

3. Consistent with his pattern in the Roman epistle, Paul transitioned into the present context (7:13-23) with a rhetorical question arising from his preceding discussion and conclusions. And as before, he will answer his own question in no uncertain terms, and then proceed to explain and develop his response.

Previously Paul insisted upon the necessity of the believer's deliverance from the jurisdiction of law. The reason this liberation is necessary is that law works inexorably with human sinfulness to produce only fruit for death. Law has no capacity to remedy a sinner's plight; quite the contrary, it always acts as an ally of sin to strengthen its hand in both its operation and its dominion. Therefore, if a person is to be set free from the power and condemnation of sin, he must be released from the husbandry of law. *This is true not simply with respect to justification, but sanctification as well.* Sin is operative in the soul of the Christian just as it is in the unbeliever. If law cannot serve sin's conquest in the unbeliever - which is the foundational premise of the gospel of justification by *faith*, neither can it do so in the believer. The Christian's service - and so also his true progress in sanctity - is carried out in the "newness of the Spirit" and not the "oldness of the letter" (cf. again 7:1-6 with 2 Corinthians 3:1-18, Galatians 1-3, 5:1-6; Hebrews 8:1-10:23).

"Paul's essential teaching about the inability of the Mosaic law to rescue sinful people from spiritual bondage is the same whether that bondage is the condition of the unregenerate person - who cannot be saved through the law - or that of the regenerate person - who cannot be sanctified and ultimately delivered from the influence of sin through the law." (Douglas Moo)

- a. Because law (in whatever form) always acts as sin's ally rather than its adversary, some may conclude that law is of the nature or quality of sin. This is the charge Paul addressed in 7:7-12, and in so doing he insisted that the problem is not with law per se; the problem resides in the way sin utilizes law to achieve its own deceptive and destructive ends. *Law is not sin, but it serves the effectuation of sin's agenda, which is the condemnation and death of the sinner.*

But this truth raises a further possible implication, which is the subject of Paul's rhetorical question introducing this next context (7:13a): *"Therefore, did that which is good become a cause of death for me?"* Even if law cannot be regarded as being of the nature of sin, can it not be regarded as the *source of death*? Literally Paul's question reads: *Did the good become death for me?* By "the good" he was referring to the Law of Moses ("the commandment is holy and righteous and good"), which expression of law specifically pertained to Paul and his experience as a Jew. But though Paul was focusing upon the role of the Old Covenant law in his own life (and so also its role in the life of the nation of Israel), *it must be emphasized that his discussion applies to law in every form and expression.* One need not be a Jew under the Law of Moses to be implicated in the issues he was presenting; they apply equally to every human being. For regardless of religious/cultural orientation, every person seeks to attain righteousness - however he may conceive it - through personal conformity to a personally adopted code of morality and ethics.

As before, Paul's response to his own question was unequivocal: "*May it never be!*" Also consistent with his previous pattern, he then justifies his denunciation with a summary statement that sets the stage for the larger explanation and clarification to follow: "*Rather, it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful*" (7:13c).

This summary statement is itself full in content, and because the subsequent discussion simply elaborates on it, it is vital to understand Paul's meaning here if the entire passage is to be rightly understood.

- 1) In response to the contention that the Law is the source of death, Paul insisted that death has its origin in *sin*.
- 2) While law is exempted from culpability with regard to the entrance and imposition of death (cf. again 5:12-14), it is not free of all involvement. Paul was clear to the Romans that sin effects death *by means of law*; it effects death "through that which is good." By employing law in this way, *sin is shown to be sin*. Paul here makes an important distinction: *law does not make sin to be sin; it acts in conjunction with sin to cause sin to be manifested for what it is*.
- 3) This observation raises three implications of its own:
 - The first is that sin does not openly reveal itself. It is a self-cloaking *deceiver* rather than a self-revealer.
 - It is only when it operates in connection with law that sin is plainly revealed. Yet sin does not employ law in order to reveal itself; deception remains its goal (7:11). Nevertheless, it is only in connection with law that sin is brought to full light.

