

Romans (34): The Law and Sin (3)

Introduction

Let us turn again to the passage that we began to consider last Lord's Day, **Romans 7:13ff.**

¹³Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. ¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. (Rom. 7:13-14)

The apostle is addressing principles respecting the believer's sanctification. In This portion of his epistle, he is addressing the relationship of the law of God to sin.

Last Lord's Day, we began to address the importance for understanding sin as God views it. Paul said that this was one of the purpose for which God had given His law. The law of God had condemned Paul due to his sinfulness. But it was not the law that was the problem, but rather it was his sin that resulted in his condemnation. His sin had used the instrument of God's law to condemn Paul as a guilty sinner. It was through the law of God that Paul came to see sin as exceedingly sinful. Paul had declared in **verse 13.**

¹³Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.

We may conclude from what Paul declares here that in order to experience the grace of God in our sanctification, we must be keenly aware and thoroughly convinced of the "exceeding sinfulness of sin" (cf. 7:13). Last week we spent some time addressing how the law of God reveals sinfulness to us and how it helps us to see its exceeding wickedness. Let us spend some time now to address this further.

When considering the subject of sin in the Bible, it is important to distinguish between *sin as an act* and *sin as a principle*, which is, committing sin and being a sinner by nature. We have addressed this earlier in the epistle, but let us rehearse the matter in more detail.

1. Man's acts of sin

The hideous nature of sinful acts in Scripture may be discerned in a number of ways. (1) Sin may be considered in the specific **words** that are used to depict sin itself. (2) The **metaphors** by which sin is described further enhance the evil nature of sinful acts. (3) The wickedness of sinful acts may be seen in **the authoritative pronouncements** respecting specific sinful deeds. (4) The measure of sin's evil may be seen by **the effects or reactions recorded respecting sinful acts.** (5) Last, and most clearly, the evil of sin may be seen by viewing **what was necessary to affect pardon for sin-- the crucifixion of God's dear Son.**

(1) There are a number of **words** used in the Bible to express the idea of sin. In the Old Testament some of the more frequently used Hebrew words are *Hatat*, *Yaohn*, *Pasha*, and *Ra*'.

Hatat (חַטָּאת) is translated most frequently as "sin." It describes a person who sins as one who has fallen short of a standard or a goal, as an arrow falls short of its target. It may be a failure to attain to a "path of right duty against man" (as in 1 Kings 18:9, and 2 Kings 18:14); or it describes the failure to attain the

goal or path of right and duty against God, which is most frequent (as in Exodus 20:20, Joshua 7:11, Psalm 4:4).¹ Sin in this sense is universal, “for there is no man who does not *sin*” (1 Kings 18:46), and “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never *sins*” (Ecc. 7:20). These sins may be committed knowingly or in ignorance. The mark or goal set forth in Scripture from which man has failed to attain is the standard of God’s glory--His own nature. It was God’s design for man created in His image to manifest His glory. But man has fallen far short of this mark, as Paul expressed clearly in Romans 3:10, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Yaohn (יָוֹן) is translated as “sin”, “fault,” “iniquity,” “mischief,” “guilt,” or “punishment of iniquity.” This depicts sin as having “its roots in an evil disposition.”² It suggests the evil motivation that leads to sinful acts. “For your *guilt* teaches your mouth, and you choose the language of the crafty” (Job 15:5). “They have turned back to the *iniquities* of their ancestors who refused to hear My words” (Jer. 11:10). In both of these instance, evil moved these people to act as they did. This evil principle itself is a cause of guilt and warrants the judgment of God. ““Although you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your *iniquity* is before Me,” declares the Lord” (Jer. 2:22).

