scholars who have drawn out the parallels between verses 7-11 and Genesis 2-3, and so between Paul and Adam. Ernst Käsemann goes so far as to state that 'the event depicted [sc. in verses 9-11] can refer strictly only to Adam', that 'there is nothing in the passage which does not fit Adam' and that 'everything fits Adam alone'. James Dunn makes a more moderate evaluation, although he sees the reference to Adam in verse 9 as 'all but inescapable', especially in this sense: 'before the commandment came, life; after the commandment, sin and death'. And John Ziesler identifies the same pattern in Romans 7:7-13 and Genesis 2-3, namely 'innocence, command, transgression, death'.

One may go even further than this and detect six parallel stages in the history of Adam and Paul. First, Paul's *once ... alive apart from law* could correspond to the age of innocence in paradise. Second, *the commandment came* could refer to God's command to Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. Third, Paul's statements that sin *sprang to life* and seized *the opportunity afforded by the commandment* (8) could mean that 'sin (the serpent) was in the garden even before man, but had no opportunity of attacking man until the command "thou shalt not eat of it" ... had been given'. Fourth, Paul's complaint that sin had *deceived* him (11) recalls Eve's complaint that the devil had deceived her. Fifth, Paul's awakening to his sin was due to the prohibition of covetousness (7f.), while the sin of Adam and Eve was similarly one of false desire. Sixth, disobedience to God's commandment

brought death to both Paul (9, 11) and Adam. Thus the sequence of law-sin-death, so prominent in Romans, is evident in Genesis also.

These correspondences are striking. At the same time, one could also draw up a list of non-correspondences. Paul is certainly not quoting from the Genesis narrative, for the only verbal parallels are the words *commandment*, *deceived* and *death*. It is not even clear that Paul is consciously alluding to Adam and Eve, since he does not mention them. The most we have liberty to say is that the two biographies (Adam's and Paul's) ran parallel.

So is 'I' Israel? This alternative is attractively commended by Douglas Moo. He points out, first, that the law throughout Romans 7 is the Mosaic law, Torah, so that a reference to Adam centuries previously would be an anachronism, even if 'what is true of Israel under God's law through Moses is true *ipso facto* of all people under "law".' Secondly, he says, 'the coming of the commandment' (9) 'is most naturally taken as a reference to the giving of the law at Sinai', including the tenth commandment against covetousness.³³ Thirdly, he suggests that the sequence of verses 9–10 (life—commandment—sin—death) could be describing Israel's history in a personal 'vivid narrative style'.

At the same time, Dr Moo recognizes that only Adam and Eve before the fall could accurately be described as 'alive apart from law'; and that all others have been from birth 'dead in trespasses and sins'. Conversely, Israel's pre-Sinai period could be styled 'alive without the law' only in the sense of 5:13 that 'before the law was given, sin was in the world', but that 'sin is not taken into account when there is no law'. Dr Moo concludes by reminding us that 'the individual Jew had a lively sense of corporate identity with his people's history', as when at Passover he rehearsed Israel's story as having been his own, so that Paul may well have been identifying himself with Israel in their experience of the law. In this case, 'egō [I] is not Israel, but egō is Paul in solidarity with Israel'.

Most commentators are understandably reluctant, when considering the identity of the 'I' in verses 7–13, to be compelled to choose between Paul, Adam and Israel, and several combinations have been proposed. For example, John Ziesler suggests that Paul's use of the tenth commandment prohibiting covetousness as a paradigm of sin's relation to the law 'enables him ... to make a fusion between the giving of the Law at Sinai and the giving of the command not to eat in the Garden of Eden'. Yet it would be impossible to eliminate the autobiographical element altogether. Perhaps, therefore, Paul is both telling his own story and universalizing it. In brief, his experience (the sequence of comparative innocence, law, sin and death), though uniquely his own, is also everybody's, whether Adam's in the garden, Israel's at the mountain or, for that matter, ours today.

b. The law, sin and death

We return now to the text of verses 7–13, and to the two questions which Paul asks, namely whether he is teaching that the law is the cause of sin and death.

Question 1: Is the law sin? (7–12).

Must the law be dubbed as being in itself 'sinful' in the sense that it is responsible for creating sin? After his emphatic rejoinder (*Certainly not!*), the apostle begins to delve into the relations between the law and sin.

