

How Sin is Overcome (Part 2): What About Romans 7?

Romans 6 is the foundation upon which Romans 7 is built. If we interpret Romans 7 apart from Romans 6, not only will our theology be messed up; but it can actually enslave us (instead of setting us free). Truth sets free.

We're going to read Romans 7:14-25 twice. The first time we'll read it **out of context**:

Romans 7:14 (NASB) We know that the law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

15 (RSV) I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.

16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good.

17 So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.

19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.

20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me.

21 **So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.**

22 For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self,

23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and **making me captive to the law of sin** which dwells in my members.

24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I **of myself**, serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Romans 7:14-25 (KJV)

14 For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.

15 For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I.

16 If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good.

17 Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.

18 For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.

19 For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.

20 Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me.

21 I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me.

22 For I delight in the law of God after the inward man:

23 But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

24 O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?

25 I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

In verse 21 Paul identifies a law or principle that he later calls “the law of sin” in verses 23 and 25. He cannot set himself free from this law, no matter how hard he tries. He is captive to the law of sin that dwells in his members.

Briefcase Illustration--To appreciate the hopelessness of trying to fight against the **law of sin** with our own strength, consider what it would be like for people to fight against the **law of gravity**. It doesn't matter how strong they are, how determined they are, or how much will power they have. They are going to lose. It's only a matter of time.

Some Observations

1) Obviously, this passage is not describing a person who is experiencing freedom from sin's dominion. Something within Paul is controlling him, so that he does not do what he wants, but rather the very thing he hates. Using a variety of different words, Paul mentions slavery within this passage thirteen times!

2) Most of this passage is written in the present tense. Therefore, many Christians conclude that Paul is writing about his current experience.

3) Verse 24b is written in the future tense: “Who SHALL deliver me from this body of death?” Therefore, many Christians conclude that our deliverance from the “law of sin” has not yet occurred.

4) A lot of Christians can identify with the terrible struggle Paul describes.

5) Some people read this passage and think, “**Wow!** If Paul is writing about his current experience, then I'm in big trouble. **If the Apostle Paul never got free, what hope is there for me?**”

But Does this Interpretation Make Sense?

If Romans 7 is interpreted accurately, it will not contradict Romans 6.

What does Romans 6 say is true of all those “in Christ Jesus”? It says that we have already died, and that we are no longer “enslaved to sin” for “He who has died is freed from sin” (6:7).

To understand Romans 7, we must read it in context. If Paul is saying that our deliverance from sin’s dominion is still out in the future, then wouldn’t the next few verses be in the future tense?

In Romans 7:7-25 Paul has been discussing life under the law. The law promises life, but because no one can obey it, it instead delivers death and condemnation. In Romans 8:1-4 Paul calls our attention to what is true NOW for those who are **in Christ Jesus**.

Romans 8:1-4

- 1 There is therefore **now** no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.
- 2 **For** the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus **has set me free** from the law of sin and death.
- 3 **For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do:** sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,
- 4 in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled **in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**

Romans 8:1-4 (KJV)

- 1 There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.
- 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.
- 3 For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh:
- 4 That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.

When Paul uses the word "us" in verse 4 above, who is he including in that term? (There is one person we can be sure of.) **So Paul is telling us plainly that at the time he wrote this passage, he was not walking according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**

To properly understand Romans 7, we must notice the significance of the very first verse. Otherwise, we are likely to misinterpret the entire chapter.

Romans 7:1 Do you not know—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person **only** _____
_____?

(KJV) Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth?

Paul is about to tell us some things about the law, but he tells us right off the bat that what he is about to say applies only to those who are still alive. It does not apply to those who are already dead. In other words, it does not apply to you!

Romans 7:1 is so important that Paul continually refers back to it. Notice the first word of the next three verses.

Romans 7:2-6

2 **Thus** a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning the husband.

3 **Accordingly**, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

4 **Likewise**, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.

5 **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.

6 **BUT NOW** we are **discharged** from the law, **dead to that which held us captive**, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

Romans 7:2-6 (KJV)

2 For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband.

3 So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man.

4 Wherefore, my brethren, ye also are become dead to the law by the body of Christ; that ye should be married to another, even to him who is raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit unto God.

5 For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death.

6 But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held; that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.

What is Paul saying? If you know the truth, your death with Christ changes everything!!

Paul is explaining the truth that sets people free!

