

Understanding Romans 7

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.
(Romans 7:19)

The aim of this article

There is a widespread opinion that Paul, in the seventh chapter of the book of Romans, is either speaking specifically about his own life, or generally about the life of a Christian. If this were true, Paul would be saying that a Christian is not able to do what is good, being sold under sin. In the following essay we would like to show that this conclusion can only be reached by ignoring Paul's statements about himself, the context of the letter, and ultimately the fundamental message of the whole New Testament.

What Does the New Testament Say About the Life of a Christian?

For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.
(Romans 6:14)

But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart.... (Romans 6:17a)

When a person becomes a Christian, he changes his whole attitude, way of thinking, will and actions.

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

The Bible speaks of a new creation—whoever becomes a Christian becomes a new person.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2 Corinthians 5:17)

A Christian no longer finds delight in worldly and sinful things and is instead led by the desire to honour God with his entire life and to be obedient from his heart. As long as we lived according to worldly standards, we were slaves of sin, but Jesus set us free from the power of sin and by this enabled us to do God's will.

...having been set free from sin, [you] have become slaves of righteousness. (Romans 6:18)

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.
(Romans 8:12-14)

The passages mentioned above make it clear that the desperate struggle described in Romans 7 cannot

refer to the life of a Christian. The following comparison is intended to further illustrate this.

The State of the Person Described in Romans 7	What the Bible Says About the Life of a Christian
For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. (Romans 7:14)	For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. (Romans 6:14); Romans 6:1.2.6.7.22; Galatians 5:24
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. (Romans 7:18)	Therefore, my beloved, ... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13); For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. (Ephesians 2:10); ...waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. (Titus 2:13-14); 1. John 2:6; 1. Corinthians 9:25-27; Ephesians 3:20-21a; Colossians 1:10
... 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. (Romans 7:23)	There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1-2); 1. John 3:6-9; John 8:31-36

This point also becomes clear if *Romans 7* is considered within the larger context of *chapters 6 and 8*.

What Did Paul Himself Say About His Own Life?

Romans 7 says:

For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. (*Romans 7:18b-19*)

If Paul had been writing about himself (as a Christian) here, he would be implying that he was incapable of doing what is good, which is impossible to reconcile with Paul's statements about himself in other Bible passages. Without wanting to say that Paul was sinless, we know that he had victory over sin and led a holy life.

He testifies of this in 1 Thessalonians:

You are witnesses, and God also, how **HOLY** and **RIGHTEOUS** and **BLAMELESS** was our conduct towards you believers. (*1 Thessalonians 2:10*)

In another passage he writes:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and **SEEN IN ME—PRACTISE THESE THINGS**, and the God of peace will be with you. (*Philippians 4:8-9*)

Paul encourages the Christians to put all these virtues into practice which they saw in his own life. If they follow his example, the God of peace will be with them. He also says:

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. (*1 Corinthians 11:1*)

Romans 7 verse 9 also reveals that he is not speaking about his personal experience when he writes, “I was once alive apart from the law.” Paul was born as a Jew and had been instructed in the law from his childhood. He could not have said of himself that there was a time in which he lived without the law.

In the letter to the Philippians, he describes his background:

...circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee.... (*Philippians 3:5*)

If Paul Is Not Speaking About Himself Nor About a Christian, What Are These Verses All About?

In this chapter Paul wants to show the believers how the Law should be assessed from the perspective of a Christian, someone who has experienced salvation in Jesus. His aim is to clearly illustrate the great difference between life under the law (as a Jew) on the one hand, and life under grace (as a Christian) on the other.

In verses 1-6 Paul shows that the Jewish Christians are no longer bound to the law, but serve in the new reality of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. The train of thought is continued in chapter 8 where God is praised for the freedom from sin which Jesus wants to give us (8:1-2). In verse 5 Paul reminds the Jewish Christians of their experience during the time under the law (“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.”). This belongs to things of the past, as he writes in verse 6: “But NOW we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive....”