First, *the law reveals sin*. He has already written that 'through the law we become conscious of sin' (3:20). Now he writes: *Indeed, I would not have known what sin was except through the law* (7a). This probably means both that he had come to recognize the gravity of sin, because the law unmasks and exposes it as rebellion against God, and that he had been brought under conviction of sin by it. In his case it was the tenth commandment prohibiting covetousness which convicted him. *For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet"* (7b).

Ever since Bishop Krister Stendahl first used the expression, it has been fashionable to speak of Paul before his conversion as having had a 'robust conscience', in contrast to the 'introspective conscience' of the West. The ground for this judgment is that he described himself when a Pharisee as having been 'blameless' in regard to righteousness under the law.³⁹ But is this an adequate basis for declaring Paul's pre-conversion conscience 'robust'? The 'legalistic righteousness' (NIV), in which he claimed to be blameless, was surely an external conformity to the law. But covetousness (*epithymia*) is internal—a desire, a drive, a lust. Indeed it 'includes every kind of illicit desire', and is itself a form of idolatry,⁴¹ because it puts the object of desire in the place of God. Paul could well have obeyed the other nine commandments in word and deed; but covetousness lurked hidden in his heart, as did other evil thoughts of which Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount. So it was the prohibition of covetousness which opened Paul's eyes to his own depravity. The rich young ruler was another case in point.⁴³ Paul's pre-conversion conscience, therefore, was neither 'robust' nor morbidly 'introspective'. That is a false polarization. Instead, his conscience was performing its healthy, God-intended function, especially when confirmed by the Holy Spirit. That is, it was convicting him of sin.

Secondly, *the law provokes sin*. Having already said that 'our sinful passions [were] aroused by the law' (5), Paul now writes: *But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead* (8). *Aphormē* ('opportunity') was used of a military base, 'the starting-point or base of operations for an expedition' (BAGD), a springboard for further advance. So it is that sin establishes within us a base or foothold by means of the commandments which provoke us. This provocative power of the law is a matter of everyday experience. Ever since Adam and Eve, human beings have always been enticed by forbidden fruit. This strange phenomenon is apparently called 'contra-suggestibility', 'the propensity some people have to react negatively to any directive'. For example, a peremptory traffic signal says 'STOP' or 'REDUCE SPEED NOW', and our instinctive

reaction is, 'Why should I?' Or we see on a door the notice 'PRIVATE—DO NOT ENTER', and we immediately want to cross the prohibited threshold.

Augustine gives us in his *Confessions* a good example of this perversity. One night at the age of sixteen, in company with 'a gang of naughty adolescents', he shook a pear tree and stole its fruit. His motive, he confesses, was not that he was hungry, for they threw the pears to the pigs. 'I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing, but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong.' 'Was it possible', he asked himself, 'to take pleasure in what was illicit for no reason other than that it was not allowed?'⁴⁶

In all such cases the real culprit is not the law but sin which is hostile to God's law (8:7). Sin twists the function of the law from revealing, exposing and condemning sin into encouraging and even provoking it. We cannot blame the law for proclaiming God's will.

Thirdly, *the law condemns sin* (9–11). We have already looked at verse 9 and asked whether its four stages—*I was alive apart from law, the commandment came, sin sprang to life, and I died*—are intended as a description of Paul, Adam or Israel. Our conclusion was that they refer primarily to Paul, but to Paul in solidarity with both the human and the Jewish race. Through this personal experience, he continues, *I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death* (10). In other words, the law condemned him. To explain this further, Paul first repeats the sentence from verse 8 that *sin seized the opportunity afforded by the commandment* (he mentions 'the commandment' six times in these verses because it is the role of the law which he is unfolding), and adds that sin first *deceived me* (presumably by promising blessings it could not deliver) and then *through the commandment put me to death* (11). Thus, all three of these verses (9, 10 and 11) speak of the commandment in relation to death; they anticipate verse 13, in which Paul will clarify that what caused his death was not the law but sin which exploited the law.

