

Bible Study Romans 7

“Or 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?”

This passage begins an extended discussion of the Old Testament law and its relationship with New Testament grace. The Old Testament was divinely revealed and of incalculable value. Later in this chapter, Paul says, *“...the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (verse 12)*. Christ spoke of the Old Testament:

“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19).

Christ is referring to the Old Testament law because the New Testament had not been written yet.

The English words “jot” and “tittle” have no meaning in modern English. The Greek word translated as “jot” is “iota” – the Greek letter “i”. The Greek word translated as “tittle” is keraia (κεραία), which means “stroke of a letter.” Christ is saying that the Old Testament is so significant that “heaven and earth” are subservient to its individual letters, waiting for fulfillment.

“The New Testament does not simply express its dependence on the Old Testament by quoting it. The fourth edition of the United Bible Societies' Greek Testament (1993) lists 343 Old Testament quotations in the New Testament, as well as no fewer than 2, 309 allusions and verbal parallels. The books most used are Psalms (79 quotations, 333 allusions), and Isaiah (66 quotations, 348 allusions). In the Book of Revelation, there are no formal quotations at all, but no fewer than 620 allusions” (<https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/the-old-testament-in-the-new-testament.html>).

There are many ways one can view the Old Testament. One of the most important was is to understand it as a progressive covenant between God and humanity. In fact, the word “Testament” also means “Covenant” in Hebrew (“berith בְּרִית”) and in Greek (“diatheke” διαθήκη).

A covenant is an agreement binding upon both sides. God made a covenant with Noah never to destroy the world again by flood (Genesis 9:11). God made a covenant with Abraham promising land, an incalculable number of descendants, and a blessing which would encompass the whole world (Genesis 12:1-3). God made a covenant with Moses, promising a special relationship with the Israelites as long as they obeyed the law He was giving to them (Exodus 19:5-6). God made a covenant with David assuring him he and his

descendants would rule over Israel forever. Finally, God gave a covenant to the Israelites that He would someday establish a “New Covenant” with them. He promised that Israel would someday, finally, completely, and eternally stop their disobedience and embrace Him as their God.

The text draws upon this covenantal viewpoint of the Old Testament with an analogy of marriage:

“² For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man.”

The marriage bond between husband and wife is a covenant. It is beautiful and praiseworthy, just like the Old Testament. Paul is saying that, even though the Old Testament law is beautiful and praiseworthy, it has some significant disadvantages. For example, it is not eternal. The covenant of marriage is dissolved by the death of either the husband or wife. As a result, the widow or widower is free to remarry. It is so with the Old Testament.

“⁴ Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another...”

The Old Testament law governed God’s relationship the Israelites beginning with Noah, and continued up to Christ. After Christ, the Old Covenant has been dissolved. Like the marriage covenant is dissolved by the death of a spouse, so that the surviving spouse is free to marry another. The death of the Old Testament law means the people who were bound to before are now free to remarry. The One they are now free to remarry is Christ.

“that you may be married to another —to Him who was raised from the dead...”

This truth gives us a deeper understanding of Christ as our “bridegroom,” who replaces the deceased spouse of the Jewish law. Many Old Testament prophecies describe the coming Messiah as “the Bridegroom.” The Song of Solomon prominently features the Bridegroom as a leading character and type of Christ (4:1, 5:1). Isaiah foretold the coming Bridegroom “*And as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, So shall your God rejoice over you*” (Isaiah 62:5). Jeremiah mentions a coming Bridegroom and His bride six times in blissful terms, including, “*the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voice of those who will say: “Praise the Lord of hosts, For the Lord is good, For His mercy endures forever”*” (33:33)

This image of Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church occurs prominently in the New Testament, and is often underappreciated. Consistently the picture of Christ and His Bride the Church are descriptions of heaven as their wedding feast. Our Lord described Himself as a Bridegroom in His parable of the wise virgins, who were accepted into wedding feast while the foolish virgins were not (Matthew 9:1-13). Christ described Himself in another parable of a wedding feast in Matthew 22:1-14, which describes “... *a certain king who*

arranged a marriage for his son...” None of those invited came, so the king invited every else to come. Some among the latter group arrived without wedding garments, and were cast out of the festivities, much like the foolish virgins in 9:1-13. The book of Revelation continues this theme in John’s vision of heaven: “Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns...’ And the angel said to me, ‘Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.’ And he said to me, ‘These are the true words of God’” (Revelation 6:9).

In all these New Testament passages, where Christ is described as the Bridegroom, He is joined to His bride, and that bride is the Church. Paul writes elsewhere: “... that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish (Ephesians 5:26-27).

This verse in Romans tells us that the marriage of the Bridegroom to His Bride is actually a second marriage for the Bride. Her first marriage was to the Old Testament Jewish law. It was a covenant that was binding as long as it lasted. That first husband has now died. She is now free to marry Christ, under the terms of the New Covenant, which our Lord inaugurated at the Last Supper (“Drink of this, all of you! This is My Blood of the New Covenant, which is shed for you and for many, for the remission of sins!)

“⁴ Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another that you may be married to another —to Him who was raised from the dead...”

The chapter continues:

Previously we saw Paul saying that the Old Testament law is beautiful and praiseworthy. One of its many values is diagnostic. It makes us aware of our sinfulness.

“...I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.”

We also saw, despite its many advantages, it also has some significant disadvantages. For example, it is not eternal. It has died, and freed us to marry Christ, the Bridegroom. Another weakness of the Old Testament is it cannot perfectly save. In fact, it can only condemn us.

This chapter teaches us another disadvantage of the Old Testament law: it was a poor instrument for restraining the passions:

“⁵ For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death.”