Pasha (עֲשָׂפָא) is “unquestionably the gravest word for sin, especially on the lips of the prophets.”³ It speaks of a revolt or rebellion against God. It is translated as “transgression.” It is the deliberate violation of God’s Law. It is the purposeful refusal to submit to God’s rule. It is a deliberate stepping over the bounds which God has prescribed. Since it is a refusal to live within the limits of God’s law, it is rebellion, revolt, and treason against God who is the Sovereign of the Universe. Elihu accused Job falsely, “he adds rebellion (*Pasha*) to his sin (*Hatat*); he claps his hands among us, and multiplies his words against God” (Job 34:37).

Ra’ (רָע) speaks of the ethical nature of sin. It is a word which conveys the idea of “bad,” or “evil.” As adjective it may describe the wickedness of actions. “Then I reprimanded the nobles of Judah and said to them, ‘What is this *evil thing* you are doing, by profaning the Sabbath day?’” (Neh. 13:17). It also may be used to describe the sins committed in men’s thoughts. This word describes men’s thoughts just prior to the flood. “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart were only *evil* continually” (Gen. 6:5).

In Psalm 51 David confesses his sin before the Lord using all of the above Hebrew words.

Be gracious to me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness;
 According to the greatness of Thy compassion blot out my *transgressions* (*Pasha*).
 Wash me thoroughly from my *iniquity* (*Yaohn*),
 And cleanse me from my *sin* (*Hatat*).
 For I know my *transgressions* (*Pasha*),
 And my *sin* (*Hatat*) is ever before me.
 Against Thee, Thee only, I have *sinned* (*Hatat*).
 And done what is *evil* (*Ra’*) in Thy sight,
 So that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak,
 And blameless when Thou dost judge.”⁴ (Psalm 51:1-4)

In the New Testament there are the **Greek** words *harmartia* (ἁμαρτία) meaning “sin”, *parabasis* (παράβασει) is transgression. The word *adikia* (ἀδικία) is “unrighteousness.” The term *asebeis* (ἀσεβής) is “ungodliness.” “Lawlessness” is *anomia* (ἀνομία). “Fornication” is the translation of *ponerias* (πορνείας) and “evil passion” or “lust” is the translation of *epithumia* (ἐπιθυμία). Because of the time, we will not

¹ William Gesenius, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, n.d.), p. 306.

² Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, p. 263.

³ Ibid.

⁴ The transliterated words in parentheses are not the precise forms of the words used but are the roots from which they are derived. This was done so the reader could distinguish and identify the words under discussion.

address the nuances of each word. The variety of words used to convey the idea of sin shows its many faceted and extensive and pervasive presence in the human condition.

The words used in Scripture to connote sinful acts shows the hideous nature of sin. Acts of sin are evil deeds done which cause individuals to fall far short of God's design for them; but further, they are acts of rebellion against God our rightful ruler. In committing them we do show our stubborn, independent, rebellious spirit and contempt for God Himself and His right to rule over us.

(2) The **metaphors** used in Scripture to describe sin further enhance the evil nature of sinful acts.

Arthur Pink graphically identifies a number of biblical metaphors for sin.

- (1) the scum of a seething pot in which is a detestable carcass (Ezek. 24:10-12)
- (2) the blood and pollution of a new-born child, before it is washed and clothed (Ezek. 16:4,6)
- (3) a dead and rotting body (Rom. 7:24)
- (4) the noisome stench and poisonous fumes which issue from an open sepluchre (Rom. 3:13)
- (5) the lusts of the devil (John 8:44)
- (6) putrefying sores (Isa. 1:5,6)
- (7)..a menstruous cloth (Isa. 3:22; Lam. 1:17)
- (8) a canker, or gangrene (2 Tim. 2:17)
- (9)..the dung of filthy creatures (Phil. 3:8)
- (10) the vomit of a dog and the wallowing of a sow in the sinking mire (2 Pet 2:22)⁵

(3) The wickedness of sinful acts may be seen in *the authoritative pronouncements* respecting specific sinful deeds. These are many and varied. God Himself declares, "Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die" (Ezek. 18:4). These citations could be multiplied before us.