Here, then, are the three devastating effects of the law in relation to sin. It exposes, provokes and condemns sin. For 'the power of sin is the law'. But the law is not in itself sinful, nor is it responsible for sin. Instead, it is sin itself, our sinful nature, which uses the law to cause us to sin and so to die. The law is exonerated; sin is to blame. The teaching of this paragraph is well summarized in the question of verse 7 and the affirmation of verse 12. Question: *Is the law sin?* (7). Affirmation: *So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good* (12). That is, its requirements are both holy and righteous in themselves and also good (*agathos*), meaning 'beneficent in their intention'. This brings Paul to the objectors' other question about the law.

Question 2: Did the law become death to me? (13).

Certainly verse 10 seemed to implicate the law as being responsible for death, stating that the commandment which 'was intended to bring life actually brought death'. So was the law guilty of offering life with one hand and

inflicting death with the other? *Did that which is good, then, become death to me?*

The apostle answers this second question as he has answered the first, with his emphatic *mē genoito*, 'God forbid!' The law does not cause sin; it exposes and condemns it. And the law does not cause death; sin does. *But in order that sin might be recognised as sin, it produced death in me through what was good (viz. the law), so that (this was God's intention) through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful* (13b). Indeed the extreme sinfulness of sin is seen precisely in the way it exploits a good thing (the law) for an evil purpose (death).

In answer to both questions, then, Paul has declared that the culprit is not the law (which has good designs) but sin (which misuses the law). Verses 8 and 11 are closely parallel. Both describe sin as *seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment*, either to produce sin (8) or to inflict death (11). Take a criminal today. A man is caught red-handed breaking the law. He is arrested, brought to trial, found guilty, and sentenced to prison. He cannot blame the law for his imprisonment. True, it is the law which convicted and sentenced him. But he has no-one to blame but himself and his own criminal behaviour. In a similar way Paul exonerates the law. 'The villain of the piece is sin', indwelling sin which, because of its perversity, is aroused and provoked by the law. Those antinomians, who say that our whole problem is the law, are quite wrong. Our real problem is not the law, but sin. It is indwelling sin which accounts for the weakness of the law, as the apostle will go on to show in the next paragraph. The law cannot save us because we cannot keep it, and we cannot keep it because of indwelling sin.

3. The weakness of the law: an inner conflict (14–25)

Having vindicated the law in verses 7–13 as not responsible for sin or death, Paul now proceeds to show that nevertheless the law cannot be responsible for our holiness either. The law is good, but it is also weak. In itself it is holy, but it is impotent to make us holy. This important truth lies behind the whole final section of Romans 7. It depicts the hopeless struggle of people who are still 'under the law'. They are right to look to the law for moral guidance, but wrong to look to it for saving power.

As we turn to this passage, what immediately catches our attention is that, although he retains the personal 'I', Paul changes the tenses of all his verbs. He has been using the past tense: 'Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came ... I died' (9). This was his past, pre-conversion experience. But now suddenly his verbs are in the present tense: 'What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do' (15). It sounds like his present, post-conversion experience. This would be the natural interpretation of the personal pronouns and the present tense. But is this really the Christian apostle who is describing

his own continuing painful conflict between what he wants and what he does, between desire and performance? Or is he impersonating somebody else?

Before studying the text, it is essential to probe the identity of this 'I'.

a. Is this 'I' regenerate or unregenerate?

The earliest Greek interpreters from Origen onwards repudiated the view that Paul was referring to his own moral struggles. They could not accept that a regenerate and mature believer like Paul could describe himself as *sold as a slave to sin* (14), when he has just celebrated his transfer to another slavery which in reality is freedom (6:6, 17–18, 22). Could this Paul confess that he cannot do what he wants to do, while he does do what he hates (15)? Could it be Paul who cries out in great anguish and wretchedness for deliverance (24), apparently now forgetting the peace, joy, freedom and hope of the justified people of God which he has previously portrayed (5:1ff.)? So these commentators concluded that Paul was impersonating an unregenerate person, at least until 8:1ff., and was portraying the human being in Adam, not in Christ. Some contemporary scholars who hold this position back it up with a quotation from the first-century Roman poet Ovid: 'I see and approve the better things, but I pursue the worse.'

The western church, however, followed Augustine, who first espoused the view of the Greek commentators but subsequently changed his mind, and then influenced the Protestant Reformers. Their view was that Paul is writing as a truly regenerate and even mature believer. Three characteristics of his self-portrait support this. The first concerns his opinion of himself. He calls himself *unspiritual* (14; RSV 'carnal') and declares that *nothing good lives* in him, that is, in his *sinful nature* (18). But unbelievers are self-righteous and self-confident; only believers think and speak of themselves in self-disgust and self-despair.

