

## Romans 7 and the Normal Christian Life

The idea starter for creating our blog at [jaylehman.com](http://jaylehman.com) was the growing realization of the incredible depth of our new covenant relationship with God. Our motive in continuing this blog is an effort to flesh out what the new covenant looks like in practice. How do the tremendous riches we have in our identification with Christ in His death and resurrection play out in the warp and woof of life? During this period of study and writing on this topic, I have become very aware of old covenant thinking that still finds its way into our spiritual formation literature.

It seems everywhere I turn these days, I encounter Romans 7:14-25<sup>1</sup> as a proof text for the believer's relationship with sin. From books on relationships to articles in Christian periodicals, Romans 7 seems to be the go-to passage for describing our grueling struggle with sin. In this famous passage, the apostle Paul laments the internal struggle between knowing the law and having no power to carry it out; between knowing the right thing to do yet feeling powerless under the influence of his sin nature.

I believe this angst is clearly pointing to Paul's experience *prior* to his salvation. It only makes sense in the context of the book of Romans if Paul is describing his *pre-conversion* life. Following this explanation of what life *before* Christ was like, Paul concludes – in Romans 7:25 to Romans 8:4 – that only Christ and the new nature He imparts can rescue us from this life of contradiction; this life of knowing the right thing to do, but lacking the power to do it. In short, after Christ, after our rescue, Romans 7:14-25 no longer applies to the life we live.

So if Romans 7:14-25 does not apply to those who have placed their faith in Christ, why do Christian authors keep coming back to it as typical of the Christian life? I believe there are at least three reasons. The first is the challenge of interpreting the passage itself. Paul's use of run on sentences and present tense verbs is especially confusing. Second, does Romans 7:14-25 describe our own struggle with sin? Is our own Christian life or those we love typified more by the Romans 7 description than the myriad of New Testament promises of the believer's victory over sin? And finally, do we prefer a "ministry of condemnation" (II Cor 3:9) toward ourselves and others? Are we more comfortable in an old covenant law keeping system? After all, I can measure how well myself – and more importantly those around me - are doing in a law keeping system. Measuring the fruit of the Spirit is much more difficult. How do you measure love, joy, peace?

Let's take up the thought process behind these three reasons in order starting with our next post.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>14</sup>For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. <sup>15</sup>For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. <sup>16</sup>But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good. <sup>17</sup>So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me. <sup>18</sup>For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. <sup>19</sup>For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. <sup>20</sup>But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. <sup>21</sup>I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. <sup>22</sup>For I joyfully concur with the Law of God in the inner man, <sup>23</sup>But I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. <sup>24</sup>Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from this body of death? <sup>25</sup>Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. (Romans 7:14-25).

## Romans 7 in Context

Last post I made a strong statement that Romans 7:14-25 does not apply to the believer's walk. I did so without much substantiation which I hope to humbly correct this time. I recognize this thought process goes against the typical interpretation of this passage and I may be heading out to the end of a long limb, but bear with me and see if this flow makes biblical sense.

The first of the challenges mentioned in my last post is the challenge of interpreting the passage itself. We need to start with the big picture and when we do we will see that attributing Paul's lament to prior to his conversion is a perfect fit with the context of Paul's message in Romans chapters 5 through 8 concerning the normal Christian life. (See my article, [A Fresh Start](#), for a verse-by-verse detail commentary of Romans chapters 5 through 8 and where Romans 7:14-25 fits into this context.)

Paul's introduction to Romans chapter 7, found in verses 1 through 6, sets the stage for the rest of the chapter, including our problem passage. To paraphrase Romans 7:1-6, Paul writes, "Let me put our union with Christ and *newness* of life another way by showing how our relationship with the Law *changed* at our *new* birth. Just as a married person is committed to a relationship with their spouse while the spouse is alive, you were 'married' to the Law until Christ's arrival on the scene put the Law to death. When Christ died, the Law as it affects your relationship with God died as well and you were now free to marry a *new* groom, Christ Himself. You are now joined to a *new* partner, Jesus Christ, to bear righteous fruit. Prior to your *new* birth in Christ, your sinful passions, aroused by the Law, were working in your body to bear dead fruit, not righteous fruit. Through Christ's death, we *died* to the Law that bound us. We no longer live under the 'old arrangement,' i.e. Old Testament, law-keeping system. We now live under a 'new arrangement' and walk in the *newness* of the Spirit rather than the oldness of the letter of the Law. Our *new* walk is carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells us." (Rom 7:1-6, paraphrase)

Then, starting with verse 7 and continuing to verse 25, Paul sets out on a giant parentheses as if to say, "Even though we are now dead to the Law, let me add this parting thought about what life under the Law was like for me." He then goes on to describe the tension he lived under prior to his conversion. We know this is prior to the new birth because the use of phrases such as sin leading to spiritual death, the active role of the Law (which we subsequently died to), being of flesh and sold into the bondage of sin, the overwhelming power of sin, the continuing *practice* of evil, and describing himself as a prisoner, or slave, to sin are all in direct contradiction to Romans 7:1-6 above as well as all of Romans chapters 5, 6, and 8. In fact, there is nowhere else I can think of in the New Testament, whether Paul or other writers, that give this type of negative description for the normal Christian life.

