

Notes on Romans 7

Intro: That Paul considered the gospel system to be greatly different from the Law is never more clearly manifest than in Romans 7-8. In these two chapters, by means of contrast, Paul shows how that man's release from law as a means of righteousness was a necessary part of God's plan to make men righteous. If chapters 3-4 describe what God has done to make man righteous by means of the work of His Son. Then chapters 7-8 reveal what God has done to make men righteous by means of the work of His Spirit.

Context: In chapters 6-8 Paul shows that the concept of justification by faith does not lead to a life of sin. The whole section begins with this question, "Shall we continue in sin?" It ends with this triumphant answer, "Nothing shall separate us from the love of God". Between those two statements is the explanation of why this is so. The answer is carefully and methodically set forth in distinct sections:

6:1-14 First Paul reveals that the very experience of faith itself involves a union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. Just as Christ died to sin once for all to live to God, so the believer dies to sin once for all and lives to God, giving both his spirit and body to God.

Restating the question, "shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace", Paul now answers it with two other answers:

6:15-23 In this section the answer is that when one obeys from the heart the teaching of the gospel, he presents himself as a servant of righteousness. Therefore, his life will be characterized by sanctification resulting in eternal life instead of lawlessness resulting in spiritual death.

7:1-6 Our release from law has made possible a marriage to Christ whose fruit in our life is righteousness. In fact, we could say that release from law was a necessary thing because the joining or union of the Romans to the Law produced by means of sinful passion only fruit to death.

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v. 1-3—Two illustrations (not allegories): The first illustrates the binding power of law until death. The second illustrates the possibility of release by death to be joined to another! Paul's point is not to teach on marriage but to illustrate two principles he will use in his application.

v. 4—The Romans were condemned by the Law as transgressors. They were bound by that law for life like man is bound to law for life or more specifically like a woman is bound to her husband for life. Only a death could release them.

Christ sacrifice made possible for the release of the Romans from the Law. This passage is not affirming that the Law was binding until the cross and then a new law, the Law of Christ, replaced it calling for their condemnation. The Law's function of convicting men of sin continued even after Jesus died and established the sin of both Jew and Gentile. (Paul is using the Law to establish the sin of people 36 years after Jesus died. So what is the point:

Christ's death made possible the Romans release from law. The Romans having died with Christ in baptism were released from law to be joined to Christ in another marriage and to live under grace.

v. 5—Paul now shows why release from the Law or death to the Law was necessary. The Romans while in the flesh were led by sinful passions that resulted in their spiritual death.

"In the flesh" refers to the period when they were under Law, not under grace. It calls attention to the condition of man under Law, under the dominion of the flesh. The Law may have been present in his external life but not in his heart. This is a point Paul will elaborate upon later as he contrasts the man walking according to the flesh with the man walking according to the spirit.

In order to be right by works, one must obey all the commands of God perfectly. The tendency of man seeking righteousness by a law outside himself is to reduce the law to its most obvious outward expression while ignoring its inward quality! This is essentially what the Pharisees did with the law. Cf. Mt. 5. The command "thou shall not kill" required more than what you do with the body. It pointed to a righteousness in the soul. The Pharisees got the external act right but ignored the inward requirement of the law. It was external present in their life but not in their hearts. Consequently, under law sinful passions are not checked and treated as sinful and therefore continue to work to produce their fruit--external acts of disobedience. These in turn lead to spiritual death.

v. 6—Those who have accepted the gospel have been released from the Law and now serve in newness of the Spirit, not oldness of the letter.

This release is comparable to that illustrated in v. 2. I.e. there remains no more a binding obligation to keep the law perfectly. This makes a great difference in the nature and quality of the Christian's service to God. Under the old way, there was but external conformity to Law. But under the new way, the law is written in the heart. The former was achieved by the application of the "letter", the written law. The latter is achieved by the acceptance of the help of the Spirit who writes the law in the heart resulting in true holiness.

Thus, Paul's point is established that release from Law does not result in a life of sin but instead in a life of righteousness and that because of God's grace working in his life.

Living under the Law resulted in bondage to sin (7:7-25).

The Law is spiritual; but sin makes use of it to bring about death (7:7-14).

Paul's discussion of the need to be released from law in order to live a righteous life, might be taken to suggest that the Law itself was at fault, that it was sin since obeying it led to sin. Paul now seeks to clarify this point by distinguishing between the Law and Sin.

7:7-12 Does this mean the Law itself is sinful? Not at all; but rather, it is holy, righteous, and good, intending to impart life by obedience; revealing sin to the one becoming familiar with it. But sin uses law as an instrument to bring about death by making man aware of it and in this awareness providing opportunity for temptation. We do not need deliverance from law because the Law is sin, but because sin used the Law to effect Paul's spiritual death (v. 7-13).

Paul feels that a description of his own experience under the law will make clear the distinction he is making and illustrate the point he has made, viz., that under law, sinful passions work to produce fruit unto death.

1. Alive (the time before accountability when the actual knowledge of sin is not possible). The period of innocence.
2. Paul was then confronted with a law demanding his perfect obedience. He begins his attempt to obey its "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not". And he is doing well. But one of them becomes a problem. "Thou shalt not covet" addresses the condition of heart toward what belongs to others. This one Paul has difficulty with. Sin became alive and died. The Law has given Paul the knowledge of sin.

7:13-14 Does this mean then that the Law is cause of death?

Paul does not want anyone to misunderstand his point. Death to law is essential to righteousness; but not because the law itself is sin or the cause of sin.

Simply put, the Law, which is good, was used by Sin to deceive Paul. Sin's use of Law heightens our awareness of how bad sin is, affecting man's very death by what was intended to make him live!

Sometimes Paul goes right to the point without these careful qualifiers. In 2 Cor. 3 he explicitly says, "the letter kills".

Sin has used the Law to kill Paul. In this way sin demonstrated itself to be utterly sinful, effecting death through the use of law! This verse wraps up the first idea and leads into the next.

Because the flesh wins the war against the mind, the man under Law is sold into bondage to sin (7:15-25).

7:14-25 Are we to say then that law, which is good, becomes the cause of our death? Not at all; instead we should say that sin shows itself utterly sinful by effecting our death by means of the very thing God gave us to keep us spiritually alive! No, the problem is not with law but with man in his relation to it. The law is spiritual; but man is of flesh, and in that state there is an ongoing struggle between the desire of the inner man to live above sin and the appeal of the flesh to live in sin. As result of that struggle, sin rules and dwells in man, resulting in bondage and imprisonment to it.

v. 14-23—The distinction between flesh (body or members) and spirit (inner man or mind) is clearly drawn. Paul recognizes the two aspects of man's nature. His mind may want to do right. The members of his body may come under the rule of sin. Paul clearly recognizes a weakness in man which provides a doorway for sin (cf. 8:3).

Thus the law is spiritual but man, being of flesh, is subject to temptations to the flesh resulting in sin. Such is the plight even of the most spiritual man under law. He may be willing, he may not want to do wrong, but sin overpowers the will through the appeal to the flesh and conquers the man.

v. 24-25—This condition brings about the law or rule of sin and death in the man--what Paul calls "sin dwelling in me". It brings spiritual death, defeat, and despair! Why? Because there is no way out of sin, no forgiveness! The cry of the wretched man is expressed, v. 24.

Explained in v. 25. Answered in 24. Such were all who rely upon their own efforts under law! Such were every Jew under the Law of Moses! Such is every man today who relies upon his own goodness to get him to heaven. Helplessly and hopeless lost! Here we hear echoes of 5:6!

However, Paul shows that that all change when one comes to Christ. For through the help of the Spirit a mighty difference is made.