

**Covenant Life College**  
**Paul's letter to the Romans**  
**Session 7 – Robin Boisvert**  
**Romans, Chapter 7 “The Christian and the Law”**

*1. Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives?*

*2. Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage.*

*3. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.*

*4. Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.*

*5. 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.*

*6. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.*

*7. What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.”*

*8. But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead.*

*9. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.*

*10. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.*

*11. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.*

*12. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy righteous and good.*

*13. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.*

*14. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.*

*15. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*

*16. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law that it is good.*

*17. So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

*18. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.*

*19. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.*

*20. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.*

21. *So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.*  
22. *For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being,*  
23. *but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.*  
24. *Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*  
25. *Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.*

## **I. Introduction**

In Chapter 5, Paul begins to describe the benefits of justification through the gospel of Jesus Christ. The first is peace with God. In Chapter 6 the theme that dominates is our union with Christ, which delivers us from the penalty and power of sin. We were slaves of sin, but now we are slaves of God, the truest freedom there can be. Now, in Chapter 7, Paul takes up the subject of the law.

Paul has said things about the law in this letter that raise serious questions about his attitude toward the law. E.g., “The law brings the knowledge of sin” (3.20). “For the law brings wrath ...” (4.15). “The law came in to increase the trespass ...” (5.20). And “... you are not under law, but under grace” (6.14).

So, what is the relationship of the Christian to the law? And just what do we mean by the word *law*?

## **II. Some General Questions About the Law**

### **A. What is the law of God?**

The *law* takes various forms. In the first five books of the Bible (the law of Moses or the Pentateuch) we find laws that are **political**, **ceremonial** and **moral**. The political laws were in force while Israel was a nation-state. The ceremonial/ritual laws (of purity and sacrifice) were instructional and temporary, pointing clearly to a fulfillment in Christ. Moral law, as seen in the Ten Commandments, was further summarized in Jesus’ two great commandments (Matthew 22.37-40). In this moral sense, the law of God mirrors the character of God.

### **B. What is the purpose of the law?**

There are three main functions of the law.

First, as was mentioned above, the law reflects the character of God. In doing so, it shows us our sin by comparison (Romans 3.20). By showing us our sin and our need for pardon, we are driven to seek God for mercy and forgiveness. In this way, the law leads us to repentance and faith in Christ (Galatians 3.19-21).

Second, the law restrains evil. The law cannot change the heart, but it can restrain the heartless. It helps to sustain civil order.

Third, the law serves to guide Christians into the good works that God has prepared for us to walk in (Ephesians 2.10). Obedience to the commands of God demonstrates the love we profess for Jesus Christ (John 14.17).

### III. Romans 7.1-6 ~ Our Relationship to the Law Has Changed

A. We have been set free from the law through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The metaphor of marriage is used to illustrate this.

7.1) The principle stated—law is binding on the living. Only the dead are released.

7.2-3) The principle illustrated.

7.4) Theological application.

7.5-6) The contrast between old and new.

B. Based on this, we can draw some conclusions about the law and our relationship to it.

1. The law had held us captive (7.6).

2. We died to the law so that we can belong to Christ (7.4).

3. This enables us to bear fruit for God (7.4; cf. 6.22).

4. The law aroused sinful passions in us (7.5).

5. We still serve, but our service has radically changed from the old way of the written code, to the new life of the Spirit (7.6).

C. If the law holds us captive, bars the way to Christ, arouses sinful passions and is complicit in our bearing fruit for death, the law must be a pretty bad thing, right? But, “NO,” says Paul. He uses the rest of the chapter to vindicate the law while at the same time showing its total inability to bring about the life that pleases God. This will require the Holy Spirit. Notice the Spirit is mentioned in verse 6, but He is not present in the remainder of this chapter. We will hear of Him again in Chapter 8.

### IV. Romans 7.7-13 ~ Paul’s Defense of the Law

A. It’s not the law’s fault. The real culprit is sin, working through our flesh, Paul explains in this section. This narrative shows how *sin* used the *law* to bring *death*.

7.7) **The law reveals sin.** The commandment Paul uses to illustrate this gets into heart motives—coveting.

