

Whom Does the Man in Romans 7:14-25 Represent?

by Robert L. Reymond

MANY OF THE ablest expositors, standing in the tradition of Augustine and the Western church at large, believe that Paul intended Romans 7:14-25 as a description of the Christian in his struggle against the power of indwelling sin (e.g., John Calvin, J. Eraser, F. A. Philippi, C. Hodge, J. Murray, C. E. B. Cranfield, John MacArthur). In my opinion (shared by J. A. Bengel, H. A. W Meyer, F. Godet, M. Stuart, W Sanday and A. C. Headlam, J. Denney, J. Oliver Buswell, Jr., A. Hoekema, M. Lloyd-Jones), however, the Romans passage is *not* a description of the regenerate person's struggle against indwelling sin. Rather, drawing upon his own experience as Saul, the most zealous law-keeping Pharisee of his day (Acts 22:3; 26:5; Gal. 1:14; Phil. 3:4-6) who had become aware through the law, as applied by the Spirit, of his own innate sinfulness, in this passage Paul, with words provided him from the enlightened vantage point which was now his as a Christian, sets forth both the impotence of the *unregenerate* ego to do good against the power of indwelling sin and the "inability" (ἀδυνατον *adynaton* 8:3) and "weakness" (ἐσθηνει, *esthenei* 8:3) of the law due to human depravity to deliver the unregenerate ego from sin's slavery.

Herman Ridderbos in his *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*,¹ concurs that this passage does not refer to the Christian struggle against sin. However, he rejects the view that "this ego of 7:7-25 ... is to be taken in a biographical sense as a description of Paul's personal experience before or at his conversion" (129), preferring rather to interpret the passage by "redemptive-historical contrasts and categories" (129), that is to say, the "I" in the passage represents Old Testament Israel and its experience with the law. I contend, however, that this is precisely what Paul intended—to employ his experience as the *unconverted* Saul of Tarsus, aroused from his spiritual torpor, convicted by the reality of his sinfulness, and struggling even more than before to please God through his efforts at law-keeping, as an illustration of the impotence of the law to sanctify the unregenerate heart and the frustration unto death that any and every unregenerate person will experience who would sincerely seek to achieve a righteousness before God on the basis of his own law-keeping. I say this for the following reasons:

¹ Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John R. DeWitt (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), 126-30.

1. Romans 7:7-13 is clearly autobiographical² highlighting the facts that sin dwelling within Saul of Tarsus had always been his problem and that the law, while not the source of sin, for it is "holy, just, good, and spiritual" (7:12,14), is impotent relative to the production of good in the sinful heart. The shift of verb tense from the past to the present at 7:14 in no way affects the autobiographical character of 7:14-25. Nor must the present tenses in 7:14-25 necessarily indicate Paul's experience at the time he is writing Romans as the mature Christian apostle and missionary. The "historical [or "dramatic"] present" is a well-known use of the present tense in Greek when the writer wished to make a past event or experience more vivid to his reader.³

2. The man describes himself as "carnal" (σαρκινος, *sarkinos*; 7:14⁴), which according to 8:6⁵ is descriptive of the state of spiritual death.

3. The man says of himself that he has been "sold as a slave [πεπραμενος, *pepramenos*] to sin" (7:14⁴), that is, he is a slave of sin, which is descriptive only of the unregenerate man. Regenerate persons "used to be [ἦτε, *ete*] slaves of sin" (6:17,20⁶) but now "have been set free from sin" and have now become "slaves to righteousness" (6:18,22⁷). They, "were controlled by the sinful nature" (7:5⁸), but now (νυνι, *nyni*; 6:22⁹)

² Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Mich.: Eerdmans, 1959), i: 248, 254.

³ E. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament*, trans. Robert W. Funk (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961), 167, para. 321.

⁴ **Romans 7:14** For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.

⁵ **Romans 8:6** For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

⁶ **Romans 6:17** But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.

