

ABSOLUTE FRUSTRATION APART FROM CHRIST
(SUNDAY, MAY 13, 2012)

Scripture Reading: Psalm 95; Rom. 7:21-25

What is a presupposition?

Presupposition is a word that comes from Latin. It means something you believe or assume to be true that comes before your argument even begins or before you take some action.

Cornelius Van Til followed by R. J. Rushdoony emphasized the importance of understanding presuppositions in defending the truth of God's Word and in speaking to an unbeliever.

A common example applied to the seating in this room is that before you sat down in your chosen pew, I doubt very much you determined if the pew was strong enough to support the weight of you and the others sitting with you. Because of countless other previous experiences, you presupposed the pew would not collapse when you sat down on it.

Both Christians and non-Christians have many presuppositions that make up what can be called a worldview. Too often people debate supposed evidence rather than dealing with presuppositions. The unbeliever must be challenged in terms of his presuppositions.

Interpreting the Bible also involves presuppositions. It is good to be clear on what are both major and minor presuppositions.

Consider the end of Romans 7. The major presuppositions I have and I trust you also share concerning this text are that, first, it is part of God's inspired Word which has been preserved throughout the ages since it was written and that God's Word has no contradictions or inconsistencies when it is properly interpreted. Second is that the Apostle Paul is the author of Romans.

Though not exactly presuppositions because they come from the study of the text, we have discussed already the questions about who is the "I" of Romans 7 and what is the spiritual condition described by Paul.

Though these questions must be answered from the text, they act like presuppositions in that once they are answered they are important for interpreting other details.

I believe it is best to understand that Paul in verses 13-25 is not giving a description of one who is a believer but rather Paul is describing using in part his own testimony the frustration and struggle of a Jew apart from Jesus Christ. Paul writes from the perspective of one now truly converted and redeemed by Jesus Christ, but his use of the first person is not because this simply is his own personal testimony as much as he is writing in union or solidarity with his people Israel.

Further I have emphasized the main point of Romans 7:7-25. **What is the main point of these verses?** Paul repeatedly defends God's law as not being the problem of man's hopeless condition apart from Jesus Christ. Yes, it is not the solution. The law does not bring salvation. But very carefully and importantly Paul states and repeats that the law is not your problem.

I have slowed down my pace a bit in covering Romans 7 because it is an important and also difficult chapter. The final verses of the chapter are not all that different from what we have already covered. But in these final verses Paul reaches the climax of this chapter in preparing the way for the beautiful presentation of the solution found in the salvation of our Triune God.

You will only find frustration when you are not seeking Christ.

We will look at Romans 7:21-25 following again a basic outline of these verses in 4 parts – a conclusion followed by an explanation and two more conclusions.¹

1. FIRST CONCLUSION, v. 21

Rom. 7:21 I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good.

On May 6, 1619 the Canons of the Synod of Dordt were officially published.² The Synod of Dordt was a very important meeting of the Dutch Reformed Church which took place from November 13, 1618 through May 9, 1619. This important gathering of Dutch pastors and theologians was called to respond to the controversy of Arminianism. The summary points written by the Synod of Dordt are sometimes called the Five Points of Calvinism, though the major points of the Synod do not appear exactly in the order as the acronym TULIP.³

Let me quote a portion from the third and fourth heads of doctrine contained in the Canons, dealing with the corruption of man and his conversion.

Art III: Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto; and, without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation.

¹ Following the basic outline of N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 218-219.

² Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, Bibliotheca symbolica ecclesiae universalis. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Harper Longmans, 1919), 550.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Synod_of_Dort

ART. IV. There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment. But so far is this light of nature from being sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God, and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay farther, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it [back] in unrighteousness; by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God.

ART. V. In the same light are we to consider the law of the decalogue, delivered by God to his peculiar people the Jews, by the hands of Moses. For though it discovers the greatness of sin, and more and more convinces man thereof, yet as it neither points out a remedy nor imparts strength to extricate him from misery, and thus being weak through the flesh, leaves the transgressor under the curse, man can not by this law obtain saving grace.⁴

These three points line up very well with what Paul is saying in Romans 7. The doctrine of Total Depravity described in the Canons of Dordt does not mean that every unbeliever is absolutely as wicked and evil as he or she could be. Rather the major point is that an unconverted man does not have the ability to do that which ultimately will bring salvation or be pleasing to God.

Look again at verse 21. Do you think what Paul says in verse 21 describes every non-believer? I don't think this would be a good description of every non-believer, because that was not Paul's point, but verse 21 would be a very appropriate description of a first century Jew apart from Jesus Christ.

This interpretation is supported by what Paul later writes in Romans 10:2-3 concerning his still lost brethren.⁵

Romans 10:2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. **3** For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

So how does this conclusion in verse 21 support Paul's main point? Verse 21 serves as a summary of verses 14-20. Paul in his unconverted state and his brethren had desired to do good but that desire was not sufficient because of the indwelling presence of evil. There is a profound contrast in this verse between desire to do good and the presence of evil. The tragedy is that the desire to do that which is good is not equal to the presence of evil.

