

In the first six verses of chapter seven Paul substantiated his prior claim that the Christian is no longer under the jurisdiction of law. He did so by showing how the believer's participation in Christ's death and resurrection brings about the termination of his previous existence "in the flesh" in subjection to the authority of law. Having been raised and joined to Christ, he has entered into "newness of life" governed, not by law, but by the leadership of the Spirit; he now serves his new Husband in "newness of the Spirit" rather than in "oldness of the letter."

By presenting the Christian's relationship with Christ and law in terms of a present and former marriage, Paul demonstrated the *impossibility* of his continued obligation to law. But the believer's release from the authority and servitude of law is not only entire and everlasting, it is absolutely *necessary*. The reason this is so is the intrinsic relation the principle of law bears to human sinfulness, and it is this relation that Paul went on to address in the second section of chapter seven (7:7-23). Specifically, Paul intended this passage to clarify his previous negative statements regarding law and the importance of the believer's deliverance from it. In this way it can be viewed as a parenthesis inserted between 7:6 and 8:1. And although it comprises a single context, it can be partitioned into two sub-sections introduced by rhetorical questions:

- The first sub-section includes verses 7-12. In this context Paul clarifies his previous assertion that law acts to induce and inflame sinful passions (ref. 7:5). He introduces his discussion with a rhetorical question identifying a potential implication of this function of law. He then proceeds to answer his own question, showing from his own experience how law interacts with sin and works toward the production of death.
- The second sub-section spans the balance of the passage (7:13-23). In it Paul continues his treatment of the interaction between law and sin, but he does so by moving from the dispassionate "clinical" analysis of 7:7-12 to a more personal, psychological assessment of it. Specifically, his discussion in this latter section focuses on the inward battle in the soul provoked by the law/sin dynamic and the agony and hopelessness it produces.

And so, in his consideration of the relation between life "in the flesh" and the husbandry of law, Paul began by insisting that this "marriage" produces only "*fruit for death*" (7:5). He then substantiates his claim by drawing upon the example of his own life under law. Paul, the devout Pharisee and impeccably meticulous "Hebrew of Hebrews" - the man who, as much or more than others "*concurred with the law of God in the inner man*" - came to recognize that his life of righteousness under law was really a life of bondage: for all his moral piety and confidence in religious accomplishment, Paul was "*a prisoner of the law of sin in his members*" (7:12-13). The law could not deliver him from his own inward corruption; on the contrary, it could only act in conjunction with it to bear fruit for death.

Recognizing the thrust and flow of Paul's argument is essential to understanding the perspective from which he was speaking in 7:7-25. As noted earlier, this context has been subject to differing interpretations driven primarily by whether Paul was here speaking of his Christian experience or his former life as a Pharisee striving to be righteous under the Law. Reformed theologians have traditionally opted for the former, viewing Paul as presenting the Christian's inward battle with his remaining sin. This view has been so prevalent among Reformed commentators and scholars that it is largely unquestioned in Reformed circles.

The various arguments raised in support of this position will be addressed at the appropriate point in the examination of the text. It is sufficient here to simply note that the underlying basis for this interpretation is a particular understanding of human depravity. Because of a presupposition concerning the nature, extent, and expression of man's fallen condition, it is an assumed premise that Paul could not be speaking from the vantage point of his pre-conversion life. For man in his depraved state is a "hater" of God; how, then, could Paul as an unconverted person be characterized by a *joyful concurrence with the law of God in the inner man*? It is argued that only the regenerated person is marked by such inward concurrence; therefore, Paul must necessarily have been addressing the Christian's battle of indwelling sin. On the face of it this conclusion seems valid, but, as will become evident, it reflects a biblically flawed understanding of the nature of human depravity and its operation in relation to divine law.

2. Verses 7:7-12, then, introduce Paul's explanation of his assertion in 7:5 that life under law bears only fruit for death (cf. also 5:20).

