

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>Scripture Memory</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Number:</b>	<b>94</b>		Gary L.W. Johnson
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Romans 7:1-25</b>		
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### FREEDOM FROM BONDAGE TO THE LAW

What is the Apostle's purpose in this chapter of Romans? Actually, it is fourfold, "(1) to *defend God's 'holy and righteous and good' law* from any charge of causation or complicity in the human disobedience and death that sin provokes through the law's prohibition of evil; but also (2) to *dramatize the law's impotence* to effect, in those still enslaved to the spiritual death of the present age, the upright behavior that it enjoins; and, in the course of achieving the first two purposes, (3) to *demonstrate the depth of sin's enslaving grip* on those who are *in the flesh*, a tyranny that cannot be broken merely by a conscious and conscientious affirmation of the law's goodness; leading finally to his objective (4) to *extol the power of God's Spirit*, who now achieves in those who trust Christ what the law itself could not, namely, the fulfillment of its righteous requirements (Rom. 8:4). Integral to this argument is the flesh/Spirit antithesis that Paul articulates in Romans 7:5-6, a contrast that the apostle identifies as *temporal* – I will argue, *redemptive-historical* – in character: '*when we were . . . but now. . .*' Equally integral is the contention that Romans 7:5-6 and the questions that these verses raise (7:7, 13) set the agenda for the development of Paul's argument throughout Romans 7:14-8:17 (and perhaps as far as 8:39). I conclude, finally, that Paul's theological purpose and rhetorical strategy at this point in the epistle demonstrate that the *I* who speaks *throughout* Romans 7:7-25 portrays the inability of humanity *in the flesh* – that is, apart from vital union with the risen Christ and therefore devoid of the re-creating power of the Spirit – to comply with the divine law, despite the conscience's affirmation that the law is *holy and righteous and good.*"<sup>1</sup>

- I. **THE PLACE OF THE LAW OF GOD (7:1-13).** This war, as Morris points out, "was a constant battleground in Paul's controversies with Jewish opponents. For them the law was the greatest good, the mark of God's kindness to his people in that he had given it to them. They studied it with the greatest of diligence, regarding even the minutest detail as important. They took it as central for any pious person as he sought to live a life of service to God. It seemed to them that Paul was rejecting this greatest of goods that God had given. Paul found himself in a difficult position. On the one hand, he could not regard the way of the law as the way of salvation, and he said this with the utmost firmness. But on the other hand, it was a good gift of God and, rightly used, was of great importance. In this section of his letter Paul gives serious attention to the place of the law. Readers often spend a lot of time and energy discussing the question of whether in this chapter Paul is talking about the regenerate or the unregenerate and, if the latter, whether it is the unregenerate as such or the unregenerate as seen from the perspective of the regenerate. Such questions are not unimportant, but we should be clear that it is the place of the law that Paul is discussing."<sup>2</sup>

- A. **The Illustration of Marriage.** Our culture's views of the disposable nature of marriage is clearly on display in the lives of movie stars. Elizabeth Taylor, for example, was married eight times to seven different husbands. Our culture has a very flippant attitude toward one of the most fundamental relationships in all of human society. But in the eyes of God,

marriage is an indissoluble bond, regardless of its disposable status to our surrounding culture. There are only three things that can break the bond of marriage: death, infidelity, or abandonment (cf. Matt. 19:1-9; 1 Cor. 7:15). The words of the officiating minister, drawn from Scripture, likely echo in our minds: "Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate" (Matt. 19:6). Paul was well aware of the seriousness of the marriage bond, as were his readers, and so he used it to illustrate the believer's newfound relationship to Christ (Rom. 7:1-6).<sup>3</sup>

B. ***The Nature of the Law.*** Paul asks, "Is the law therefore sinful? Absolutely not." The law is good, but people are not! Look at what the law actually does: sin is seen by the light of the law and sin is provoked by the law.

