

## Brief Comments on Romans 7

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The seventh chapter of Romans may be said to be Rom. 6:14 expanded. It is a masterly argument for the holiness and perpetuity of the law, and is all the stronger because the nature or the perpetuity of the law is not the subject under discussion. The apostle showing, in the sixth and seventh chapters, what true Christian life is, and how one is brought to be a Christian. The references to the law are, we may say, incidental, and show how impossible it is to ignore the law when speaking of Christian experience. We shall give this chapter a brief exposition, dwelling only on the portions that are often misunderstood by the casual reader.

We have already shown from Rom. 6:14; Gal. 5:18-23; 4:4, 5; and 4:21-31, that "under the law" indicates a condition of condemnation on account of sin; and that persons are freed from the law, or redeemed from under the law, only through faith in Christ, by which they are thenceforth enabled to comply with its just demands. In this chapter the apostle carries out the figure of life and death, introduced in the sixth chapter, representing the one still under the condemnation of the law as alive, and the justified one has been dead. The relations of the man to his sins, to the law, and to Christ, are first indicated by an illustration, which we quote:—

"Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law), how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath a husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man." Rom. 7:1-3.

In this illustration we have four terms, namely, a woman, her first husband, her second husband, and the law. The law says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," and thus defines marriage as the union of one woman and one man. Such a union the law sanctions. Not only does the law sanction such a union, but it binds the parties during life. While her husband lives, the law binds the woman to him; but when the husband dies, then of course the union is at an end. Now, says the apostle, she may be married to another man, and she will be no adulteress, because she is freed from the law that bound her to her first husband. How was she freed from that law? By the death of her husband, which rendered further union impossible. But did the law itself change in any particular? Not in the least: It performs the same office that it did before. The law binds the woman to the second husband just the same as it did to the first; and if while her second husband lives she should be married to a third, the law will condemn her as an adulterous just the same as it would if she had married her second husband while the first husband was living. Thus we see that the law is the one thing that remains unchanged. Now read the application:—

"Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to Him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God. For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death. But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead [or, "being dead to that"] wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter." Rom. 7:4-6.

Here, as in the illustration, we have four parties, namely, the man, his sins, Christ, and the law. In the first place, the man is united to his sins. That is when he is "in the flesh," under the law (Gal. 5:17, 18), and unable to please God. Rom. 8:7. Here is a union in which the law holds him fast. "For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit and unto death." The apostle says that the sins were "by the law." This is the same as "where no law is there is no transgression." If no law existed, there could be no such thing as sin, and therefore Paul says that the motions of sin were by the law. "The strength of sin is the law." Now we say that the law holds the man fast in this union with sin. That does not mean that the law delights to have the man a sinner; nothing of the kind. The law has no choice in the matter. By his own voluntary action the man has transgressed the law and thereby become a sinner, and now the law can do nothing else than declare him to be such. If the man, through fear of the consequences of his sins, or for any other reason, wishes to escape from this union, he cannot. The law still reiterates, "You are a sinner." If the law could die, or could be made void, then the man at it once would be free; but that cannot be.

There is, however, a way by which the man may be freed from the galling bondage to sin, if he feels it to be a galling bondage, and that is through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. He may be "justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are passed, to the forbearance of God." Rom. 3:24, 25. When "the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ," has been imputed to the man, the law no longer calls him a sinner. He is justified, freed from the body of sin.

But this freedom from sin, and consequent deliverance from the condemnation of the law, has been accomplished only through Christ. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things have become new. And all things are of God." 2 Cor. 5:17, 18. Now the man is united to Christ, and by the same law which before held him to be a sinner. While he was in the flesh, the law would not for a moment allow that he was righteous; now that he is in Christ, the same law witnesses to his righteousness. The law remains the same; the man only has changed.

Notice the parallel between the illustration and the application. The law binds the woman to her husband. She cannot escape from that union, even though it be disagreeable to her. But the husband dies, and she is a free woman, and may legally be married to another man. So a man is united to sin, and the law, true to itself, holds him to that account. But by Christ the body of sin is destroyed; and now the man, being free from sin, is united to Christ, and the law sanctions the union. As a woman cannot legally be united to two husbands at the same time, so no person can be united at the same time both to his sins and to Christ. "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." Matt. 16:24. Union with Christ while we are in sin is impossible; and if, while professing Christianity, a person still clings to sin, he is guilty of spiritual adultery. "Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship with the world is enmity with God?" James 4:4. The law sanctions no such union as that.

The reader may, however, think that he detects a flaw in our reasoning, because in the application {360} the apostle tells us that we have to die in order to become united to Christ. This, he will say, is not an exact parallel to the case of a woman whose husband dies that she may be joined to another. The difficulty is only apparent, not real. The parallel is as close as it is possible for any parallel to be. In the illustration the husband dies, and thus the woman may be united to another. Now if you should suppose a case in which the woman died with her first

husband, and then have a resurrection, and was thus united to another, we have an exact parallel to the case of the sinner being freed from sin and united to Christ. The case is of sufficient importance to warrant a more detailed investigation. The following verses contain the whole argument:—

“What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death; that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin.” Rom. 6:1-7.