⁴ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 588.

⁵ See also Romans 9:3.

Look again at verse 21 and the word **law**. There is another difficulty in these closing verses as how to best translate and interpret the word law as it is used a number of times in the final verses of Romans 7.

William Tyndale translated this verse as follows: I fynde then by the lawe that when I wolde do good evyll is present with me.

The Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) translates: So I discover this principle: When I want to do what is good, evil is with me.

The question here is does the word law refer to God's Law, *Torah*, or is Paul using a play on words by using the word law to refer to a rule or principle? ⁶

This is a difficult question and thoughtful scholars have disagreed.⁷ I should point out that of the 100x in the NT, law is used with an article, that at least 98% of the time it is referring to God's law.⁸

I can't be dogmatic here but I do think it makes sense to see that the word law used throughout verses 21-25 refers to God's law both in its goodness and perfection and also then twisted by sin.

This we have already seen Paul state in verses 8 and 10.

Rom. 7:8 But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all *manner of evil* desire. For apart from the law sin *was* dead.

Rom. 7:10 And the commandment, which *was* to *bring* life, I found to *bring* death.

If the word law in verse 21 is referring to God's law, then Paul in verse 21 is again reflecting on how God's law exposes sin and is also twisted by sin. The perfect Law of God **becomes**, because of sin, two laws as it were.

James Dunn writes:

Indeed, it is precisely when we recognize v 21 as a reference to the (Jewish) law that we can see what an important conclusion this is for Paul's argument. For this sentence actually gives Paul's reason why the law is ineffectual as a means of grace, unable to provide a secure and continuing basis for man's relation with God. The reason is that the law properly understood informs the willing but does not enable

⁶ Dunn, 392-393.

⁷ Don Garlington notes that "those who argue for Law as a principle in v. 21 include: Cranfield, Sanday/Headlam, Murray, Black, Schlier, Lietzmann, Zeller, Ridderbos, BAGD, 542; Bruce, "Paul and the Law of Moses," 259; Fung "Impotence," 44." "Romans 7:14-25 And The Creation Theology Of Paul." *TrinJ* 11 (1990): 235, footnote 138. Moo who argues for the interpretation rule or principle cites also Godet, Kuss, and Kasemann.

⁸ Using Accordance Software and my own review of the data.

the doing. Outside the realm of willing, the law is still too much sin's tool to be able to overcome sin in the flesh.

This is the important first conclusion of verses 21-25. Paul next gives further explanation or proof in verses 22-23.

2. EXPLANATION, vv. 22-23

Rom. 7:22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. **23** But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

Note the word **for** at the beginning of verse 22. These two verses serve as an explanation of Paul's point in verse 21.

Verse 22 seems to only properly describe a Christian. This verse taken this way could be used as an argument that Paul is describing the experience of a true believer in these verses. What unbeliever delights in God's law?

But if we understand again that Paul is describing a zealous but lost Jew, this can be an accurate testimony.

Listen to part of Paul's testimony from Philippians 3:5-6.

Philippians 3:5 circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, *of* the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; **concerning the law, a Pharisee; 6** concerning zeal, persecuting the church; **concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.**

The term inward or inner man is used only elsewhere in Ephesians 3:16 where Paul prays that the Ephesians will be strengthened by the Holy Spirit in the inner man. But its usage in Ephesians doesn't mean that Paul here is speaking of one who is converted. Verse 23 shows again the Paul is describing one who is still very much under the power of sin despite the fact that there is some delight even in God's Law.

Verse 23 describes as I mentioned earlier that the presence of sin is not balanced out by the desire to do what is good. Paul in verse 23 uses again imagery of warfare, which he does throughout chapters 6 and 7.

Sin which dwells in a person fights against godly desires and brings captivity. Sin uses the law to bring the person into captivity to the law as twisted by sin.

I think a present day illustration of verses 22 and 23 would be an unconverted Catholic who is in many ways very sincere, zealous, and pro-life and yet lost in terms of knowing the true gospel.

Other illustrations could be found among those who in many ways are politically conservative but who know nothing truly of the power of Jesus Christ. This congregation had its initial calling to minister to those politically conservative but either lost or attending churches that would not point them truly to Jesus Christ.

Again, keep in mind that Paul's main focus is not psychological but theological in giving answer to the two questions of verses 7 and 13.

Further here we see Paul describing the frustration that one who is in this lost situation should feel if they are honest. This we see in verses 24 and 25a.

