



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 7

In Romans 6:14, the Holy Apostle Paul says, "You are not under law but under grace." In Romans 7:1 he further explains precisely why Christians are no longer under the Law: "Do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives?" St. Paul is implying that, because Christians died in Holy Baptism, we are no longer subject to the Law.

St. Paul uses marriage as an analogy to explain this point. When a woman is married to a man, she is not free to leave her husband and marry another man (Romans 7:2-3). If her husband dies, however, she is no longer tied to the dead man, but instead may now marry someone else. Christians are similarly no longer "married" to the Law: because we died in Baptism, we are now free to "marry" Christ (7:4).

The example of marriage helps us to understand St. Paul's point, but this example can also be misunderstood. St. Paul is saying that the wife represents Christians: in the example, however, it is not the wife who dies, but instead it is the husband who dies. If the husband represents the Law, and the husband dies in the example, is St. Paul really saying that the Law has died? St. John Chrysostom points out this problem, "Paul's conclusion does not tally with his premise." Theodoret, a fifth century bishop of Cyr in Syria, addresses the problem by simply reminding readers, "Paul did not say that the law had come to an end but rather that we have died to the law by the saving grace of baptism."

St. Paul carries the marriage analogy to our relationship to Christ. Just as the people of God were once married to the Law, Christians are now married to Christ (Romans 7:4). Why, you might ask, are we married to Christ? St. Paul answers, so "that we should bear fruit to God" (7:4). St. Paul talks about this "fruit of the Spirit" in several places. In Ephesians 5:9 he says the fruit of the Spirit "is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth." In Galatians 5:22-23 he expands, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

Our sinful passions bear only the fruit of death (Romans 7:5; see James 1:15); Christians died to these things in Holy Baptism. Christians now have newness of life (Romans 6:4), a newness of the Spirit that enables us to bear the fruit of the Spirit.

It is easy to imagine someone who is dedicated to the Law objecting at this point: "The Law is intended to make us better people! How could *dying* to the Law make us better? Are you saying that the Law is sinful?" The problem is not with the Law itself, but instead with sin. The Law is "holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (7:12), very effective in helping people to identify sin (7:7). St. Cyril, bishop of Alexandria in the fifth century, explains,

The Law is not the cause of sin but rather the instrument which points it out, making it clear to those who did not know what it was. It did not do this in order that, once sin was made known, those who

committed it should continue in what they were doing...On the contrary, its intention was to convert people to better things by making their sins known to them.

Unfortunately, because we are sinful, merely *identifying* sin does not necessarily enable us to *avoid* it: instead, once we become aware of sin, we become tempted to engage in that sin (7:5, 8). St. Paul therefore concludes, “The commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me” (7:10-11).

How did sin deceive St. Paul? Sin promises that it will make us happy and content, but it ultimately betrays us and leads to death. Blessed Augustine writes, “Paul means by this that the fruit of forbidden desire is sweeter...It deceives us and turns into very great bitterness.”

Because the Law is holy, it cannot itself lead to death. However, deceptive and powerful sin *does* lead to death. God gave the Law so that His people could know sin, and hate it for its sinfulness; the Law is intended to show how disgusting and repulsive - indeed, how “exceedingly sinful” - sin really is (Romans 7:13). People who know the Law, and yet still engage in sin, that person, according to St. Cyril of Alexandria, “have committed a crime of madness and have completely rejected God.” St. Paul shows us that the Law taught him the “exceedingly sinful[ness]” of sin. He agrees with the Law that it is right and good (Romans 7:16), and yet he is unable to practice the good that is taught by the Law, and instead finds himself doing the sinful things he hates (7:15).

St. Paul’s statement in Romans 7:16 is vitally important for understanding not only his teaching in Romans chapter seven, but also our life as Christians: “It is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.” It is important to understand that St. Paul is not saying that he as an individual does not sin. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains:

The point that he makes is simply that in sinning, he is not only false to God, he is also false to himself. The real Paul - the one made in the image of God, the one who sees sin with loathing and repents with tears - this Paul is as grieved over his sinfulness as God is...In his inmost self, he wants desperately to keep God’s Law. But he sees a different law in his members, soldiering-against the law of his mind and taking him captive to the law of sin which is in his members.

This is the dilemma of every Christian. The “inward man,” born in newness of life, delights in the Law of God (Romans 7:22). At the same time, because no good dwells in our physical bodies, we find ourselves practicing evil rather than the good preferred by our true Christian selves (7:18-20). The flesh (meaning the life of the senses) is a traitor, betraying - by submitting to temptation and sin - our desire to faithfully serve God. The fourteenth century monks Callistus and Ignatius confirm St. Paul’s point:

We experience temptations even against our will; and we grieve over passions (when they arise), yet we love to prolong their impulses and their sweetness. Sins we do not desire; yet we accept with enjoyment the impulses which lead us to them. So in practice the latter become for us the cause of the former. He who enjoys the sweetmeats of passions becomes involuntarily subjected to them and is a slave to his passions against his will.

Notice how St. Paul describes this dilemma: it is a *war* between the law of his mind (his knowledge of God and desire to follow His will) and the law of his physical members (his sinful passions) (Romans 7:23). The fourth century Christian Ambrosiaster states that the law of the mind “is attacked by the violence of sin.” Our dilemma is not a calm matter of choice between two general impulses: it is a bitter struggle in which our sinful passions viciously attack us with the sole aim of totally destroying us.

It is for this reason that St. Paul - and every Christian with him - cries out, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death” (Romans 7:24)? St. Paul realizes that he cannot win the war with sin: it has battered and beaten him until he realizes his helplessness. He is defeated and realizes that he has no other option but to cry out for someone to save him. This is the sad situation faced by every person.

The situation, however, is not hopeless. There is One Who can save us from destruction: “I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 7:25)! St. Paul serves God with his mind, and his sinful passions with his body - Jesus, in the words of Fr. Lawrence Farley, “introduces a third principle and power into [St. Paul’s] life: the law of the Spirit of life” (Romans 8:2).

The situation described by St. Paul in Romans chapter seven is vividly and concisely sung by St. Andrew, a bishop of Crete in the seventh and eighth centuries, in his Great Canon: “From my youth, O Christ, I have rejected Thy commandments. I have passed my whole life without caring or thinking as a slave of my passions. Therefore, O Saviour, I cry to Thee: At least in the end save me.”