

Following Moo's advice that the best solution is the one that takes into account all of the *Pauline* (rather than personally or theologically imposed) contextual data, it seems obvious how this passage ought to be understood. However valid the arguments for the Augustinian position may appear to be, the *irreconcilable contrasts* between Paul's description of the "I" in 7:14-25 and his declarations concerning the Christian and his new life in Christ are compelling.

- How is it possible that Paul could have labored so methodically and passionately to establish in the minds of his readers crucial truths of gospel faith: reckoned righteousness, death to sin, deliverance from law, and the effectual transforming grace of the indwelling Spirit - only to then testify to them that he (and they) still live under the condemnation of sin's dominion and the jurisdiction of law?
- Even more, how could he convey to them that his success or failure in conforming to the Law is determined by his own inward resource with no mention of any contribution by the Holy Spirit?

Herman Ridderbos' observations are well worth noting:

*"It should first of all be established that the discord pictured in Romans 7 consists not merely in a certain temptation of the ego (the will to the good, the inward man), **but in the absolute impotence of the 'I' to break through the barrier of sin and the flesh in any degree at all.** Undoubtedly it is said of the new man as well that he continues to be engaged in conflict with the flesh. Thus, for example, in Galatians 5:17 where it is said: 'the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would.' And similarly it is said to believers in Romans 6:12 that sin may not (continue to) reign in their mortal bodies, etc. All this points to enduring battle, struggle, resistance of the flesh against the Spirit. But the absolute distinction between these and similar pronouncements and the portrayal of Romans 7 is that the former are spoken within the possibility and **certainty** of victory (cf. Rom. 6:14; Gal.5:24), while in Romans 7 everything is directed toward throwing light on man's situation of death, his having been sold under sin, his having been taken captive by the superior power of sin...The elements placed over against each other in Romans 7 are consequently not (as in Gal. 5) the Spirit and the flesh, or (as in Rom. 6) grace and the law, but the human ego, the 'I-myself' and the flesh, the law of God and the law of sin. In the struggle between those parties the victory is to the flesh and sin, and the ego finds itself, despite all that it would will and desire, in absolute bondage and the situation of death. Other powers must enter the field, another than the 'I-myself' must join the battle, if deliverance is to come." (Paul: An Outline of His Theology) (emphasis added)*

By understanding Paul in this way, the Christian is not left denying his ongoing struggle against sin; quite the contrary, **he is fully equipped to engage that struggle**, for he does so in the confidence of God's absolute victory in Christ by His Spirit. The Christian can confidently engage himself against sin for the simple reason that Christ has prevailed to give him *present* deliverance from sin's tyranny. Moreover, by the indwelling Spirit he has both the divine *power* to live as an overcomer and the sure *promise* of final victory.

b. As observed previously, verse 7:14 marks a notable grammatical shift in the larger context. Whereas to this point Paul predominantly used verb tenses oriented toward the past, he employed the present tense throughout the entirety of 7:14-25. This shift is arguably the best *textual* support for the contention that Paul's perspective here is that of his Christian battle with indwelling sin. Nevertheless, it is not a compelling argument, as his use of the present tense also supports the conclusion that he was speaking from the perspective of his unregenerate life under the Law.

- First of all, the present tense is commonly used in New Testament Greek where the actual events being recounted are in the past. Grammarians often refer to this as the "historical present," and its purpose is to bring a pronounced sense of *immediacy* to the content. It is intended to create a "you are there" feel for the reader. This use of the present tense is especially common in John's gospel.
- That Paul would here use the present tense in this way is understandable. Though he was recounting his earlier unconverted experience under the Law, *he was doing so from his present perspective* as a Christian who had been delivered from the Law. This accounts for the apparent contradiction between Paul's declared confidence under the Law (cf. Philippians 3:1ff) and the despair he here insists that it produced in him.

In Philippians he was speaking from the perspective of his life as a Pharisee when he had no real sense of his utter failure and condemnation under the Law. That insight would not come until later when he was brought under the conviction of the Spirit. Only then would he see that what he thought was conformity to the Law was actually the sin of self-deluded self-righteousness. The Law called him to be devoted to God, and Paul's zeal and obedience had been nothing more than devotion to himself and the exercise of his fierce pride. In this Romans context Paul was addressing his former life under law, but from the vantage point of his enlightened Christian understanding of it.

