

The negative effect that the law has on believers is not the fault of the law

A sermon preached by Henry Dixon
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7¹⁴We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. ²¹ So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²²For in my inner being I delight in God's law; ²³but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!(Romans 7.14 – 25)

Introduction

For these last few weeks we have been considering Romans chapter 7, which is about how the relationship that the believer has with the law of God has fundamentally changed. We have seen that the apostle says that the believer has died to the law, not in the sense that he is no

longer under an obligation to keep it, but in three senses: firstly in the sense that the law no longer condemns the believer; secondly, in the sense that the believer no longer needs to seek to attain his own righteousness by means of the law, and, thirdly, in the sense that the believer is set free from the effect the law has of aggravating the unbeliever's slavery to sin.

The apostle anticipates that when he said that the law has the effect of aggravating the slavery to sin that the unbeliever experiences, someone might say that he is saying that the law is somehow sinful or bad. So he spends the rest of the chapter saying that, whatever bad effect the law might have on a person, it is not the law that is at fault. The law is good, righteous and holy. The problem is not with the law. The problem is with our own sin, that is exposed by the law.

Last time we were thinking about verses 7 to 13, which were looking at the negative effect that the law has on those who are not believers. We saw that the apostle said that the negative effect that the law has on unbelievers is not in any way because of anything wrong with the law of God. It is because of the sin that lives in unbelievers. The holy law of God has the effect of revealing sin in the unbeliever, bringing it to the surface, and leading the unbeliever to sin more. But this is not the fault of the law. It is the fault of the unbeliever, who already has that sin in him.

This leads us to verses 14 to 25 which we are considering today. You may be aware that this passage has generated an enormous discussion about its interpretation. The argument has centred around the identity of the person that Paul is describing. Who is he describing? The difficulty arises because, on the one hand, the person the apostle is describing would seem to be a believer, but, on the other hand, he is experiencing a level of frustration about his failure to obey God's law which would seem to contradict the positive things that the apostle says elsewhere about the believer's power to obey God. So some say that Paul is describing his experience prior to his conversion. Others say that this is Paul describing his life as a believer before he had some experience of "second blessing", or a "baptism of the Holy Spirit". Others have suggested that this is a description of a man who is in the process of being converted. He has been awakened to his sin, but does not yet properly understand or know the Gospel.

The way I am planning to deal with this passage today is, firstly to deal with the question, who is the apostle talking about in this section? And

then to go on to a second question, what can we learn from this passage?

1. Who is the apostle speaking about in this section?

As we approach this section we must remember the context. The apostle has just been talking about the negative effect that the law has on unbelievers, and has sought to show that the law is not to blame for this. In order to illustrate this he speaks from his own past experience before he was converted.

But now, in from verse 14 there is a change. He is still talking about himself and his own experience, but he switches to the present tense, and stays in the present tense until the end of the chapter. What is he doing here? I suggest that he is still seeking to defend himself from the charge that he has said that the law is sinful. This view is strengthened by the fact that in the Greek verse 14 has the word “for”, linking it with verses 7 -13. This is in most English translations, but is missing from the translation that we are using.

The apostle has spoken about the negative effect that the law has on the unbeliever, and has shown that this is not the fault of the law, but sin in the unbeliever. Now, in these verses, he speaks about the negative effect that the law often has on the believer, shows that this too is not the fault of the law, but is due to the tendency to sin that lives on in the believer. I suggest that the apostle is quite simply talking about his present experience, when he compares his life with the perfect standard of God's law.

On what grounds do I say that Paul is talking about his present experience as a believer? First of all, because he is from verse 14 speaking in the first person, and in the present tense. The natural conclusion is that he is now talking about his present experience as a believer. This would seem to be confirmed by the very positive things that he says about the law of God, that it is “spiritual” (verse 14) that it is “good” (verse 16), and that he “delights” in it (verse 22). Only a true believer would have such an attitude to the law of God. Moreover, he says repeatedly that he wants to do what is good and right, and hates it when he sins. This is also the attitude of the true believer. Furthermore, there is a very frank admission of the power of the tendency to sin that lives in him. An unbeliever would never make such a frank admission. So I suggest that we must say that this is Paul describing his experience as a truly born again believer.

