The Law and the Christian’s relationship to it! Romans 7: 1-25

The letter to the Romans is Paul’s attempt to explain, expound, and interpret the gospel: the message of what God has done in Christ. In the first four chapters of this letter, Paul has presented a powerful exposition of how Christ by his death has achieved our justification with God. In the second section of his letter, extending from chapters 6 to 8, Paul, in light of the good news of being justified with God, picks up and expounds upon three key factors – issues and concerns that have been affected by the coming of Jesus and the salvation that was achieved by him. Paul, in these three chapters, expounds upon Sin, the Law, and the Holy Spirit. Paul addresses these issues one by one in these chapters, devoting one chapter to each of these fundamental concerns.

While each of these three issues – Sin, the Law, and the Holy Spirit – is a separate concern for Paul, at the same time they are so interrelated that the reader must be careful to maintain an awareness of each of these issues as being present throughout each and every one of these three chapters. For example, last week David focused on Paul’s exposition of sin and the relationship of the Christian to sin. Now in chapter 7, Paul picks up the topic of the Law and the Christian’s relationship to it. For Paul, the two issues of law and sin are related to each other. A grasp of what Paul has presented in chapter six with reference to sin significantly affects our understanding of what Paul will argue regarding the law and the Christian.

Now the topic of the Law – the Mosaic Law – the commandments – is the main focus of Paul’s exposition in chapter 7. John Stott observed that terms “the Law, the commandments, or written code is mentioned in every one of the first 14 verses and some 35 times in the whole passage extending from 7:1 to 8:4.”1 This is Significant! For previously in chapter six, Paul declared twice in his exposition in that chapter that we “are not under the law”. (Rm. 6:14-15) This then raises the crucial question for everyone one of us regarding this statement. What does Paul mean by saying: we are no longer under the law?

In chapter 7, Paul begins to help clarify the meaning of “We are no longer under the law”. Admittedly, this is not an easy chapter. It is a hard and confusing chapter. This is a chapter that Christian interpreters have for centuries understood in very different ways. So the average reader could easily be tempted to skip over it. Yet, this would be a foolish mistake. All of us need to establish our own view of whether or not the Old Testament Law is still binding upon us. This is the first main concern that Paul addresses in this problematic chapter. The importance of this chapter is that it helps each one of us to form our own opinion of our proper position to the Law. Moreover, this chapter is valuable to us.

in more ways than merely informing us about the Law and our relationship to it. The chapter provides valuable insights into the continuing corrupting power of sin in our lives and valuable insights regarding the corruption and weakness of our own human natures. All of these insights, when pondered and understood, can significantly strengthen us in our aspiration to live lives pleasing to God.

I. Dead to the Law: No longer under its authority (Rm. 7:1-6)

Overall in these next six verses, Paul will clarify and explain his previous contention that believers who are in Christ are no longer under the law! Paul in verse four states this plainly again, saying: I want you to know brothers and sisters “that you have died to the law.” This, according to Schreiner, is the central proposition of this first section.² The rest of the verses of this first section function to help us gain an understanding of what dying to the law means, how this happened, and the ramifications flowing from this state of affairs. This statement that you are no longer under the law would be viewed as a very radical statement by some of Paul’s contemporaries. So why does Paul raise the issue? Paul raises the issue because it was part of the message of his gospel. Yet, to those of the recipients of this letter whose background was Jewish, this proposition “you are not longer under the law” would appear to be scandalous! Paul’s opponents – even some Jewish Christians – could interpret this to mean that Paul was rejecting the Law. This, to some of Paul’s hearers, would be perceived as the grounds for discrediting him and his gospel. So Paul in these first six verses reiterates his position regarding the Law, making the following points. 1) Christians have been released from the Law. 2) What this means. 3) How this happened.

A. Christians have died to the Law. (vs. 4) This is the central proposition that Paul is asserting in this entire section. Being dead to the law implies that an individual is or has been released or set free from the law’s authority over that person. According to verse one being dead to the law means that the law “is no longer binding or has authority over us” (NIV). Paul then illustrates this point by giving a specific example of a woman who is bound by the laws of marriage. The point of this example used by Paul is that the married woman is obligated to obey and submit to specific guidelines of marriage because she is married to her husband. (vs. 2-3) The key point in this example is that the rules of marriage no longer apply to her or are no longer binding upon her if her husband dies. Paul’s application is simple. Christians are free from the rules and obligations of the Law. Just as a woman is free from the obligations stemming from her marriage when her husband dies; the Christian is now free from the obligation of the Law of Moses because we have died with Christ.

