

Romans 7:7-13

Chapter 7 vs 7-25 is a difficult passage. Over the centuries it has given even the best scholars a great deal of difficulty. Even scholars we would normally rely on vary wildly on this text. I have wrestled with it myself for as long as I can remember. In interpreting this passage there are several things that I think will help us.

First, Paul is not going to demolish the building in chapter 7 that he built in chapters 5 & 6. 5 & 6 are easy to interpret in comparison to chapter 7. So we must interpret 7 in light of 5 and 6 and not allow anything we conclude from chapter 7 to contradict things taught previously. There are things said that appear to be contradictions but they are not. Our job is not to determine IF they are true. Our job is to determine how they are true. We know that Paul cannot be teaching in 5 and 6 that a believer is set free from sin and then telling us in chapter 7 that it really makes no difference at all in the behavior of a believer. We know that chapter 7 cannot be telling us that a believer has not been given freedom from the power of sin over his life. So we must interpret 7 from the platform of what we have already learned. Secondly, We have a context that gives us important clues about how to interpret the text. If we look at the text in outline form we can see that the main topic is the law. Verses 7-13 are a defense of the goodness of the law. Verses 14-25 are a discussion on the weakness of the law. So the primary topic is not so much Paul's general experience or even a hypothetical person's experience but it is a text telling us something about the law.

Third we are given a reference to the flesh given in verse 5 that is then repeated in verse 18. In verse 5 it must be logically referring to our position in Christ. We are either in Christ or in the flesh. Before we were positionally in Christ we were positionally in the flesh. If the text gives us nothing to make us

change our use of the term "flesh", we should use it in the same way in both places.

Fourth, Paul is speaking more experientially here than he has spoken previously in Romans. That will be clear in verse 9. In that verse Paul says, "I was alive" and when the commandment came "I died". This is not a positional statement or he has contradicted what he said in chapters 5 and 6. In 5 & 6 we were dead to Christ first and alive to sin first. So in chapter 7 he cannot be saying that he was alive to Christ positionally but the law showed up and he died spiritually.

We are left with the conclusion that Paul is referring to alive and dead in a different sense, an experiential sense. He must be speaking of how a person experiences this event in their lives. This text gives us clues that may allow us a little more freedom for experiential expression rather than technical language.

Fifthly, the verses prior to this passage would be very difficult for a Jewish person to receive. They would in many ways be "fighting words". Any Jews in his audience may have considered Paul to be speaking antinomian language. They may have thought that Paul was saying that the law was bad. So at this point Paul must show them how his thinking does not fit into that category. First he had to show that grace doesn't foster living in sin. Now he must show that the law is not the origin of sin and death.

Sixth, In Chapter 5 the law made sin abound and grace also abounded. Our current passage is giving us details about chapter 5 vs 20,21 20Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, 21so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

With that said let's start into the text.

A simple outline is

Vs 7- The law reveals sin

Vs 8- The law provokes sin

Vs 9-11 The law condemns sin.

⁷What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet."

One of the first questions we must answer about this text is who is the "I" Paul is referring to that would not have known sin without the law.

Some say it is Adam.

Some say it is Israel.

Some believe it is an Old Testament believer.

Some say it is Paul at boyhood.

Some say it is Paul in pre-conversion.

Some say it is Paul in his normal day to day experience as a believer.

Some say it is Paul as a believer prior to understanding the role that faith plays in sanctification so that Paul was attempting to be sanctified through the law.

Some say that Paul is using a common literary device of his time that creates a hypothetical person and describes what that person would do in the first person. It is likely if he did this his Greek audience would understand what he was doing.

Now, if we are to use the term, "in the flesh" consistently we will have to interpret this person as either Paul or a hypothetical person who is unregenerate and trying to be made right by obeying the law. That is clearly how the term "in the flesh" was used in verse 5. So that will be my operating assumption. But I want to make something clear here. I don't think we can be dogmatic about this. Paul may be jumping from his or someone's

pre regenerate state to their regenerate state. Since the point he is making is not what happens when a person is born again, but what effect the law has upon a person trying to use the law to be right with God, Paul could be jumping back and forth across those lines. I don't think that would hurt the point that he is setting forth to make. The state of the person has been argued by scholars across the centuries. But it could be that the debate distracts us from the rock solid point Paul is making.