That is why Romans 7 has become the go-to passage for the "life is a civil war" view. *Because it is the only one we can find to support it.* The attribution of this much power to the sin nature in a believer is nowhere else to be found in the New Testament. My suggestion is that when we properly understand Romans 7:14-25 as prior to Paul's conversion, we will go from one to zero in passages that support this view. Then we can move on to what *is* the common theme in the message of the New Testament; the idea that when you joined God's family, you took on a moral resemblance to God your Father and Christ your brother and literally have God living inside you by the Holy Spirit and victory over sin is the normal result of the Spirit-infused life.

Am I preaching perfection from sin? NO. That will not happen in this earthly life. The realities and fallibility of life on this fallen planet is something I am only too aware of. But we can do much better than we typically think. While sin will always be with us, nipping at our heels, it is not destined to rule over us or to be our normal practice. Because of our new nature, we can say with the apostle John, “No one who is born of God practices sin, because God’s seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.” (1 Jn 3:9). That is, because Christ’s nature has become our nature – “God’s seed abides in us” – sin is no longer our natural way of life. Sin is no longer our normal practice. Sin is no longer our propensity. Thanks be to God who has set us free from the penalty *and power* of sin.

## Romans 7 and the Present Tense

I would like to add this aside concerning one of the biggest stumbling blocks to what I believe is the proper place of Romans 7:14-25 in the timeline of the life of Paul. As I stated in our first post on this topic, I think the apostle is describing his experience *prior* to his conversion. I made a very brief summary argument for that position based primarily on the context of Romans 5 through 8 and what I believe to be the predominant message of the New Testament regarding our new moral resemblance to Christ. But the challenge of Paul’s use of the present tense is still unresolved.

The best I can offer is the following. Paul is writing with a strong sense of purpose and may be using the present tense to drive home his point. For example, if I grew up on a dairy farm, I might tell you the following story. “When I was a kid, this is what my life was like ... I get up at 4:00 AM. I drag myself out to the barn to milk the cows. I freeze my fingers to the bone. I come back to the house. I skip breakfast and try to get a few more minutes of sleep. Sooner than I would like, I climb on the school bus and sit out the one hour ride to school.”

I used all present tense verbs in that story to try and bring you into the action. I get up, I drag, I freeze, I skip, I try, I climb, and I sit. You well understand that I am not describing my current life, but putting my past experience in the present tense for emphasis. Could Paul be doing the same thing? No guarantees, but something similar is easy for me to visualize in Paul’s style of writing. The bottom line to me is still the fact that Romans 7:14-25 only makes sense with the rest of the New Testament teaching regarding the believer’s relationship with sin if it encapsulates Paul’s experience prior to conversion.

Finally, I would like to address the suggestion that Romans 7:14-25 has to be Paul’s present experience because the doctrine of the total depravity of man does not fit Paul’s stated desire in this passage to do the right thing prior to his conversion. Without going into the specifics of this doctrine, suffice it to say that the unsaved have, in various degrees, plenty of desire to do the right thing. There are many unbelievers who are unselfish in their marriages, contribute to worthwhile causes, and look out for the welfare of others. Our conscience, and the ramifications that come with it, is part of the common grace we share with all humanity by virtue of being created in God’s image.

In the particular case of the apostle Paul, there should be no surprise that prior to his conversion he desired to obey God’s law. He described himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews (Phil 3:5), a Pharisee in regard to the Law (3:5), and zealous for God (Acts 22:3) prior to his conversion. His problem in Romans 7 was not a lack of desire, but a lack of power having not yet experienced the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that comes at our new birth. To summarize, I believe interpreting Romans 7:14-25 to reflect Paul’s pre-conversion experience is the best fit for the message and context of this passage.

## Romans 7 and the New Nature

Maybe we and the teachers we follow keep coming back to Romans 7:14-25 because it seems an apt description of our own Christian experience. How many of us feel the weight of desperation articulated in this passage and think it normal for the Christian life? When we identify this kind of struggle with sin as normal, we make a grave mistake regarding all that became new at our conversion.

A key issue to keep in front of us is the fact that the Christian life is lived by faith, not by sight. The Christian life is lived by faith, not by feelings. The Christian life is lived by faith, not by Satan's lies. We may *feel* like Romans 7:14-25 is our Christian destiny, but to believe it is true is to fall into Satan's trap. Two titles among the many ascribed to Satan are "deceiver" (Rev 12:9) and "accuser of the brethren" (Rev 12:10).