Secondly, there is Paul's attitude to the law. He not only calls it *holy, righteous and good* (12), and *spiritual* (14), but also refers to it *as the good I want to do* (19). He states both that *in my inner being I delight in God's law* (22) and that *I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law* (25). So here is a man who not only acknowledges the intrinsic goodness of the law, but who loves it, delights in it, longs for it, and considers himself enslaved to it. This is not the language of the unregenerate. For in the next chapter Paul declares that 'the sinful mind [AV 'the carnal mind'] is hostile to God' and that 'it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so' (8:7). Paul, however, feels love for the law, not enmity; and is submissive to it, not rebellious.

Thirdly, consider Paul's longing for final deliverance. The wretched man's cry (24) expresses desire rather than despair. He yearns to be rescued 'out of this body of death', that is, out of this present state of sinfulness and mortality into a new and glorious resurrection body. Is not this an example of the inward 'groaning' of God's people who are eagerly waiting for the redemption of their bodies (8:23)?

Such a person, deploring evil in his fallen nature, delighting himself in God's law, and longing for the promised full and final salvation, seems to provide ample evidence of being regenerate and even mature.

Commentators still range themselves on both sides of this debate. The most eloquent recent defence of the 'unregenerate' position is provided by Douglas Moo. He sees Paul as 'looking back from his Christian understanding to the situation of himself, and other Jews like him living under the law of Moses'.⁵² What was decisive for him in reaching his conclusion was the contrast between Paul's self-designation here as sin's slave (14) and his statements in Romans 6 and 8 of Christian freedom.

The most cogent statement of the alternative position has been provided by Charles Cranfield, who writes that these verses in Romans 7 'depict vividly the inner conflict characteristic of the true Christian, a conflict such as is possible only in the man in whom the Holy Spirit is active, and whose mind is being renewed under the discipline of the gospel'.

But neither position is wholly satisfactory. It would be as strange for unregenerate people to want ardently to do what is good as for regenerate people to confess that they cannot do it (15–19). How can a regenerate person, who has been set free from sin (6:18, 22; 8:2), describe himself as still its slave and prisoner (7:14, 23–25)? And how can an unregenerate person, who is hostile to God's law (8:7), declare that he delights in it (7:22)? There is an inherent contradiction here, which makes both extreme positions unacceptable.

Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones rejects both. Anyone who delights in God's law 'cannot possibly be ... unregenerate', and anyone who calls himself sin's slave cannot possibly be a 'fully regenerate' person either. The wretched man's cry is entirely incompatible with the profile of a Christian in the rest of the New Testament.⁵⁶ He suggests, therefore, that the people Paul is describing are those who in times of revival are 'brought under conviction of sin by the Holy Spirit', feel themselves 'utterly condemned', struggle to keep the law in their own strength, but have not yet grasped the gospel. They are for a time 'neither unregenerate nor regenerate', for they experience 'conviction but not conversion'.⁵⁸ He cites John Bunyan's intense agony of spirit portrayed in *Grace Abounding* as an example, and refers to the teaching of several Puritans, especially William Perkins. My hesitation in accepting this view is that what distinguishes the people Paul is depicting, indeed impersonating, is not the unusual situation of revival, but rather their peculiar relation to the law. Their anomaly was that, although they were Christian enough to delight in God's law, they were not Christian enough to obey it. They were making the mistake of looking to the law, instead of to the Spirit, for their sanctification.

Professor Dunn lays his emphasis on 'the eschatological tension of being caught between the two epochs of Adam and Christ'. He believes that Paul is giving voice to his experience as a regenerate Christian, who had indeed died in Christ to sin and the law, but who has not yet fully shared in the resurrection. So he 'is suspended (so uncomfortably) between the death and resurrection of

Christ'.⁶¹ Consequently the believer's 'I' is split, suspended between the epochs, divided between my belonging to Christ and my belonging to this age'. This is 'the two-sidedness of the believer's experience',⁶³ being simultaneously in Adam and in Christ, enslaved and liberated. And the piteous cry of verse 24 is for 'escape from the tension of being suspended between the two ages'.