(4) The measure of sin's evil may be seen by *the effects or results of sinful acts* recorded in the Scriptures. When one reflects on the consequences of Adam and Eve's sin, Achen's sin, King David's sin of numbering the people, the sin of touching the ark and even peering into the ark. And in the New Testament we read of the sins of Ananias and Saphira.

There are also communal effects of sin to be considered. This is seen most clearly in the Old Testament Scriptures. The thinking of the ancient world was that one's sin, even if committed in "private", always had ramifications for the community. This idea is lost to our world. It is assumed that what one does is one's own business and "hurts no one else," therefore, society has no right to impose its standards upon individual behavior. But consider this description of the biblical world view:

In this connexion, however, another side of the matter very alien to modern ways of thinking has to be observed. As we commonly understand it today, not only is the consequence of the sin narrowed down to fall only on the individual and his spiritual life, but the evil that accompanies the sin is also confined to the evil act itself. The act no doubt sometimes has serious visible consequences for the man who does it, that is, when he gets himself entangled in some way or another in the evil he has wrought. But such consequences are to a greater or lesser degree fortuitous, and no one is surprised if such a punishment fails to come to pass. In contrast, for the people of antiquity sin was something much wider in its effects. The evil deed was only one side of the matter, for through it an evil had been set in motion which sooner or later would inevitably turn against the sinner or the community to which he belonged.⁶

⁵ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings from the Holy Scriptures* (Moody Press, 1969).

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, vol. 1, The Theology of Israel's Historic Traditions* (Harper & Rowe, 1962), pp. 264f.

(5) The evil of sin may be seen most graphically when considering that only the death of God's Son could affect pardon for sin.

Tell me, ye who hear Him groaning,
Was there ever grief like His?
Friends through fear His cause disowning,
Foes insulting his distress:
Many hands were raised to wound Him,
None would interpose to save;
But the deepest stroke that pierced Him
Was the stroke that Justice gave.

Ye who think of sin but lightly,
Nor suppose the evil great,
Here may view its nature rightly,
Here its guilt may estimate.
Mark the Sacrifice appointed!
See Who bears the awful load!
'Tis the Word, the Lord's Anointed,
Son of Man, and Son of God.⁷

2. Man's sinful nature

I suppose if there is a word less used in the world today than "sin", it would be the word "sinner." To declare that man is a "sinner" is not a nice thing to say among civilized sophisticated people. It conjures in the mind a hypocritical black-garbed, flint-faced, fiery preacher who totes a black Bible, thumping on a pulpit, performing verbal abuse and producing guilt and emotional damage to simple uneducated people who know no better than to listen to him and believe what he says. Although most people would admit that they commit acts of sin, I wonder how many people would readily admit they are *sinner*s as the Bible depicts a sinner to be.

When speak of man's sinful nature, we are speaking of the doctrine of original sin. Here is the definition rendered in **The Westminster Confession of Faith**:

Our first parents, being seduced by the subtlety and temptation of Satan, sinned, in eating the forbidden fruit. This their sin, God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel, to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory. By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions. (Art. 6)

The doctrine of original sin is not a direct reference to what Adam and Eve did; rather it speaks of the result of Adam's sin, we were all as a result born into this world sinners. Man was created originally in the image of God, perfect in holiness in His nature, being free from sin. But he transgressed the command of God and fell, resulting in him and his posterity becoming sinful in nature, subjects to satan and servants of sin, incurring the wrath of God whereby they suffer misery and death forever, incapable of recovery unless the Lord Jesus sets them free. That is what we mean by original sin.

We mentioned earlier that in order for you to be one who is being sanctified, you must be keenly aware and thoroughly convinced of the "exceeding sinfulness of sin" (cf. 7:13). This means not only that we

⁷ "Stricken, Smiten, and Afflicted", Trinity Hymnal, #257.

should be aware of the *acts* of sin as exceedingly sinful, but that our very *nature* is exceedingly sinful. Therefore it is good that we consider in what ways our nature is sinful.

