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Exegetical Paper on Romans 7:7-25

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by

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Introduction

While at first glance the Law of the Old Testament may appear to be an impossible standard, destined to leave all who followed it without any true hope of redemption, Romans 7:7-25 reveal it is in fact vitally necessary to the plan of redemption in revealing man's utter dependence on God. While some may have read Paul's earlier passages to have not only disregarded the need for the Law, some could have even interpreted his words to mean that the Law itself is sinful. In verses 7-25, Paul corrects that misinterpretation, pointing out the usefulness of the Law before Christ and even after Christ, but also points out its weaknesses, and ultimately the need for true dependence on Christ and His atoning sacrifice.¹

Context

Written by the Apostle Paul, the epistle to the Romans is a significant piece in the New Testament in discussing doctrine. While Paul did not start the Roman church, and as of the writing of this epistle, had not been there, he wanted to build connections with the church there as well as provide apostolic instruction. He wrote it towards the end of his third missionary journey, most likely around AD 58.²

The context of Romans 7:7-25 within the epistle itself is significant. After traditional greetings, Paul launches into the discussion with his thesis statement, Romans 1:17 in the NASB, "For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'But the righteous man shall live by faith.'" Having laid the ground work that salvation is through faith,

¹ Wiersbe, Warren W., *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Volume 1*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1989), 535.

² MacArthur, John F., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary Romans 1-8*, (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1991), xviii.

Paul begins the process of making his case as he systematically moves through Romans. In chapters 3-5, he establishes that the Law cannot save. In chapter 6 he establishes that it cannot sanctify. And then in the first six verses of chapter 7 he reveals that the Law cannot condemn a believer of sin.³ Given that context, it would be easy to see how the reader in Rome might have wondered if Paul was labeling the Law a bad thing, which triggers Paul's explanation in 7:7-25 both of its value and limitations.

Analysis of Text

Following MacArthur's division of the text⁴, this analysis will make two broad divisions; 7:7-13, with a focus on the relationship between sin and the Law, and 7:14-25, with a focus on the relationship between sin and the believer.

Sin and the Law (v.7-13)

In this section Paul answers the question, which may have arisen out of his previous comments on the Law, of whether or not the Law is sinful, broken, or causes sin. Having been a significant piece of the Jewish culture and practice for generations, Paul's comments in chapters 1-6 must have been inflammatory to some! For others, they may have misunderstood his meaning to suggest a new freedom to sin, or that sin itself originated in the Law. There are four main points contained in verses 7-13⁵:

1. The Law reveals sin (v.7). With his question, "What shall we say, then?," Paul demonstrates that he anticipates the previously mentioned false assumptions to be a possible

³ Moo, Douglas J, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 423.

⁴ MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 365-393.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 368-376.

rebuttal. And with that simple question, he launches into his defense. He explains that the Law reveals his sin, or informs him of sin that he may have been unaware of – the Law itself is not the sin, it is his actions that are. In his phrase, “I would not have known what sin was except through the law,” he uses the Greek word *εγνων*, which in this context conveys a type of knowledge that is gained through experience, as opposed to intuitive knowledge.⁶ This is critical in Paul’s explanation because it points to the Law’s ability to illustrate and explain what qualifies as sinful behavior, something he needed to learn to do.

2. The Law arouses sin (v.8). Stating that “sin, seizing the opportunity” to trigger sinful actions, Paul again brings the point that the Law is not sinful and does not cause sin. Instead, it is the sinful desires within men and women, that upon hearing something is prohibited, sinfully desire it. A simple example of this principle is found in painting contractors. Very rarely will professional painter hang a “wet paint” sign on something they have painted. Why? Because in normal situations, it is very rare that a person will want to touch a wall, yet simply hanging that sign with two simple words, “wet paint,” seems to trigger a desire in every passerby to reach out and touch the wall as if to see if it is really wet.⁷ There is something within the sinful heart that rebels against instruction, so while the Law does on the one hand reveal the presence of sin, by defining the sin a fallen person may find themselves now desiring to do something they were unaware of before the Law opened their eyes to it.

But then Paul goes on to say, “apart from law, sin is dead.” How could this be? It is still part of the idea contained in this verse; that sin uses the Law as a launching point, something to react to. As sin has been around since before Genesis 1:1 (Satan’s sin), it is not dependant on the

⁶ Moo, *New International Commentary*, 433.

⁷ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 536.