II. ***SANCTIFICATION AND THE REALITY OF REMAINING SIN (7:14-25).*** Paul describes the very real sinister conflict that exists in the true Christian – we *love* the law of God but we *live* the law of sin. Some scholars who think that Christian experience is described here believe that Paul describes the substandard Christian experience that one should transcend as one matures spiritually. The attempts to limit this to substandard Christian experience are unsatisfying. The purpose of the text is to delineate the inability of the Torah to transform human experience. Paul is not drawing a psychological portrait in which believers who are defeated by sin find the secret to victory over it. His point is that the flesh (native human capacities) has no ability to observe God's commandments. Noted commentator J. R. W. Stott, for example, thinks the reference is to OT believers who did not yet possess the Spirit but loved God's law. These OT believers experienced perpetual defeat since the Spirit did not indwell them but only anointed them with power to specific tasks and ministries. Stott goes on to argue that some believers also live under the confines of 7:14-25 since their religion is legalistic and rule-based instead of being liberated by the power of the Spirit. Stott's view is unpersuasive, for Paul does not criticize legalism here but inability to keep the law. Nor is the reference here to individual believers during the OT period.<sup>4</sup>

**CONCLUSION:** G. C. Berkouwer captures well the apostle's intent: "Throughout God's Word we run into the idiom of struggle. And confession of guilt is especially common with those who know the fellowship of God. The call of the believer is always a psalm *de profundis*. It is man in touch with grace who cries: *If thou, Jehovah, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?* (Ps. 130:3). Not the child of wrath but the servant of God says: *And enter not into judgment with thy servant; for in thy sight no man living is righteous* (Ps. 143:2). It is before the throne of grace that guilt reveals itself. Self-complaint is a natural product of communion with God. When John speaks of walking in the light in which God dwells, he immediately begins to witness to the blood that cleanses us (1 John 1:7). It is when we confront the glory and grace of God that we realize we still stumble in many ways (James 3:2). To speak of the Church is to speak of the struggle to remain children of God in communion with him and to live gratefully in virtue of the forgiveness of sin. This life of sanctification proceeds in weakness, temptation, and exposure to the powers of darkness. Hence the life of the believer is fenced in with admonitions: *Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin* (Heb. 12:4). Or in the incisive words of Paul: *Neither give place to the devil* (Eph. 4:27), or of James: *Resist the devil* (James 4:7). All these admonitions are expressions of divine grace. Grace prompted Paul to rage against the sins of the Corinthian Church, against such fornication as is not even among the Gentiles (1 Cor. 5:1), against pride (1 Cor. 5:2), against greed and irreverence (1 Cor. 11:21). Perfectionism is a premature seizure of the glory that will be: an anticipation leading irrevocably to nomism. The *second blessing* constitutes the link. The believer, who understands his justification and views his life against the backdrop of Divine grace, will gain a deeper knowledge of his own sinfulness. When Peter, stupefied by the wonderful catch of fish, confronts the goodness of his Master, he cries out: *Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord!* (Luke 5:8). Surrounded by the radiance of the Master, Peter can only bow his head. Later those other words were to cut through the night: *If all shall be offended in thee, I will never be offended* (Matt 26:33). By these words Peter meant to envelop Christ with his fidelity and love. Christ must here

bathe in Peter's glory, not Peter in Christ's. We know the outcome."<sup>5</sup> Calvin took the same approach. In his commentary on Romans 7:25 he wrote, "*So I myself, &c.* A short epilogue, in which he teaches us, that the faithful never reach the goal of righteousness as long as they dwell in the flesh, but that they are running their course, until they put off the body. He again gives the name of mind, not to the rational part of the soul which philosophers extol, but to that which is illuminated by the Spirit of God, so that it understands and wills aright: for there is a mention made not of the understanding alone, but connected with it is the earnest desire of the heart. However, by the exception he makes, he confesses, that he was devoted to God in such a manner, that while creeping on the earth he was defiled with many corruptions. This is a suitable passage to disprove the most pernicious dogma of the Purists (*Catharorum*), which some turbulent spirits attempt to revive at the present day."<sup>6</sup>

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup>D. E. Johnson, "The function of Romans 7:13-25 is Paul's Argument for The Law's Impotence and the Spirit's Power, and Its Bearing on the Identity of Schizophrenic 'I' in *Resurrection and Eschatology: Theology In Service of The Church in Honor of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.* (P&R, 2008), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>L. Morris, *The Epistle To The Romans* (Eerdmans, 1988), p. 269.

<sup>3</sup>J. V. Fesko, *Romans: The Lectio Continues: Expository Commentary on The New Testament* (RHB, 2018), p. 178.

<sup>4</sup>T. R. Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary On The New Testament* (Baker, 1998), p. 392.

<sup>5</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Sanctification* (Eerdmans, 1952), p. 66.

<sup>6</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. John Owen (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 274-75.