

Romans 7:1-12

Freedom in the New Life of the Justified Sinner

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 1

For the link with what came before, and the main points of this section, see Main Thoughts, 1.

"Do you not know...": is an appeal to the addressees' knowledge of the faith. It means: "You know very well..."

"Who know the law": the believers in Rome know both the law of Rome and also the law of God in the Scriptures, including the laws of marriage which are referred to in vv. 2 and 3.

Verses 2, 3

This is the example of a second marriage. It may take place only when the death of one of the partners has ended the first marriage. The only point of agreement in this "parable" is that death annuls a marriage. It is the same for the believer.

Verse 4

He has died to the law of God (see Main Thoughts, 2), for the believer has died with Christ (see 6:2ff.).

Verse 5

"When we were controlled by the sinful nature": at one time Paul and the believers in Rome, Jews and Gentiles, were still without the grace of Christ.

"The sinful nature": the state and characteristic of man without faith in Christ.

Verse 6

Paul contrasts: Under the law (that is, in the sinful nature, v.5) and under grace (6:14).

Under the law is: (a) trying, by legalistic service, to keep the commandments (as the Pharisees and Judaizers do, for example), thereby earning God's grace; and (b) consequently to be condemned by the law (judgment of the law), for he who does not keep the whole law perfectly is condemned (see Main Thoughts, 2 and 5).

"Released from the law": (a) free from legalistic service, and (b) free from the curse of the law.

Under grace: saved from sin by the grace of Christ, to serve God in freedom.

Paul presents the contrast of "under the law" and "under grace" as "the old way of the written code" (the code is the law; legalistic service under the law, which is serving sin), and "the new way of the Spirit" (serving the Lord through the Spirit of God as a believer).

Verse 7

As a result of the unflattering way in which Paul has spoken about the law in the foregoing sections, it might be thought that the law and sin belong together, or worse, that the law itself is sin (v. 4: believers have died to the law, which is a blessing; v. 5: sinful passions were aroused by the law; v. 6: written code, i.e. the law, as opposed to the Spirit of God). Paul counters this by saying: the law is not wrong, but man became wrong. Hence the conclusion in v. 12, that the law is holy and just and good.

"Yet... I should not have known sin...": the apostle is not saying that without the law he would not have sinned, or that without the law he would not have wanted to sin, but he says: I would have had no knowledge or consciousness of sin and covetousness¹. For through knowledge of the law comes knowledge of sin (see 3:20).

Verse 8

The commandment arouses the evil desire to sin (Main Thoughts, 3).

Verses 9-11

First see Main Thoughts, 4.

Verse 9

"Sin sprang to life": then I started to see sin as sin and through the law of God it was clearly shown to me as sin.

"And I died": then I started to see that I was given to sin and because of sin, to death as punishment for sin.

Verse 10

"The very commandment...":

But God gave the law as a protection of life. He who stays within God's law stays within the paradise of God's love. Just as a mother, whose child is playing outside, forbids him to leave the sidewalk to protect the life of the child. So also, when a father warns his son against certain dangers and adds a commandment to the warning, he does so with a view to his son's well-being. In the gift of his law God acts in exactly

¹ Ed. Note: The NIV renders this verse more clearly than the RSV

the same way. He points out evil while at the same time rejecting it for his children. He exposes wrong in order to keep their feet far away from it.²

Verse 11

"For sin...": Paul learned to see that sin tempts us to do what God forbids. For sin used the commandment as an opportunity to depict God's commandment as spiteful, restrictive and unpleasant (remember what the serpent/devil did, according to Genesis 3!) and to depict breaking the law as desirable, pleasant and sweet. ("You will be like God!" Genesis 3) But that was gross deception!

Verse 12

Thus, the conclusion is the answer to the question in v. 7: the law is blameless! (See Glossary #19.)

B. Main Thoughts

1. The connection between Romans 7:1ff. and what goes before we can describe as follows: the *root* of the new life of the justified sinner lies in the union of faith in Christ (6:1-14). This new life is *service*: free from slavish service to sin, it is obedience to Christ, to his Word and law (6:15-23).