- As one whose spiritual eyes had been opened, Paul had come to view his confident self-righteousness very differently. He had believed that the Law was his ally and benefactor in his service to God and his pursuit of righteousness, but in Christ he had come to recognize that it was actually only the ally of his self-idolatry, and therefore the instrument of his condemnation. As a Christian he now discerned the frustration and agony of trying to live under law, and so also the necessity of being delivered from its jurisdiction and husbandry. It was the intense anguish of his struggle under law that Paul desired to communicate to his Roman readers, and the best way for him to do this was to thrust them into the immediacy of his own experience by speaking to them in the present tense.

In entering upon his recounting of his former struggle under the Law, Paul began by reaffirming to his Roman readers that the problem lay within himself and not with the Law: “*We know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin*” (7:14). This assertion provides an important point of transition, first of all because it explains how it is that sin was able to effect Paul’s death through the Law, which is itself “holy and righteous and good” (7:13), but secondly because it serves to introduce the succeeding context. In fact, it provides the essential content of Paul’s subsequent discussion, so that everything that follows through the end of the chapter must be interpreted as simply an enlargement and clarification of this core thesis.

- 1) The first thing Paul’s assertion does is introduce two contrasting realities and present them as standing in opposition to one another. The two realities are the *spiritual* and the *fleshly*, and he associates the one with the Law and the other with himself. Obviously Paul was not constraining the categories of “spiritual” and “fleshly” as applying only to himself and the Law. His primary concern in this context was to show that these two realities necessarily stand opposed to each other, with the result that, since the Law is spiritual and he is fleshly, *the Law stands opposed to him*.
- 2) Second, Paul insisted that this principle of fleshliness is defined in terms of *bondage to sin*. When Paul spoke of his “fleshliness” he was not referring to his physicality or mortality, but to his predicament. His point was that his enslavement to sin’s power and authority was both the source and definition of his fleshly condition. Notably, this introduces the third and final actor in the context, namely sin. From verse 7:14 through the end of the chapter there are only three characters: *Paul himself* (“ego”), *the Law*, and *sin*. The entire passage is simply Paul’s recounting of the interplay between the three.

But already with his introductory assertion Paul has established that sin lay at the center of his conflict with the Law; it rendered him “fleshly” and therefore unable to live in conformity to the “spiritual” Law. Far from aiding him in his labors to keep the Law, sin insured that the Law would become his adversary, accuser, and condemner.

Paul’s self-described condition was that he was sold into bondage to sin. He was not simply tempted by it and occasionally subdued by it; he was its slave, fully constrained to its will and service. Most importantly, because 7:15-25 merely expands upon and clarifies 7:14, *this state of bondage is definitive for all that follows in the balance of the chapter*. This being so, it becomes obvious that Paul could not have been speaking of the Christian’s battle with residual sin, unless of course the Christian life is to be understood in terms of ongoing enslavement to sin and its power. But if this is the case, what is to be made of Paul’s prior declarations that sin’s tyrannical hold over the Christian has been broken (6:1-22)?

c. Verse 7:15 begins Paul's explication of 7:14, which explication is focused upon his bondage to sin and its operation and implications. And central to this discussion is Paul's insistence that *he served sin as an unwilling subject*.

- 1) The things he did in sin's service baffled him: "*That which I am doing, I do not understand...*" (7:15a). Paul's point was not that he had no insight into the things he was doing, as if they flowed out of him apart from his conscious knowledge and awareness. Rather, he meant to say that he could not understand *why* he did them.
- 2) The reason for his sense of confusion is presented in the second half of the verse: "*...for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.*" Paul's lack of understanding of his conduct was tied to the fact that he found himself doing the very things he hated. He not only knew that the things he did were wrong, his own affections and desires were set against them – he *hated* the things he practiced.

This language is again a primary reason for the conclusion that Paul was speaking of his Christian conflict with sin. For can it be said – and more importantly, demonstrated biblically - that the unbeliever hates the things he practices as a sinner? The answer is unequivocally *yes*. This is not to say that every unbeliever always acknowledges as hateful everything he does; this is clearly not the case. But it yet remains that, as creatures bearing the image of God, all men innately know and approve of what is good and right (Romans 1:18-23, 28-32, 2:1-5, 11-23), so that they are quick to identify and condemn the "speck" in the eye of another, though they will overlook the "beam" in their own eye (Matthew 7:1-5).