But the apostle also describes in these verses a problem that he has when, as a believer who wants to serve God, he compares his life with the perfect standard of the law of God. When he compares his life with the law of God he finds his life to be woefully inadequate. Even though he is born again, and even though he has a new desire to serve God, and even though he has made substantial progress in his sanctification, he still finds sin to be a very powerful force in him. Because he has been born again, he wants to please God, but, again and again, he finds himself falling into sin. When he does so he is very disappointed with himself. The law of God has the effect upon him of making him feel utterly miserable about himself. That is not the fault of the law. The law is good. It is the fault of the sin that lives in his flesh.

The strength of language that the apostle uses to describe this sense of frustration has led some to suggest that he is talking about his experience prior to some “second blessing”, or prior to being “baptised with the Holy Spirit”.

However, the fact that he uses the present tense would tell against this. Moreover, there is nothing in this letter, or anywhere else in Scripture, which talks about any other experience, apart from being born again, which brings a person to the position where he has power over sin.

You will have heard me in previous weeks commend the sermons of Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones on this book. In his sermons on this chapter Lloyd Jones argues strongly that the apostle is describing his experience during conversion, when he had been awakened to his sin, but did not know the answer to that sin through the Gospel, and so was in a sort of “no man’s land”, awakened to his sin, but not delivered through the Gospel. Lloyd Jones argues that the apostle cannot here be speaking about his current experience as a believer, because what he says is too negative and despairing and cannot, according to Lloyd Jones, be reconciled with the positive things that he says in other Scriptures about the power that the Christian has over sin. However, persuasive though the argument of the Lloyd Jones is, I have the temerity to say that I disagree with him on this point. The use of the present tense would seem to me to tell against his argument. I think that the negative things that the apostle says here can be reconciled with positive things he says elsewhere about overcoming sin if we remember what he is doing here. He is not comparing his life with how it used to be before he was converted, or with the lives that unbelievers live. He is comparing his life against the perfect standard of God’s law. When he compares it with that standard, even the great apostle is greatly disappointed with himself.

I would like to suggest to you that what the apostle is describing here is in fact something which every true believer experiences, at least from time to time, when he compares his life with the perfect standard of God's law.

If you are a Christian, and if you are honest with yourself, surely you will have to admit that there are times when your experience exactly matches what the apostle describes here. There may be some present today who would say, if asked, that this exactly describes how they feel at this very moment. You have been born again. You love God's law, where once you hated it. You want to do what is right. You can see ways in which your life has dramatically changed since you were converted. But even so, when you compare your current life with the perfect standard of God's law, you are bitterly disappointed with the standard of your obedience to God. The tendency to sin that still lives in your flesh is still strong. You find yourself falling into a particular besetting sin again and again. You rebuke yourself for it, and say to yourself, "I MUST not do this", but then, before you realise it, you have fallen into the same sin all over again. You feel utterly wretched, and echo in your mind subconsciously, if not consciously, the words of the apostle, "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

So, I suggest to you that what the apostle is describing here is the negative effect that the law can have upon believers, when we compare our lives with the perfect standard of that law. The law often has the effect of making us feel utterly miserable about our lives. The experience the apostle describes here is not all that there is to say about the Christian life – thanks be to God! There are many other passages in the Bible which speak about the power that we have over sin and the joy that we can know in the Lord. But the passage is simply a frank description of how the law can make us feel very despondent about our poor performance as Christians. The point that the apostle is making is that even though the law often has this effect upon us as believers, it is not the law's fault. There is nothing wrong with the law. The problem is with our tendency to sin that still lives in our bodies.

I felt I needed to give a bit of time to this question of the identity of the "Romans 7 man" because it has been so debated, and because it is so problematic. What I have presented to you is not my own new interpretation. It is in fact the classic "Reformed" interpretation of this passage that most commentators of that school would follow.

2. What are the main lessons we should learn from this passage?

Having given you what I think is the correct understanding, let me in the remainder of our time bring out what I think are the main lessons that we can learn from this passage.