“The wages of sin is death.” Rom. 6:23. The law demands the death of every sinner. But “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16. For Christ “bore our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sin, should live unto righteousness.” 1 Peter 2:24. By baptism we show our belief in the death and resurrection of Christ, and our acceptance of him as a propitiation for our sins. Indeed, by baptism we are joined to Christ: “As many of you as have been baptized in the Christ hath put on Christ.” Gal. 3:27. But we are baptized into Christ, by being “baptized into his death.” “We are buried with him by baptism into death.” And thus it is that we receive the penalty of the law; not in person, but in figure. Christ has suffered for sin; and if we are “in him,” we also are accounted as having received the penalty. And since it is by baptism that we become united to him, we become dead to the law and united to Christ at the same time.

“Dead to the law.” What does the apostle mean by that expression? Simply that we have (in Christ) received the penalty of the law, and that it now regards us as dead. To illustrate: A man guilty of stealing is by the law sentenced to a term of years in the penitentiary. He serves his sentence, and then is set at liberty. Now he has no fear of the law. He may go boldly into the court-room, and even into the prison; for he knows that, having received the penalty for his crime, the law will not molest him. Now carry the illustration a little further: A man commits murder and is sentenced to death. When he has been executed, the law is satisfied. Suppose now that it were possible for the man to come to life again. Having received the full penalty of the law, he is, so far as his past offense is concerned, thenceforth considered by the law as a dead man. So with the sinner’s relation to the law of God. It condemned him to death. In Christ he received the death penalty, and now that he is raised to walk in newness of life, the law considers him to be a dead man. He is now a new man; the man who sinned is dead, and the man who takes his place shuns those things which the former man did, and therefore the law declares him to be righteous. In harmony with the above quotation and explanation are the following words:—

“If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. *For ye are dead*, and your life is hid with Christ in God.” Col. 3:1-3.

Read also of the following statement by the same apostle: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” Gal. 2:20.

Now why was it necessary for us to go through this process of dying and being raised to new life? Because we have upon us a burden of sin from which we could not otherwise be free. Did we get rid of this body of sin by that means? Yes; hear the apostle: "Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin." The body of sin was the first husband. We became disgusted with that union, and desired to become united to Christ, but could not as long as the first husband was living; and in order for that husband to die, we ourselves have to die. For the moment, both are dead; then we are raised to be henceforth joined to Christ in a new life, because the first husband, the old man, the body of sin, remains dead. So long as that body of sin remains dead, we, although alive in Christ, are dead in the eyes of the law. But if at anytime the old man should come to life by our calling back going back to our old sins, that moment the law would condemn us as adulterers.<sup>1</sup>

The remainder of the seventh chapter of Romans is a graphic account of the steps which lead the sinner to hate the sin in which he was bound, and to his freedom therefrom. It is not, as some have supposed, a Christian experience; it is simply an account of the experience of a man passing from a state of sin, through conviction, to a new creature in Christ. It will be worth our while to give it a little study, that we may learn more of the law's dealings with the sinner.

The apostle first declares (verse 7) that the law is not sin; this is proved by the fact that it points out sin. But for the law he could not have known what sin is. "But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead." Verse 8. Here sin is regarded as a person, producing all manner of evil in the heart. And since without the law there would be no sin he says that sin took occasion by the commandment. In the next verse he embodies this idea and carries it farther. He says:—

"For I was alive without the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." Verse 9.

The first clause of this verse presents to us a picture of carnal security. It is the confidence of the man who is insensible to danger. "Without the law" means that the law had not been driven by the Spirit into his heart. Many a man who has read the ten commandments scores of times, has never felt them searching his heart. Therefore his way is right in his own eyes, and he feels secure. An easy mind is by no means a sure test of acceptance with God. It was forgetfulness or ignorance of this fact that caused David so much trouble. Ps. 73. He saw the wicked wholly at ease, and that there were no bands even in their death. But when he learned their end, he found that such a condition is not an enviable one.

But as soon as a personal application of the law is made to one's heart, the sin stands out in bold relief. "When the commandment came, sin revived." The law did not create the sin; it simply brought to his view that which already existed. A room may be very dusty and dirty, yet if it is dark, the filth will not appear. But let a bright light be brought in, and the foulness becomes all too noticeable. So the law of God lights up the dark corners of the heart and reveals the depravity within.

When this had been done, says Paul, "I died." He does not here mean death to sin; for the next verse says: "And the commandment which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death." The law had shown him that he was a sinner, and "the wages of sin is death;" therefore he felt himself to be virtually a dead man. He did not actually die, but he speaks as though that which

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<sup>1</sup>The Signs of the Times 12, 23 (June 17, 1886), pp. 359, 360.

was inevitable had already come. In like manner the Lord said to Abimelech, who had taken Abraham's wife, "Thou art but a dead man." Ex. 20:3. "For sin taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me." Rom. 7:11. Sin is deceitful; it arrays itself in a pleasing garb so that to the unsuspecting one it appears to be good. But underneath its pleasing exterior it carries a weapon that wounds to the death all who come in contact with it.

