

Romans 7:13-26

The Struggle in the New Life of the Justified Sinner

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 13

This is a complicated sentence. In the previous verse the apostle wrote that the law and the commandment of God are holy, righteous and good; in a word, perfect. And yet, the result of life under the law is death (7:10,11)! And now someone presents Paul with what looks like the right conclusion: then good causes death. This conclusion is rejected: on the contrary, sin and sin alone is the cause of death. That is how the evil character of sin came to light. For evil (sin) abused good (the law of God). That was dishonest of sin.

How was the law of God abused? Sin once said: break the commandment and you will be like God (Genesis 3). Sin is still saying this, but it is wicked and misleading, for breaking God's commandment does not lead to happiness and peace and salvation.

Verse 14

The law is good but man is bad. "I am unspiritual" does not mean: I am flesh, but: I am weak and wicked. Paul, a believer, says this. It means that the root of sin has not yet been removed from us. Sin does not rule and control our life as Christians; its great power is broken; and the Spirit of God is now in control. But also, we, as God's children, have not yet reached sinless perfection. (See Glossary #5. More about the word "flesh" in Main Thoughts, 3e.)

Verse 15

This verse is a further explanation of v. 14. "I do not understand what I do": I don't know myself; I am an enigma to myself. The believer still commits the sin which, as a believer, he abhors.

Verse 16

The conclusion is that God's law is good, for the believer admits that he may not do what is wrong (against God's law).

Verse 17

We may not speak here of a twofold "self", a better "self" and a worse "self" (see Main Thoughts, 2). Rather, Paul differentiates between himself and sin which lives in him. The house and the inhabitant are two. There is a conflict in his heart and life.

Verse 18

"In me, that is, in my sinful nature": living in my bodily existence, in which sin has settled. The second part of this verse says: as a believer I desire to serve the Lord in perfect holiness and without sin, but I am unable to do it.

Verse 19

This verse gives the reason for v. 18: the believer keeps on doing evil, although he wants to do what is good.

Verse 20

Literally this verse says: I do it and I do not do it. This means: really it is no longer I who do it; it does not come from within me, but from the sin that still remains and dwells in me. In the vv. 18-20, vv. 16 and 17 are repeated. As a believer, Paul delves into the terrible difficulty of his Christian life (doing evil while hating it!). It occupies him so intensely because it is such an enigma and a deep sorrow to him.

Verse 21

"This law." Paul does not mean the law of God, but a rule, i.e. a compulsive force, an almost invincible principle of law.

Verses 22, 23

Once again Paul raises the issue: as a believer he is a new creation, so that his desires and his will are changed, and he delights in God's law (cf. Psalm 119). But again, there is an evil double to God's law, namely, the law of sin, the compelling power of sin (see v. 21). (See Glossary #22.)

Verses 24, 25

In so far as he is engaged in the struggle between sin and grace, Spirit and flesh, the believer is a "wretched" man. The cry is not a cry of despair, for the answer follows the question: through Jesus Christ I am delivered. So the cry is a longing for complete deliverance.

Verse 26

The final conclusion for me (and all believers) is this: with our minds we serve the law of God, but with our flesh we serve the law of sin. So there is a sharp contrast between "the mind" and "the flesh" [RSV] or "sinful nature" [NIV]. "The mind" is the seat of mind and will, the inmost self of v. 22. "The flesh"[RSV] is the sin that remains. But the apostle says that the believer is responsible for both, for he says: I serve the one as well as the other. (See Main Thoughts, 4).

B. Main Thoughts

1. The difficulty in explaining Romans 7:13-26 dates back to the times of the first Christian church in the beginning of our era. The question is, who is Paul

talking about, the Christian, the non-Christian, or a third person? Three answers are possible.

- a) One view is that Paul is speaking about the unconverted person, who struggles between wanting to do good while doing evil in his life; between two selves, a better self and a worse self.

In support of this argument an appeal is made to a line in the poetry of the unbeliever Ovid: "I see what is better and approve of it, but I do what is wrong" (Metamorphoses VII 20), The presupposition of this view is that in every man there is a deeper or better self which opposes the evil self.

- b) The second opinion is that Paul speaks about man standing between good and evil, between being unregenerate and regenerate. This man is indeed drawn to the gospel, but has not yet been won by it.
- c) The third view is that Paul has the converted in mind, the believer who still has to fight daily against the devil, the world, and especially his own flesh, and who has as yet only a small beginning of the obedience required of him (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 114, 115, 126, 127).