Now, what does Paul say? Ok, what should we say about this law? How should we think about it? Are sin and law the same thing since they seem to produce the same outcome? Does the law create sin? Paul answers, certainly not!

Then he says, "on the contrary". This is to say that not only is the first statement not true but it is the opposite of the first statement. It is not that both the law and sin are bad. No, it is just the opposite. The fact is that the law is so good that it shows sin to be so bad. The law reveals sin.

If the law was bad and sin was bad we would never know how to tell what sin is. When we hunt we rely on contrasts to both be safe and be successful. We wear blaze orange because it is a direct contrast to any color you will ever see on a deer or in most outdoor settings. The contrasting color keeps you safe.

Most hunters want some snow for hunting. This gives you a white contrast that helps you see the dark deer. These contrasts are revealing. Well the law is holy and good. It is the bright white that evil's darkness shows up against. The contrast is necessary for the opposite to be revealed. The only way we will ever know how bad sin is, is by using a standard that is only good.

Then Paul picks one of the commandments to make his point. And it is the kind of thing that the more you think about it, the more sense it makes. Think about this. How would you know that coveting is evil?

The Greek word for covet means-
to turn upon a thing

2) to have a desire for, long for, to desire

3) to lust after, covet

3a) of those who seek things forbidden

The interpretations for lust and covet come from the same word.

First, I would like to quote the best source I've ever read explaining coveting. It is in the book on True Spirituality by Francis Schaeffer on page 8 of *The Law and Love of God*.

Does this mean that any desire is coveting and therefore sinful? The Bible makes plain that this is not so- all desire is not sin. So then the question arises, when does proper desire become coveting? I think we can put the answer down simply: desire becomes sin when it fails to include love of God or men. Further, I think there are two practical tests as to when we are coveting against God or men; first, I am to love God enough to be contented; second, I am to love men enough not to envy.

Mr. Schaeffer goes on to say that "A quiet disposition and a heart giving thanks at any given moment is the real test of the extent to which we love God at the moment." In essence if we want something to the point that it causes us to leave that position, we are coveting. He has much more to say about this first test and it is worth reading.

Quoting Mr. Schaeffer, "The second test as to when proper desire becomes coveting is that we should love men enough not to envy, and this is not only envy for money; it is for everything. It can, for instance, be envy of his spiritual gifts. There is a simple test for this. Natural desires have become coveting against a fellow creature, one of our kind, a fellow man, when we have a mentality that would give us secret satisfaction at his misfortune. If a man has something, and he loses it, do we have an inward pleasure? A secret satisfaction at his loss? Do not speak too quickly and say it is never so, because you will make yourself a liar. This ends the quote.

The law clearly tells us that coveting is wrong. The first question we should ask ourselves is do we think it is wrong? Or

have we learned to accept improper desire for things as acceptable. Have we become good at excusing our lack of contentment regarding our circumstances for one reason or another? Do we actually refuse to be content with what God has given us because there is some condition that He has not met for us. Maybe we are not content with our relationships with our spouses. Maybe we are not content with our work situations. Maybe we are not content with our status with others. We could go on and on. The thoughts that feed that discontentment are sin and we must deal with them. Giving thanks is appropriate. Being content is appropriate. But coveting is not.

Now back to our original question. Who would have known that desire in us was evil if the law had not addressed it? And the answer is "nobody".

I can think of several reasons that coveting is a very good illustration here. First it is not something that humans would immediately associate with an ill effect. So they may never pronounce it as being evil. People in most cultures come up with laws about murder pretty quick. It isn't hard to see that murder has a very permanent negative effect. But until coveting expresses itself in some other sin, coveting doesn't seem like a real problem.