What were the effects of the fall upon mankind as a race? Every part of his being has been effected---his mind, affections, and his will.

1. He is blind to the fact that he does not see himself as a sinner reveals is blindness to the fact, for God's Word says he is. He is absolutely blind to His terrible condition; if he were but to get a glimpse of what he would one day face when he stands before an angry God, he would go mad, faint from the fear. But He cannot see.

2. He is ignorant. He does not know who God is, of what God expects of him. He is ignorant of the ways in which God governs His world. He is ignorant of God's presence beholding every deed, considering every thought, and recording every infraction against His holy law.

3. He is proud. If through the means of common grace, he is given a measure of understanding, he is too proud to acknowledge shortcomings, yet alone to seek counsel as to how his condition might be remedied.

4. He is rebellious/self-willed. He wants to be the master of his own life, not submitting to any man or God Himself; yes, he may attempt to change this or that, but it is only because he wants to do so, not because God may have commanded Him to do so.

5. He is enslaved. Bound by his wicked thoughts, controlled by his passions, led about by his wicked thoughts; unknowingly, he is enslaved to the devil (Eph. 2:2)

6. He is helpless. He cannot distinguish spiritual truth from error, he is helpless to do so. And even if he could, he does not have the power or the will to walk in it. He is without strength to lift himself from his condition.

7. He is lost, unable to find His way to God; he is lost, alienated, and unable to find his way to God.

8. He is dead. He is void of the kind of life there is in the presence of God and describes man's inability to rise above his condition.

In short, we see the Bible teaching what most Protestants have taught since the Reformation: Man is **totally depraved**. Another definition other than that which was given above may be as follows:

Man was created originally in the image of God, perfect in holiness in His nature, being free from sin. But he transgressed the command of God and fell, resulting in him and his posterity becoming sinful in nature, subjects to satan and servants of sin, incurring the wrath of God whereby they suffer misery and death forever, incapable of recovery unless the Lord Jesus sets them free.

This requires some words of explanation. First, this does *not* mean that every man is at the worst state he can be, that every man expresses the full extent of his evil nature as much as possible at all times. And so, the doctrine is not *utter depravity*, or *absolute depravity*. But if it were not for the common grace of God each of us and all in society would manifest evil in our lives to the fullest measure. God has given us society, laws, a legal system, fear of man's opinion of us, and fear of temporal consequences, which things prevent us from manifesting our sinful natures more than what we do. It is not because of a love of God and righteousness that fallen man does not live more wickedly.

Second, the doctrine of total depravity does *not* mean that man is incapable of human good.

The solemn doctrine of total depravity does not mean that there are no parents with genuine love for their children, and no children who respectively obey their parents; that there are none imbued with a spirit of benevolence to the poor and kind sympathy for the suffering; that there are no conscientious employers or honest employees. But it does mean that, where the unregenerate are concerned, those duties are discharged *without* any love for God, any subjection to His authority, or any concern for His glory. Parents are required to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and children are to obey their parents in the Lord (Eph. 6:1, 4). Servants are to obey their masters "in singleness of heart, as unto Christ." Do the unconverted comply with those injunctions? No, therefore their performances not only possess no spiritual value, but are polluted. Every act of natural man is

faulty. “The plowing of the wicked is sin” (Prov. 21:4) because it is for selfish ends. Then is it better not to plow at all? Wrong, for slothfulness is equally sinful. There are different degrees of enormity, but every act of man is sinful.