- Israel's singular legacy throughout the nation's history was that they were a people who repeatedly committed themselves to following after Yahweh in conformity to His covenant, only to perpetually fail to honor their commitment. This pattern was established at Sinai (cf. Exodus 24:1-8 and 32:1-10), and continued from that time forward. Indeed, the cycle of covenant faithfulness, waywardness, apostasy, judgment, subjugation, repentance, deliverance, and renewal leading again to waywardness, is the central theme of the book of Judges.

- So also Paul was characterized by the same commitment to covenant faithfulness in the context of failure. For Paul to here speak of hating his sinful practices while he was yet unconverted is entirely consistent with his own life experience. The very fact that he had bound himself to the sect of the Pharisees showed how zealous he was for the Law of Moses. He was so committed to the God of Israel and the way of life and truth in the Law that he sought the death of those who embraced the false "Way" of Jesus.

Thus the seat of the conflict in Paul's life was not between himself and the Law as such, but between *his practice under sin's tyrannizing power* and the righteousness of the Law - the Law that had come from the mouth of Yahweh on the holy mount and with which Paul was in full agreement. This distinction between Paul himself (the "ego") and the operative principle of sin within him is crucial to Paul's argument, and to miss it is to misunderstand all that follows. *It is this very distinction that is the basis for Paul's agony under the Law.* Had Paul concurred with sin and its practices rather than the Law, his subjugation to sin would have been considerably less painful. The torment of Paul's soul was precisely because he had been constrained against his will to serve the master whose service he despised.

d. Far from acting against the Law out of disregard for it or despite of its righteousness, Paul agreed with it and confessed its goodness (7:16). Furthermore, the evidence of his agreement with the Law was found in the fact that he had been constrained to do precisely what he did not want to do. He did not serve sin – and therefore oppose the Law – out of a heart of eager devotion to his master; he had been held captive by sin contrary to his own intentions, interest, and affections, and thereby forced to do what he *hated*. This forced and powerless slavery to a despised master is what Paul meant by being sold into bondage to sin.

1) By this agreement Paul showed how he understood the *spirituality* of the Law. He recognized the divine origin and righteousness of the Law; it was not a human concoction, but was sourced in and expressive of the divine mind and will. Paul agreed with the Law of Moses because he understood it to be God's law (cf. 7:12, 22).

2) At the same time, Paul's unwilling violation of the Law reveals how he understood his own *fleshliness*. He was fleshly, not in the sense that he did not understand, acknowledge, or approve of the righteousness of the Law, but in the sense that he was enslaved to sin. He was fleshly in that he was constrained to do and practice the very things he hated. How, then, is Paul's perspective in this passage to be reconciled with his previous assertion that the Law provoked every form of sin in him (7:7-8)? In other words, *did sin's mastery provoke him to transgress the Law, or did the Law provoke him to sin?* The answer is that both are true.

The entrance of the Law did bring with it the provocation of all sorts of sin, but the Law did not accomplish this by itself. Rather, sin used the Law to bring about this provocation – it used what was good to bring about death, and thereby show itself to be "utterly sinful." The Law of Moses was the effective instrument of provocation for Paul (and Israel), but it was an instrument in *sin's* hands. Sin exercised its tyrannical rule over Paul, but it wielded its power through the Law, compelling Paul to violate that which he agreed with and confessed as good. In this way sin maximized the agony of its unwilling subject.

- e. Lest the Romans miss his point, Paul explicitly stated to them the implication of his making such a sharp distinction between himself and his “fleshliness”: “*So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me*” (7:17). The evidence that Paul’s slavery to sin was not willing is that he found himself doing what he hated and failing to do that which he desired to do. He did not *give* himself to be sin’s slave; he regarded himself as having been *sold* into slavery. But if Paul’s servitude was forced and contrary to his own desire, then it followed that his sinful conduct and failure under the Law were not, in that sense, attributable to “him,” but rather to sin’s authoritative power over him. Paul himself sought to do differently, but he had neither the freedom nor the power in his bondage to do what he desired.