Now there is freedom to serve the Lord and his Christ, the freedom of the law (7:1-12). For 6:14 says: you, believer, are not under law, but under grace. That is what Paul refers to in 7:1ff. The exact question is: *What does being free really mean?* By "law" the apostle means the whole Law of Moses, especially the Ten Commandments.

2. In 7:1-12 the main thought is: death releases us from the law. So the apostle must make it clear that the believer in Christ is no longer under the law, but under grace. The believer has moved on from one service (service of sin, under the law) to another (service of the Lord, under grace). He then uses a second marriage as an example. As long as her husband is alive a woman is bound to him by the law of marriage. However, when her husband dies, she is free of the bonds of marriage, and no longer subject to the law of marriage. Then she is free to marry again.

Man had an unhappy marriage to the law. But this man has been declared dead, for the believer has died with Christ (6:2ff.) and, as a result, the believer is no longer under the law. The point of comparison and agreement is: as death nullifies a marriage and so frees one from the law governing marriage, so the death of the sinner (together with and in Christ) puts an end to the service of sin and consequently the sinner is no longer under the law of sin. He has been released to another service, namely the service of the Lord. That is the point in 7: 1-12.

² Ed. Note: Quote is from *Verkenningen in Ronteinen* by W. H. Velema (1962).

3. This raises questions, as 7:7 shows. The main question is: now that believers have been set free from the law of God, can the law be identified with sin? For being freed from the law is the same as being freed from sin. The apostle's reply to that is: no, the law is holy and just, but man had become sinful and wicked. The "first marriage," the first service in paradise, was without sin. Man kept God's law in faith, love and obedience. But when sin came there was a "conflict" in the marriage: the law was broken. The law, however, remained and worked in man in a perverse way: the commandment provoked him to break the law.

There is story about a young boy called Peter, who was invited to stay for a while in an old, three-storey house. His aunt wanted to test his obedience. She showed him all the rooms, except for one little cubicle in the far corner on the third floor. She told him that he was not allowed to go in there. You can guess the rest of the story: the first room Peter chose to play in after his aunt left was that forbidden cubicle. Sin, with the help of that commandment, had aroused this desire in him. Surely you cannot blame the commandment. It is sin that Peter yielded to. Sin found its power specifically in the commandment. So it is also with the law of God. It has been given to keep evil (and sin) at bay and to protect man from evil. God did not intend law to be a negative thing, a list of do's and don'ts. We often speak in those terms: "We're never allowed to do anything." ³

Thus, sin is a reaction; it reacts to something. That is the purpose of the law. The law says: not this! But the sinner counters that with: that happens to be exactly what I do want!

4. The question of whom Paul refers to in verses 7:7-11 is often discussed. Who is the "I" to whom sooner or later (v. 9) the law penetrates and who is convinced that covetousness is also sin, etc.? At least three answers are possible. Paul could refer to:
- (a) man before the fall into sin in paradise;
 - (b) man in the time before the giving of the law on Sinai; or
 - (c) his own childhood, when the law of God had not yet consciously dawned on him.

The latter opinion appears to be the best. We should accept that Paul, when writing "I," does mean himself. Only when this "I" cannot possibly refer to him may we, indeed, must we, look for a different explanation. It does happen that the apostle when writing "I" refers not only to himself but includes all people, thereby expressing a general human experience (e.g. 3:7). The "I" can also mean all believers (e.g. 8:38).

³ Ibid.

Therefore, the "I" in 7:7 refers in the first instance to Paul himself, but at the same time includes the "I" of all those into whose hearts, sooner or later, the power of God's law, which exposes sin, penetrates.

5. Thus, the main thought of 7:1-12 is: we as believers have been discharged, set free, from the law of God. For "under the law" means: (a) wanting to do good works in order to "earn" the grace of salvation, in a pharisaic or Judaistic way; and (b) being under the curse of the law, because in this the saving and justifying grace of Christ is ignored.

Being free from the law does not mean having nothing more to do with this law. On the contrary, the Christian believer has everything to do with this law as rule of thankfulness in his redemption (Romans 3:31; 8:4; Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 34-44). Thus, it follows that free from the law means: (a) free from legalistic service of the law, which is serving sin; and (b) free from the curse of the law which has come upon all sin.

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