Law for existence since the Law came much later. However, framed in the understanding of this passage, sin is less active without a list of prohibitions to trigger reactions in the sinful man or woman. MacArthur explains that it is not so much that sin is dead, but that it is dormant, or not fully active.⁸

3. The Law ruins the sinner (v.9-11). Verse 9 opens with the statement, “Once I was alive apart from law”, which Cranfield explains as referring to the pre-fall state of Adam in the Garden of Eden.⁹ However, both MacArthur and Moo disagree with that assessment, primarily pointing at the use of the Greek word *ἐγώ* to support their understanding that Paul’s use of it directly refers to himself, not Adam as a representative. While there is room for interpreting it the way Cranfield did, given the context it would be highly unlikely. In this case, Moo would argue that Paul uses it to refer to himself, as in, “I was existing” before knowing the Law.¹⁰ Granted, that would be referring to a very early stage of his life, as Paul would have, as a Jewish boy, and then a Pharisee, been well versed in the Law starting at a young age.

What then does Paul refer to when he claims in verses 9-10 to have died after the Law came and “sin sprang to life”? It refers to spiritual death, not physical death. Part of Paul’s point is that ultimately, while the Law does not produce sin, it also does not produce life since no one is able to live up to its demands in their pursuit of God. If trust is placed in the Law, not Christ, it can only end in spiritual death, which reveals its fatal limitation. It reveals mankind’s need for a Savior without providing salvation. Granted, if someone was able to keep the Law perfectly they

⁸ MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 372.

⁹ Cranfield, C.E.B., *Romans: A Shorter Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985), 161.

¹⁰ Moo, *New International Commentary*, 437.

would gain life,¹¹ but as humanity is fallen, that goal is unreachable by anyone other than Christ, thereby making the reality of the Law for fallen mankind death.

In verse 11, some interpret the use of ἐξηπάτησεν (to deceive) as a parallel to Adam's sin in the Garden, however, as the Law had not been established at that time, and in the context of Paul's discussion so far, it makes more sense to connect it to the Jewish people and their relationship with the Law since it was given.¹² In so many of them placing their hope in the Law for salvation, instead of God, they were deceived. Hebrews 11, in particular, makes it clear that salvation has always come, and will always come through faith in God – not in making sacrifices, following the Law or other activities. Those actions can be symptoms of a saving faith, but they can also be symptoms of a deadly deception.

Getting back to this third point's premise, the Law ruins the sinner, that title sums up the dangers of the Law. Mankind's sinful nature often times leads to deception that results in placing faith in something other than God. More specifically, while theoretically life is possible in the Law, realistically it is impossible for sinful humans to attain.

4. The Law Reflects the Sinfulness of Sin (v. 12-13). Paul is wrapping up his defense of the Law by answering the question of whether or not the Law is sin with an emphatic NO. In fact, his point is that the Law does exactly what God intended it to do!¹³ As such, he rightfully labels it holy, righteous and good. Paul concludes this part of the scripture passage by pointing out that sin is so utterly sinful that it can even corrupt man's usage of God's holy Law.

¹¹ Leviticus 18:5, Romans 10:5, Psalms 19:7-10, Ezekiel 20:11, Luke 20:28.

¹² Moo, *New International Commentary*, 440.

¹³ Boice, James Montgomery, Romans 5-8, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1991), 744.

MacArthur explains it this way: “The fact that the law reveals, arouses, and condemns sin and brings death to the sinner does not make the law itself evil. When a person is justly convicted and sentenced for murder, there is no fault in the law or with those responsible for upholding it. The fault is in the one who broke the law.”¹⁴

The Believer and Sin (v.14-25)

Over the previous couple chapters, Paul focused on sanctification, how the believer is a new creation, completely new in Christ, holy and forgiven. He wrote of what Christ’s death and resurrection accomplished that the Law could not. However, while that salvation results in eternal reward and a new creation here on earth, it does not result in a perfect or easy Christian life. Verses 14-25 paint a very real picture of what it is like for the believer to struggle with sin.

Over the years there has been much debate on who the subject of Paul’s writings is in this passage. Some believe, because of the failures in sin, that it must be referring to someone who is not yet saved but considering faith. Others contend that only a believer would be that concerned with following God and doing the right thing. Some are convinced that Paul, as a mature believer, must be referring to an immature believer who has much growing left to do – as displayed in their sin struggles. On the other hand, others are convinced that Paul is in fact referring to himself and his own struggle, and only a mature believer could recognize the struggle for what is in the way that Paul does in this passage.¹⁵

¹⁴ MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 374.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 378.

However, because Paul has shown this level of humility elsewhere in his writings, and uses the first person singular 46 times in verses 7-25 of this chapter¹⁶, it seems apparent that in this particular instance Paul is very much writing about himself and his own personal struggles with living out the Christian faith. For many believers, this is an incredibly powerful encouragement, painting a picture of the very real struggles Christians have as they pursue Christ-likeness. Through this particular set of verses, 14-25, Paul identifies four laments out his struggles as a believer with sin.