In verses 7-13 Paul vindicates the law as being given by God. The law clearly shows what sin is. It does not bring about sin, but brings sin’s true character to light. As soon as the commandment came, what sin really is became clear: hostility towards God’s law.

In verses 14-25 Paul states that although the law shows what man ought to do, it is unable to liberate anyone from the slavery of sin. What he writes in verse 19, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing”, cannot be referred to the time of the Old Testament in an absolute

sense, since even at that time believers did experience the help of God in their fight against sin. We know of examples like Abraham and Job, who lived by faith and were considered by God to be righteous, and who knew God as their saviour (Job 1:8 "...a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil...." and Job 19:25 "For I know that my Redeemer lives....").

Abraham stands as an example of faith to the Christians in the New Testament (Romans 4 verse 3: "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."; *Galatians 3:6 ff.*, e.g. verse 9 "So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.").

Furthermore, Psalm 19 and Psalm 119 testify that even in the time of the Old Testament people were able to experience the closeness and the grace of God:

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. (*Psalm 19:14*)

Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble. (*Psalm 119:165*)

Even Gentiles who lived according to their conscience were not incapable of doing good. Paul writes in the very same letter in chapter 2 verses 10,14,15a: "...glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.... For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts...."

Paul himself lived according to his conscience before his repentance. This is expressed in *Acts 23:1b* ("I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day.") and *2 Timothy 1:3a* ("I thank God whom I serve, as did my ancestors, with a clear conscience."). With this he clearly shows that he did not intend to describe his personal life in *Romans 7* nor does it reflect his religious life prior to his encounter with Jesus.

Someone may object that if Paul writes in the first person, "I", he must be referring to himself in this chapter. Why did he choose to express himself this way?

The stylistic device utilized here by Paul, in which he allows a person to relate his own life story, may seem unusual to some. However, it makes what he wants to say more vivid than what is possible by using abstract formulations. He describes the experience of people who lived

- before Moses without the law (verse 9),
- after Moses under the law (verse 9b to verse 24 and verse 25b) and
- after Jesus without the law, being led by the Spirit (chapter 7:25a and chapter 8).

Paul employs this stylistic device in order to clearly point out how much those under the law were in need of salvation. It was not his aim to write about a specific person, but rather to assess **through the eyes of a Christian** what life under the law was like and through this to express gratitude for the gift of salvation.

Moving towards verse 24 he uses very strong language to describe the problem, with statements such as: “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing”, or, “I know that nothing good dwells in me.” As we have briefly explained above, if we compare these statements with other passages, even those in the same letter, it is evident that he does not intend to teach that man is incapable of doing anything good. Quite the contrary, these statements express the attitude of someone who is deeply aware of what his sins mean in front of God and is humbly and desperately seeking the solution to his problems. (“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me....”).

Verse 25a (“Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”) offers a glimpse of the answer: salvation in Jesus. In verse 25b he summarizes everything once again, in order to make the transition to his description of Jesus’ triumphant victory (beginning from 8:1) and the resulting liberation from sin and death.

Concluding Thoughts

In spite of the clear words in the New Testament that state that Christians live holy lives, time and time again we meet people who want to refer Romans 7 to the inner struggle of a Christian. They do this without noticing that they are actually identifying themselves with an unredeemed person who does not experience God’s power.

The attitude described in this chapter is that of a person who wants to do what is good, but finds he is unable to. This person does not justify his sins, but suffers under the burden of his inability to do what is good. Sadly though, Romans 7 is frequently and gladly used by people in the religious world to justify their own sins, saying: “It was the same with Paul....”

To refer this passage to Christians is to completely invalidate the salvation Jesus brought us. How can we speak of salvation in the case of a person who is incapable of doing good and who is still tormented by the misery of being enslaved to sin?

The New Testament clearly says:

...walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. (*Galatians 5:16*)

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.” They answered him, “We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, ‘You will become free’?” Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (*John 8:31-36*)

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