

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch
Lesson 10 - Romans 7:1-25

Romans 7:1-6

In chapter 7, Paul addresses a question at which he has hinted several times. His question is “What is the relationship between a Christian and the Mosaic Law?” Let’s find out how Paul answers this.

In the first of the three segments which form this chapter, Paul uses the analogy of the law of marriage to show how the Christian is now free from the old law.

He begins by addressing the Roman Christians. Notice that the original text has the term “brothers” but the translation in the NRSV has “brothers and sisters.” This is a legitimate example of inclusive language. Paul is not only addressing his letter to the male members of the Roman community; he is addressing all the members. He tells them they know the law. The implication is that he is referring to the Mosaic Law. The subsequent verses, particularly verse 4, support this interpretation. He tells them that the law has power over a person while that person is alive. If a person dies, that person is no longer subject to the law.

In verse 2, Paul begins the analogy of marriage. This analogy becomes confusing because he switches his imagery in the middle of the segment. He says that a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive. If the husband dies, she is then free to marry another if she chooses to do so. The impression given at this point is that the woman represents the Roman Christians. There was a time when they, at least the Jewish Christians, were married to the law. They were bound by the obligation to try to fulfill the law. But Paul says that if the husband dies the wife is free. Trying to follow this thought pattern, we would say that the law has died because of what Jesus has accomplished in his death/resurrection. Since the law has died, the Christians are now free to marry another. This “other” is Jesus. The Christians are united with Christ. They are bound to him in a loving relationship.

Verse 3 is a further explanation of the thought in verse 2. Paul simply says that the woman cannot marry another as long as the first husband is alive.

This confusion comes with verse 4. In the previous verses, our attention was on the woman and she is the one who is spoken of as being alive. Now, in this verse, Paul says that the Christians are the ones who have died. Through baptism into the person of Jesus, Christians have died a death to sin and the law. Because of this death, Christians are no longer subject to sin and no longer bound by the precepts of the Mosaic Law.

This freedom in death has allowed them to belong to another. They now belong to Christ. Paul continues the marriage analogy. As marriage produces the fruit of offspring, so too, the marriage with Christ produces the fruit of charity. The life of the Christian must now reflect the goodness of the resurrected life which is shared with the resurrected Christ. Sin should no longer have power over a follower of Christ. The attitude of trying to achieve salvation by fulfilling the law should also have died in the waters of baptism. Salvation comes through faith in Christ.

At the beginning of verse 5, Paul uses the phrase “While we were living in the flesh. When Paul speaks of the flesh he is not referring to the material body. Paul does not condemn materiality. And when a Christian is baptized, the Christian does not cease to live with a material body. Paul uses the term “flesh” to mean anything which separates a person from Christ. To live “in the flesh” means to live without Christ. This was the state of both Jews and Gentiles before the coming of Christ, and before the gift of faith.

Paul says that sinful passions were a powerful influence over a person. The law did not cause these passions, but when the law pointed out what was sinful it enhanced the attraction of the sin. The forbidden fruit looked even better. The law was able to point out what was sinful, but the law could not help a person overcome the sin. This is the issue Paul will examine in verse 7.

At the end of verse 5, Paul reminds the Romans that the fruit of the sinful passions is death. Again, with the word “passions” Paul is not talking about artistic passions or a passion for life, but rather, that which is contrary to life in Christ. Through faith and baptism, the Christian now has a new life of freedom in the Spirit. The Spirit gives a person the ability to choose that which fosters a deeper relationship with God.

Paul begins verse 6 with the words “But now.” This is the way he refers to the new life in Christ. The new life is in sharp contrast to life under the frustrating bondage of the law, or life in the pagan world. The way of Judaism was far better than the pagan world because the Chosen People had a knowledge of God. But they still lacked the intimate knowledge which can only come through acceptance of Jesus as Lord.

In this new life, the Christian has died through baptism and is no longer bound by the written code. Once a person has died that person is no longer subject to the law. The Christian can now belong to Christ and in this new union the Christian shares divine life in the Spirit.

Romans 7:7-13

This present segment is a difficult one. But if we are to grasp Paul’s notion of the relationship between the law and sin, we need to work with this text.

Paul returns to the technique of asking questions. He asks his readers if the law is the same as sin. Paul answers “No!” No, the law is not the same as sin, but if it had not been for the law Paul would not have known sin. This is true for Paul in two ways: First, the law points out certain acts and attitudes which are contrary to the will of God. If Paul had not been made aware of this, he would not have known that he was sinning. Second, by forbidding certain things, the law inadvertently made these same things more attractive. This attraction leads to sin because of the false sense of freedom that comes from doing something which is forbidden.

