

UNDERSTANDING ROMANS SEVEN

I want to thank all of you for being here this morning. This is a very special time that we get to share together, and it is not something we do just because we thought this would be a cool thing to do. This time is something God calls us to, and it is something we need to make sure is one of our chief priorities every week. God tells us to not forsake the assembling of ourselves together (Hebrews 10:27). We gather to honor Him and His desire for us. We gather together, as we said a couple of week's ago, to remember. Especially in the Lord's Supper that we shared just a few minutes ago, we remember what God and Christ have done for us. In addition to that, it is also a time when God calls on us to lift up our voices and sing His praises. In that time we also teach and admonish one another through the use of Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We pray together and as we also did just a few minutes ago, we give an offering in an effort, not only to sustain the work of this church but to show our love for God (2 Corinthians 8:8). And now we come to that time in our assembly when, as God directs, we take time to hear from His Word. I am the one who is privileged to bring you that word from week to week. My goal for each lesson is to bring a message that clarifies something that God wants all of us to know, or that inspires us to do something that He wants us to do.

Since the beginning of the year, I have also been attempting to bring a lesson drawn from the reading assignments associated with the Bible class curriculum being followed this year, the New Testament Studies. Currently we are reading and studying from the book of Romans, which of course could easily be a year's study in itself.

Well this week, after reading and thinking about the chapters assigned to us, I found myself more and more fascinated with **chapter 7**. I am sure that many of you, like myself, have found this chapter to be a difficult one to understand. When Paul writes, for example, as he does in verse 20, "*Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me,*" we want to know, was Paul talking about himself, and thus to the Christian's experience today, or just what was he saying? To give you a clearer understanding of what Paul was talking about in this chapter is the purpose of my lesson this morning. And of course, with that clearer understanding, hopefully you will also experience a more successful and joyful Christianity.

What I want to do in the time that I have this morning is three things.

- First I want to give you what I believe is the right perspective on what Paul is saying in this chapter.
- Second, I would like to do a quick walk through this chapter in an attempt to make sense of several of the more difficult verses.
- Finally, I want to send you back to chapter 8 once more so you can read that chapter with a whole new understanding! If you will, please open your Bibles to Romans chapter 7 and let's take a look at this very interesting chapter together.

After a lot of reading and study I am convinced that the perspective you need to have in order to properly understand this chapter is that Paul is talking about the impossible struggle that any

person is going to have if they are trying to be justified by the law. He is NOT talking about his experience as a Christian still struggling with sin. Let me repeat that, just so you will be clear, ***Paul is NOT talking about his experience as a Christian who is still struggling with sin.***

Now I know that Paul uses the personal pronoun I over and over again, especially in verses 7-25. It looks like he is talking about himself, but the things he says could in no way be true of Paul as a Christian. I believe I can demonstrate that to you fairly clearly.

Admittedly, as Paul works through this discussion, he does say some things that are hard to understand. Maybe this is one of those passages that even Peter had a problem with, according to what he said in 2 Peter 3:16. On the other hand, what Paul wrote can also powerfully strengthen our faith. That's what I've been praying to happen this morning.

Now, it is obvious, at least in this part of Romans that Paul is writing to the mind and heart of those who were of a Jewish background. These would be people who had grown up knowing the Law of Moses. It would have been something taught to them both in the home and in their synagogues. Young men especially would have been schooled in the Law, and even though they had now become Christians, their allegiance to the Law of Moses was not something they could give up easily. Paul is trying to help them with that. In fact, several times already, Paul has made it clear that the Law is of no value to Christians as far as being justified is concerned.

- In **2:13**, he said: *“For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.”*
- In **3:20**, he writes: *“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”*
- Eight verses later, he again says, *“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”*
- **4:13**, *“For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the Law but through the righteousness of faith.”*
- **6:14**, *“For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”*

Here in chapter 7, Paul drives home this point, and he does that by using a simple illustration involving marriage and divorce, death and remarriage. Now in these verses 1-6, it is important to recognize three persons.

- the person who dies; who is that?
- the person who is free to be joined to another when the first person dies?
- the person to whom the surviving spouse joins?

So we have to ask, who is the husband that dies as represented in these verses? Who is represented by the surviving spouse who remarries? Who is that person to whom the surviving spouse is joined?

Well, I think it is obvious that the married woman represents these people who were joined to the law, and that would be the Jews. So they are not the ones who are dying, they are the ones who on the death of the other spouse are free to be joined to another. So who dies in this context?

Bear in mind, in the Old Testament, God often represents Israel as His unfaithful wife. He found them in their filth. He took them in, cleaned them, gave them wedding garments, gave them His name, but again and again, they played the harlot. Israel was God's bride, and the Law served as their certificate of marriage. But now Paul is talking about Israelites being free to marry another, so who died?