2. I am of the opinion that the latter view is the correct one. When we take a close look at this matter we learn to understand better the content of the Scripture passage in question.

As far as the first viewpoint is concerned: it is true that in Christian circles there often was talk about two kinds of will, etc. A. Kuyper even taught that in regenerate man the "innermost self" is totally holy and without sin.¹ Calvin also said that part of the believer's soul is regenerated while the other part is not yet regenerated. Also Prof. Dr. S. Greijdanus (in his commentary on Romans 7) still speaks of "I, in my innermost being."

We must get rid of this twofold self, that deeper self, that better self in a sinful human being. Man only has one self, he is one self. Romans 7:13ff. speaks about the believer in whom sin still remains; therefore there is the struggle in that believer between the Spirit of God and sin.

3. In support of my opinion I draw attention to the following:

- a) When Paul says "I," he means himself, himself as man (possibly including all men), or himself as believer (including possibly all believers). (See Outline 13, Main Thoughts, 4).

¹ Ed. Note: See e.g. A. Kuyper Sr. in *Common Grace*, vol. 2. The author refers to A. Kuyper Sr., a prominent Dutch leader in politics, education, and theology from 1865 to 1917.

- b) In vv. 13-26 Paul keeps using the verb in the present tense. Nowhere does it appear that he portrays the past as the present. Therefore this section of Scripture cannot point to the apostle before his conversion to Christ.
- c) All of Romans 5-8 speaks about the believer in Christ, and the text of 7:13-26 gives no cause to think of anyone else.
- d) The apostle says nowhere (which would be impossible anyway) that an unbeliever recognizes that the law is good (7:16), that sin dwells in him (v. 17), that he wants to do what is right (vv. 18, 19), and that he delights in the law of God (v. 22). (cf. Romans 8:6,7 and 1 Corinthians 2:14, and especially Romans 1 and 2, about the sin of the sinner.)
- e) The following is more difficult: can a believer say that he is sold under sin (v. 14), that he does what he hates (v. 15), that he does not get around to doing what is right (v. 18), that he is captive to the law of sin (v. 23), that he is still a wretched man (v. 24) and that with his flesh he still serves the law of sin (v. 25)? In short, is there such a struggle in the believer about the great amount of sin he still commits?
- f) That can be answered as follows: Romans 6:1-11 says that believers are dead to sin, but in vv. 12ff. of that chapter we find the admonition not to be ruled by sin any more. Romans 8:2 states that believers have been set free from the law of sin and death, but in 8:12 there is again an admonition not to live according to the flesh. (cf. also Galatians 5:16-17)
- g) Therefore, we have to say: as believers we are dead to sin, which means that the power of sin has been broken and defeated in principle, but not all sin has thereby been removed from our lives. For example, when the Allies crossed the Rhine in Germany in 1945, Hitler's power had already been broken, but the Allies had to fight till they reached Berlin to overcome Hitler completely. Sin has not quite withdrawn from our lives as believers, and still mounts "rear-guard" actions.

Sanctification as cleansing from sin has begun in our lives, but is not yet complete. It is only complete when we die. Only then does the Lord take away our sin completely, together with the body.

- h) In the Scriptures we are told repeatedly that believers fall into sins (even great sins), and sometimes live in them for quite some time. Read the first paragraphs of Canons of Dort, V, where David and Peter are mentioned. (For David, see 2 Samuel 11, 12 and 24; cf. also Psalm 32 and 51. About Peter, see John 18:15ff.; 21:15-23; Galatians 2:11-14).

For his thesis that man is "at the same time righteous and sinner," Martin Luther referred to Romans 7:13-26. This thesis means that the believer is righteous before God in Christ (see Heidelberg Catechism, A. 59), but because he continues to sin (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 60 and 126) there is a continuous need for justification.

- i) It is incorrect to speak of inner struggles, or a split personality, or anything of that kind. Paul speaks about the struggle between God's Spirit and our sin, about the discord between wanting to do good and doing evil.
4. We must note carefully that Paul, in distinguishing between his self and sin (vv. 19,20), is not teaching a dualism in his life, as if he would not be responsible for committing sin. In some pietistic and mystical groups responsibility for sins which are committed is shrugged off with the remark: "Yes, but that is not me doing it, it is the old Adam in me." Scripture teaches us differently. Paul says clearly and correctly: I, the believer in Christ, still do evil (vv. 15, 18, 19, 25). The believer has but one self, is but one self, and that self does both good and evil. The believer cannot deny responsibility for his sin before God.

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