1. The First Lament (v.14-17). Paul leads off with the problem, that he is “all too human, a slave to sin.” Even though he is redeemed, he is not yet made perfect and still contends with his sin nature. He goes on to say that he does not “understand” himself, using the Greek word γινωσκω, which is translated “understand” in this passage. It is an interesting word choice, literally meaning “to know absolutely,” and used both as a way to express gaining knowledge and to show the relationship between a husband and wife. It is knowledge that goes beyond just factual.¹⁷ In this case, it is tied to the relationship between the believer (Paul) and Christ. He laments that his walk, as much as he desires otherwise, does not measure up to what it should. Even though he agrees the law is good, and he knows how he wants to live, he finds himself going against it anyway, which is a heart breaking development for him.

In saying that it is the “sin living in me that does it,” it may sound as though Paul is laying blame elsewhere. In fact, he is owning it, as he has already owned his sinful nature. However, what he is doing is separating the sin in him from the new life in Christ also within

¹⁶ Ibid., 379.

¹⁷ Ibid., 384.

him. He is slowly become more and more like Christ, but as yet his efforts are imperfect, which results in sin still being present in his life.

2. The Second Lament (v.18-20). The second lament of Paul is simple, that he has a sinful nature and there is nothing good in it. He is careful to clarify that it is his sinful nature, not the new creation that he has become. The two are coexisting until he reaches heaven, resulting in the frustration he experiences as he writes this in that he has the God given desires for righteousness that come with his new life, yet the sinful nature resisting it every step of the way. Wiersbe points out that Paul is not saying that it was impossible for him to follow God's perfect way, but that of his own efforts he could not do it, and even when he did "succeed" in pursuing God's will it was still tainted with his sinful nature.¹⁸ Once again, he repeats his statement regarding the sin, or sin nature, living within him that pursues sin, not his new nature in Christ.

3. The Third Lament (v. 21-23). The third lament is similar to the first two; that in spite of being a new creation, there is still evil present within him. It is in fact such a common problem for believers that Paul does not call it an issue that is just his own, but a principle of life, a reality all believers must face. Consequently, this lingering sin nature fights every good thing the new creation may set out to do. Cranfield refers to it as another law, a "law of sin," with the two laws, the law of sin and the law of God fighting against each other in their contradictions.¹⁹ Regardless, it is one of the great frustrations that believers must prepare for, the reality of the ongoing war between their sinful nature and their redeemed nature. The two are incompatible in every way, and if a believer is not aware of the struggle, than it is something to be worried about – most likely it is a symptom of their God given new nature being silenced in the war between the two.

¹⁸ Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 537.

¹⁹ Cranfield, *Romans*, 168.

4. The Final Lament (v.24-25). In these two verses, Paul really lets loose with his lament, calling himself a miserable person, and crying out for freedom from a life dominated by sin and death. The Greek for “set free” in this passage is *ρυσεται*, which literally means “rescue from danger.” During the time of the writing of this Epistle, it was a word used to describe a soldier rescuing a wounded soldier from the battlefield and bringing him to safety.²⁰

And yet, having made these laments, Paul does not hesitate to give the answer, that Christ will provide the rescue! In spite of his fallen tendency to still be a slave to sin, he has a great hope for the future that this will not always be the case!

Application

Romans 7:7-25 is a critical discussion on legalism and the Law for both the Jewish and Gentile believer. The Old Testament lays the groundwork, Christ arrives, lives, dies, rises again, fulfilling the prophecies and revealing the great mystery. Human nature loves a checklist, a series of tasks that must be performed in exchange for salvation, but Paul makes it crystal clear that restoration with God does not come through work, completing a checklist – in this case the Law, or any other method of human origin – it is a gift from God, God is the one creating and giving the righteousness, there is nothing mankind can do other than place their faith in Christ.

While packed with theological and doctrinal weight, the application of this passage is simple: the Law is useful for the believer in revealing God’s holiness, mankind’s need of a Savior, and the complete inability to receive that Savior without God’s intervention. However, believers must recognize their own sin nature still at war and the almost certain potential for it to rebel against every aspect of God’s law.

²⁰ MacArthur, *Romans 1-8*, 392.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the challenge for the believer is to recognize the natural human tendency to desire a to-do list, a works system of merit based salvation, and in recognizing that acknowledge that weakness to God and ask for the strength to simply place faith in Christ's death and resurrection to receive the eternal security of God's righteousness, as well as rely on Him for help in the struggle between his or her two natures. While there are incredible amounts of resources and debates focused on these verses, sorting out every possible detail and angle, the core truth - that everyone is equally sinful and fallen under the Law, hopeless without the power of God, with the only requirement being belief in Him – is one that is easy to remember and apply to one's life. As overwhelming as the battle may seem at times, as verse 25 so boldly proclaims, "Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord."

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