Second, coveting is an internal thing. A person could be living according the first nine commands and may even be able to keep all of them to the law's satisfaction in day to day behavior. A person could think that they are in good shape according to the law. But the 10th commandment comes and the castle crumbles. Every person alive, if they will tell the truth, has coveted often. We wrongly want what we don't have and it inspires all kinds of other evils inside of us if we allow it to have its way.

Third, there is no penalty for coveting since it is impossible to prosecute in a human court. As such it would be a very good revelation of a man's heart. If a man is to choose not to covet, he will only do it because God is looking. He has no other reason to abstain from coveting. Most of the other commands have a penalty that any good Jew may want to avoid. But coveting is a secret thing, something that you cannot be punished for by a

human court. In fact, in our world coveting is often viewed as a positive thing. We are told that we should admire those who want our jobs. Yet often that is nothing short of coveting. So it is not something that would stand out to the ordinary citizen as something evil.

⁸But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all *manner of evil* desire. For apart from the law sin was dead.

Paul is saying, it's not the law that's the problem. It is sin. It is sin that takes the opportunity. The law provides opportunity for sin to express itself, but it doesn't cause it to do so. Any more than it causes the person to go 80 mph when he sees the 60 mph sign. It is what's in the driver that is the problem.

The word for taking the opportunity is interesting here. If we were to put on a military campaign to conquer Frostburg and we set up a camp in Finzel to stage that campaign from, that would be what the word for opportunity is here. It is a base camp for a military campaign. It is a beginning, a toehold for additional activity. That is what the law provides for sin. It gives sin something to work with.

So we see here that the law stirs sin up, it provokes sin. And the law does it by identifying right and wrong. The law is completely neutral. It isn't for anyone. It isn't against anyone. It is like the ruler at the carnival rides that says only someone this tall can ride the ride. The measure just tells the truth about whether a person qualifies or not but has no preference at all. Here the truth shows us that coveting is wrong. But then what happens?

The sin that was in Paul produced all kinds of coveting. Now how did the law provide an opportunity? By identifying it. That is all the law has to do for sin. It's kind of like radar identifying a fighter plane flying over. All the radar does is identifies it. But the people on the ground are already motivated in regard to that plane's presence so that now that they know it is there they will seek to destroy it.

Well the law says- this thing is wrong. Sin in a unregenerate person already wants to do the wrong thing. So the law provides the opportunity by telling us what to do if we want to sin. If you wanted to know how to best commit sin you would read the law. Now this same law would also be the best source if you wanted to read something telling you what to avoid if you do not want to sin. But since sin is in us we won't chose that route.

So now that sinful man knows what is sinful, sin has something to work with and it works extremely well. A person in the sinful state given information about sins will result in a tremendous growth in sinful activity. In our text the sin of coveting is the desire itself, but sin will never stay there. It will always express itself in behavior in one form or another.

For apart from the law sin was dead.

Was sin dead in that it did not exist prior to the law's arrival? No. Paul has been clear about this. Sin still existed prior to the law being given. But sin had no fuel. It was in a coma compared to what it would do with some food. Sin had no direction. It had no target. It didn't know what to do to be sinful. But the law provided the fuel. It gave the standard to rebel against.

Martin Luther said, I quote "sin, by definition, depends on some kind of standard by which performance can be measured." End quote Without the standard sin would appear to be lifeless.

The words chosen for dead and alive in the context don't give us much help in understanding the text because they are words similar to our words dead and alive. The context has to define what they mean.

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

In the same way that sin was dead when there was no law, so was Paul or a hypothetical person alive without the law. And so he also died. How was Paul alive? This could not be referring to alive spiritually. There are too many verses that would counter this teaching.

I believe it makes the most sense in the context to say that Paul or this hypothetical person was alive with prospects and hope and optimism. He was alive in the sense that he appeared to be able to exist and his existence was not threatened. He would say, I am ok and he wouldn't know any better.

But then the law came and made everything visible. It made his true status visible. After seeing his own sin and knowing the penalty for sin, he knew he was as good as dead. He was in essence a dead man.

This man could not read the law as a thinking person and not miss the fact that the more he read it, the more he wanted to do things that it spoke against. The law identified sin as being deadly and this person described as a sinner. Any hope of saving himself by the law was completely shot.