The condition of the natural man is such that in the discharge of his first responsibility to his Maker he is utterly unfaithful. His chief obligation is to live for the glory of God and to love Him with all his heart; but while he remains unrenewed he does not have the least spiritual, holy, true love for Him. Whatever there may be in his domestic and social conduct which is admirable in the eyes of others, it is not prompted by any respect for the divine will. So far as man’s self-recovery and self-recuperation are concerned, his depravity is total, in the sense of being decisive and final. Spurgeon stated:

Man is fallen; every part and passion of his nature is perverted: he has gone astray altogether, is sick from the crown of his head to the soles of His feet: yea, is dead in trespasses and sins and corrupt before God. O pride of human nature, we plow right over thee! The hemlock standing in thy field must be cut up by the roots. Thy weeds seem like fair flowers, but the ploughshare must go right through them, till all thy beauty is shown to be a painted Jezebel, and all human glorying a bursting bubble.⁸

Third, total depravity does *not* mean that unsaved man is incapable of discerning to a degree the distinction between good and evil. That he can and does is one cause of his aggravated condemnation. He has been given a conscience by which right and wrong can be distinguished. However, because of sin, even his conscience is corrupted so that he cannot discern the presence of all of his sin or the exceeding sinfulness of his sin.

Fourth, it *does* mean that he is incapable of doing anything so as to merit God’s favor with respect to salvation. All his good deeds are performed without a view of glorifying God. It means in his natural state he is incapable of doing anything or desiring anything pleasing to God. It means that his loves and loyalties lie in things other than God and His will. He loves darkness rather than light. He chooses to serve self rather than God.

Fifth, by *total* depravity we mean that man is as bad off as he can be, that there is no part of him which has been unaffected by the fall--his mind with its understanding, his heart with its affections. His loyalty is supremely to himself and satan. It means apart from a work of God’s grace in regeneration, he will continue in this state, for he is both unwilling to change and incapable of remedying his condition. It means that although free offers of pardon and salvation may be presented, because his will is so bent on ordering his own existence and he is unwilling to be subject to the law of God, if left to himself, will reject offers of mercy and persist in his self-directed existence to his own destruction. It means that man does not have a “free will” if what is intended by that term that he is free and able in and of himself to choose to respond to God’s commands apart from being born again. It follows that if he is to be saved, God must choose to save him and work His grace in him so that he will be saved, for if left to himself, he cannot and will not choose God.

Let us return to our passage in Romans 7.

¹³Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. ¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my

⁸ Arthur Pink, *Gleanings from the Scriptures; Man’s Total Depravity* (Moody Press, 1969), p. 124.

flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

²⁰Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ²¹So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, ²³but 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! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks 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. (Rom 7:13-25)

There is great difference of opinion on how to understand this section of Paul's epistle. The difficulty lies in determining who Paul was describing in this passage. There are three possibilities. (1) Paul was describing himself as a Christian. (2) Paul was describing himself as the non-Christian, prior to his conversion. (3) Paul was describing the Christian who has not yet discovered the key to living as a victorious Christian. This last position can be readily dismissed, I believe. It reflects the errant view of sanctification popularized by the Keswick conferences. Although there are strong reasons to support the first two proposals, I prefer the position that holds that Paul was describing what he viewed as the common way and experience of the Christian.

The reasons that commentators cite for their positions may be summarized in the following ways:

1. Reasons cited by those who espouse that Paul was speaking of an *unregenerate person*.⁹

(1) The strong connection of "I" with "the flesh" (vv. 14, 18, and 25) suggests that Paul was elaborating on the unregenerate condition mentioned in 7:5: being "in the flesh."

(2) "I" throughout this passage struggles "on his/her own", without the aid of the Holy Spirit/

(3) "I" is "under the power of sin" (v. 14b), a state from which every believer is released (6:2, 6, 11, 18-22).

(4) As the unsuccessful struggle of vv. 15-20 shows, "I" is a prisoner of sin" (v. 23). Yet Romans 8:2 proclaims that believers have been set free from this same "law of sin (and death)."

(5) While Paul makes clear that believers will continue to struggle with sin (cf., e.g., 6:12-13; 13:12-14; Gal. 5:17), what is depicted in Romans 7:14-25 is not just a struggle with sin but a defeat by sin. This is more negative view of the Christian life than can be accommodated within Paul's theology.

