

Law and Sanctification

A Study on Romans 7:7-14

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In preaching and teaching the Bible, there is no substitute for verse-by-verse exposition, but this sometimes presents problems for it is difficult to determine the true meaning of some passages of Scripture. This is the case with Romans 7:7-25.

This section has been a source of controversy for centuries, and good Bible scholars are divided as to its interpretation. Various interpretations suggest that the passage is describing: (1) a person before his conversion, struggling with Law and sin; (2) a personal experience of Paul that is not applicable today; (3) a Christian out of fellowship with Christ; (4) a normal Christian experience of conflict with sin and Law; (5) a Christian living a subnormal and defeated life, who should be living in Romans 8 instead of Romans 7; (6) a Christian trying to live a spiritual life apart from the power of the Holy Spirit. My particular interpretation is that the person being described is a Christian trying to live by the Mosaic Law after he has been delivered from Law to serve Christ. It seems Paul was trying to bring his flesh under control by keeping the Mosaic Law through his own efforts apart from the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 7, “T” is used 16 times, “law” is used 20 times, and the Holy Spirit is not mentioned once. However, the Holy Spirit is mentioned 20 times in Romans 8.

BACKGROUND OF PAUL

Paul was a Jew and had been taught the Mosaic Law from childhood (Acts 22:3; 26:5). He was a strict Pharisee, and was trained for 18 years in the best Jewish seminaries. He was probably the most promising religious leader in the Jewish nation (Gal. 1:14). Paul’s father was a Pharisee, so Paul most likely began a concentrated study of the Mosaic Law at the age of five. He was steeped in the Law and Jewish tradition.

As a Pharisee, Paul kept the outward form of the Law to the letter:

“Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews: as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ” (Phil. 3:4-7).

We know that he was a self-satisfied, self-righteous, self-sufficient, proud Jew because he felt that he kept the Mosaic Law as well as anyone could. He kept the outward forms of the Law but, was blind to the spiritual requirements of the Law. Thus, his religion was ritualistic — he was steeped in legalism, tradition, works and outward religion. It was cold — he thought the Jews alone had the truth and became critical, hard, calculating and cruel. He even persecuted Christians in the name of God. It was powerless — he had no inward power to defeat sin, but had only outward conformity to the Law. His religion was also legalistic — he had a works system for salvation and sanctification.

Paul's whole life was wrapped up in the Mosaic Law. For over 30 years he had been brain-washed in Judaism. Then one day on the road to Damascus, where he was going to persecute Christians, he met Jesus Christ. That day Christ supernaturally saved Paul and he became a new creature in Christ. But at that time his salvation did not change many of his concepts about the Mosaic Law. He had to learn that the Christian walk is not keeping the Mosaic Law, but is walking in dependence on the law of the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus. Paul had to undo and unlearn much that he had been taught for over 30 years. He had to learn to walk by the Holy Spirit, not trusting in self effort or law.

The time from Paul's conversion to his first big assignment from God (to minister at Antioch with Barnabas) was approximately 12 years. For all those years God was teaching Paul to walk by the Spirit and not by human effort or Law. Paul had to learn this truth before he could be effectively used.

Therefore, I would like to suggest that this struggle Paul writes about in Romans 7 is his experience after his conversion before he went to Antioch for his first major ministry. During this time he was learning that sanctification or Christian living was not by the Mosaic Law, but by dependence upon the Holy Spirit. Sin was to be defeated by the Holy Spirit, not by obedience to the Mosaic Law.

This is an experience that every Christian has as he struggles with sin. Every day Christians have conflicts with God's will (law), and we cannot defeat sin by self effort and law keeping, but only as we are dependent on Christ.

PAUL'S DISILLUSIONMENT WITH LAW — Romans 7:7-14

We must remember that in 7:7-13 Paul was a saved man. He had become aware of the spiritual aspects of the Mosaic Law, but was unable to keep these precepts because of indwelling sin (his sin nature).

“What shall we say then? Is the law sin?” In Romans 6 Paul stated that the Christian died to sin in Christ, and in 7:1-6 he stated that the Christian had died to the Mosaic Law in Christ. Thus, someone might think that Law and sin are placed on the same plane, that the Mosaic Law is sinful.

“God forbid.” That the Mosaic Law was sinful was unthinkable. The Law was a reflection of God’s holy character; it could not be sinful.

“Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law.” Paul could never have become aware of his own sinfulness except through the Mosaic Law. He knew that he had shortcomings and weaknesses, but it took the spiritual aspects of the Mosaic Law to show him that these things were sin and that he was basically sinful: “For by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). It took the Law to show Paul his bondage and helplessness because of indwelling sin.

“For I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.” The Law taught Paul about lust for he found himself coveting, which is forbidden in the tenth commandment. Paul does not say that he would not have been a sinner without the Law, but that he would not have known sin and recognized himself to be a sinner. After Paul was saved, he became aware of the spiritual aspects of the Law and realized that in his own efforts he could not keep them.

Paul seemed confident that he could keep the other nine commandments (thou shalt not steal, lie, bear false witness, commit adultery, murder, etc), but the one that said, “Thou shalt not have evil desires [covet],” slew him. Everywhere Paul turned he found himself coveting. He finally realized that the harder he tried to suppress this, the worse it got, until finally he saw that the trouble was himself. It was his own selfish heart, his own sinful nature.

“But sin [the sin nature], taking occasion by the commandment [Law], wrought [worked] in me all manner of concupiscence [evil desire].” The Law actually stirred up sin in Paul instead of restraining it. There was nothing wrong with the Law; the problem was with Paul who was sinful and selfish. The Law stirred the sin that was in Paul’s life.

Suppose a man were determined to drive his car to the very limit of its speed. If signs along the road said, “No Speed Limit,” the man’s only thought would be to press his machine forward. But suppose he suddenly encountered frequent road signs limiting the speed to thirty miles an hour. His will might rebel, and his rebellion might be further aroused by such signs as, “Speed Limit Strictly Enforced.” He could drive on fiercely, conscious of both his desire to speed and his rebellion against restraint. It was not the speed limit signs that created his wild desire to rush forward; that was there before he saw them. But the signs brought him into conscious conflict with authority.

“For without the law sin was dead.” Apart from the Law sin was dormant and inactive. Sin was present in Paul, but it was not aroused to activity as it was when he became conscious of the Law. Law simply stirred the sin nature to rebel.

“For I was alive without the law once.” As an unsaved man, Paul did not recognize any of the spiritual aspects of the Law, and fancied himself to be alive to God because he kept the outward letter of the Law.

“But when the commandment came [Law], sin revived; and I died.” When, as a saved man, he became aware of the spiritual requirements of the Law, he became conscious of his own sinfulness and inability to keep the righteousness of the Law. So the Law, no matter how much he loved it, only stirred up sin in him. God used the Law, the thing Paul loved the most, to show him his utter inability to keep it. Through the Law, God brought death to all Paul’s hopes in himself and his flesh to keep the Law.

“And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death.” This is not speaking of eternal life, for the Law never produced that. It was originally given by God as a rule of life for Israel, and it was to guard and promote life. But because of man’s sinfulness and the holy character of the Law, it brought death in the sense that all hopes in one’s flesh or human effort were shown to be ineffectual. This reflects Paul’s own tragic experience with the Law. How disappointed and disillusioned he must have been when he realized that even as a saved man he could not, by his own efforts, keep the righteous requirements of the Law.

“For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.” The Law stirred sin, and all Paul’s complacency and self-righteousness were brought to naught. God permitted sin to beguile (deceive) Paul so that he might find the utter powerlessness and finally the despair of delivering himself from sin by keeping the Law.

“Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good.” Paul realized that the problem was not with the Law, but with his own sinful condition. He upheld the Law because it was from God and reflected God’s holy character.

“Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid.” Did the Law bring death? No. It was Paul’s own flesh (sin nature) that put him to death. The Law simply stirred his basic sinfulness.

“But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.” The Law made the sin nature show its true colors, and Paul learned that he was sinful and needed outside deliverance from his state of wrestling with his flesh to obey the Law.

“For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal [fleshy], sold under sin.” Paul acknowledged the spiritual character of the Law, and stated the problem of his weakness to sin, because of his sin nature which was sold out to sin and did nothing but sin. He knew that only the law of the Spirit in Christ Jesus could give him deliverance from this sin nature.

CONCLUSION

Law stirs sin for the unsaved as well as for the saved. Have you kept the Ten Commandments perfectly? Only a liar would say, “Yes.” Any honest person would say, “No.” This simply shows that you are a sinner and need a Saviour. Only Jesus Christ can forgive your sin and give you eternal life. To be a Christian you must receive Christ as personal Saviour from sin and as Lord. Only Jesus Christ can change your life!