Not every person has this happen to him. Everyone in Adam will respond to the law by sinning, but not everyone will recognize the dilemma this puts them in. In fact this describes the exception, not the norm. Only a person that the Holy Spirit is convicting will experience this effect by the law. And it is a miracle when it happens. It feels bad but it is a good thing, much like learning you have a disease will cause you to get treatment before it is too late.

¹⁰And the commandment, which was to *bring* life, I found to *bring* death.

What this doesn't mean is that God intended the law to bring life but it failed, and He was surprised, so he had to come up with another plan. It cannot mean that. So what can it mean?

The words "was" and "to bring" are added to the text. It literally says And the commandment which to life.

Let's take a look at some of the verses in Psalm 119:

- 7 I will praise You with uprightness of heart,
When I learn Your righteous judgments.
- 8 I will keep Your statutes;

Oh, do not forsake me utterly!
9 How can a young man cleanse his way?
By taking heed according to Your word.
10 With my whole heart I have sought You;
Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!
11 Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You.

We must keep remembering, the commandment is very good. To someone who kept the law completely it would pronounce them as righteous. It does tell us all what God likes and doesn't like. If a person had a perfect heart, a heart that wanted to please God, the law would tell us how to do so and as such it would bring life. It would show that person how to perfectly serve God. But given that Christ was the only person like that, it has not had that ministry to any of us.

When the law confronts a person under Adam it can only pronounce condemnation. It pronounces judgment and demands justice. Death is the only alternative.

¹¹For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me.

Taking occasion is the same phrase used earlier. This is the military camp word. We see here that sin set up camp for further operations due to the law. And from that outpost managed to deceive the person and then kill the person.

The word for deceive means to utterly deceive. Sin, using the law as its base camp, utterly deceives a person under Adam.

Now how does sin deceive me? I think it is the same way that Eve was deceived. Eve was given one commandment. And the serpent, the master of the sin in this story convinced Eve that God was holding out on her. Sin would give her the better things that God didn't want her to have. It seems that in context this idea of deception would fit. Sin tells us that rebellion has more to offer than obedience. The things we really want are only gained by disobeying the law. In fact the law will display those things

that sin says God is holding out on us. Sin will read every prohibition as a good thing that God is being stingy about.

And sin killed me. Again I think it is best understood that it made Paul realize that he was as good as dead. Paul had already taught that we were all born in Adam, already spiritually dead. So the law could not have created a positional change. But it made the death pronouncement. There was no more optimistically holding on to some vain hope. The doom was announced. It said- you are dead.

12 Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

Given what Paul has just said we can see that the problem is not with the commandment. The commandment is holy, just and good. Let's look at those words.

Holy hagios Thayer Definition: 1) most holy thing, a saint. This is the word most often used for Holy. A set apart item.

Just= one of the definitions for just is- rendering to each his due and that in a judicial sense, passing just judgment on others, whether expressed in words or shown by the manner of dealing with them

Good- excellent, distinguished

Paul is finalizing his point that the law is good. It isn't the law's fault that sin uses it in a bad way. The law is not the problem.

¹³ Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.

This describes almost the same thing that is described in Chapter 5, vs 21,21

Paul sums up the problem. Has the law, that which is good, suddenly turned into something that produces a bad effect upon

us? Does the law turn into an evil instrument? No. That isn't the problem at all.

Well then, how can the law's effect be explained? It can be explained by describing what sin does. It was sin that was doing all the bad things, not the law.

God gave us the law so sin would look like sin. God wants bad to look bad and good to look good. So when sin expresses itself against the backdrop of the law it will look like sin. It will look evil. And it will accomplish what sin always accomplishes. It will produce death. The law never made any of us more lost. It only proved that we were lost.

The law is the white backdrop that allows every tiny pollutant to be revealed for what it is.

Sin does the producing of death. It is sin that moves us to go against the law. Sin will accumulate the condemnation. And the net effect, the picture that is painted at the end of the day is that sin is seen by the backdrop of the law to be exceedingly sinful.