1) We should not be overly dismayed by our failings as believers

If my interpretation is correct, and the apostle is describing the sense of frustration with his tendency to sin that even he, the great apostle, feels, then there is a strange sense in which this passage is comforting for the true believer. Many a Christian has, at least from time to time, felt a sense of deep unhappiness with his life as a Christian, when he has compared his life with the standard of God's law. For many believers this sense of unhappiness with his life grows the more they progress as Christians. It is not necessarily that they are becoming more sinful, but as their knowledge of God and God's law deepens, they become more and more aware of their failings as Christian.

If you are dismayed by the standard of your obedience to God, be of good cheer! Far from showing that you are not a Christian, almost certainly it means that you **are** a Christian. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." One of the marks of conversion is that a person is profoundly aware of his spiritual inadequacy, and aware that the only thing that can make him acceptable to God is the righteousness of God that has been imputed to him through Christ.

2) The problems that we experience are not the fault of the law of God

The second thing to learn from this passage is that the problems we experience are not the fault of the law of God. Romans chapter 7 says some of the most exalted things that are said about the law of God in the whole of Scripture.

We saw last time that in verse 12 the apostle says that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good."

In verse 14 he says, "We know that the law is spiritual." The law is not just a set of outward rules. It is "spiritual". It is concerned with the attitude of the heart. It commands us to love God, and to love others, from the heart. Moreover, the law of God is perfectly in accord with the

desires of the Holy Spirit. There are many who would drive a wedge between what the Holy Spirit wants us to do and what the law of God commands us to do. But there is no difference, because the law is the law of God, and the Holy Spirit is God. The law and the Spirit agree perfectly.

In verse 16 the apostle says, "I agree that the law is good." As a believer, he rightly agrees that the law is good. It is something which he should obey. It is something which will do him good as he obeys it.

In verse 22 he says, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law." The law is something that the believer rightly delights in. It is good and right and wonderful. In the Old Testament there are three Psalms which particularly speak about the blessing of meditating on God's law, and delighting in it. They are Psalms 1, 19 and 119. The apostle says that delighting in God's law is good and right. It is not just for Old Testament believers. It is for New Testament believers as well.

One trap that people sometimes fall into when they are struggling with a sense of guilt and disappointment with themselves because of their failure to keep the law of God is to listen to those voices which say something like this: "You do not need to worry about the law of God. That is just the Old Testament. God does not expect you to keep these laws now." They therefore try to ease their troubled conscience by lowering the standard for their lives, and by abandoning the attempt to live according to God's law.

That is a blind alley leading to disaster. God's law is holy, righteous and good. If you listen to those who tell you that you do not need to obey it any more, your life will end in ruins. Suppressing a guilty conscience is no cure for feeling sick with yourself about your sin. It just leads to further stress and anxiety in the long term. In the short term you might feel a bit happier if you persuade yourself that God's law no longer applies to you, but in the long term your life will end in disaster. Do not go there. Continue to believe in the goodness and rightness of God's law, even if you are bitterly disappointed with your failure to keep it.

3) The unhappiness that we often feel about our lives comes from the tendency to sin which still lives us

We have seen in chapters 5 and 6 of this letter that we who believe have been baptised spiritually into Christ. We have been united with him in his death. The old man that wanted to sin has died. A new man that loves God has been born in us, in union with Christ's resurrection.

However, as I mentioned at the time when we were looking at those chapters, there is still a tendency to sin which lives on in us. The term that the apostle uses to speak of this tendency to sin is a word whose literal translation is “the flesh”. This word is rendered in the translation that we are using, “the sinful nature”. What the apostle is describing here is the conflict, which every Christian experiences, between the desire to serve God that he has in his “inner man” and the desire to sin, which still lives in his flesh.

The strength that the flesh still has, even after a person is born again, is something that comes out throughout the passage. Several times in this passage the apostle contrasts the goodness of the law of God with his own tendency to sin:

1. *The law is spiritual, but I am unspiritual, verse 14*

In verse 14 the apostle says, “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual.” The Greek word which our translation renders “unspiritual” literally means “of the flesh”. The King James Version translation translates it “carnal”. Paul contrasts the spiritual nature of the law, with his own fleshly, carnal behaviour. Here is a man who has made great progress as a Christian, who has in many ways learned to conquer sin, but, even so, when he holds his life up against the standard of the perfection of the law of God, he has to say that his behaviour is “carnal”.