3. CONCLUSION 2, vv. 24-25A

Rom. 7:24 O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? **25** I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

The word wretched used here is used only elsewhere in Rev. 3:17 describing the true condition of the church of Laodicea. The word can mean miserable, distressed, unhappy. It can also describe the state of being pulled in two directions which here is appropriate.⁹

Though a believer rightfully is also frustrated by sin and the awareness of still falling short of God's glory, Paul's description here is stronger than what generally would be appropriate for the failure of a Christian.¹⁰ Paul is not *just* giving his own testimony here but certainly Paul knew very well the anguish and frustration described here.

Body of death here is not just a description of sin but a description of one who is under sentence of spiritual death.¹¹ Martin Luther before his conversion very well related to the description of utter frustration and condemnation found here.

Roland Bainton records the testimony of Luther in his own words:

I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work.

But as Bainton goes on to describe, Luther found no peace through all his efforts. He never could feel that he had done more good than evil.¹² Before his conversion we can say, Luther was a wretched man.

⁹ Greek New Testament Key, s.v. Romans 7:24.

¹⁰ Moo, 465

¹¹ Moo, 466.

¹² Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 34.

One of the arguments that Paul is describing in verses 7-25 one who is not a believer is that there is no reference in these verses to the power of Jesus Christ except for the end of this chapter.

Paul has written this chapter so beautifully and powerfully. It is not a long chapter but after twelve verses expressing confusion, the inability to do good, and the power and presence of sin in the life of one apart from Christ, verse 25a comes as a most welcome answer.

Ben Witherington here writes:

V. 25a is most naturally seen as the anticipation of what Paul is going to say in ch. 8. He anticipates the deliverance he will discuss there and celebrates it here in advance. This is effective rhetoric because he has been dealing with a very heavy and serious matter throughout chs. 6-7 and the audience will need some relief. So Paul here lets them know that relief from the lengthy discussion of the bondage of sin, death, and the Law is coming. This way he keeps his audience from despairing or tuning out.¹³

There are three main questions and answers in Romans 7, but this question and answer is the great climax. Yes, the law is not sin. It is not the cause of spiritual death but it also is not what will deliver one from the body of death. It is God – the Triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that bring the most needed deliverance. This is the glorious subject of Romans 8.

But before Paul turns to this glorious subject, he ends the chapter with what might appear to be a strange ending given the glorious answer of verse 25a.

4. CONCLUSION 3, v. 25B

Romans 7:25b So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

Why after the answer of verse 25a does Paul close this chapter with this final conclusion? This final part of the chapter might seem to be anticlimactic but such is not the case.

The chapter ends very well with the dominant theme of chapter 7 – confusion in the person and the twisting of God’s law.

Paul has made three very important points in chapter 7. First, he has affirmed God’s law as good and holy. Second, he has showed that because of sin and the flesh, it cannot bring

¹³ Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Kindle Edition, 204.

the ultimate solution. Third, he has hinted that God has most powerfully provided a solution and that God has purposes even in the twisting of His perfect law.¹⁴

Romans 7 doesn't end with a stalemate. There is not an equal balance that is found here in the second half of verse 25. No, the victory apart from deliverance by God in Christ will always go to sin and the flesh and the twisting of God's holy law.

Paul very appropriately has pointed to the ultimate solution but does not yet work out the glory of this solution. No, frustration is appropriately the end of Romans 7.

CONCLUSION:

You will only find frustration when you are not seeking Christ.

I mentioned last week that for the believer the challenge and struggle of the Christian life is better described by Romans 6 than looking to Romans 7. There are no commands in Romans 7 but there are commands as we have already noted in Romans 6.

There are certainly though a number of applications for the believer that can be taken from Romans 7. We noted several last week. Let me suggest two others.

Some have mistakenly used Romans 7 to basically justify a believer living a sinful life with no concern. The ridiculous idea is that this chapter supposedly shows that sin is not really the fault of the believer but our sinful nature. Others would misuse this passage by saying, well, if the Apostle Paul could never really do what he wanted, then who can be expected to really be any different?¹⁵ There is no comfort in saying, "well, other people aren't perfect." Romans 7 is not written to give comfort to any believer who is justifying sin or living a very lukewarm life. I don't find anywhere in Scripture that gives comfort to those who are looking for excuses. There is only comfort given to those who confess their sin and seek to repent through the power of Christ in the continuing work of the Holy Spirit.

A further application that you should take from this passage is the frustration that even a true believer will find if you are not seeking after Christ.

John 15:5 "I am the vine, you *are* the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. **6** If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw *them* into the fire, and they are burned. **7** If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. **8** By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

¹⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 199-200.

¹⁵ Robert Reymond shows the folly of both of these foolish ideas at the end of his systematic theology, 1131.

1John 2:28 And now, little children, abide in Him, that when He appears, we may have confidence and not be ashamed before Him at His coming. **29** If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who practices righteousness is born of Him.

There is a great need both for personal holiness and seeking to press the crown rights of Jesus Christ in all areas of life.

Romans 6:13 And do not present your members *as* instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God.

I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Prayer

Hymn 432

BENEDICTION – 1 CORINTHIANS 15:57-58

But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.