Given this dynamic, it may at first appear that Paul was contradicting himself. For he just observed that sin used the Law of Moses to deceive him, and now he was saying that law shows sin for what it is. These truths are reconciled by understanding that each statement comes from a different vantage point. Sin *deceives* men through law, and so is able to finally kill them. But by effecting their death in this way, sin is also forced to show its true colors. *Its work is the work of deception, but when it accomplishes its end it is seen for what it is*.

- The third implication proceeds out of the previous two, which is that law must be considered and understood from two perspectives. First of all, law is *sin's* instrument for deception, but it also is *God's* instrument for sin's unmasking.

Thus law - in this instance, the Law of Moses - serves an *immediate* function in facilitating sin's deceitful goal of bringing death, but in God's design it serves an *ultimate* function in bringing sin into the light of full disclosure. What sin intends to assist it in its deception acts ultimately to strip away its veil.

- 4) In accordance with God's purpose, law serves its ultimate function by rendering sin "*utterly sinful.*" The way in which it does so is by facilitating sin's effecting of *death* through that which is *good*. By producing its dastardly fruit through that which is "holy and righteous and good," sin is made manifest in all its deceptive and damning power. It is one thing to accomplish sinister, ungodly ends through evil means and agencies; it is something else to have the power to effect those ends through an agent that is righteous and good. *Sin is of such a power that, far from being overcome by the goodness of law, it is able to subjugate law to the effectual service of its own unholy ends.*

With that introductory overview Paul entered into a more thorough treatment of the Law's role in rendering sin "utterly sinful." It is this passage (7:14-23) that is the focal point of the controversy regarding Paul's perspective in this chapter. Was he writing as a Christian addressing the ongoing, inward battle of sin, or was he writing from the perspective of his previous existence (and so also Israel's) under the Law of Moses and the agony accompanying his efforts to be righteous through the Law?

At first glance it may not appear to be terribly important which view is embraced, but, in truth, one's conclusion has huge practical and theological implications:

- From the practical standpoint, is the Christian to understand that his new life in the Holy Spirit is to be characterized by the sort of agonizing inward torment and bondage that Paul describes in this passage? Or conversely, should he approach his life in Christ from the perspective that he has been delivered from that torment and tyranny? *How the believer answers this question will determine the way in which he understands and addresses the issues of Christian sanctification and his own remaining sin.*
- Theologically, how one concludes regarding Paul's perspective in this passage will determine how he envisions what it means to "*serve in newness of the Spirit*" rather than "*oldness of the letter.*" Thus, at the very least it has profound implications for how the Christian understands the significance of the Pentecost event in salvation history and the role and operation of the Spirit within him. It will inform and even largely govern his understanding of what it means to be a "new creature in Christ" - to be a participant in the renewal that Christ has introduced by His death and resurrection. It will further drive his understanding of his own relation to law, particularly as it serves a role in his sanctification. *In the broadest terms, the interpretation that is embraced is foundationally important to how the Christian views the relationship between the Old and New Covenants.*

It was observed that, in Reformed circles, the former understanding is commonplace. The church father Augustine embraced this view later in his life, which some attribute to his contention with Pelagius over the doctrine of “free will.” More than a thousand years later many of the Reformers, who were deeply impacted by “Augustinian” theology, followed Augustine’s lead and promoted his view. That interpretive heritage was passed down to the doctrinal heirs of the Reformation and is reflected in the commentaries and theological works of numerous Reformed (and even non-Reformed) Christians.

- Again, the argument that is foundational to this position is *theological*. It is a particular understanding of man’s depravity held by many within the Calvinistic tradition. Beginning with the maxim that fallen man is characterized by an absolute and entire enmity with God, there is no option but to understand Paul’s declarations in this passage as addressing his Christian battle with sin. His repeated insistence that he agreed with the Law and purposed to do what is good - that he served the law of God with his mind - is contrary to a state of enmity marked by hatred for God, his law, and everything good associated with Him.
- A secondary argument for this view is *linguistic* rather than theological. It is Paul’s notable change in grammar in 7:14-23. Whereas in the preceding context he spoke in terms of “past tense” realities - “produced in me,” “once was alive,” “I died,” “deceived me,” “killed me,” etc. - this passage is constructed entirely in the present tense. This change in tense is said to indicate a shift in Paul’s perspective. The contention is that verses 7:7-13 provide his characterization of his previous life in his unconverted state, while 7:14-25 find him describing and interacting with his then-present life as apostle to the Gentiles. Paul’s discussion of his Christian battle with indwelling sin is said to find its summary statement at the end of the chapter, where, after confessing his confident gratitude to God in Christ, he nonetheless acknowledges that with his flesh he still continues to serve the law of sin (7:25).