“⁸ But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire.”

Adam and Eve could eat of any fruit in the Garden but one. It was the commandment that they could not of one particular fruit that made them want it all the more. Isn't this an extremely common trait in human nature – that we pass by the good things that are offered and covet the very things that are forbidden?

“⁶ But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.”

In contrast to the “oldness of the letter” of the law, which was a poor instrument to restrain the passions, we now have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The presence of the third Person of the Holy Spirit within us is a far more powerful to help us restrain passions and resist sins than was a dusty old lawbook.

“For apart from the law sin was dead.”

To intentionally live apart from the law of God is a precarious situation. Paul wrote in Ephesians: *“And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world...”*(Ephesians 2:1-2).

If living apart from God's commandments is death to the soul, trying to live by the Old Testament law is also fatal as a source of salvation.

“⁹ I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. ¹⁰ And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. ¹¹ For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me...”

The Old Testament law is like an x-ray. It is valuable to make you aware if you have a serious *condition*. If you read the Ten Commandments, and you are a liar, you become aware that you are a liar. If you are a thief, you become aware that you are a thief, If you are an adulterer, you become aware that you are an adulterer, etc. You may have gone for a long period of time with these serious spiritual conditions without knowing it. You may have been quite happy before you became aware. You were, *“alive once without the law.”*

But like a person who receives an x-ray, and finds out they have a life-threatening illness, they feel the presence of death. Like a frightening x-ray, *“...when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. ¹⁰ And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death.”* Some people do not like going to the doctor and getting medical tests because they fear that doing so is a trap. They fear getting medical tests will not lead to better health but instead will lead to their deaths. This was Paul's experience with seeking salvation through the law: *“For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me...”*

Paul describes the experience of every Christian who is struggling against their fleshly passions. In confession and counseling, parishioners often express to me their dismay at the state of their spiritual life. They say they know the right thing to do, and sometimes do it, but often they do not. At the same time, they know what not to do, and sometimes they do not do it. But often, despite their best intentions they do the wrong thing anyway.

As a young Protestant Christian in my early teens, I experienced this for years. I went to a spiritual guide and told him of my struggles. The spiritual guide was deeply concerned because he knew I had sincerely believed in Christ as my savior, and there had “gotten saved.” He told me that if I was a Christian, I shouldn’t be having these problems. True Christians are saved from such sins. Therefore, I might not even be saved.

So I repeated everything I had done to get saved the first time. I felt a little bit better. But within a day or two, the same struggles against my own passions came back, with the same failure to combat them. That was the first spiritual crisis of my life.

Have you ever felt this way?

At first, my solution was to fall back on “once saved always saved” – the Protestant belief that if you are saved, you are automatically going to heaven no matter how many sins you commit. But that solution felt completely wrong in practice. I regularly read the Bible, and came across this passage from Romans 7:

“¹⁵ For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ¹⁷ But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸ For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹ For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. ²⁰ Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.”

“²¹ I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. ²² For I delight in the law of God according to 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 will deliver me from this body of death?”

It stunned me that the great Apostle Paul was describing his own spiritual struggle against his passions. What he was describing in his experience was exactly describing my own experience – almost word for word. He ended this passage with an expression of gratitude, and an inexplicable sense of triumph over his plight. But not himself.

“²⁵ I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

Paul was brutally honest about his failures in conquering his passions, but he rejoiced in Christ’s ongoing forgiveness, trusted in Christ’s help in eventually overcoming the fleshly enemy within, and hoped in Christ’s ultimate victory. I underlined this passage from Romans, and read it hundreds of times.

In reading and understanding this passage of Scripture, I discovered some spiritual truths.

First, I learned that this sense of struggle against my own sinfulness was normal. If the great Apostle Paul was going through what I was going through, then I was not unique, and there were probably millions of Christians just like me.

Second, if Paul who strived and failed could still have enough hope to say, “²⁵ *I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” then there is hope for me too.

Third, whenever Protestantism says that the persistent presence of sin in a believer’s life is evidence that they are not saved (as they define it), they are wrong. Paul clearly had persistent sin in his life according to Romans 7. He was still saved. But nowhere in all my years in Protestantism did anyone ever talk about what to do with the sins that still exist. The question haunted me for decades: what am I supposed to do with them?

Decades later, when I began to study Orthodoxy, all the pieces about struggle against sin after faith, and what to do with our failures, fell into place.

Unlike Protestantism, which has little to say about the Christian’s struggle against our passions, Orthodoxy has much to say. Protestantism believes that this struggle is an aberration of the Christian life and completely separate from salvation. Orthodoxy says that this struggle is the norm in the Christian life, just like Paul says. We also believe that this struggle is not completely apart from our salvation – it is the very heart of our salvation. We call this struggle “deification.” Without it there is no salvation.

Because Orthodoxy believes in this struggle against the passions, it also gives us tools to help us in our struggle. This is where moderate asceticism comes in. Fasting has long been a practice that dulls the passions. Christ fasted for forty days, and towards the end of his fast he faced temptation from the devil. This is an example for us if we really want to combat our fleshly nature. Significant time in prayer is another part of asceticism. The more time we spend praying, the less time we tend to fall prey to our sin nature. Giving some of our earthly treasure is another part of asceticism. The more we give to those in need, the more we assault the greed that lurks within all of us.

Monastics combat their passions through the daily practice of these and other ascetical disciplines. The saints practice asceticism to an extraordinary degree, and as a result achieved a closeness to God that was supernatural, receiving gifts like healing, clairvoyance, and miracle working. The more we want to be like them in the results of their deification, the more we need to imitate their ascetical struggles to some degree.