He is instructing us about something that is now true of those who are "in Christ Jesus". **He clearly declares that our captivity is over--NOW!--because of our death with Christ.**

You are no longer under the law, and you are no longer under sin's dominion.

Paul Sounds Like He's Down on the Law

Paul has shown that the law can't justify us, and it can't sanctify us either. **Even worse, the law actually arouses sin!** At this point Paul realizes readers might be getting the wrong impression (thinking the law is a bad thing), so he defends the law. It's good, but it has certain limitations.

What the Law CANNOT Do

It cannot justify us (3:20). It cannot sanctify us. It cannot set us free from the law of sin and death...even when we try our very best in the power of the flesh (7:18).

What the Law CAN Do

The law does have certain God-given functions. It can show us our sin (3:20). It "arouses sin" (7:5) and "comes in to increase the trespass" (5:20). It can show us how wretched we are apart from grace (7:24a). It can show us our complete inability to deliver ourselves, and it therefore proves to us that we need someone outside of ourselves to deliver us (7:24b).

The purpose of the law is to bring us to defeat and to kill our faith in ourselves. The law is "our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ" (Galatians 3:24 KJV). This is true, not only for justification, but for sanctification as well.

Under Grace or Under Law?

Romans 6:14 says, "**For sin shall have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.**"

(KJV) For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace.

The verse above is not a command, but a statement of fact. And the converse would also be true.

If you are under grace, sin has no dominion over you. **But** if you are under law, sin **DOES** have dominion over you.

In the second half of Romans 7, Paul describes what it's like to be "under law".

Romans 7:14-25...Re-visited!

As we re-read the second half of Romans 7, let's not lose sight of the facts Paul already established:

- 1) ALL of those "in Christ Jesus" have already died
- 2) The law is binding on a person "only during his life"
- 3) The law which promises life instead brings death, because no one can obey the law in the power of the flesh. Paul can't do it, I can't do it, and you can't do it either. If we seek to fight against sin with our own strength, we will lose. If we are living under the law, sin reigns over us. The law cannot deliver us from "the law of sin", and we cannot deliver ourselves.

Grace Not Mentioned Once

In the second half of Romans 7, **grace is not mentioned** even once, because Paul is not talking about grace. Paul describes life under the law. He writes from the viewpoint of being under the law. Paul is describing the frustrating hopelessness of trying to fight sin with our own strength. He wants to obey God's law, but he can't do it in the power of his own flesh. **Everyone** who relies on his own strength will lose.

Some interpret these verses to mean that our freedom from sin's dominion is still out in the future, that we will not be set free until the day we die *physically*. **But this interpretation ignores all that Paul has been saying throughout Romans 6 and through the first six verses of Romans 7.**

God has already delivered us from the body of death. That's the point of Romans 6:6-7:

"We know that our old self **was** crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might **no longer** be enslaved to sin. For he who **has** died is freed from sin."

Another Ancient Document Sheds Light on Paul's Words in Romans 6-8!

Another ancient document, written by a doctor during the early days of the Church, actually quotes Paul's own words. The words give us the essence of what Paul is saying in Romans 6-8! The ancient document is the Acts of the Apostles.

Acts 13:39 is speaking of Christ when it says:

"by him everyone that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses."

(KJV) And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses.

In Romans, when Paul is talking about getting free from sin's dominion, he describes what DOESN'T work and what DOES work. The law doesn't work, even when we add our best efforts to the equation.

Fortunately, that's not the end of the story!

Romans 8:3: "For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do, sending His own Son..."

What could the law not do? The answer is in the preceding verse. The law could not set us free from "the law of sin and death".

God has done **the very thing** the law was unable to do. How? By sending His Own Son...

If a reader tackles Romans 6-8:4 and does not recognize that Paul is addressing these two different topics (i.e. what DOESN'T work and what DOES work), the reader is likely to be quite confused by the contradictory nature of Paul's statements. After all, the second half of Romans 7 seems to completely contradict what Paul says in Romans 6-7:6 and in Romans 8:1-4. For example, in one place Paul says he is "captive to the law of sin that dwells in [his] members" and in another place he says "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus HAS SET ME FREE from the law of sin and death."

So...which statement is true? They're both true, but Paul is speaking of two different topics.

Paul writes Romans 7:14-25 from the viewpoint of someone living under the law. Even by mustering all the power of our flesh (i.e. our human strength, our determination, our will power), we cannot get free. The law brings us to defeat...and makes us realize we need someone OUTSIDE OF OURSELVES to deliver us, because we cannot deliver ourselves (no matter how hard we try).