In the second half of verse 7, Paul clearly indicates that he is referring to the Law of Moses by quoting one of the precepts of the law, “You shall not covet.” Paul does not condemn the law for revealing that this is a sin. He knows that sin must be revealed as sin so that truth can be known. But, as he will say later, the problem is that the law did not help him overcome the sin. The law only pointed out the sin.

In verse 8, Paul shows the diabolical nature of sin. What sin is able to do is to take something which is good, namely the law, and use this good thing to its own destructive end. Sin has the power to corrupt and destroy, but when sin is given a false glamour, this power to corrupt increases. This is what Paul means in this verse when he says that sin seizes the “opportunity in the commandment.” Sin takes to its own advantage the attention which the commandments of the law give to it.

At the end of verse 8, Paul says that “Apart from the law sin lies dead.” This means that if the law had not pointed out what is sinful, then sin would have no power. This point cannot be pushed to its extreme. We cannot say that therefore we should have no laws so that nothing is forbidden. This would be chaos. What Paul wants to stress is that the law was supposed to be a help to humanity, but it became a hindrance because no one could fulfill it.

At the beginning of verse 9, Paul again uses a phrase which should not be understood in a strict sense. Paul says that he was “once alive apart from the law.” **He is not saying that he would be better off not knowing God’s will. This would contradict all that Paul was trying to accomplish. Rather, what he wants to do is to show the powerlessness of the law.** The law revealed to him how he was transgressing the will of God, and then the law left him right there. It did not give him the power to overcome the sin which had taken hold in his life.

In verse 10, Paul goes so far as to say that he died. This is not the death associated with baptism, a dying with Christ. This is the death which is the result of sin. The law was meant to be a sign of hope for God’s people. The law was good for it expressed the will of God. But the very thing which was supposed to give hope, ended by giving death. Sin showed its diabolical nature by using the commandments to separate people from God.

A sense of frustration and despair set in as people realized that they could not fulfill the commandments. They could not keep the law. The result was a life of hopelessness, a life of death. This is what Paul is saying in verse 11. The law was meant to keep a person from sin, but sin used the commandments of the law to encourage a person to seek that false sense of freedom. Autonomy in sin is not freedom, but death.

In verse 12, Paul concludes that the law is still good. The law does convey the will of God. It does teach people how to live with one another. It is holy, just and good, but sin is the culprit. It is sin which destroys that which is good.

As devastating as this relationship has been, meaning the relationship between sin and the law, Paul says that it is not without some value. In verse 13, he says that the tragedy which has taken place shows all the more the evil of sin. Sin has the power to take that which was supposed to lead people to God and use it to separate people from God. This does not mean the law is evil, it means that sin knows no bounds.

When Paul returns to a more positive note in his letter, he will remind the people that even though sin is powerful, Christ is even more powerful. At this point in his letter he seems ready to fall into despair, but there is still reason for hope. Jesus the Lord has been victorious in his resurrection. **He** is our hope.

Romans 7:14-16

Paul now delves into his own inner conflict. In this segment he describes the battle between good and evil which is going on within him. It is the same battle that goes on within each of us.

In verse 14, he says that the law is spiritual. This is his way of saying that the law is good. It is a gift from God and its purpose is to lead people back to God. We should remember that the opposition Paul presents between “spirit” and “flesh” is not an opposition between the immaterial and the material. For Paul the material world is good; it reflects the goodness of God. For Paul the opposition is between whatever draws a person to God and whatever separates a person from God. When Paul says that he is “of the flesh,” he means that there is within his human nature an attraction toward sin. In this sense he is under the bondage of sin.

In verse 15, Paul says that he knows what is right and he desires what is right. But because of the strong attraction of evil, he experiences an alienation within his person. This alienation leads to controversy in human relationships, as well as a sense of separation from God.

In verse 16, Paul’s thoughts take an abrupt shift. He says that if he does what he does not want to do, then this is a clear sign that the law is good. What is he saying?

He means that since he knows that what he is doing is wrong, then there must be a norm by which he is informed about the difference between right and wrong. If he is doing what he knows is wrong, then it is the law which has made him aware of this. Since the law makes known what is wrong, the law must be revealing what is good. If the law reveals what is good, then the law itself is good.