- a. His transition into this context comes in the form of a rhetorical question: "*What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?*" This manner of argumentation is common to Paul's epistles, and has already occurred several times in Romans (cf. 2:17-23, 3:1-9, 27-31, 4:1-3, 9-10, 6:1-3, 15-16, 7:1). It is a form of diatribe in which he poses an objection that someone would reasonably be expected to raise when interacting with his argument. In the present instance he has just insisted that, far from addressing and resolving the problem of sin, law (in whatever form) serves only to induce sinful passions and thereby press the one under law toward death. *But if this is the case - if law is an effectual agent of sin that only acts to provoke sin - then does it not follow that, in some sense, the law itself is sin?*
- b. Paul's response to this proposed conclusion is characteristic: "*May it never be!*" The inference that the law is sin is absolutely unfounded and absurd, and Paul proceeded to provide his refutation of it by recalling to the Romans his own experience under law. That experience is summed up in his statement, "*I would not have come to know sin except through the law*" (7:7b).

This is an interesting response in that, by itself, it does not appear to refute the inference expressed by his rhetorical question. For if the law is of the *nature* of sin (as the inference contends), then clearly it also brings the *knowledge* of sin. For this reason the knowledge of sin coming through the Law does not prove that the Law is not sin. But Paul was reasoning from another perspective: law as a governing principle (and more specifically, the Law of Moses) is not of the nature of sin, but it is an *ally* of sin in that it invokes, informs, and inflames sin. In this way law brings the knowledge of sin without itself having the nature of sin.

This general declaration is followed by an example to make his point clear: "*I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet'*" (7:7c). As a Jew, Paul appropriately drew from the Decalogue as the heart of the Old Covenant, although his statement concerning the role of the Mosaic Law in his own life applies equally to every person under any form of law.

But if it is true that law in general has the effect Paul stated, then why did he specifically mention the law against *coveting*? It is impossible to answer this question with certainty, and it is true that Paul could have referred to any precept, prescription, or prohibition in the Law of Moses to establish his point. For as a Jew under the Old Covenant, every aspect of it was equally authoritative and binding upon him, and every one of its particulars served the same role of informing his knowledge of sin. Perhaps the best explanation is that the law against coveting has a *summarizing* significance. That is, it speaks to the most general quality of sin, namely sin as self-idolatry. Because sin is absolute devotion to and concern for self, it finds its overarching expression in the desire for that which one does not have. Whether one considers stealing, murder, lying, adultery, or any other particular “sin,” they all have their origin in the innate drive toward personal gratification. In this way coveting embraces within itself all of the other forms and manifestations of sin, even as it is the antithesis of love.

- c. But there is a more important question to be answered, which is how, specifically, did the law against coveting cause Paul to *know* about covetousness?
- 1) Some have understood him to be saying simply that the tenth commandment of the Decalogue identified and established coveting as a sin. Without this commandment the Jews would not have known that covetousness was a violation of righteousness. This interpretation will not stand, because Paul has already observed that such knowledge is innate to human beings as image-bearers (ref. 1:28-32, 2:14-15).
 - 2) Others have concluded that the Law brought a definition and clarity to sin that would have otherwise been absent. In other words, all men innately know that covetousness is wrong, but the law against coveting made known to Israel the *scope* of coveting as well as the *extent* of its offense (ref. Exodus 20:17). This contention is questionable on both counts. First of all, if, as Paul has insisted, every person understands what coveting is, then all are also able to understand the scope of its operation. A person does not need a law to tell him that coveting extends to another man’s wife as well as his personal property. Furthermore, if he knows innately that “*those who practice such things are worthy of death*” (1:32), then he already grasps the seriousness of the offense. Thus the law against coveting serves only to reinforce explicitly what he already discerns.

Paul provided his own explanation of this “knowledge” in verse 7:8. The tenth commandment gave him the knowledge of covetousness in the sense that *it provoked in him every expression of coveting*. Much more than an intellectual knowledge, the commandment brought an **experiential** knowledge; it caused Paul to be driven in his personal experience toward every form and expression of covetousness. With the entrance of the commandment, sin now had an effective ally for bearing its fruit. It was not that the Law simply *defined* and *clarified* coveting; it acted in Paul’s consciousness to *provoke* covetousness within him.