When Paul is writing from the viewpoint of someone living under the law in Romans 7:14-25, he writes about the bondage in present tense and about the deliverance in future tense...which makes complete sense.

When he is writing from the viewpoint of someone who is "in Christ" (and who therefore has a new identity through his co-crucifixion, co-burial, and co-resurrection with Christ), he writes about the bondage and deliverance in the past tense, which also makes complete sense. E.g. Romans 6:6-7; Romans 7:4-6; Romans 8:2-3

Revisiting the Gravity Illustration

Recall our illustration about how hopeless it is to fight against a law (like the law of gravity) with your own strength.

But what if you were in a realm in which you were free from gravity? Does such a realm exist? _____

Likewise, this passage indicates there is a realm in which you are set free from the law of sin and death. The "law of the Spirit of life _____" has set me free from the law of sin and death".

Whatever You Want to Call the Problem...

What is the correct conclusion to all this? That Paul never got free? That Paul the great Apostle was still doing the things he hated, still trying to obey God's law through the power of the flesh?

No, Paul openly acknowledges that the law could not set him free, but then he says, "God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do" (Romans 8:3).

Whether you call the problem the "sin nature", or "the Law of Sin and Death", or "the Sin Principle" or "the Law of Sin in our Members", **one thing is clear. Jesus has conquered it.** He has done what is necessary to secure the freedom of those who walk in light of the truth. **Because we died with Christ, our captivity is over.**

We must be careful not to put off into the future something God says is true NOW.

We only experience freedom when the truth sets us free. When we understand Christ's finished work in this area, the chains fall off and we "enter into his rest".

Remember How Paul Started This Whole Discussion

Romans 6-8 started with the fascinating question: "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" These three chapters expound on that one verse.

In other words, Paul's purpose in writing Romans 6-8:4 is to show that continuing in sin is inconsistent with our new identity.

Paul is explaining the significance of our death with Christ so that we will no longer "continue in sin".

Frequently Asked Questions

What Does "Flesh" Mean?

In the second half of Romans 7, Paul keeps using the word "flesh". What does he mean by that term in this context?

The Bible often contrasts "walking in the flesh" with "walking in the Spirit". Walking in the Spirit means the person is being empowered by the Spirit. Walking in the flesh means the person is not. Those "in the Spirit" operate in the power of God, whereas those "in the flesh" operate in the power of man.

Are you still trying to fight against sin in the power of your own flesh? Good luck with that! I'm not looking in a crystal ball, but I can see your future. As long as you try to fight against sin in your own strength, you are going to fall on your face.

How many times must people fall before they put no more confidence in the flesh? Will a dozen times do it? A hundred times? When we have no more confidence in our own flesh, we are ready to put our faith in what God has done to set us free.

1 Cor. 3:1-3 But I, brethren, could not address you as spiritual men, but as men of the flesh, as babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food; for you were not ready for it; and even yet you are not ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, **are you not of the flesh, and behaving like**

_____?

(KJV) And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?

These Corinthians are “in Christ” but are behaving as though they are still “in Adam”, because they do not yet see themselves accurately. Thus, they behave in a manner inconsistent with who they really are.

The Bible never equates the flesh with who we really are. On the contrary, Christians who walk “according to the flesh” behave like ordinary men precisely because they are deceived about who they really are.

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of truth. To walk in the Spirit involves tapping into God’s power by walking in light of the truth. We must see ourselves accurately—as those dead to sin and alive unto God. We then walk “in the new life of the Spirit”.

FAQ: Do you think people can reach "sinless perfection" in this life-- if they believe what God says about their new identity?

I’m going to give you my opinion at this point. I don’t believe anyone reaches sinless perfection in this life. I believe sanctification (the process of becoming more Christ-like) is an on-going process. Christ’s finished work is finished, but our appreciation of it is not.

We already have the whole package. We have ALL of Him, and ALL of grace, but we don’t yet know how rich we are.

Eph.2:7 that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

(KJV) That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.

Since it will take the “coming ages” for us to realize all that we have already been given, no Christian has fully renewed his mind, and therefore no one has been fully metamorphosized into the likeness of Christ.

Much growth will occur as we renew our minds to the "in Christ" truth, as Jesus indicates in his prayer recorded in John 17:16-17:

(KJV) They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

The more we renew our minds, the more we change. It also causes us to experience freedom from sin's dominion

Just as the news of the 13th amendment changed people's lives, so the news in Romans 6 contains that same type of power.