Romans 6:20 For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.

⁷ **Romans 6:18** And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness.

Romans 6:22 But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.

⁸ **Romans 7:5** 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.

⁹ **Romans 6:22** But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life.

“are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit” (8:9¹⁰), “having died to what once bound them” (7:6¹¹). They *did* “live according to the sinful nature” (8:4¹²), but now *they are living* (περιπατουσιν, *peripatousin*) “according to the Spirit” (8:4b¹²). and the law’s requirements are being “fully met” in them (8:43).

4. The man says of himself that his members are being mastered by “indwelling sin” (η οικουσα εν εμοι αμαρτια *he oikousa en emoi hamartia*; 7:17, 20¹³). This is not true of the Christian for he is governed by the “indwelling Spirit”; if he is not so governed, he is not a Christian at all (8:9, 11¹⁴)!

5. The man says of himself that “in me...dwells no good thing” (7:18¹⁵), which is not true of the Christian for the Spirit of God dwells within him (8:9, 11¹⁴).

6. The man says of himself that a “law [of sin]” within him is “waging war against [αντιστρατευομενον, *antistrateuomenon*] the law of his mind [that is, his desire to do good] and making him a prisoner [αιχμαλοτιζοντα, *aickmalotizonta*] of the law of sin at work within his members” (7:23¹⁶). Here again he stresses his slavery to sin which is not true of the Christian (6:14¹⁷), for the gospel has “liberated [him] from the law of sin and death” (8:2¹⁸).

¹⁰ **Romans 8:9** But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

¹¹ **Romans 7:6** 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.

¹² **Romans 8:4** that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us | who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

¹³ **Romans 7:17** But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Romans 7:20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

¹⁴ **Romans 8:9** But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

Romans 8:11 But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

¹⁵ **Romans 7:18** 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.

¹⁶ **Romans 7:23** 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.

¹⁷ **Romans 6:14** For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

¹⁸ **Romans 8:2** For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

7. The man says of himself throughout the passage that he does not do the good that he wants to do; rather, he continually does, indeed, actually practices, what he does not want to do (Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, i. ii. c. 26, says something almost identical with that of the apostle here). In sum, the man in this passage is enslaved by indwelling sin and sees his state as “wretched” and his body as the sphere in which sin is operative unto death (7:24¹⁹). This is not true of the Christian nor can this be descriptive of the Christian.

8. The advocate of the Augustinian view contends that the unregenerate person could not and will not “delight in God’s law after the inward man” as the man in the passage says he is doing (7:22²⁰); only Christians, they urge, can do that. But I beg to differ. Saul of Tarsus, as a Pharisee, did just that. It may legitimately be said that throughout his life as a self-righteous Pharisee he “delighted in the law of God with his mind” — observance of the law was his very reason for being. He was a “son of the law,” was committed to it, and wanted to obey it. But when the tenth commandment truly “came home” to him at some point with condemning power (had he coveted Stephen’s knowledge of Scripture and his exegetical power?) and made him aware of his indwelling sinfulness, the sin which had always dwelt within him “came to life” and he “died” (7:9²¹). Paul also declared that the Jewish nation was “pursuing” a righteousness of its own through law-keeping (Rom. 9:31-32²²). Apparently, then, unregenerate people can sincerely desire to be obedient to the law. Their problem, as the passage teaches, is their impotence to do what they want to do or know to be right.

9. Some advocates of the Augustinian view contend that Romans 7:25b²³, as the conclusion of the argument, describes a condition only true of the Christian: he “is a slave to God’s law with his mind but a slave to the law of sin with his members.” But this radical dichotomy

¹⁹ **Romans 7:24** O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

²⁰ **Romans 7:22** For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.

²¹ **Romans 7:9** I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.

²² **Romans 9:31-32** 31 but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. 32 Why? Because *they did* not *seek it* by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone.