A simple illustration of this dynamic is a child being told not to eat a cookie. Prior to the giving of the commandment that child had not consciously thought about eating a cookie, but now that it had been forbidden it became an irresistible temptation. A simple cookie was now the “forbidden fruit,” so tantalizing that it would only be a matter of time before the child would find himself giving in and eating it. Yet the issue is not that children cannot resist cookies; any command can be substituted for it and the result will be the same. The nature of sin insures a desire for what is forbidden, and in this way law serves as its greatest ally.

Given sin’s nature, the great irony of law is that *every commandment invariably acts to provoke its own violation in the experience of the one under it*, whether the violation is doing what is prohibited or failing to honor what is positively obligated. This principle applies universally to commandments and laws in every form, but in context Paul’s focus was particularly upon his own (and therefore Israel’s) experience under the Mosaic Law. The great requirement of the Law was Israel’s singular, absolute devotion to Yahweh as Father and Husband, and this very obligation provoked in the nation perpetual rebellion. The covenant demanded spiritual *fidelity*, and it provoked spiritual *adultery*. The implication is that, had the commandment not come, neither would the provocation that led to violation. Thus Paul could declare, “*apart from the Law sin is dead*” (7:8b).

- He was not saying that sin did not exist until the Law of Moses. This would contradict his previous statement that sin was in the world before the Law came into existence (5:13).
- Sin exists in the absence of law, but transgression does not. The reason is that transgression is violation of commandment, so that where there is no commandment there can be no violation. In this way law provides a unique *occasion* for sin. But Paul’s emphasis is that law acts to *provoke* sin; law serves to make sin “utterly sinful” (7:13), and this is the sense in which the deadness of sin in the absence of law must be understood.

Thus, when Paul stated that apart from the Law sin is *dead*, he meant that the absence of law robs sin of its potential vitality and power. Sin exists apart from law, but the presence of commandment affords to sin an effectual platform and instrument for it to attain to the fullness of its strength, power, and expression. For law not only brings new opportunity for sin, it incites and nourishes it.

- d. This principle is rearticulated in 7:9, but from a different perspective. Together with 7:8, this verse sets out a contrasting parallel structure:
- Apart from law sin is *dead* (7:8b); when the commandment came sin *became alive* (7:9b).
 - So also Paul was *alive* apart from the Law (7:9a); when the commandment came, Paul *died* (7:9c).

The consideration of these statements shows that Paul contrasted each instance of “life” with the opposing principle of “death.” Furthermore, the life of the one entity is associated with the death of the other, and vice versa. When sin was dead, Paul was alive, and when sin sprang to life Paul died. *Most importantly to Paul’s argument, the mechanism for this “life to death” and “death to life” transformation of both Paul and sin was the bringing in of the Law.*

But this language begs two obvious questions. The first is: *In what sense could Paul regard himself as ever being “apart from the Law”?* Surely from his youngest years he had been instructed in the Law of Moses, and his life as a Pharisee was centered in his study and observance of the Law. The second question is related to the first: *In what sense did Paul regard himself as being **alive** apart from the Law?*

- These issues have led some to conclude that he was speaking of his life prior to the time in which the Spirit began to convict him of the true significance of the Law, and therefore his abject failure under it. Throughout his years as a Pharisee he viewed himself as righteous under the Law - in that sense he was “alive.” Likewise, until the time of his conversion he had been “apart from the Law” in the sense that its true meaning and his failure with respect to it were not evident to him.
- Others have concluded that the “I” of Paul’s discussion must be attributed to Adam. For he alone was truly “alive apart from the Law.” With the sentence of *death* in Eden, no person since Adam can claim to be *alive*, whether or not he is specifically under the Law of Moses. The problem with this view is that Paul went on to say that *when the commandment came he died*. If he was speaking of Adam, then the “commandment” must refer to God’s prohibition regarding the tree of knowledge and Adam’s death because of it. But Paul’s contextual emphasis is upon the Law of Moses, which argues against any intended reference to Adam.
- Still others have taken Paul’s “I” as implicating theocratic Israel. Therefore, when he spoke of being alive apart from the Law, he was referring to Israel’s experience prior to the giving of the Law of Moses at Sinai. Paul has already insisted that “sin is not reckoned where there is no law” (5:13), and in this sense the sons of Israel were alive prior to Sinai.