I know this is not an easy to thing to grasp, but it's God! God, in the person of Jesus Christ comes, faithfully keeping the marriage commitment that was sealed at Sinai. But then He dies, or rather, He was put to death. God has kept His word, even though his bride was unfaithful to Him over and over again. So when Jesus dies on the cross, the law that bound Israel was rendered null and void; Israel became dead to that law.

Colossians 2:12 teaches that Christ took that old law out of the way, nailing it to the cross. Thus, the widowed bride that was Israel was then free to be joined to another. That's why Paul says in **verse 4**, *"Likewise my brethren, 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."* Paul didn't say that the brethren had died. He said they had died to the law; that is they were no longer bound by it because the One to whom they belonged had died.

And Paul says since that is true, you can now belong to another; and who is that? Paul says it is him who has been raised from the dead. In other words, God in the person of Christ dies; dies on the cross, which then frees Israel to be joined to another, which is Christ, God's Son who has been raised from the dead. I tell you folks, there is a great mystery in all of that, but it is incredibly wonderful!

In **verse 6**, Paul speaks about their being released from the law, just as the wife in verse 2 is released from the law of marriage if her husband dies.

But now, beginning in **verse 7**, Paul has to explain that this is not because the Law was a bad thing. Not at all, and in fact, in verse 12, he will write that the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. However, if it was all of that, why would God want to take that law out of the way? Why would he want people to be released from something that is holy and righteous and good?

To answer that we have to understand something about the purpose of the Law. Paul has already touched on that earlier in Romans, in **chapter 3, verse 20**. Paul writes: *"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes a knowledge of sin."* Over in the book of Galatians, chapter 3 we learn some more about the purpose behind

the law. I don't have time to read and get into all of that with you this morning, but essentially in that passage Paul tells us that the law was NOT given to justify anyone, or help them become or be righteous. In **verse 21** of that chapter, Paul wrote: *"For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would be by the Law.* So, if it wasn't to give life, or make people righteous, what was the purpose of the law?

Paul tells us in **Galatians, chapter 3**. In that chapter Paul is talking about the relationship of the law to the promises God made to Abraham and his descendents. And Paul stresses that those promises preceded the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai. In **verses 17 and 18**, he wrote:

This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. 18) For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise.

Now, understand Paul's argument here:

- 1) the law came 430 years after the promise.
- 2) if the inheritance comes by the law, that would render the promise useless. But God made a promise.

That's when Paul goes on to tell us about the purpose of the law. In **verse 19** he says, *"Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring—which refers to Christ—should come to whom the promise had been made."* In **verse 21**, he says, *"Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law."*

So what is Paul saying? He is saying that the law was added because of transgressions, and he is saying that the law does not give life and bestow righteousness. In other words, the purpose of the law was not to give life or bestow righteousness on people. That's what the promises were about. So, why was the law given? Paul says, the law was added, on top of the promises, *because of transgressions*.

Well now, Paul, that's a little confusing to us. What do you mean the law was added because of transgressions? Can you make that a little simpler for us?

The promises that Paul speaks of here (Galatians 3) were those made to Abraham; that in his seed, or offspring, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. In making that promise to Abraham and his descendents, God was in effect taking to Himself a specific family of people with whom and through whom he would work. They are going to be His chosen people, and as such, they are to be a holy people, even as he was holy. So the law was given so they would know what holiness looked like. They were not a holy people and so God wanted them to have an idea of the kind of people He wanted them to be.

So the law was given to serve them, kind of like a tutor or guardian, but it was not intended to be something permanent. It was to serve in that capacity until Christ came. However, in

making known to them the will of God, the law didn't make them a better people. Instead, it revealed to them just how sinful and unholy they were. Furthermore, those commandments became additional ways for them to sin and fall short of God's glory.

Now, part of the problem for the Jews is that they thought God chose them because they were special people. They failed to understand that they were special because God chose them. Furthermore, they assumed if they kept at least some aspects of the law, such as circumcision, and sacrifices, that was what made them righteous in the eyes of God. What they failed to see and understand was that the law only increased their transgressions.

Why is that? We have to go back to Romans chapter 7 where Paul, in effect, says, "let me illustrate." In verse 7 he had said that if it had not been for the law, he would not have known sin. He wasn't saying he wouldn't have sinned, but that he would not have really known he was sinning. Take the matter of coveting, for example. Paul says he wouldn't have known what it is to covet if the law had not said to him, "you shall not covet," but because of the law, he knew what coveting was, and suddenly he realized that he was doing all kinds of coveting! In verse 8, he says, so sin seized the opportunity of that knowledge to produce in him all kinds of covetousness." He said, "*apart from the law sin lies dead.*" That is, if you don't know what the law says, you don't really realize that you are sinning. For awhile in life a person might live like that, but when you begin to read and hear and learn and you begin to understand the law—verse 9—then sin becomes alive.

And so, as he says in **verse 10**, "*the very commandment that seemed to promise life proved to be death to him.*" The law is holy and righteous and good, but it only served to make him realize all the more just how much of a sinner he was.