However, there are many other ways we need to grow up as well. For example, we must:

- comprehend God's kindness so we will trust in Him and cooperate with Him
- become free from the fear of man
- learn to fear God properly
- consecrate ourselves to God's service
- make it our aim to please God
- learn to humble ourselves
- choose to love others
- learn to value things properly (seeking things that are above, not things of the earth)

All these things cause growth to occur and cause our behavior to become more Christ-like.

FAQ: But what if I *want* to sin?

If you believe you want to sin, you've been deceived in one of two ways. Either you've been deceived about who you are or about who God is.

If you believe the real you wants to sin (that the problem is somehow related to your true nature), it's just a lie! God says you are "the righteousness of God in Him". Does it make sense that the righteousness of God wants to sin?

The other possibility is that you have believed lies about God so that you don't trust Him. You want to sin because down deep you believe that your plans are better than God's plans. You want to go your own way because you believe your way is better than His. Perhaps at some level you believe this sin is good for you instead of recognizing that sin is bondage and death--dressed up in a pretty package. Sin is that which damages human beings. Sin is self-murder... by the installment plan. The cure is the truth.

What is Temptation?

I think people today think of "temptation" in a way different from the way the Bible uses the term, Today, people speak of temptation to describe the struggle they experience when they try not to give in to some sin that they are considering. They feel tempted as they mentally consider whether or not they will do some evil thing that is enticing to them.

But biblically, temptation is simply when the enemy presents a lie to a person's brain, hoping that they will believe it. Jesus was repeatedly tempted in the wilderness, during his 40-day fast.

When the Bible says Jesus was "tempted" in the wilderness, it doesn't mean that He was considering whether to sin or not. When Jesus was tempted, that just means Satan threw a lie in His direction. Jesus then put up His shield and blocked the dart.

Sometimes people believe a lie, and then they try their hardest NOT to act out on the lie they believed. They then think of temptation as that struggle to not give in to the sin. As soon as Eve believed the lie that God was not looking out for her best interests, that God was holding back something good from her, she had a flaming dart stuck in her. Even before **she acted out** and disobeyed God, Eve was **already compromised**. From that moment when she believed the lie, Eve was a **walking time bomb**. It was only a matter of time.

Remember that these darts are on fire. They have power in them, and they are designed to turn our hearts away from God.

We are to fight the "fight of faith". In other words, we have to guard our minds from lies. If we believe lies, we're **already compromised**, even if we refuse to act out on them. Some people say, "Why are we spending all this time studying Romans 6-8? Let's face it. **It's all about choices**. We can choose to sin or we can choose not to sin. That's all there is to it."

But that's not all there is to it.

The problem with that point of view is that a person's **will is informed by their brain**. In other words, their will makes decisions based on information provided by their brain. What happens if the brain is giving bad information to the will? That bad information causes the will to make bad decisions. That's what happened to Eve.

Imagine a modern-day Christian man is being tempted in the area of sexual immorality. Satan throws a flaming dart in his direction. If he believes that God's will for his sexuality is not as good as his own will, that his nature is to sin or that he **WANTS** to sin, the dart has found its target. He will then experience a terrible struggle if he tries not to act out on the lie(s) he has believed.

The way to win in spiritual warfare is NOT to dig in our heels and to refuse to act out on lies we have believed. The way to win is to block and quench the flaming darts with the shield of faith, so we don't believe the enemy's lies in the first place. God has given us His armor. Let's use it.

If we have already believed a lie, then we need to use the weapons God gave us to tear down the stronghold.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study is not to bring people to the point where they spend the rest of their lives saying, "I'm dead to sin...a new creature in Christ...the righteousness of God in Him."

The purpose is to launch you into effective service. If you believe you are who God says you are, then you will realize you can do what God calls you to do. The "in Christ" truths give us a platform from which we can launch into effective service.

Because these things are true...we are equipped.

We can live fruitful and meaningful lives. We can love people. We can fulfill our callings. We can make a difference in this world.

To the glory of God alone.

Answers for Fill-in-the-Blank Questions

How Sin is Overcome (Romans 7)

during his life

Yes, in outer space

in Christ Jesus

ordinary men

Please note: We only have time to cover about 1/3 of the “Freedom in Christ” series during the Regional Conference, but the entire series is available on CD in our conference book store.

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