This is an absolutely crucial point in Paul’s thinking that must not be misconstrued or caricatured. Paul was not attributing to himself some sort of schizophrenia; neither was he portraying his sinfulness in psychological terms in order to free himself of personal responsibility for his “lawlessness.” He established the distinct categories of *sin* and *self*, not for the purpose of excusing his sinfulness or his responsibility for it, **but in order to accurately represent the nature and power of sin’s hold over the sinner**. By speaking of sin as a master that effectually dominated him contrary to what he believed, desired, and sought, Paul was able to portray to the Romans the *utter powerlessness* of men to escape sin’s tyranny. Even more, whereas men naturally look to law to come to their aid in their efforts to gain deliverance from sin’s tyranny, the reality is that *law only acts as sin’s instrument to fortify its dominion*.

Recalling again that 7:15-23 provide Paul’s clarification and amplification of his core thesis in verse 7:14, it is clear how he could attribute his failure under the Law to sin and not to himself. In his own experience (which experience was duplicated in the life of the nation of Israel) he found himself agreeing with the Law, but powerless to meet its demands. He eagerly desired to do one thing, but sin compelled him to do another; he had been sold into bondage to sin.

In the sense that men are helpless in their resistance against sin’s subjugating power, sin is an entity that operates within them separate from themselves. Thus Paul could exclaim: “No longer am **I** the one doing it, but **sin** which indwells me.” But what did he mean by the phrase, *no longer*? Was he indicating that there had been a time in which his wrongdoing could be rightly attributed to himself rather than to the sin within him? The answer is that Paul’s qualification is *logical* rather than *temporal*. That is, the phrase “no longer” does not refer to a time in the past, but to a logical conclusion that now necessarily results from what has been observed and understood about the nature and operation of sin. In other words, because of the truth that Paul found himself acting contrary to his own understanding, agreement, and desire, he could no longer view his sinfulness except in terms of his own hopeless subjugation to sin’s tyrannizing power. Given how he had come to understand the nature of his struggle with sin and law, he could no longer be regarded as the one doing the things that he despised.

f. Verses 7:18-20, then, provide Paul's explanation of the implication raised in 7:17. This implication is the focal point of his entire line of argumentation in this context, and he was concerned that it be properly understood. Paul just stated that *indwelling* sin was the culprit in his unrighteous practice. Sin is not a force that acts upon a person from the outside; it dwells within him with a permeating presence. As such, Paul could neither localize it to one particular part of his being nor extricate it. Paul saw sin as *distinct* from "himself" (even as a master is distinct from his unwilling slave), but yet not *divisible* from himself.

- 1) It is this dynamic that Paul first clarifies: "*For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh*" (7:18a). This clarification serves to make Paul's statement about indwelling sin **absolute**. That is, sin's indwelling presence – by which Paul was rendered "fleshly" – does not in itself necessarily preclude the presence of any goodness within a person. This being so, Paul's statement made explicit the fact that sin's presence within him had a permeating and exhaustively transforming effect. As a slave is subject to his master in every respect and to the fullest extent, so Paul, being sold in bondage to sin, was utterly subjugated to sin's power and influence: there was absolutely no good in his flesh.
- 2) At the same time, Paul was careful to reiterate the distinction between himself ("ego") and his sin-captivated "flesh." Though no good resided in his flesh, he himself concurred with what is good. Paul - the slave of sin - agreed with and longed to conform to the righteousness of the Law, but sin's comprehensive power over him insured that he was left incapable of that conformity (7:18b). The good that he set himself to do he failed to practice; conversely, the evil (that is, violation of the Law) that he rejected in his mind he found himself practicing (7:19).

Douglas Moo observes: "*Paul is drawing a dichotomy between a certain element within the 'mind' or 'will' of the non-Christian and the 'rest' of that non-Christian – the flesh. His point is that the Jew under the Law, and, by extension other non-Christians, do have a genuine striving to do what is right, as defined by God (cf. also 2:14-15). But this striving after right, because of the unbroken power of sin, can never so 'take over' the mind and will that it can effectively and consistently direct the body to do what is good.*"

- 3) Finally, in verse 7:20 Paul brought his argument back to the core implication he previously raised in 7:16-17. That implication is that the dichotomy between *himself* (as concurring with and striving toward that which is good) and his *flesh* (as subjugated to sin) establishes the principle that Paul's practice of evil was properly attributable not to himself, but to indwelling sin. Because this restatement adds nothing to his point, some have regarded it as redundant. But given that it expresses Paul's central point in the passage, and is therefore crucial to his argument, it makes perfect sense that he would spotlight it for his Roman readers in this way.