In response to these views, some observations need to be made.

- 1) First, by using the principles of *life* and *death* in relation to sin as well as himself, it is evident that Paul’s claim of “life” before the entrance of the Law was not a denial of his own innate state of spiritual death as a sinner. Again, he previously indicated that “*death reigned from Adam until Moses*” (5:14), making it absurd that he would here argue otherwise with respect to himself.

Rather than speaking in the theological categories of spiritual death and spiritual life, he was using this terminology in reference to one's confidence of personal righteousness and the Law's role in that regard. Where law has not defined transgression, a person can find himself "alive" in the sense that he is free from formal, legal condemnation resulting from chargeable violation. In this way a man who is spiritually *dead* can still be regarded as being *alive*.

- 2) But this being so, at what point in his life, and under what circumstance, did Paul regard himself as "alive apart from the Law"? He clearly regarded himself as alive *under* the Law: "*as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless*" (ref. Philippians 3:1-6). To view Paul as speaking of his pre-conversion life as a Pharisee seems strained at best. In this case "alive apart from the Law" means alive under the Law, but at a time when the true significance of the Law was hidden from him.

The only other option is to have Paul referring to his young childhood before he became personally accountable to the Law. But if this was his meaning, then "the commandment came" with his entrance into young manhood, and this is problematic. For he also insisted that with the commandment came *death*, and it is clear that Paul's life as a Pharisee was marked by personal confidence of righteousness under the Law, not the sense of his failure and the Law's condemnation of him.

Given Paul's redemptive-historical perspective and his contextual focus upon the Law of Moses, it is probable that, while using personal language, Paul's argument was directed more toward Israel's corporate experience with the Law. This is not to say that he was not referring to himself in any respect, but only that he was implicating himself *as a Jew in solidarity with the nation of Israel*.

Israel (and by extension, Paul the son of Israel) had first of all been alive apart from the Law in the sense that "*sin is not reckoned [as transgression] where there is no law*" (5:13). When the Law (the commandment) came in, the nation fell under formal condemnation. But more properly to the immediate context, Paul was alive in the sense that sin was "dead." For, apart from the presence of law, sin does not reach its full potential of power and consequence; in that sense it is "dead." And where sin is dead, the human being is "alive" - he is not subjugated to sin's power and domination in the way he is when he is under law.

Considered together, the evidence points to Paul - the quintessential Hebrew - as emphasizing Israel's theocratic experience under the Law, which experience he shared. As he revealed to the Romans his own agonizing quest for righteousness under the Law of Moses, he was opening to them the legacy of the Jewish nation. But beyond that, his words must be understood as pertaining to the experience of all of Adam's fallen descendents; *in addressing the dynamic of life and death in relation to sin and law, he was effectively speaking on behalf of all men*.

Douglas Moo comments: “*I died*’ will describe that situation according to which the law, turning ‘sin’ into ‘transgression,’ confirms, personalizes, and radicalizes the spiritual death in which all find themselves since Adam. Israel, in this sense, ‘died’ when the law was given to it.”