In response to this explanation, we must certainly agree that Christians are caught in the tension between the 'already' of the kingdom's inauguration and the 'not yet' of its consummation, and that this tension can be painful. But is not the antithesis between freedom and slavery too stark for them to be combined in the same person at the same time? Can we really maintain that all Christians are simultaneously 'set free from sin' and 'sold as slaves to sin'? This is not a tension, but a contradiction.

If we go back to the beginning, and try to construct a profile of the 'I' of Romans 7:14–25, we come up against three stubborn facts which cannot be avoided. First, he is regenerate. If the unregenerate mind is hostile to God's law and refuses to submit to it (8:7), then somebody who loves God's law and longs to submit to it is regenerate. Secondly, although regenerate, he is not a normal, healthy, mature believer. For believers 'used to be slaves to sin' but now 'have been set free from sin' and have become slaves of God and righteousness (6:17ff.), whereas this believer declares himself to be still the slave and the prisoner of sin (14, 23). True, conflict between flesh and Spirit is normal Christian experience, and Reformed commentators have tended to identify Romans 7:14ff. with Galatians 5:16ff. Thus Calvin writes in his comment on verse 15: 'This is the Christian warfare between flesh and Spirit, of which Paul speaks in Gal. 5:17.' But is it? Galatians 5 promises victory now to those who walk in the Spirit; Romans 7, however, while expressing assurance of ultimate deliverance (25), describes only unremitting defeat.

Thirdly, this man appears to know nothing, either in understanding or in experience, of the Holy Spirit. Many commentators have paid insufficient attention to what Bishop Handley Moule called 'this absolute and eloquent silence' in Romans 7 about the Holy Spirit. He is mentioned only in verse 6. Since that verse characterizes the Christian era as the age of the Spirit, one would have expected this chapter to be full of the Spirit. Instead, Romans 7 is full of the law (mentioned, with its synonyms, thirty-one times). It is Romans 8 which is full of the Spirit (mentioned twenty-one times) and which calls the indwelling of the Spirit the authenticating mark of belonging to Christ (8:9). If then we are looking for a description of the normal Christian life we will find it in Romans 8; Romans 7, with its concentration on the law and its omission of the Spirit, cannot be held to describe Christian normality.

To sum up, the three salient features of the person portrayed in Romans 7:14–25 are that he or she loves the law (and therefore is regenerate), is still a slave of sin (and therefore is not a liberated Christian) and knows nothing of

the Holy Spirit (and therefore is not a New Testament believer). Who then is this extraordinary person?

If we approach the question from the perspective of 'salvation history', that is, of the story of God's unfolding purpose, the 'I' seems to be an Old Testament believer, an Israelite who is living under the law, including even the disciples of Jesus before Pentecost and probably many Jewish Christian contemporaries of Paul. Such people were regenerate. Old Testament believers were almost ecstatic about the law. 'Blessed is the man ... [whose] delight is in the law of the LORD.' The Lord's precepts give both 'joy to the heart' and 'light to the eyes'.⁶⁸ 'I delight in your commands because I love them.' 'Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long.'⁷⁰ This is the language of born-again believers.

But these same Old Testament believers who loved the law lacked the Spirit. And the penitential psalms bear witness to their inability to keep the law they loved. They were born of the Spirit, but not indwelt by the Spirit. He came upon special people to anoint them for special tasks. But the prospect of the Spirit's continuous indwelling belonged to the messianic age. 'I will put my Spirit in you,' God promised through Ezekiel. And Jesus confirmed this: 'He lives with you and will be in you.'⁷² It seems accurate, therefore, to describe pre-Pentecost believers in terms of 'love for the law but lack of the Spirit'. And even after Pentecost it appears that many Jewish Christians took time to adjust to the transition from the old aeon to the new. To be sure, they loved the law, but they were also still 'under' it. Even those who had grasped that they were 'not under law but under grace' for justification had not all grasped that they should also be 'not under law but under the Spirit' for sanctification. They had not yet come out of the Old Testament into the New, or exchanged 'the old way of the written code' for 'the new way of the Spirit' (7:6).

