

Dead to Law's Arousing Power

Romans 7:1-25

Ah, here we are in Romans 7. Here we are having learned of a decisive deliverance from the power of sin and dependent responsibility to yield to God. So, is a holy life now bounded by the Law? Since the law cannot save, do we now live by law-keeping – by a principle of law? Particularly when the universal experience of Christians is that of struggle. We find ourselves in the midst of an enormous battle that it seems should have been won in Romans 6.

It seems to me that Romans 7 is meant to do three major things:

1. It is meant to undercut reliance on law as a means of transformation. Law keeping cannot save nor can it sanctify. And there are number of questions raised by that statement that Paul wrestles with here.
2. It is meant to reflect the universal struggle with sin in both unbelievers – particularly those who are self-righteous – and in believers, particularly those who function by legalism.
3. It is meant to show us the third way – that it is neither license nor legalism, but life. It is meant to bring us to Romans 8:20-25. Thus, Romans 7 is about the already-not yet reality of people in relation to sin.

In all the book of Romans, more ink has been spilled over the identification of the person in verses 7-25. Is it Adam whose experience is being closely mirrored? Is it Jews who have the Law but are largely without regeneration? Or is it Paul? If it is Paul, then is it Paul when he was unconverted or when he was saved? The answers to these questions were as varied and numerous as I had commentaries. So, I fully expect that among the Bible students hearing this message there will enormous division.

Without developing the merits and problems with each view, I want to propose that Paul has left it ambiguous on purpose. I do believe that it is autobiographical, yet intended to be universal. He has chosen to relate his own struggle because this is precisely the struggle we face as well. Further, since Romans 7 is preparing us for and taking us into Romans 8, then I am intentionally reading some of Romans 8 back into Romans 7.

Thus, what is going on Romans 7 is simply the already-not yet tension that a Christian lives in all the time – not only relating to his eschatology, but also relating to his transformation. I have been decisively delivered from the power of sin and I will be fully and finally delivered from the presence of sin, but not yet. And that makes the struggle in Romans 7 what it is and the hope giving walk in and with the Spirit in Romans 8 what we all aim for and pursue after.

Our Freedom from the Law

(v.1-6)

The Law is treated as a sphere of authority and Paul unpacks how we are delivered from it. He is answering the questions that might be raised in response to Romans 6:14 where we are said to be not under law, but under grace. How is that so and what does it mean?

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? ²Thus 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. ³Accordingly, 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.

⁴Likewise, 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. ⁵For 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. ⁶But 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.

Its Concerned Interrogative

(v.1)

Paul poses a question based on an obvious principle. Law only has jurisdiction over a person when they are alive. This would have been true in both Jewish and Roman law, as it is in ours. A person who has died is beyond the reach of the Law. Their death moves them out from its sphere of authority.

Its Clarifying Illustration

(v.2-3)

To make this clear, think about the authority of law to bind together a marriage. This is a carefully crafted illustration. Notice that the woman is freed from the binding affect of the law, not because of her own death, but because of the death of another, her husband. A married woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. If he dies, she is released and is free to remarry *even if there were no divorce*. The point here is that they are married and any living with another man while married is adultery. Some have concluded from this that any remarriage is adultery unless the former spouse dies. I do not believe this is what Paul has in mind. To do that would destroy his illustration and make it nonsense. Paul has carefully chosen this illustration because it is so close to the reality.

Its Careful Instruction/Implications

(v.4-6)

So Paul in verse 4 makes the connections between his illustration and its implications (v.4). Upon the death of another, the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been released from the authority sphere of the Law. This is done so that we may be united to Christ and bring forth all that union is intended to bring forth, here described as *fruit*. We are released from the authority of the Law so that we might be united to Christ. Paul often thinks of the flesh as producing works and Christ or the Spirit producing fruit.

The summary of the argument is laid out (v.5-6). Notice how each of the phrases corresponds to Romans 6 – 8.

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.	Romans 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	Romans 7
but in the new life of the Spirit	Romans 8

Our release from the Law is a redemptive-historical reality that impacts us personally and individually. I get that from the language itself: “while we were” and “but now we are.” Now that Christ has come, having died on the cross and having been raised from the dead, the new era of life in the Spirit has begun. The Law as an authoritative sphere came to an end at the cross. Further, we were under law while in the flesh until we were saved. Now that we have been saved, we are now under grace. Once again, there is the historical aspect (before/after the cross) and personal aspect (before/after conversion).

