

Romans 7:14-20

by Dan Corner

Sometimes connected with the freedom in Christ message is Rom. 7:14-20:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it (NIV).

Some have erroneously alluded to this passage by saying it's normal Christian living and the like:

Paul is speaking of the normal Christian life.

The experience described in Rom. 7:14-25 is that of every genuine Christian.

Applying this Roman's passage to Paul, Gromacki and MacArthur respectively wrote:

Paul said that he was "sold under sin" (Ro 7:14). Sin owned and controlled him; he was its slave.

Romans 7 is the classic text describing the believer's struggle with his sinful flesh. Note that while Paul acknowledged his own disobedience

Remember this, we should always compare Scripture with Scripture when studying the Bible. If this is done, it will become apparent that Paul didn't *keep on doing* (Rom. 7:19) sinful things, as he frequently taught against; neither was he *unspiritual* (v. 14). Let's journey around the New Testament to learn more about Rom. 7:14-20.

Was Paul A Hypocrite Or Holy?

Please consider what Paul wrote about himself in his first epistle to the Corinthians:

He [Timothy] will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church (1 Cor. 4:17, NIV).

Paul's *way of life* (or behavior) agreed with what he taught all the churches. So what did Paul teach Christians about behavior? Among other things, he taught:

But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving (Eph. 5:3,4, NIV).

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices (Col. 3:5-9, NIV).

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit (1 Thess. 4:3-8, NIV).

Paul's personal behavior conformed to these passages, according to 1 Cor. 4:17. What else did Paul say about his own behavior?

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me -- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you (Phil. 4:9, NIV).

Ponder that statement! If the Philippian Christians would put *into practice* what they had *heard* and *seen* in Paul as exemplary, the God of peace would be with them. Could Paul have been that kind of example if he was *controlled* by sin?

Lightner wrote:

Paul, for example, often did what he didn't want to do (Rom. 7:15).

In contrast, Paul declared explicitly how he and his co-laborers behaved:

You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed (1 Thess. 2:10, NIV).

What a refutation Paul's actual life was to the OSAS interpretation of Rom. 7:14-20.

The Scriptures add to all of this by saying that Paul:

- never used flattery nor put on a mask to cover up greed (1 Thess. 2:5);
- put no stumbling block in anyone's path (2 Cor. 6:3);
- was pure, patient, kind, had sincere love, truthful speech, etc. (2 Cor. 6:6,7);

- had only one goal and that was to please God (2 Cor. 5:9);
- feared God (2 Cor. 5:11);
- risked his life for the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 15:26);
- his life meant nothing to him only to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus gave him (Acts 20:24);
- fulfilled his duty to God in all good conscience (Acts 23:1);
- when he was cursed he blessed, when persecuted he endured it, when slandered he answered kindly (1 Cor. 4:12,13);
- ran his race to win first prize (1 Cor. 9:24);
- did not seek his own good but the good of others for their salvation's sake (1 Cor. 10:24,32); etc.

In another concise summary of his own life, Paul said that he conducted himself in the *holiness and sincerity* that are from God:

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace (2 Cor. 1:12, NIV).

Is it possible for Paul's words, *I am unspiritual sold as a slave to sin* (Rom. 7:14), to refer to himself in light of all of these passages about his own behavior? Never!

Besides Paul's holy and zealous lifestyle, we know the OSAS interpretation of Rom. 7:14-20 is wrong in yet another way! Let's focus our attention in upon verses 18 and 19:

... For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing (Rom. 7:18,19, NIV).

In other words, the spiritual power is missing to live a holy life free from sin's bondage, according to those verses. Is it possible that Paul is speaking of himself or *the normal Christian life* by writing such? If so, then how did Paul live such a consistently holy life?

Paul elaborates on the Christian's freedom from sin:

And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (Rom. 6:18, NKJV).

Before salvation, however, a person is *powerless*:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly (Rom. 5:6, NIV).

An unsaved person is without spiritual power, being under the control of his sinful nature (Rom. 7:5) and the evil one (1 Jn. 5:19), but after salvation, one is freed from the power of Satan (Acts 26:18) and sin (Rom. 6:18; Jn. 8:36) to live a holy life (2 Tim. 1:9).

Furthermore, if we focus our attention in upon Rom. 7:18, we clearly see that Paul wrote in that passage that *nothing good lives in me*. Could Paul have written that from his own Christian perspective?

Isn't it true that God lives in all Christians (2 Cor. 6:16) and God is *good* (Mk. 10:18)? Since that is true, and Paul was a Christian when he wrote his epistles, then it is impossible for Paul to have written *nothing good lives in me* from the perspective of a Christian!

What then was Paul referring to when he used the singular pronouns *I* and *me* in Rom. 7:14-20?

Rom. 7:17 clearly shows the *sinful nature* is the *I* and *me* that Paul wrote of:

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out (Rom. 7:18 NIV).

In other words, the *sinful nature* is personified in Rom. 7:14-20 just like *wisdom* is in Proverbs 8! So, Paul was not writing of himself or *the normal Christian life*, but of the *sinful nature* in this much-disputed passage.

Finally, how could Paul have stated, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7) at the very end of his life, if he was owned and controlled by sin? Since the Christian battle, in part, is against sin (Heb. 12:4), Paul fought this fight against sin also in his own life and came out as an overcomer.

Christ's Slave

The Christian is *free*, but at the same time, he is *Christ's slave* (1 Cor. 7:22) and a *slave to righteousness* (Rom. 6:18)! As freed people, we are to be living for Jesus and his cause (2 Cor. 5:15). In fact, service to God is an immediate responsibility after turning from our idols that kept us in spiritual darkness and death (1 Thess. 1:9 cf. Jonah 2:8).

With these verses in mind, how could the real freedom in Christ message, coupled with the true grace message, added to the proper interpretation of Romans 7, dismiss lukewarm, unholy, worldly, entertainment-seeking, amusement-seeking, pleasure-seeking "servants" who have very little or no fear of God as *normal*?