²³ **Romans 7:25** 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

between what he wants to do (the good, obedience to God's law) and what he in fact *continually practices* (see *πρασσο*, *prasso*, 7:19²⁴) (evil, transgression of the law) is not true of the Christian. Romans 7:25b is either

a. a conclusion descriptive of the unconverted but deeply convicted Pharisee, Saul of Tarsus, struggling to obey the law in his own power, with the preceding "Thanks be to God" phrase (7:25a) being the regenerate Paul simply interjecting into the flow of his argument as he occasionally does an anacoluthonic praise statement from his vantage point as a Christian (e.g., Eph 2:5), highlighting where he found the solution to his struggle,

or it is

b. following Theodor Zahn,²⁵ a rhetorical question (taking the *αρα ουν*, *ara oun* "Now therefore," of 7:25 as *αρα ουν*, *ara oun*, "Shall I then?" which expects the negative response "Of course not!"), with the preceding "Thanks be to God" phrase then to be construed as an essential part of Paul's statement marking the point in the flow of his argument when he was converted and thus the point at which his *non-victorious* struggle with sin's power ceased.

10. The man in Romans 7:14-25 is struggling against sin's power and he desires to obey God's law. But he is utterly defeated by the power of indwelling sin. This is not true of the Christian who, while he too experiences a struggle against sin (Gal. 5:16-18²⁶), is described as victorious in his struggle against sin's power because of his new master, the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

Ridderbos writes:

Undoubtedly it is said of the new man . . . that he continues to be engaged in conflict with the flesh. Thus, for example, in Galatians 5:17 where it is said: "the flesh lusts against [NIV— "desires what is contrary to"] the Spirit [to

²⁴ **Romans 7:19** For the good that I will *to do*, I do not do; but the evil I will not *to do*, that I practice.

²⁵ Theodor Zahn, *Der Briefe des Paulus an die Romer* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1910), 370ff.

²⁶ **Galatians 5:16-18** I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. 17 For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. **BUT SEE:** 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. 24 And those *who are* Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. 25 If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit.

prevent you from doing the good that the Spirit wants you to do], and the Spirit against ["desires what is contrary to"] the flesh... to prevent you from doing [the evil that the flesh wants you to do]." And similarly it is said to believers in Romans 6:12 that sin may not (continue to) reign in their mortal bodies, etc. All this points to enduring battle, struggle, resistance of the flesh against the Spirit. But the absolute distinction between these and similar pronouncements and the portrayal of Romans 7 is that the former are spoken within the possibility and certainty of victory (see Rom. 6:14: "for sin shall not have dominion over you; for you are not under law, but under grace"; Gal. 5:24: "but they that are of Christ have crucified the flesh with its passions and lusts"), while in Romans 7 everything is directed toward throwing light on man's situation of death, his having been sold under sin, his having been taken captive by the superior power of sin. . . . The elements placed over against each other in Romans 7 are ... not (as in Gal. 5) the Spirit and the flesh, or (as in Rom. 6) grace and the law, but the human ego, the "I-myself" (v. 25 !) and the flesh, the law of God and the law of sin. In the struggle between those parties the victory is to the flesh and sin, and the ego finds itself, despite all that it would will and desire, in absolute bondage and the situation of death. Other powers must enter the field, another than the "I-myself" must join the battle, if deliverance is to come. So far is it from any suggestion that since there is mention here of a *dis-cord*, this were able to furnish the proof that the struggle between the old and the new man is described [in Romans 7] in the manner of Galatians 5:17.²⁷

Some Christians have employed the Augustinian view of the passage to undergird the antinomian's "carnal Christian" theology. I remember reading an antinomian tract once that actually argued, because Paul says of his evil practice here, "it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwells in me" (which means something on the order of, "my evil deeds show that I am impotent against sin in my own strength, that is, I am not my own master [the "it is not I that do it" phrase], but am rather a slave to indwelling sin which governs and controls me") (7:17,20²⁸), that the

²⁷ Ridderbos, Paul: *An Outline of His Theology*, 127.