B. Dead to the Law, but alive to Christ. This proposition is the key to understanding what Paul is saying in this first section. Yes, we have died to the Law. This statement, Paul

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wants us to grasp. But equally important to grasp in understanding Paul’s overall proposition is that we also understand Paul’s insistence that at the same time that we belong to Christ and are under his authority. Verse 4 explicitly declares “that we belong to Christ” An implication that stems from Paul’s illustration of the married woman is that Christians are now “married to Christ”. We belong to him. He is our husband. We are under his authority. So the overall point is not merely that we have died to the authority of the Law. Yes! This is true. But the corollary is that we are under the authority of Christ. How did this happen? Through our baptism into Christ. We died to the law and became united with Christ (we belong to him) “through the body of Christ”. This is a reference to Jesus’ death and the benefits that have been transferred to each one of us because of our belief and baptism into Christ.

C. The meaning of being released from the Old Testament Law. (vs. 5-6) Having noted that Paul does contend that we as Christians have been released from the law, the crucial question then becomes: what then does it mean that we have been released from the Law? For example, does that mean that because the Law is not longer binding upon us, that we are thereby free from the obligation to know and live out the Ten Commandments. Some Christians say yes to this interpretation. I say No! I believe that Christians are still under obligation to know and practice the commands of God as found in the Old Testament. In chapter 7, beginning with verses 5-6, Paul begins to clarify and explain what he means by his statements that we have died to the law and that we are no longer under the law in this chapter. Beginning with verses 5-6, Paul declares two key aspects that clarify his meaning to being dead to the law. Let us take a brief look.

“For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.” Vs. 5

“But now we have been released from the law, having died to that which held us captive....” Vs. 6

What is the meaning of these two verses (vs. 5-6) that Paul uses to conclude this section? How do they contribute and even help provide valuable clues to discerning the all important question: what does it mean for Christians to be released from the law? Cranfield, in his commentary on these verses, declares that verses 5 & 6 together are not only closely tied together as signaled by the particle “for” but that these two verses together function to elucidate verse four. 3 This is a fantastic observation. Let me be so bold as to say it more bluntly. These two closing verses of the first section help us to clarify what Paul means by his statement that we are no longer under the law. What does Paul want us to see? Lots! So the first thing to see is:

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First, Paul wants us to see strong reiteration of the principle that we in Christ have been released from the Law. (vs.6) Come on, Paul, I get it. Yet, twice in verse six, Paul declares this again for emphasis. “But now we have been released the law”. Note the law and not just sin in verse six is described as something that held us captive. This release has a purpose: We are released from one authority to someone else – Christ – “in order to serve in the new way of the Spirit.” This also looks forward to chapter 8 where Paul will describe this new way in depth.

Secondly, Paul wants us to see what we have been released from. This is principally seen in verse 5, which is quoted above. We have been released from the former way of living life, described as living in the flesh. This is a description of the state of our life before we became Christians. Living “in the flesh” is not a neutral term. It is not merely describing living our lives in physical bodies. The term “in the flesh” describes human life where the “basic direction of their lives was determined and controlled by their fallen sinful natures.” Living life being controlled by sin leads to one thing: Our death. Paul affirms this truth here (vs.5) and elsewhere (Rm. 8:1). But now, according to verse six, we in Christ have been released from this penalty. For Christians there is now no condemnation – there is now no fear of being punished by death. According to both Cranfield and Stott, verses 5 & 6 together elucidate and affirm that the statement in verse 4 that we have died to the law. And to die to the law means that we are no longer under the law. For Stott and Cranfield the expression no longer under the law means that Christians are no longer under the condemnation of the law.

