

2. The Sinner-saint according to Romans 7.14-25 pt1

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Introduction

In Romans 7.14-25, we have record of a conflict which, remarkably, is a distinguishing mark of a Christian.

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹ So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²² For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³ but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. (Romans 7:14-25 ESV)

This information is important because it will give us a healthy inward perspective as a solid foundation for the pursuit of holiness from the inside out. To grasp it, we need the context.

I. What does Paul mean by “freedom from the law”?

In 7:1-13: the subject is freedom from the law, which is nevertheless holy. How so?

A. Our need for this freedom

We needed freedom from the law because in our flesh (in our fallen condition) the law aroused our sinful passions with fruit for death (7.5: **For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death**).

B. Our release from the law

He speaks of *our* release from the law and thus of freedom from sin’s bondage: **you also have died to the law...so that you may...bear fruit for God...now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code** (7.6). What makes for this new life of freedom from the law? It is the new way of the Spirit. The law for us without the Spirit is the old way of a written code that holds us captive, but now we serve by the law **in the new way of the Spirit**. The law without the Spirit is a dead letter.

C. Our true problem

Do not think ill of the law. The problem is not the law, Paul says, because the law teaches us about sin (7.7, **if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin**). The problem is sin, which uses the law to produce in me all kinds of sin arousing sinful passions, as covetousness for example (7.8). In truth, the law is holy (7.12); it is sin, not the law, that produced death in me (7.13). Conclusions:

1) The meaning of freedom from the law

It means freedom from sin’s use of the law to intensify sin and lead to death.

2) The experience of living in the flesh

Thus, in 7-13, Paul defends the law and speaks in the first person (I, me) stating that sin used the law to deceive *me* (v. 11) but the law is holy (v. 12) and it exposes the true sinfulness of sin (v. 13). So, Paul speaks of his experience of living in the flesh in 7.5 (our) and in 7.7-13 (I, me) to frame his defense of the law.

II. Does Paul continue to speak of his experience in the flesh as an unbeliever in 14-25?

Notably, in 1-13, the apostle describes an experience in sin that includes the *conviction* of sin by the law and thus it is *a transitional phase of his spiritual pilgrimage*: shaken by the law “his state of mind was no longer one of unperturbed calm and self-esteem” (Murray, *Romans*, I,

255). Does he shift to a new subject at v. 14? Yes, if we see how things in v. 14 can be said of a Christian, and if we consider the language in 15-25 that cannot be said of a non-Christian. 2

A. How v. 14 can be said of a Christian

For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. He does not speak of living in the flesh, but says **I am of the flesh**. He does not speak of being dead in sin or of sin using the law to increase his sin, but he does say **I am...sold under sin**.

1. Of the flesh

The best reading here is "fleshly" (I am fleshly). In 1 Cor 3.1, 3 the Corinthian Christians are said to be living fleshly lives. Also, in Romans 7.17-18, flesh dwelling in Paul is parallel with sin dwelling in him (**sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh**). Thus, being of the flesh is not the same as the former life of living in the flesh for Christians may live fleshly lives and flesh refers to the fact that Christians still have a sinful nature. This is not a wise or safe path to travel; decisions of folly may have life-long effects.

2. Sold under sin

In the OT, Ahab sold himself to do evil and thus abandoned himself to sin (1 Ki 21.20, 25), an action of an unregenerate person. However, the person struggling according to Romans 7.15-25 is not one who gives himself over to indwelling sin and who thus gives himself into the captivity of sin to live under its bondage. Instead, he may be under sin as if it owned him, but he reproaches himself for his sin and bemoans being carried away captive by it: **I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. ²⁴Wretched man that I am! (7.23-24) and I do the very thing I hate (7.15)**. The unregenerate do not have this war going on within.

B. How 15-25 cannot be said of a non-Christian

Some phrases are not as strong as others, but they all point to things that are not true of a natural man. Some basic ones are: **I agree with the law, that it is good (16b)**, **I have the desire to do what is right (v. 18)**, there is "a good I want to do" (v. 19) and "evil I hate" (v. 19). Given the reality of total depravity, it is hard to take these verses as descriptive of fallen man. Some very strong phrases are: **I delight in the law of God (v. 22)** and **I myself serve the law of God with my mind (as a slave to God's law, v. 25)**. This hardly describes a non-Christian who cannot submit to God's law (Rom. 8:7, **For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸Those who are in the flesh cannot please God**).

Conclusion

Therefore, we should conclude that Romans 7.14-25 refers to the reality that saints are sinners in tension because of the flesh, because of our fallen nature (because of what we are without the Spirit, because of what we would be if the Spirit left us). It speaks to the fact that we have been set free from our sinful selves and we can no longer do evil only and continually, *but we still have the nature to sin and the Lord does not deliver us from our sinful selves all at once*. We are in a process of growth in holy living while learning lessons about our true unholiness at the same time. Learning these lessons is part of the growth process in humble and repentant holiness.

Accordingly, God's holy law intensifies sin in the unregenerate, it gives the knowledge of sin on the path to becoming a Christian, and it is our delight as Christians in God's schoolhouse regarding who we are in ourselves. The tension of being sinner-saints accents the joy of fellowship with God, the joy we lose when we go our own way. So, the sinner-saint reality is a schoolhouse of dependence on the Lord and therefore a schooling in faith and repentance.

In Part 2 we will look more closely at 15-25.