Although commentators and theologians present other lesser arguments, the primary bases for the Augustinian view are those addressed above. Others, including most of the church fathers, maintain that Paul was speaking from the perspective of an unregenerate person. Even so, they differ as to whether the “I” of his discussion finds its referent only in himself, in Adam, in himself in solidarity with Israel, or was used by him as a metaphor simply to represent the unregenerate man. This latter issue is not unimportant, but it is secondary to the larger question which concerns Paul’s regenerate vs. unregenerate perspective in this passage.

In attempting to answer this greater question Douglas Moo’s counsel is well taken: *“Interpreting Romans 7 is like fitting pieces of a puzzle together when one is not sure of the final outline; the best interpretation is the one that is able to fit the most pieces together in the most natural way. Because of this, it is inconclusive, and even misleading, to cite several arguments in favor of one’s own view and conclude that the issue has been settled. The best interpretation will be the one that is able to do the most justice to all the data of the text within the immediate and larger Pauline context.”* (emphasis added)

With Moo's instruction in mind, several observations about this text are crucial:

- 1) Paul's overall emphasis in this context is on his *fleshliness* and *subjugation* to sin's power. Paul notes that he is "*of flesh, sold into bondage to sin*" (7:14), that "*nothing good dwells within him*" (7:18), and that he is a "*prisoner of the law of sin in his members*" (7:23), so that he "*serves the law of sin with his flesh*" (7:25).
- 2) Second, and very importantly, there is a conspicuous absence in this passage of any mention of the *indwelling Spirit* or His sanctifying and transforming power.
- 3) Conversely, whatever good Paul mentions in this context he ascribes to *himself*. He locates his sin in his members, but he grants to his *mind* godly understanding, agreement, desire and effort. He recognizes, agrees with, and seeks to do what is good (7:15-16, 18-21), and for that reason he associates his sinful practice not with himself but sin's power within him (7:17, 20-23). Furthermore, he insists that he agrees with the Law and openly confesses that it is good, joyfully concurring with it and serving it with his mind (7:16-22, 25).
- 4) Finally, there is an overt emphasis throughout on Paul's relationship to *the Law*. Far from being delivered from the jurisdiction of law, he acknowledges its claims upon him. As such, his desires are set upon meeting its demands, and all of his mental and emotional energies are directed toward living in conformity to it. *Obedience to the commandments is the "good" that Paul seeks to do, so that his failure to do what he desires - which is the result of sin's enslaving power - is specifically his failure to meet the demands of God's law* (7:14-23).

When these emphases are juxtaposed with Paul's larger contextual arguments concerning the believer's new life in Christ, the contrasts are remarkable:

- 1) The believer has been delivered from sin's tyranny and enslaving power: by participating in Christ's death and resurrection he has "*died to sin*" (6:2); his "*body of sin has been done away with*" (6:6a) and he has been "*freed from sin*" (6:7, 17-18, 20-22). Thus he is *no longer a slave to sin* (6:6b). Furthermore, this is not simply theological jargon; these are **determinative realities** that the Christian must necessarily reckon as true with respect to himself (6:11).
- 2) As well, Paul insists that the believer is preeminently defined by the indwelling, transforming presence of the Holy Spirit (5:1-5, 6:4 with 7:6, 8:1-17).
- 3) So also the good that marks the affection and will of the believer is not attributed to his own mind, but the renewing power and grace of the Spirit (7:6, 8:1-17).
- 4) In addition, the believer is released from the jurisdiction of law and his obligation to its husbandry (7:1-6). He is "*not under law but under grace*" (6:14-15); he has "*died to the law by which he was bound,*" and having been released from it, he no longer serves according to the "*oldness of the letter*" (7:4-6).