Thirdly, Paul wants us to see that we have not only been released from the law's condemnation, but that we have been set free from the power of the law to provoke sin in our lives. What? Paul maintains strongly in chapter 7 that the law does not just not restrain sin in our lives; the law fosters sin in us! Schreiner in his commentary on this section is very adamant in saying that the sole point of verse five is not that we have been released from the condemning power of the law; but rather we have been set free from sin’s power to use the law to instigate, arouse, and promote sin in our lives. What? Can you see that this is so contrary to the popular view held by Jews and even Christians that the law did not merely fail to restrain sin but the law is seen as an accomplice to sin? The law helps sin (as seen as an alien power) to arouse our sinful passions – holding us captive and ultimately even causing us to rebel against God. If what Paul is teaching is true, then it raises at least a couple of pertinent questions. Is the law then evil and not good? If sin is abetted by the help of the law, is the conclusion then that the law itself the cause of my death? These are two great questions that Paul has probably heard before in declaring the gospel. Paul now addresses this issue in the following verses in his second section of this chapter again. Let us take a closer look.

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4 Cranfield, p. 337.
5 Schreiner p. 350-352.
II. The Law is good; Sin is bad! (vs. 7-13)

This second section of this chapter is triggered by Paul’s earlier comment that sin
used the law to arouse sinful passions to incite sinful actions that lead to death. This could
lead to the false inference that the law – the Mosaic Law – is responsible for Paul’s and
anyone else’s death. Paul in this short section strongly wants to repudiate the idea that the
law is ultimately responsible for enticing Paul to sin; that the law itself is evil, since it was a
means by which Paul was led into sin. No! According to Paul, not so! **Sin is the main culprit!**
Sin is the main culprit behind the mess that we all deal with in this life – even as Christians.
The law is not the main culprit for causing my death according to Paul. This is the main
point of these six verses of the second section. Let us take a closer look at some of Paul’s
statements and viewpoints that Paul wants us to grasp from these six short verses.

**A. The Law is good!** The law is not to be held responsible for Paul’s death or anyone
else’s death. Twice, Paul states that the law is good. “The law according to Paul is “holy”. (vs.
12) This means that the law is not sinful. This is Paul’s initial point in verse 7, that
introduced this second section by the rhetorical question, is the law sin? Paul strongly
counters “absolutely not” What does this mean? This is a very strong affirmation by Paul
**that the law is good!** Paul then provides a specific aspect highlighting “the goodness of the
law”. What is that?

The law is the means by which anyone – including Paul – gets to know what is right
from what is wrong. This is the inference from Paul’s statement in verse 7 “that if it had not
been for the law, I would not have known sin. I interpret this last statement to be that Paul is
saying that the law helped him to know what sin is – or what is right and what is wrong.
Case in point: A person can come to know that coveting is wrong by coming to hear the
commandment “You shall not covet. “ I think this is a great example for two reasons. I do not
think it is obvious to everyone that coveting is wrong or that coveting is a sin. The
commandment against coveting makes me aware that desiring something that
someone else has is wrong.

Secondly, this is a great example, for it should bring to mind for each one of us – the
story of Eve coveting the fruit that God prohibited in the Garden of Eden. In this story, God
specifically prohibited Eve fruit from one particular tree. So what then is wrong? The
command – not to covet – is not wrong. So what is wrong? The persistent desire to covet is
wrong. And in some cases the implicit action that follows from the coveting. The desire to
covet is to blame for breaking God’s law. But again is the law the culprit? No! Is the law to
blame for desires and actions that lead to death? No! So who is to blame? Who then is the
culprit that leads to our death? Sin!

**B. Sin is the culprit.** Sin used or **exploited something good toward its own evil
ends.** This is the main point that Paul makes in this section. Sin should be seen as an alien
power outside of a person that seeks to incite a person to do evil and wrong. Sin is not just
another term for wrongdoing specifically coveting as Paul used the term verse 7. Sin is seen
**a personified presence** – an evil presence-stalking and inciting all human beings including
Paul himself to do wrong. Twice in this section, Paul declares that "sin seizing the opportunity through the commandment" deceived him to do something wrong. (vs. 8, 11) Sin promised something good – but instead brought death. Here, buried in this obscure section, Paul gives a brief insight into why sin was allowed to do this by God. Paul concludes this second section with a statement that death came to him from that which was good, "in order that sin might be shown to sin, and through the commandment (which is good) might become sinful beyond measure." Now that is some twisted statement. Basically, I think Paul is affirming that God allowed sin to have this power. God allowed Sin (as perceived as an alien evil power existing apart from us) to pervert and corrupt something God had created that was good-in order to advance its own ends. Point: This is the nature of evil. Evil – whether sin, or an evil person, or evil being, or anything else that is evil. Evil perverts and destroys what is good-even using what is good, holy, and right to achieve its evil ends.