(6) The "I" in these verses struggles with the need to obey the Mosaic law; yet Paul has already proclaimed the release of the believer from the dictates of the law (6:14; 7:4-6).¹⁰

2. Reasons cited by those who espouse that Paul was speaking of a *regenerate person*.¹¹

(1) "I" must refer to Paul himself, and the shift from the past tenses of vv. 7-13 to the present tenses of vv. 14-25 can be explained only if Paul is describing in these latter verses his present experience as a Christian.

(2) Only the regenerate truly "delights in God's law" (v. 22), seek to obey it (vv. 15-20), and "serve" it (v. 25); the unregenerate do not seek after God" (3:11) and cannot "submit to the law of God" (8:7).

(3) Whereas the "mind" of people outside of Christ is universally presented by Paul as opposed to God and his will (cf. Rom. 1:28; Eph. 4:17; Col. 2:18; 1 Tim. 6:5; 2 Tim. 3:8; Titus 2:15), the "mind" of "I" in this text is a positive medium, by which "I" serves the law of God" (vv. 22, 25).

(4) "I" must be a Christian because only a Christian possesses the "inner person"; cf. Paul's only other two uses of the phrase in 2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 3:16.

⁹ This is the view of Douglas Moo.

¹⁰ Douglas Moo, *Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996), p.445.

¹¹ This is the view of John Murray.

(5) The passage concludes, *after* Paul’s mention of the deliverance wrought by God in Christ, with a reiteration of the divided state of the “I” (vv. 24-25). This shows that the division and struggle of the “I” that Paul depicts in these verses is that of the person already saved by God in Christ.¹²

There are many minor, varied interpretations held. Interestingly, **Tomas Schreiner** holds the position that an examination of this passage cannot reveal with certainty whether it reflects the Christian or the non-Christian, but rather, neither position is “precisely on the mark...there is truth in both views.”¹³

The arguments on both sides are remarkably strong, with some arguments of course being stronger than others. I would suggest that the arguments are so finely balanced because Paul does not intend to distinguish believers from unbelievers in this text. Paul reflects on whether the law has the ability to transform human beings, concluding that it does not. The law puts to death unbelievers who desire to keep it, since they lack the power to keep it. They are in bondage to sin and captives to sin, and when they encounter the law, death ensues. On the other hand, believers are not absolutely excluded from this text either. It would be a mistake to read the whole of the Christian experience from this account, for, chapter 8 shows, believers by the power of the Spirit are enabled to keep God’s law.¹⁴

It is my view that *Paul is clearly describing the experience of the true Christian*. My primary reason is due to Romans 7:17 and 20. Paul wrote: “Now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me”, and, “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.” Only a true Christian, who understands his identity with the new life that God has given to him, could make these statements. The nonchristian can never say, “It is no longer I that sins.” Only the true believer, who was in union with his Savior, can make this claim rightly.

But there are other convincing arguments to show that Paul was speaking of the Christian in vs. 17-25.¹⁵

(1) Paul says, “I delight in the law of God after the inward man” (7:22). This cannot be said by an unregenerate man, for in Romans 8:7 we read, “the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.”

(2) Similarly, verse 25 reads, “So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind.” “This is service which means subjection of heart and will, something impossible for unregenerate man.”¹⁶

(3) “The person portrayed in Romans 7:14-25 is one whose will is toward that which is good (vs. 15, 18, 19, 21) and the evil that he does is in violation of that which he wills and loves (vss. 16, 19, 20). This means, without doubt, that his most characteristic will, the prevailing bent and propension of his will, is the good.”¹⁷ This cannot be said of a man who is not born again.

Let us consider the details of the verses before us in Romans 7:13-25.

Paul first exonerated the law from being responsible for his misery. It was sin, not the law, that was the cause of his problems. **Verse 13** reads, “*Did that which is good (i.e. the law), then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.*” God would show sinners that they are sinners and to the great degree that they are great sinners, showing that they are subject to and

¹² Ibid., pp. 446f.