Notwithstanding all that the law had revealed to Paul, he could say, "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good." Verse 12. He would uphold the dignity of the law, and shield it from all blame for his present deplorable condition. Although he had before said that the law, which was ordained to life, he found to be unto death, he insists that it was not the law,—“that which is good” (verse 13),—that was made death to him, but that it was sin that condemned him to death, and that the commandment had simply made sin “become exceeding sinful.” Happy is the awakened sinner who views the law in this light. Such a one is “not far from the kingdom of Heaven.” Unfortunately too many rail at the law, as though it were the cause of their lost condition, and then, as if they could avert the danger by shutting their eyes, they turn away from the law, and relapse into their old state of false security.

“For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not; for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.” Rom. 7:14, 15.

Again we must caution the reader against supposing that in these verses Paul is relating a Christian experience. Up to this point he has shown how any a person is convicted of sin. He has related the experience of one who, when the law convicts him of sin, does not turn from the light, but honestly desires to obey. Now he proceeds to give the experience of one under conviction, until he is made a free man in Christ. He uses the first person and the present tense in order to make the narrative more vivid, as he portrays the sinner's struggle for freedom. It was once a present matter with him, and is the experience that all pass through, though with various modifications, before they find peace with God.

“Sold under sin.” This idea is carried out in many places. Peter says that the sinner is “in bondage.” 2 Peter 2:19. Paul says that he is in bondage “to the weak and beggarly elements of the world.” Gal. 4:3, 9. He is a slave to sin. Rom. 6:16, 17. In a future article we shall see the case stated in even stronger terms. The idea is that the sinner is helpless. He may “consent unto the law that it is good” (verse 16), and may with his mind serve the law of God (verse 25); that is, he may desire to obey it, yet sin has dominion over him, and he is forced to serve the law of sin, namely his natural, sinful habits. As Paul elsewhere says, “They that are in the flesh *cannot* please God” (Rom. 8:7); and “The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other; so *ye cannot* do the things that ye would.” Gal. 5:17.

This is the condition of the awakened sinner. He would do good, but evil is present with him, so that he does the very thing that he has resolved not to do. The flesh is depraved, having no good thing in it, so that although he may determine to do good, he will not find any power in him to carry out his determination. The trouble is, sin *dwells* in him; it has never been killed.

Let the reader imagine a man bound with fetters and having a dead carcass fastened to him by a strong chain. He is fully conscious of the seriousness of the situation, and knows that death must be the inevitable result. Every day the load which hangs to him becomes more noxious, and the whole air becomes putrid. Imagine the terror of the man as he contemplates the steady and sure approach of a horrible death, and imagine his despair when he finds that all his frantic efforts to escape from the disgusting cause of that death are in vain. It would be impossible for

the imagination to overdraw the feelings of horror and despair that would fill the soul of the unfortunate man. This was the condition in which Paul found himself. Sin was upon him as a terrible burden; he knew that unless he could get rid of it and lead a life of righteousness it would sink him into perdition; and he found that his most desperate efforts to get rid of it, and to do the good that he longed to do, were unavailing. It was the law that revealed his condition to him. As he continues to look into that holy law, his sin becomes more and more disgusting to him, and yet the more he looks, the larger and more revolting does the burden of sin become. What shall he do? Must he sink into perdition? In the agony of his despair he cries out, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from this body of death?" Even as he utters this wail for help, the help appears, and he immediately answers his own question, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord." He has found peace and rest in Christ. His condition now is presented in the following words,—a Christian experience:—

"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Rom. 8:1-4.

"No condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus," because they are new creatures. They are not the ones against whom the law had such a terrible indictment. The condemned ones have died, have been crucified with Christ, and now although they live, it is no more they, but Christ dwelling in them. Once sin dwelt in them; now Christ has taken its place.

Verse 2 is a parallel to Rom. 3:21, 22. The righteousness of Christ being imputed to the sinner, frees him from sin and the fear of death. For a long time he may have tried to make himself righteous, but he found his best deeds so far below what the law requires that they alone would have been sufficient to ruin him. Even if he could have fulfilled the requirements of the law, that would not have removed past transgression. What the law cannot do is to make a sinner righteous. This is not on account of any defect of the law, but is solely owing to the weakness of the flesh. The law points out the disease and shows what a condition of health would be; then the man begins an ineffectual struggle to reach that high condition; the law goads him on until he finds that he has not power to accomplish his desire; and when he has lost all confidence in himself, he accepts Christ as the only source of help, and at once becomes free. Thus the law drives the sinner to Christ that Christ may free him from his past sins and enable him to keep the law.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The Signs of the Times 12, 24 (June 24, 1886), p. 374.