- e. Yet, despite law’s effectual alliance with sin, it still remains that law is not sin. Sin brings death as its wage (5:12-14, 6:23), and *the Law was to result in life* for Paul (and Israel) (7:10). Once again, a correct understanding of Paul’s perspective and the way in which he was employing his terminology is essential to discerning his point. For, like other statements in the overall context, it appears on the surface that he was once again contradicting himself. Did he not previously insist that the Law was intended to effect the increase of transgression (5:20), and that the service of law as “husband” only bears fruit for death (7:5)? And even granting his concession that the Law ultimately resulted in death for him (7:10b), how could he speak of the commandment as being *unto life* (7:10a)?
- 1) Often this is interpreted as Paul pointing back to the first articulation of a “law covenant” in Eden. A maxim of Reformed Theology is the so-called “covenant of works” God made with Adam, which covenant is said to be implied in God’s commandment concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:15-17). In Reformed (Covenant) Theology, this “law” is viewed as constituting Adam’s legal “probation,” and therefore the basis upon which he would be secured in life or plunge into death. Thus it was a “commandment unto life.” And because Covenant Theology sees a singular, unified principle of law (usually expressed in terms of “moral law”) as determining and governing man’s relationship with God throughout human history, it understands the Law of Moses as intending life in the same sense that the law covenant with Adam intended life.
 - 2) Certainly the Jews believed that obedience to the Law would result in life, and their conviction was not entirely unfounded. For in making His covenant with Israel God promised that He would give them the inheritance of abundant “life” if they would keep His covenant (cf. Deuteronomy 7:1-24; Joshua 23:1-7; Ezekiel 20:10-11; etc.). But what Israel failed to discern was that this promised life was *theocratic* and not *spiritual*. It pertained to their continued blessing and prosperity in Canaan as Yahweh’s covenant people; it did not promise them spiritual renewal (ref. Deuteronomy 30:11-20; Joshua 23:1-16, 24:1-28; etc.).
 - 3) At the same time, because the Law of Moses was effectively God’s articulation to Israel of what constitutes true righteousness - that is, authentic human existence as divine image-bearer living in perfect communion with the Creator - it can be argued from this vantage point that the Law was “unto life.” It presented to the sons of Israel what “life” really is, and who it is that possesses it. In this way it is accurate to say that the Law promised life to those who live in perfect conformity to it.

- 4) But the fact that the Law of Moses could, in effect, promise spiritual life to those who live in perfect compliance with it does not mean that God gave it with this specific intention in mind. God never intended that men would find life through the Law. The New Testament makes this abundantly clear, but it is also the overarching teaching of the Old Testament (cf. Deuteronomy 30:1-6, 32:1-43; Ezekiel 11:14-20, 36:16-38; Hosea 1-3).

And so the Law - which articulated to Israel what it is for men to live in accord with their created purpose and function - held out *life* as the very essence of authentic human existence. Yet, because the righteousness revealed in the Law is the perfection associated with an *unattainable personal renewal*, the Law became in its administration purely an instrument of condemnation and death. That which was to result in life resulted only in death (7:10b).

- f. With the Law as its ally sin gained its ultimate mastery over the sons of Israel. Sin used the Law to render itself utterly sinful: with the help of the Law sin not only turned iniquity into transgression (lawlessness), it found the mechanism for its own empowerment. Taking opportunity through the commandment, sin produced every form of disobedience (7:8a). But its goal was not simply disobedience; sin's ultimate design is to *deceive* the sinner in order to *kill* him through law (7:11).

That which presented life acted, in alliance with sin's deceit, to kill. Such a charge was radical coming from Paul the Pharisee, and it would have been startling to Jewish readers. *God* gave the Law to Moses on the holy mountain; it was "God-breathed" and written with the divine finger. By God's own declaration the Law was pure, righteous, and true (Psalm 19:7-11, 119:1ff). Was it not, then, the height of blasphemy to accuse the Law of being an instrument of *deceit*? In one sense such a charge is blasphemous, but in the sense in which Paul was speaking he was correct in ascribing to the Law a deceptive role. For in that the Law held out the promise of life, the sons of Israel came to believe that they could attain life by their obedience to it. Their sin deceived them, and the Law became a stumbling block as the Jews sought through the Law and the status it afforded to them to establish their own righteousness before God (Romans 9:1-10:5).

- g. Lest his readers misunderstand his charge, Paul concluded this section by reaffirming that the Law in itself is not the problem: "*The Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good*" (7:12). The Law of Moses was, in its essential nature, all that Israel believed it to be. It was the God-breathed, holy word of life, for it presented to Yahweh's covenant people what it is to truly live as human beings. It called them to be perfect as their Father is perfect, and in this way live authentic lives as creatures made in the divine image and likeness.

The Law *in and of itself* does not deceive men or incite sin. It is only when it is seized upon by sin and made its ally that it provokes and kills. The law is a "minister of condemnation" because of its righteous demands and its sanction that "*the soul that sins shall die*"; in sin's presence, law is a destroyer of men.