¹³ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 379.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 390.

¹⁵ These are listed by John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 257f.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 258.

¹⁷ Ibid.

deserving of His judgment of them due to their sin. Here we see the preparatory work of the law of bringing a sinner to Christ. The sinner must first understand that he is a sinner, who is without ability or desire to change.

The reason that he was certain of his argument in verse 13 was due to **verse 14**: *“For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.”* Some have argued that this could not be said of a regenerate person. But this is incorrect. Paul is asserting that it is the law of God that is holy, righteous and good, and that he is not those things. Here he is simply saying that he is subjected to an alien power that seeks to control him. Sin has purchased him as a slave owner has purchased a slave in the market, subjecting the slave to himself. It is Paul the Christian who is laboring under this misery.

Paul next expresses his own frustration trying to live as a Christian. *“For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate”* (7:15). Here again, he is describing what he desires, that is to live in conformity to God’s law, but he is frustrated and struggles to do so. He does the things he hates. Of the non-Christian, on the other hand, it can be said that when he sins, he does the things that he loves, not hates.

If this was Paul’s attitude toward himself sinning, then he is confirming by his own desires that God’s law is good and not to be faulted as the cause of his misery. His sin is the problem. We read in **verse 16**, *“Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.”* Paul was still attempting to vindicate God’s law against any misunderstanding or false accusation.

Then we read of Paul’s Christian faith expressed in **verse 17**, *“So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.”* This is Paul who has applied the command of Romans 6:11 to his own life. It reads, “Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 6:11). Paul then proceeds to express his own frustration and quandary:

¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

Paul took responsibility for his sinful actions. Even though it was not his true self that moved him to live contrary to the law of God, he declared that he knew that in his “flesh” no good thing dwelled.

What is meant by “flesh” in this context? He is speaking of the sin principle that was still with him, even in him. Several things can be said about Paul’s “flesh.”

(1) The flesh is wholly sinful—no good thing dwells in it. (2) The flesh is still associated with his person—the flesh is *his* flesh and it is in *him*. (3) Sin is also associated with his person, for it is in his flesh that sin inheres.¹⁸

Paul affirms the statement that he had already asserted. *“Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me”* (v. 20). He then states the principle that is true of every true believer: *“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand”* (v. 21). Evil always lies close at hand. As sin was crouching at the door of Cain, as a ravenous beast, desiring to thrust itself into his house and overwhelm him, so sin is ever present, even in us, which should call forth our diligence and resolve not to yield to its enticements. God had said to Cain:

“If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.” (Gen. 4:7)

¹⁸ Murray, p. 263.

Paul the Christian wrote of his own struggle against sin. **Verse 23** reads, ***“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.”*** The Christian life is one of continuous struggle. “The law of my mind” would be God’s law that he serves with his mind (cf. v. 25). The law of sin is the principle of sin that resides in every Christian. Warfare is the course of life for the Christian. (cf. Ephesians 6).

Paul then expresses the intensity of his struggle in verse 24: “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” He longed to be delivered from the sin that dwelled within him. This cause him to look afresh to Jesus Christ, who would one day deliver him from the presence of sin. ***“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”*** (7:25). Here is optimism. Here is faith. Here is his hope.

Paul then provides a concluding statement to this chapter, ***“So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin”*** (Rom 7:25). Paul the Christian stated that He served the law of God with his mind. The law of God was his rule of life. Even as he struggled with sin that would pull him downwards and defeat him, He delighted in God’s law and purposed to serve it with his mind, his essential self.

Those who claim that the Christian has nothing to do with God’s law, but grace only, should consider careful Paul’s words. He did not despise God’s law; he loved God’s law and as he was the Christian, he would seek to serve God’s law. But even with this godly desire, he struggled with the sin that was in him.

May our Lord enable each of us to understand and relate to Paul’s assertions regarding sin and righteousness.