III. The Law is good! We are defective! We are sold under sin! (vs.14-25) This section of twelve verses is the third and final section that concludes Paul's exposition upon the Law – particularly the Law's relationship to the Christian. Paul has already presented a number of thought provoking ideas concerning the Law that all of us as Christians must ponder. These ideas that Paul has presented earlier in this chapter do have a bearing on how we live our lives as Christians. We are not longer under the law: the Law's power to condemn and to encourage sin no longer has its gripping negative hold upon us. We are free from these negative aspects of the law. In light of the 2nd section, we should now be aware of the nature of our true adversary. It is sin. This is the true culprit instigating sin and causing our death. Finally, Paul wraps his discussion up concerning the Law by focusing on still another culprit that aids and abets sin to promote sin's evil agenda. Who is this culprit? Who is to blame for the responsibility of causing our own deaths? This 2nd culprit is ourselves!

Paul strongly contends that it is not just the law – which in itself is good – but our own flesh (our fallen natures) that is used and exploited by Sin, in order to have us desire what is evil and do what is wrong! This assessment of humanity’s condition is true of all humanity – including Paul. This reflects our state of living even as Christians. We are according to Paul “sold under sin”. So let us take a look at this final section to see what further insights that Paul wants us to be aware of as we seek to live out our lives as Christians.6

A. Paul wants to do good! This is Paul’s description of himself as a Christian and a description that applies to all Christians. Paul as a Christian strongly wants to do what is good. Paul states this explicitly in verse 18. “For I have the desire to do what is right...” Or again in verse 21, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is right...” Or again vs. 21. “when I want to do what right...” Paraphrasing Paul’s implicit inference flowing from his

6. Cranfield, insightfully comments on a second but related concern in this chapter saying "that we gloss over it to our undoing".6
desire to do good is the recognition that the law is good and that the law commends what is good. Paul recognizes that he knows what good is from the Law. By desiring what is good is agreeing and carrying out the good that the law itself commends. (vs.16) For Paul states that part of his nature “delights in the law of God.” This is a confession by Paul that he himself delights in doing what is good. But, Paul contends that this desire to do good is matched by an opposing desire to do wrong. This is very troubling to Paul.

B. Paul wants to do evil! This entire section of twelve verses bears witness to an ongoing struggle within Paul himself not only to want to do good, but equally Paul within himself wants to do evil. This is strongly affirmed by Paul. This confession does not merely reflect the state of Paul’s life before he was a Christian, but soberly bears witnesses to Paul’s awareness of himself struggling to live a life pleasing to God even as a Christian. Previously in chapter 6, Paul had asserted that Christians have “died to sin”. This final section clarifies that major assertion by giving evidence that while Christians may have died to sin, they living as Christians must still struggle with sin. This is a major point of this final section. I think this is the meaning of Paul’s initial statement that “we are sold under sin.” Paul strongly bears witness to this ongoing struggle with sin by vividly illustrating the struggle in his own life. Paul summarizes this struggle right from the beginning by characterizing it as: “I do not understand my own actions.” Then three times in the following verses, Paul states what we have seen already: He knows what is good, and desires to do the good; but cannot. “For I have the desire to do what is right, but I don’t have the ability to carry it out.” (vs.18) In fact, he confesses desiring and doing what is evil. (vs.10) Paul knows that this is wrong! Paul confesses that he himself is “wretched”! A careful reading of his section discloses that Paul feels inadequate to deal with this struggle himself. Paul does end the chapter raising the possibility of hope of being delivered from the defeat of this struggle. How? Through Christ! In the next chapter, Paul will provide insights on how Jesus is enabling us to deal with the ongoing struggle with sin.