Hence their painful struggle, their humiliating defeat. They were relying on the law, and had not yet come to terms with its weakness. In order to emphasize this, Paul identifies with that stage of his own pilgrimage. He proclaims the impotence of the law by dramatizing it in the vivid terms of personal experience. He describes what happens to anybody who tries to live according to the law instead of the gospel, according to the flesh instead of the Spirit. The resulting defeat is not the law's fault, for the law is good, although weak. The culprit is *sin living in me* (17, 20), the power of indwelling sin which the law is powerless to control. Not until Romans 8:9ff. will the apostle bear witness to the indwelling Spirit as alone able to subdue indwelling sin. Before that, however, he will refer specifically to the law as 'weakened by the sinful nature', and will declare that God himself has done what the sin-weakened law could not do. He sent his Son to die for our sins in order that the law's requirement might be fulfilled in us, provided that we live 'not according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit' (8:3-4). Only when the gospel has replaced the law, and the Holy Spirit the written code, can defeat be replaced by victory.

If the 'wretched man' of verse 24 is typical of many Jewish Christians of Paul's day, regenerated but not liberated, under the law and not yet in or under the Spirit, does Romans 7 have any application to us today? Or must we jettison it as having historical interest only but no contemporary relevance? I want to suggest that there is both a wrong and a right way to apply this passage to ourselves. The wrong way is to regard it as a pattern of normal Christian experience, so that we all have to pass 'through Romans 7 into Romans 8'. This would create a two-stage stereotype of Christian initiation, in which the Holy Spirit first regenerates us and only later indwells us, and in which defeat is the necessary prelude to victory. But that was a once-for-all, Old Testament/New Testament, 'salvation-history' development. God does not intend it to be repeated in everybody today. For we live on this side of Pentecost, so that the indwelling of the Spirit is the birthright and hallmark of all who belong to Christ (8:9).

The right way of applying Romans 7–8 is to recognize that some church-goers today might be termed 'Old Testament Christians'. The contradiction implied in this expression indicates what an anomaly they are. They show signs of new birth in their love for the church and the Bible, yet their religion is law, not gospel; flesh, not Spirit; the 'oldness' of slavery to rules and regulations, not the 'newness' of freedom through Jesus Christ. They are like Lazarus when he first emerged from the tomb, alive but still bound hand and foot. They need to add to their life liberty.

As we now turn to the text (14–25), it divides itself naturally into two paragraphs (14–20 and 21–25), both of which open with a positive reference to the law. *We know that the law is spiritual* (14), and *in my inner being I delight in God's law* (22). The tragedy is, however, that the writer (or rather the half-saved person Paul is impersonating) cannot keep this law. Nor can it keep (or save) him. So both paragraphs elaborate the weakness of the law, which is attributed to sin.

b. The law and the 'flesh' in believers (14–20)

In this paragraph the apostle writes almost exactly the same things twice, presumably for emphasis, first in verses 14–17 and then in verses 18–20. It may therefore be helpful if we consider them together. Each of the two sections begins, continues and ends in the same way.

First, each begins with a frank acknowledgment of innate sinfulness. It is a question of self-knowledge. *We know* (14) and *I know* (18). And in both cases the self-knowledge concerns the flesh (*sarx*). Although *the law is spiritual*, the writer himself is *unspiritual*, 'fleshly' (*sarkinos*), still possessing and being oppressed by his twisted, self-centred nature (*sarx*), on account of which he can also describe himself as *sold as a slave to sin* (14), or 'the purchased slave of sin' (NEB). Literally translated, the expression would be 'sold under sin'. But because the verb *pipraskō* was used of selling slaves, and because of the

preposition 'under' (suggesting the slave-master's authority over his slaves), it seems legitimate to add the word 'slave'. We have already noted the difficulty of reconciling this admitted slavery to sin with the freedom from sin, and slavery to God and righteousness, which Paul claimed for Christians in the previous chapter (6:18, 22). The continuing slavery to sin is easier to understand if the 'I' is a believer who is still under the law.

The corresponding statement of verse 18a is this: *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature (sarx)*. This cannot be interpreted absolutely, meaning that there is nothing at all in fallen human beings which can be labelled 'good', since God's image in which we are still made, although defaced, has not been destroyed, and since Jesus himself spoke of the possibility of even pagans doing good.⁷⁵ Since the person Paul is describing goes on in the second part of the verse to say that he has *the desire to do what is good* (18b), it seems likely that the 'nothing good' of the first part of the verse alludes to his inability to turn the desire into action. It also means that everything 'good' in human beings is tainted with evil.