This perspective prepares us to expect an inaugurated and incomplete experience of its reality. The rest of Romans 7 unpacks verse 5 to show how our sinful passions, aroused by law, worked in our body so as to bring about death. What follows is designed in such a way that we will be gripped by the glorious hope set forth in Romans 8.

Our Functioning in the Law

(v.7-12)

Verses 7-12 argue that though the Law is holy and its content just and good, it is bent by the power of sin to arouse wants and passions leading to evil deeds resulting in the judgment of death.

⁷What 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.” ⁸But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. ⁹I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. ¹⁰The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. ¹¹For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. ¹²So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Even today when we take Paul at face value and declare that we are released from the Law’s authority, people will ask, “Are you then implying that the Law was sinful or not holy?” Paul anticipates that objection. Of course not. Just because we are delivered from the Law, does not mean that the Law was sinful. What it was is limited. It had a limited purpose and was essentially powerless to cause what was commanded. That is because it is a description of righteousness, and not the righteousness itself.

One grammatical point: the use of the past tense verbs points to this operating primarily in the unregenerate, the unbeliever. There is a very definite and deliberate shift from the past tense in verses 7-12 to the present tense in verses 13-20.

In its Purpose

(v.7)

What was the purpose of the Law? The law is intended to identify and illuminate sin. We would not know that coveting was wrong. The Law told us it was wrong. So we know what righteousness is and sin is.

In its Powerlessness

(v.8-11)

But, instead of the Law actually producing in us what it demanded of us, sin uses the law to stir up evil desires and deeds resulting in the judgment of death. The problem with the Law is not the Law itself. The problem is in the perverting power of sin to take the good law and use it to stir up in us the very evil forbidden. This is the depths to which our depravity has taken us.

You who have children see this principle operate all the time. Your children may have never thought of picking up the scissors until you said, "Don't touch those. They're sharp." Then your child's inward sinful nature takes the command not to touch and stirs up the desire in your child to pick it up. This doesn't make your command wrong - this shows that something evil lurks in the heart.

One very important note to make: Paul clearly sees sin as an active force, a power whose affects can be felt and described. Later, he will call this a law of sin. It has helped me over the years to compare this to gravity and the law of gravity. The power of gravity is "something" while the law of gravity describes how that power works.

So, verses 8-11 describe the energizing power of sin in the presence of people trying to live by law. Paul plays on the wages of sin being death from Romans 6 to be ironic here. Sin was dormant until it was told not to sin. Then sin was aroused to stir up the desire to do what was forbidden. So the desire for a sin leads to the doing of the sin with the result of judgment, death as the wages of desiring and doing sin.

In its Perfection

(v.12)

So sin is the problem, not the law. The law is perfect. The law itself is holy. The law may be weak, having a limited purpose and subject to being misused by sin, but it is still holy in God's sight. The law is the holiness and righteousness of Christ as exhibited and encoded for a people (Jews) in a particular time (Sinai to the cross). It is an authority sphere. But incredibly, our sinfulness is such that sin thrives within the sphere of the Law.

So, we are released from the Law, not because it is sinful, wrong or evil, but because it only reveals, not solves our sinfulness.

Our Futility under the Law

(v.13-25)

In showing our futility under the Law, Paul develops the contrasts and conflicts between sin and law in me.

¹³Did 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. ¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

In its Cause

(v.13)

OK, the Law is holy and I have sin in me that uses the Law to stir up evil. So, is the good and holy Law actually the instrument of spiritual death and judgment? Are we released from the Law, not because it is sinful, but because it produces death in me? No, it is sin *using the Law* that produces death. The wages of **sin** is death, *not* the wages of the Law is death.

Why? What is the cause of our futility under the Law? By making sin worse, sin is revealed for what it really is. The Law does not produce death, rather it fully uncovers the awfulness of sin's power and the utter depravity of our sinful state. We know how bad sin is because it is so perverted and powerful that it uses the Law the way it does.