7.8) Sin uses the law as a base of operations from which to attack. **The law provokes sin.**

7.9) **The law animates sin.**

7.10) The law has good intentions, but the outcome is disastrous.

7.11) Sin seizes the opportunity, deceives and kills—and does it through the commandment.

7.12) The law is holy and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

7.13) “Yeah. But didn’t this ‘good’ law bring death to me?” No! The culprit is sin. It produced death, true, through what is good (law) so that sin might be shown to be what it is and might become sinful beyond measure, exceeding sinful, utterly sinful.

B. The law makes sin recognizable. It makes sin reveal its true colors. This is needful, because sin is deceptive. It represents itself as other than it really is in its nature, causes and effects. Cf. Hebrews 3.13; Genesis 3.1-6; I Timothy 2.14.

## V. The Identity of the “I” in Romans 7

A. The identity of the “I” in Romans 7 is not the central issue of the chapter, but it is important. In particular, verse 9 is significant:

1. **I was once alive** apart from the law
2. but when **the commandment came**,
3. **sin came alive** and
4. **I died.**<sup>1</sup>

B. There have been four main directions taken relative to the identity of this person: Paul, Adam, Israel and an existential ‘nobody in particular-everybody in general.’<sup>2</sup>

C. After a lengthy discussion, Moo believes the best explanation to be “Paul describing his own, and other Jews’, experience with the law of Moses: how that law came to the Jewish people and brought to them, not ‘life’ but ‘death (vv. 7-12); and how that law failed, because of the reign of the flesh, to deliver Jews from the power of sin (vv. 13-25).”<sup>3</sup>

D. “Paul’s essential teaching about the inability of the Mosaic law to rescue sinful people from spiritual bondage is the same whether that bondage is the condition of the unregenerate person—who cannot be saved through the law—or that of the regenerate person—who cannot be sanctified and ultimately delivered from the influence of sin through the law.”<sup>4</sup>

E. So is the person speaking regenerate or not?

i. History of interpretation.

ii. Some reasons to say, ‘no’:

1. “sold as a slave to sin” sounds like a situation from which the believer has been released (7.14 cf. 6.6, 14).
2. While Paul makes it clear that believers will continue to struggle with sin, this description (7.14-25) sounds more like defeat than struggle.<sup>5</sup>
3. There is no reference to the aid of the Holy Spirit in these verses.

iii. Some reasons to say, ‘yes’:

1. In verses 7-13 the language is past tense. When we come to verses 14-25 it changes to present tense. It makes sense that Paul is speaking of himself.
2. Only the truly regenerate delight in the law of God (7.22).
3. Similarly, the desire to do right is present with believers (7.18).

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<sup>1</sup> J.R.W. Stott, *Romans*, IVP, 1994, p. 199.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, 1996, pages 425-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 445.

F. Summary: there are good reasons on both sides. Douglas Moo thinks that this is an unregenerate person. “Specifically, I think that Paul is looking back, from his Christian understanding, to the situation of himself, and other Jews like him, living under the law of Moses. Of course, Paul is not giving us a full picture of that situation; he is concentrating on the negatives because this is what he must do to prove how useless the law was to deliver Jews from their bondage to sin.”<sup>6</sup> (Moo believes that Christians do still struggle in fighting against indwelling sin, but not that this passage describes that struggle.)

G. Stott’s position is similar in some ways, but identifies this person as a believer. “If we approach the question from the standpoint 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<sup>7</sup>.”

## **VI. Romans 7.14-20**

Verses 14-17 and 18-20 are parallel, perhaps for emphasis. Three features can be seen in each of these:

1. A frank acknowledgement of a problem: “We know...”(14) and “I know” (20).
2. A resulting conflict within: “I do what I don’t want to do” (15, 19).
3. The real culprit is (indwelling) sin: (17, 20).

## **VII. Romans 7.21-25**

This is a summary of the situation, though still without mention of the Holy Spirit.

The struggle is graphically depicted and reaches its crescendo in the cry, “What a wretched man I am! Who will deliver me ...?” And then, the immediate answer, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 448.

<sup>7</sup> Stott, op. cit., p. 209.