Those who are still under the law, therefore, although (being regenerate) they love it, yet (being also *sarkinos*, fallen) are enslaved, and so incapable of turning good desires into good deeds.

Secondly, each of the two sections of this paragraph continues with a vivid description of the resulting conflict (15 and 18b–19). After confessing that he does not altogether understand his own actions (15a), and that he has desires for good which he cannot carry out (18b), the writer summarizes his inward struggle in negative and positive counterparts. On the one hand, *what I want to do I do not do*, and on the other *what I hate I do* (15b). Similarly, *what I do is not the good I want to do*. Instead, *the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing* (19). He is conscious of a divided 'I'. For there is an 'I' which wants the good and hates the evil, and there is an 'I' which acts perversely, doing what is hated and not doing what is wanted. The conflict is between desire and performance; the will is there, but the ability is not.

Surely this is the conflict of a regenerate person who knows, loves, chooses and longs for God's law, but finds that by himself he cannot do it. His whole being (especially his mind and will) is set upon God's law. He wants to obey it. And when he sins, it is against his reason, his desire, his consent. But the law cannot help him. Only the power of the indwelling Spirit could change things; and that will come later.

Thirdly, each section of this paragraph ends by saying (in almost identical words) that indwelling sin is responsible for the failures and defeats of the person under the law whom Paul is impersonating (16f. and 20). Both verses contain a premise and a conclusion. The premise is stated in the phrase *if I do what I do not want to do* (16a, repeated in 20), drawing attention to the radical discontinuity between will and deed. Then the first conclusion is *I agree that the law is good* (16b) and the second is that *it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me* (17, repeated in 20). Who, then, is to blame for the good

I do not do and the evil I do? This is what Paul clarifies. It is not the law, for three times he declares its holiness and goodness (12, 14, 16). Besides, in wanting so ardently to do good and avoid evil, he is thereby endorsing and approving the law. So the law is not to blame. But neither, Paul goes on, am 'I myself' responsible, the authentic 'I'. For when I do evil I do not do it voluntarily. On the contrary, I act against my better judgment, my will and my consent. It is rather the *sarx*, *sin living in me*, the false, the fallen, the counterfeit 'I'. The real I, 'I myself', is the 'I' which loves and wants the good, and hates the evil, for that is its essential orientation. Therefore the 'I' which does the opposite (doing what I hate and not doing what I want) is not the real or the genuine 'I', but rather a usurper, namely 'indwelling sin' (17, 20), or *sarx* (18). In other words, the law is neither responsible for our sinning, nor capable of saving us. It has been fatally weakened by the *sarx*.

c. The double reality in believers under the law (21–25)

Having given a graphic description of inward conflict, as he identifies with believers under the law, Paul now summarizes the situation in terms of their double reality, even though this is not the complete story, since still the Holy Spirit is not yet included in it. He depicts this double reality four times in four different ways, as the two egos, the two laws, the two cries and the two slaveries.

First, there are two egos: *So I find this law* ('I discover this principle', REB) *at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me* (21). The antithesis between the 'I' who wants the good and the 'I' beside whom the evil lies is more obvious in the Greek sentence by reason of the repetition of *emoi*, meaning 'in me' or 'by me'. One might paraphrase it: 'When in me there is a desire to do good, then by me evil is close at hand.' Thus the evil and the good are both present simultaneously, for they are both part of a fallen yet regenerate personality.

Secondly there are two laws: *for in my inner being* (that is, in the real regenerate me) *I delight in God's law* (22). It is the object of my love and the source of my joy. This inner delight in the law is also called *the law of my mind* (23), because my renewed mind approves and endorses God's law (cf. 16). *But I see in addition another law*, a very different law, which is *at work in the members of my body*. This Paul calls *the law of sin* which is continuously *waging war against the law of my mind* and *making me its prisoner* (23). Thus the characteristic of 'the law of my mind' is that it operates 'in my inner being' and 'delights in God's law', whereas the characteristic of 'the law of sin' is that it operates 'in the members of my body', fights against the law of my mind and takes me captive. Once again, this is the condition of the person who is still under the law; it is the Holy Spirit who is missing.