In the next phrase he says that he is “sold as a slave to sin”. This is a very strong statement, which would seem to contradict what the apostle says elsewhere about what happened to us when we were born again. But remember what the apostle is doing here. He is comparing his life, not with how it used to be before he was converted, but with the perfection of the law of God. When he compares his life with the standard of God’s law, he has to say that his life is still, at least to a certain extent, in the grip of sin. Sin is still a very powerful force in his life.

The apostle then goes on, in verse 15, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.” The apostle says that as someone who is born again he loves God’s law. He wants to obey it. But he finds that there are times when he does not do what he wants to do. Instead he does what the flesh wants him to do.

2. "God's law is good, but I do not obey it"

The second positive statement about the law is in verse 16, "And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good." He agrees that the law is good. But he fails to keep it as he should. Why? Because of sin living in him. He says in verse "As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me." The apostle makes a distinction between his inner being which wants to obey God's law, "I myself", and sin "living in me".

He continues in verse 18, "I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature (the Greek word is "flesh")". The apostle frankly admits that there is nothing good in the tendency to sin that lives in him, his "flesh".

The power of sin in the flesh also comes out in verses 19 to 21, where the apostle says, "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me.

3. "I delight in God's law, but I see another law at work in my members"

The third positive statement about the law is in verse 23, "For in my inner being I delight in God's law", but this is immediately followed by yet another negative statement about his obedience to that law, due to the tendency to sin that lives in him: "but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members."

This leads to a bitter cry of disappointment with himself, in verse 24 "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

The apostle sums up his problem with indwelling sin, in verse 24, "So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but, in the sinful nature, a slave to the law of sin." In his mind, in his inner being, having been born again, he is a slave to God's law. He loves God's law. He wants to obey it. But in his sinful nature, his flesh, he is a slave to the law of sin. There is a constant battle going on between these two forces in his life, and, even the great apostle sometimes wrongly yields to the flesh.

So we see that the negative effect that the law has on a believer, in making him sad about his failure to obey God, is not due to anything bad about the law. It is entirely due to the power of the tendency to sin, “the flesh” that still lives in the believer.

4) There is hope for us in Christ

The fourth thing that this passage teaches us is that there is hope for us in Christ.

The very fact that there is a battle between the inner man, who wants to serve God, and the flesh, that wants to serve sin, should be a tremendous encouragement for us as Christians. Before, there was no battle. Sin had total domination over our lives. Our inner man and our flesh were both working in the same direction, against God. But now we have a new desire to serve God in our innermost being. That in itself should encourage us.

On top of this, there is the hope that one day we shall be completely free from indwelling sin. This is without doubt what the apostle is alluding to in verse 25 when he says, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Jesus is going to come again, and when he comes, if we have died already our bodies will be raised from the dead. If we have not yet died, our bodies will be transformed instantly into resurrection bodies. These new bodies will be completely free from sin. We will never again struggle against the flesh.

There is also a tremendous consolation that we have, which the apostle speaks about in the very next verse after this section: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Yes, we do constantly fail as believers, but Christ paid for all of our sins, including our sins as believers. We cannot be condemned. We shall, God willing, start to consider this next time.

Conclusion

I have argued that in this passage the apostle describes what is his own experience, and what is the typical experience of every true Christian, that when he compares his life with the perfect standard of God’s law, he is disappointed, and prone to great unhappiness. This is not the fault of the law. It is the fault of the tendency to sin, the flesh, that still lingers in the life of the believer.

I hope that if you are a believer you will have been encouraged today, to learn that, if you do experience this disappointment with yourself, you are not alone. Even the great apostle experienced it. If you feel this disappointment, do not go down the blind alley of watering down God's law. Instead, go afresh to the Cross, and receive forgiveness all over again.

If you are not yet a Christian, what does this passage teach you? You need to be born again. Until you are born again you will know nothing of this desire to obey God. You will be a slave of sin. Come to Christ. Ask him to give you a new heart.

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