Romans 7:17-25

With today's verses, Paul continues to speak of his inner struggle. He is allowing us to look into the depths of his soul and witness the turmoil he experiences. He is reflecting the human condition. He knows what is right. He desires to do what is right. But evil has an attraction of its own, and sometimes he succumbs.

One of the false impressions which this segment can give is that Paul is absolving everyone from personal responsibility with regard to sin. This is not what he is saying. He knows people have free will. He knows that if people choose sin they are responsible for that choice. Paul would understand to some degree the nonculpability of the mentally ill. Paul is not lax with regard to the need to conform the will to the teachings of Christ. What Paul is saying is that even though the true self desires what is good, sin is still a powerful force dwelling within a person. The only way a person can conquer this force is through the indwelling power of Christ.

Paul expresses this inner battle in verse 17 when he says, "It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me." In the depths of his soul, Paul wants to abide by the will of God. And as he speaks, he wants the Roman Christians to identify with him. He wants them to know that he understands their struggles and even their tendency to despair. But Paul is even more certain of his and their reason for hope. In the next verses, he will build the crescendo of intensity until he bursts forth with praise and thanksgiving in verse 25.

In verse 18, Paul says, "Nothing good dwells within me." If this sentence is taken as it stands, it would contradict the account of creation in Genesis. The author of Genesis insists that everything which God created is good. Humanity is not only good, but even created in the image and likeness of God. This is why it is important to include the qualifier which Paul adds to this sentence. He says, "that is, in my flesh." This is Paul's way a saying again that sin dwells within him. Anything which hinders his relationship with Christ cannot be good.

In the second half of verse 18, Paul reiterates that the will has been wounded by sin. In the Genesis account of life before the fall, all human faculties were in harmony with one another and with God. The devastating effect of sin is that this harmony of the human person is destroyed. The relationship with God is seriously wounded, and the will is no longer in control. Paul says that his will wants to do what is right, but the power to do so is gone.

Verses 19 and 20 repeat the same theme. The true self within Paul wants to do what is right, but there again is the slavery to sin. Who can free him from this bondage?

In this paragraph beginning with verse 21, Paul uses the word “law” with a new connotation. Prior to this segment of his letter, he has used the word “law” to mean the Law of Moses. But now he is speaking in terms of a principle or a knowledge that comes from lived experience. This is what he means in verse 21 when he says, “I find it to be a law.” This is not a written law. It is not a formulated code. It is his experience that whenever he wants to do what is right, evil is always near at hand. And this evil has such power that it takes on the force of law.

Verses 22 and 23 should be taken together. In verse 22, Paul says that he delights in the law of God. He knows that God’s will is what will bring true happiness. He knows this and he firmly believes that this is true. And to the extent that the Law of Moses expresses the will of God, Paul can rejoice in this law. In verse 23, Paul says “In my members,” which is another way of saying “In the flesh.” He experiences the battle which is being waged between the flesh and the mind, between sin and his desire to do the will of God. Again, the implied cry is “who will save him from this bondage?”

With verse 24, Paul reaches the low point of his cry of pain. He has brought his readers through the raging battle. He has expressed the frustration and darkness of the bondage of sin. He has delved into the law and described how sin is able to turn something good into another form of captivity. The Law of Moses could only show him that he was sinning; it could not lift him out of this pit. Now, in desperation he cries out his own wretchedness, and with a last gasp of breath, he cries out for help. Where is mercy!?

Verse 25 is filled with all the force and feeling that Paul can muster. Just as his emotional fall is about to end in destruction, Paul lifts up his readers with a cry of exaltation. His excitement seems to cause him to verbally stumble for a moment. At the end of verse 24, Paul asks who will rescue him. What we would expect at the beginning of verse 25 is the answer “Jesus Christ!” But knowing this, Paul immediately goes into praise and thanks to God and then finishes his answer by proclaiming “through Jesus Christ our Lord!” All the bondage and fear and desperation and sin are conquered in the person of Jesus Christ. By his death/resurrection, and by baptism into this death/resurrection, Christians have the certainty in hope of salvation. All praise be to Jesus Christ!

The end of verse 25 seems anticlimactic. Paul reminds his readers that they still face the battle. He knows the outcome of the battle, Christ is victorious. But the battle is still to be fought. One possible explanation for the last sentence in verse 25 is that Paul does not want the Roman Christians to base their faith on emotions.

Emotions are good, but they can be fleeting. Paul wants his readers to have both feet on the ground. Living the life of faith is a struggle. Paul seems to say to his readers, “Keep working and know that in Christ you are victorious.” He says it to us too.

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