Thirdly, there are two cries from the heart. One is *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?* (24). The other is *Thanks be*

to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! (25a). The former is not so much ‘a heart-rending cry from the depths of despair’ as a cry of longing, which ends in a question mark, while the latter is a cry of confidence and thanksgiving, which ends in an exclamation mark. Yet both are the ejaculations of the same person, who is a regenerate believer, who laments his corruption, who yearns for the final deliverance at the resurrection (indeed, ‘groans’ in waiting for it, 8:23), who knows the impotence of the law to rescue him, and who exults in God through Christ as the only Saviour, although again the Holy Spirit is not yet introduced. The two cries are almost simultaneous, or at least the second is an immediate response to the first. It anticipates the declaration of Romans 8:3–4 that God has done through his Son and Spirit what the law was powerless to do.

Fourthly, there are two slaveries. *So then*, Paul concludes, *I myself* (*autos egō*, the authentic, regenerate I) *in my mind am a slave to God’s law*, for I know it and love it and want it; *but in the sinful nature* (in my *sarx*, my false and fallen self, uncontrolled by the Spirit) I am a *slave to the law of sin* (25b), on account of my inability by myself to keep it. The conflict is between my renewed mind and my unrenewed *sarx*. The conflict in Galatians is different because there it is the Spirit who subdues the *sarx*.

Those who think that the ‘I’ of Romans 7 is an unregenerate unbeliever, who reaches the depths of wretchedness and despair in crying out for rescue, and who then immediately announces his salvation in the second cry which counters and cancels his first, find verse 25b an impossible anticlimax. It is embarrassing to the point of being intolerable, since it expresses a continuing slavery to the law of sin. The only way they can find to solve their problem is to do violence to the text (though with no manuscript support whatever) and to change the order of the verses, putting verse 25b *before* the cry of verse 24. Thus, C. H. Dodd approved James Moffatt’s rearrangement, ‘restoring the second part of verse 25 to what seems its original and logical position before the climax of verse 24’. J. B. Phillips follows suit. So does Käsemann, who regards verse 25 as a later gloss.

But verse 25b stands stubbornly there in all the manuscripts, and we have no liberty to erase it or move it. Moreover, it is seen to be an appropriate conclusion if the whole passage describes the continuing conflict within Old Testament believers. The two egos, two laws, two cries and two slaveries together constitute the double reality of people who are indeed regenerate but who are still living under the law. Indwelling sin masters them; they have not yet found the indwelling of the Spirit. Nor has Paul yet alluded to it.

When we are seeking a legitimate application of Romans 7 to ourselves today, we are likely to find verses 4–6 to be crucial. For these verses set the two orders or ages and covenants or testaments over against each other in sharp antithesis as *the old way* and *the new way*. Both are called ‘service’, but the old was characterized by ‘letter’ (a written code), while the new is characterized by ‘Spirit’ (his indwelling presence). In the old order we were married to the law

and controlled by the flesh, and we bore fruit for death, whereas as members of the new order we are married to the risen Christ and liberated from the law, and we bear fruit for God. We need then to keep a watch on ourselves and others, lest we should ever slip back from the new order into the old, from a person to a system, from freedom to slavery, from the indwelling Spirit to an external code, from Christ to the law. God's purpose is not that we should be Old Testament Christians, regenerate indeed, but living in slavery to the law and in bondage to indwelling sin. It is rather that we should be New Testament Christians who, having died and risen with Christ, are living in the freedom of the indwelling Spirit.¹

Additional Resources:

Podcast: [Help Me Teach the Bible with Michael Kruger on Romans 1-7](#)

Article: [Romans 7 Does Describe Your Christian Experience by John Piper](#)

Article: [Romans 7 Does Not Describe Your Christian Experience by Thomas Schreiner](#)

Commentary: Romans, F.F. Bruce

Commentary: *Romans*, N.T. Wright

Commentary: *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Colin Kruse

Commentary: *NICNT, The Epistle to the Romans*, Douglas Moo

Book: *Romans: A Visual and Textual Guide*, Steven E. Runge

¹ John R. W. Stott, [The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 197–215.

Book: *Romans: Encountering the Gospel's Power*, John Stott

Book: *The Wiersbe Bible Study Series: Romans: How to Be Right with God, Yourself, and Others*" by Warren W. Wiersbe.

Book: *Romans: The Gospel of God for Obedience to the Faith*" by Sarah Ivill.