Satan makes his living among Christians by accusing them of their sin, while diminishing the power of our identification with Christ in His death. He uses our daily experience as exhibit A that we will fall to sin's power. He takes us back to an old covenant way of thinking that maybe we aren't "good enough" or aren't "working hard enough" to receive God's promise of a life set free from the power of sin. But Satan's accusations are not true. Remember, Satan is the "deceiver," the "father of lies," and Christ Himself proclaimed that if Satan's mouth is moving, he is lying since it is his very nature to lie and deceive. (Jn 8:44).

Can I encourage you? Do not believe Satan's lies regarding the power of sin in the believer's life. Sin's power was removed by the cross, by the death of our old nature with Christ. Whether you feel it or not, believe it *by faith*. This is the message of Romans chapter 6. "Reckon (an accounting term) yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Rom 6:11). Because our old self was "crucified with Christ" (Rom 6:6), God is asking us to go to the accounting spreadsheet and *by faith*, not by experience, remove our name from the "sinner by nature" column and place it in the "dead to sin" column. Accountants don't fill out spreadsheets based on feelings. They fill them out based on facts.

A healthy tree automatically produces its natural fruit. A healthy believer produces the fruit of the Spirit naturally, may I even say, almost automatically. The fruit of the Spirit is our default mode. Our problem is not the "work" required to attain the fruit that should be happening naturally. It is the hindrances we put up that keep the natural fruit from springing forth. And one of the hindrances is simply not believing all that God promised in our new birth.

Can I encourage you to, by faith, believe that:

- You are holy and beloved. (Col 3:12)
- The seed of God lives in you. (I Jn 3:9)
- You have a new heart. (Ez 26:36) Your old deceptively wicked heart has been removed.
- Your new self is created in the likeness of God; in righteousness and holiness. (Eph 4:24)
- He who has died with Christ has ceased from sin as their normal practice. (I Pet 4:1)
- The time for sin is in your past. (I Pet 4:3)
- God's divine power has granted to you everything pertaining to life and godliness. (II Pet 1:3)
- You share the divine nature. (II Pet 1:4)
- You have a moral resemblance to Christ. (I Jn 2:29)
- You are a new creation. (II Cor 5:17)
- Holiness is your new default mode. (All of the above and more)

John Stott was a great Bible teacher of the late twentieth century. He recently passed away at age 90. Among his many well-known quotes is: "Sin and the child of God are incompatible. They may occasionally meet; they cannot live together in harmony." The theme of many tributes to Rev. Stott upon his passing is that he didn't just write it, he lived it. May we also live by faith in the promises of God, one of the most compelling of which is the promise of a life set free from sin's power.

## Romans 7 and the Ministry of Condemnation

I believe another reason we like to see Romans 7:14-25 held up as normative for the believer is the difficulty we have with leaving the old covenant way of life behind. The old covenant method of law and its consequences just fits our natural way of thinking. New covenant living does not seem natural because, quite frankly, it is not natural! It is supernatural at its core! But it is a supernatural that is not only available to us but is, in fact, who we really are in our heart of hearts as a child of God.

What does old covenant spiritual formation – if those words should even be used together – look like? Paul calls it a ministry of condemnation as opposed to a new covenant ministry of life. Look with me at II Corinthians chapter 3, "But our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as ministers of a *new* covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter *kills*, but the Spirit gives *life*." (II Cor 3:5-6). The old covenant eventually ended in death for there was no resurrection power to overcome the sin that the law so clearly made us aware of. The new covenant gives life, and according to Jesus in John 10:10, life to its abundant fullness.

Paul goes on in II Corinthians 3 to call the old covenant a ministry of death (vs 7) and a ministry of condemnation (vs 9). "For if the ministry of condemnation (old covenant) has some glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness (new covenant) abound in glory. For indeed, what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away (Greek word, *katargeo*, literally 'brought to an end') was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory." (II Cor 3:9-11). The old covenant was temporary and ineffective in changing hearts and resulted in condemnation. The new covenant is permanent, filled with resurrection power, and gives life.

May I encourage you to examine your own ministry? Is it a ministry of condemnation or a ministry of life? I am speaking to myself here as much as anyone. We are so prone to see the sin in people and think, "This is the real you." It doesn't matter how much good we have observed. When we see the worst, we think "this is who you really are" and label people accordingly. How much more should we, as ministers of the new covenant, see people at their best and say, "This is the real you." The sin is the anomaly.

I am convinced that we have let the ministry of condemnation hold way too much sway in our Christian message. It tears down believers and keeps the unsaved totally disinterested in our message. The ministry of the new covenant offers rescue for sinners, builds up believers, gives life, and spurs our fellow saints on to new heights. Won't you join me as a minister of the new covenant?

"But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve (minister in the here and now) in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter." (Rom 7:6).