In its Conflict

(v.14-20)

The conflict is the great conflict between that which is spiritual and that which is flesh. These two categories are going to shape the rest of Romans 7 and most of Romans 8. There is that which is of God and invisible and essentially holy and spiritual. And there is that which is of the world, in and connected to fallenness and evil and fleshly. And these are in constant and never ending conflict. The Law is in the category or realm of spiritual. But, we are in the realm of the flesh – we are still living here in the midst of fallenness.

Romans 6 is not supposed to bring us to some triumphalistic, victorious Christian life where we live separate from and not affected by any real struggle with sin. What Paul is driving home is that we are decisively delivered from the power of sin while we live in the presence of fallenness. If we try to live by the Law, we will be defeated by sin *even in the face of Romans 6* because of the way sin uses the law to stir up evil in us.

So, here is the \$100 question. Is this Paul the sinner or Paul the Christian? Is this the struggle of a sinner under the conviction of the Law who wants to obey the Law but finds that sin is using the Law to cause what he doesn't want? Or is this a Christian who is struggling with the reality of sin when we know the truth of our deliverance?

Doesn't this text resonate with the reality of our own struggle? Aren't the tensions exactly what we feel? Doesn't this ring true with our experience? We delight in God's truth and yet seem enslaved to sin. We are under grace and yet live as though we were under law. We have been delivered from the power of sin, yet struggle with the presence of the flesh.

Notice the repetition of the word "do". The struggle is clearly between what the law says to me is right and wrong and the powerful urges and passions of sin that cause me to do what I know I ought not to do. Here is his terrible plight. In himself he acknowledges what is right and wrong and finds in himself sin that does evil.

Notice also the repetition of the word "want". In his flesh sin remains. He wants to do what is right, but finds himself doing the opposite of what he wants. We do not read this and say to ourselves, "Boy, I have no idea what Paul is talking about here." We know this very well. We do what we know we ought not. And we often do the opposite of what we apparently want. He ends this section by repeating that it is indwelling sin that is causing him to do what he does not want.

Now, one word. Paul is not here saying that he is no longer responsible. This is not, "I am excused because this is so." Not at all. This is the very essence of the frustration and futility.

Now comes the great surprise. The reason this is both his pre-conversion and post-conversion experience is because this is what we will experience when we try to live by law. If an unbeliever tries to be righteous by keeping the Law, he will struggle with this. If the believer tries to live out righteousness by Law-keeping, he will struggle with this. The remnants of indwelling sin in the believer have their power because we stop living by the power of life and start trying to live by the rules of law. The result is that we step over into the realm of law. But that is the realm of the flesh, the world. Thus the struggle comes when holiness becomes about rules and works rather than fruit produced by life.

But that is not even the worst of it yet...

In its Consequence

(v.21-25)

Here is what Paul finds to be true in this struggle. Here are his observations and responses.

²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³but 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. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks 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.

First, in verses 21-23 he observes the presence of conflicting spheres of authority and law. There is a principle that when we want to do good, evil is close at hand. How is that so? Well, we rejoice in God's Word in our minds. But we find a principle that sin is at war in us, taking us captive through the power of sin our bodies.

How thoughtful Christians resonate with verses 24-25.

. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks 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.

We are wretched people indeed if this is all there is. If we have a decisive deliverance from sin's power in Romans 6 and yet we are captive to its remnant because we are still in the presence of sin in our fallenness, then we need deliverance from the body that sins. And that deliverance is through Christ.

Here it is then. We no longer have to be subject to sin's power. We need to yield ourselves to God and not to sin. The Law cannot help us and further, we are no long under its sphere of authority. Jesus will deliver us from the frustration and futility of our struggle with sin. And that deliverance has begun, but is not yet complete. We will fail and fall if we try to live in the old way under the Law. But we will begin to succeed and grow in holiness if we live the new way by the Spirit.

Reflect and Respond

Let me close by simply bringing together verses from Romans 6-8.

First, Romans 6:11-14:

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³ Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

And, Romans 7:5-6:

. 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.

And, Romans 8:22-25

²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Not license and not Law, but life by the Spirit – begun in now but groaning in struggle and suffering until the day Jesus comes.