So, Paul asks, **verse 13**, "*did that which is good, then bring death to me?*" Is the law to blame for his sinning? Paul says, absolutely not; the problem was not in the law, it is sin that is revealed by the law that produces death in a person. And in fact, because of the law, which is good, one can now see and know more clearly than ever, just how sinful they really are. He says in verse 14, "*For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.*"

Now here is where a lot of people begin to get confused. Some people think that Paul is talking about himself as he struggles to be a Christian. But that isn't what Paul is doing at all. It is true that the first person personal pronoun is used, in fact several times in this context. But Paul isn't referring to himself. How do we know that? We know that because Paul could not say the things he said about himself in these verses if he was a Christian.

Why not? Well, just think about it: Back in **chapter 6:14** he told the Christians that "*sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.*" So how can he say that sin won't have dominion over them if he is "sold under sin?" Furthermore, the person crying out in these verses of Romans 7 says a couple of times, "It isn't me, it "...is sin that dwells in me." Isn't that a contradiction if over in 6:14, he says "sin will have no dominion over you" and then in 7:17, and again in verse 20, that sin is dwelling in him?

Furthermore, in 7:14, the person in this verse is pictured as saying, *“I am of the flesh.”* How could Paul say something like that when in the next chapter, **chapter 8, verse 8** he will write, that *“those who are in the flesh cannot please God?”* How could he say that he was of the flesh when in verse 9 of chapter 8, that those Roman Christians, *“...are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.”* Why are they not in the flesh, if he was in the flesh? Think about that.

Furthermore, the person in this verse is pictured as saying, in **verses 18, 19** that *“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. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”* Was Paul saying that he was basically helpless that he couldn't really do anything about sinning?

Is that what he said back in chapter 6 when he said that the *“body of sin might be brought to nothing”* (verse 6) *so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin?”* Does that sound like a Christian is basically unable to do anything about sinning?

Why did Paul tell the Roman Christians that they were to consider themselves as *“dead to sin”* (6:11) if Paul himself couldn't help sinning?

How could he tell the Christians in Rome to not let *“sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions”* (6:12) if the reality is there isn't much you can do about sin?

Why would he tell them to *“not present your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness,”* (6:13) if Paul himself was unable do that?

No, in these verses Paul is not talking about himself. All of these first person, personal pronouns is simply his way of illustrating what he would be thinking and feeling if his only way to be justified and attain righteousness was through the law.

If I'm going to try to go that route, then I'm going to constantly be frustrated.

- Verse 15, I'm not going to understand my own actions. I don't do what I know I should do, and I do a lot of things that I don't want to do.
- Verse 16, I agree with the law that it is good, but I don't do it.
- Verse 17, It is like I am someone else; it isn't me, it is sin dwelling in me.
- Verse 18, I look at myself and begin to think, there is nothing good about me because even though I know to do good, I don't do it.
- Verse 19, I keep doing the wrong things.
- Verse 21, it is like some exorable law at work, that no matter how much I want to do what is right, evil is right at hand.
- Verse 22, on the one hand I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but
- Verse 23, this law is at work in my body, keeping me doing the things I don't want to do. I am like a captive that has now been enslaved.

- Verse 24, I am this wretched man, who feels trapped and I need someone to deliver me. Who is there who can do that?
- Verse 25, Paul quickly tells them the answer to that question—thanking God because there is one who does deliver us—Jesus Christ our Lord. But apart from Him, I am left with the frustration of serving the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh, continuing to serve the law of sin.

You can see from the things Paul says here that he could not be talking about his experience as a Christian. In no sense is a Christian a captive or slave to sin. That is the very thing Jesus said he came to do. He said, *“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”* **John 8:32.** He said 4 verses later, *“So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”*

Back in chapter 6 of Romans, in verses 7 and 18, Paul had written, *“For one who has died has been set free from sin.”* And *“having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”* Could that possibly be the same person as that person over in chapter 7 who is a captive and enslaved to sin?

How could Paul as a Christian, as someone already delivered by Christ be someone who is still enslaved to sin, still feeling wretched, and still crying out for someone to deliver him, who is going to do that? There is no one else to deliver us. *“There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus,”* **1 Timothy 2:5**

Paul makes it very clear in the 2nd verse of the next chapter: *“For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”*

Now, I know that we often feel like what is written here. Even as Christians, we are frustrated with ourselves that we keep messing up. We keep doing things we shouldn't do and failing to do the things we should. That certainly is true, but that isn't what Paul was writing about here.

No, the Christian's experience is completely different and that is what he writes about in chapter 8—so go home and read that chapter again, will you, now that you have a better understanding of what Paul was really saying in chapter 7.

Yes, we do still struggle with sin, even as Christians, but as Paul will say in **verse 1 of chapter 8**, *“there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”* There's no wretchedness there. There's no crying out for someone to deliver us because someone has delivered us, and set us free. Free to live righteously, being led by the Spirit of God. Knowing, as Paul says in **8:33, 34**:

Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. 34) Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died--more than that, who was raised--who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.