²⁸ **Romans 7:17** But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Romans 7:20 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no

Christian need not worry about his carnal practice since, after all, it is not he who is sinning but simply his sin nature within him that is doing so! The antinomian has also used the Augustinian interpretation of the passage as his excuse for the sin in his life when confronted by his pastor: “Well, I’ve been taught that the man in Romans 7 is the apostle Paul, the most mature Christian of his day, who could never do what he wanted to do but rather continually sinned against his will. While I wish I didn’t sin, and I hate it when I do, I guess, like Paul, I’m just the carnal man in Romans 7!” To use this passage in these ways is a travesty! Nothing Paul ever wrote did he intend the Christian to use as an excuse for the toleration of sin in his life, and no biblical passage should ever be used to justify a “carnal” Christian existence. The Bible denounces carnality *wherever* it is found. And it expects the Christian to denounce his carnality (which he will have) as a legitimate experience of Christian existence, and to repudiate and overcome the carnal thoughts and activities in his life (which, not without struggle, he will do).

It is better, I would urge, to hold that Paul is describing his state prior to his conversion on the Damascus Road but, due to his conscience having been awakened to his sinfulness but still “kicking against the goads” of Christ’s gracious overtures (Acts 26:14), a state in which he is hopelessly struggling in his own power to be obedient to the law and thus to please God.

Why does Paul take his Christian reader back to his struggle against sin as a convicted Pharisee? How, in short, does this autobiographical piece fit into the context and the argument of the epistle? Paul, in his argument for justification by faith alone, knows he has said some things about the law which, if left unexplained, might lead his reader to the conclusion that the law of God is a bad and sinful thing. For example, he had said: “through the law we become conscious of sin” (3:20); “The law was added so that the trespass might increase” (5:20); and “the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies” (7:5). Therefore, he pauses in the development of his argument at 7:7 to ask the question: “Is the law sin [that is, a sinful thing]?” Using his own experience as a Pharisee as his prime example, he answers this question with a resounding “Certainly not!,” developing then the fact that it was not the law that made him covet; rather, it was his sinful human nature, seizing upon the opportunity provided it by the “holy, just, good, and spiritual” commandment, “Do not covet,” that produced in him all manner of evil coveting. Not only this, says Paul, but his sinful human

longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

nature, seizing the opportunity provided by the commandment’s unrelenting demand of obedience also “killed” him (7:11). He asks then the question: “Did that which is good [the law], then, become death to me?” (7:13) In other words, was the law the “killing thing”? He answers, “By no means!” and declares again that it was his sinful human nature, through the “good” commandment that forbade coveting, that both produced death in him and showed, in its willingness to use the holy law for such a purpose, its “utter sinfulness” (7:13). It is both this last point—the “utter sinfulness” of his sinful nature—and the impotency of the law in the struggle against sin—that Paul develops in 7:14-25, arguing that even when as the convicted Pharisee he wanted to do the good and obey God, his sinful nature would not let him and the law did not help him; to the contrary, the sinful nature “waged war against the law of his mind [his desire to do good] and made him a prisoner of the law of sin at work within his members.” His conclusion: his unregenerate state had been a “wretched” existence, so wretched, in fact, that he cried for deliverance from it! Not knowing where to turn (for he still did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah or that Jesus could help him), however, he continued in his impotency to struggle against sin’s potency until his Damascus Road conversion finally brought him deliverance from his slavery to sin (8:1-4)!

Thus Paul restricts the source and locus of sin to man, the second cause, and while vindicating the “holy, just, good, and spiritual” law, showing that it is only the instrumental dynamic that the sinful nature, aroused by the law’s prohibitions, uses in its hostility to God to lash out against God by enslaving his moral creature in sin and disobedience, highlights in doing so the law’s “inability” and “weakness” to deliver from sin’s enthrallment.

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