“DEAD TO THE LAW” (Romans 7:1-6)

This is one of the most controversial chapters in the Bible. All kinds of weird interpretations have been made about this chapter. Some say it is Paul writing autobiographically of his life as an unsaved person throughout. Others say that this chapter proves that a believer has no relationship to God’s moral law as summarized in the Decalogue.

It is always helpful to stand back and look at this chapter in the context of what has gone before. As you do, you will see that Paul is answering in chapters 6 and 7 major objections to his teaching of justification by free grace alone. In chapter 6, Paul has to defend himself from the objection that his teaching encourages sin. Now, in chapter 7 Paul has to defend himself from the objection that free grace undermines the law. As he unfolds this defence, Paul will set forth the purpose and function of the law in the life of an unbeliever and a believer. Indeed, the word “law” is used some 23 times in this chapter.

Paul is cognizant that his Jewish readers are especially proud of the written law that was delivered in its written form to Israel in Exodus 20. No other nation had this privilege. So, every Jew is particularly sensitive to any perceived reduction in the status of the law.

Now, Romans 7 is linked to the discussion in chapter 6. Much of Paul’s argument in chapter 7 is rooted in the doctrine of the union of the believer with Christ detailed in the previous chapter. The law cannot justify the unregenerate man nor cannot it sanctify him either. It is not the law that is faulty but man’s depraved nature. Indeed, Paul defends the law as “holy, and just, and good” (v12). So what must change is the death of the old man that cannot submit to the moral law’s requirements and a new man must now reign in a believer’s life. This new man will delight in the law in Christ (v22).

Paul shows that a change in our relationship to the law is vital for sanctification, as it was for justification. So, the only way for a person to begin to live up to the moral requirements of the law is by a new nature empowering him to do so, “in newness of spirit.” Paul will explain this by first stating a general axiom or principle in v1, then he uses the analogy of marriage in v2-3 to show this principle is true in a specific example before applying these truths in v4-6.

(1) AXIOM (v1)

Paul begins his unfolding of the relationship of the believer to the law by laying down an axiomatic self-evident principle that every reader can agree with, “the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth” (v1). All men both Jews and Gentiles are subject to the obligations of the moral law of God. This is a Covenant of Works that no man can be removed from. It is revealed in the written form of the law and the work of the law written on the hearts of all men (Rom. 2:15-16).

Ray Stedman illustrates this domineering power of the law over every man by showing four common character traits of all unregenerate human behaviour,

(1) Pride in our achievements
(2) Critical of others
(3) Reluctant to admit failure
(4) Constant suffering of depression, discouragement and defeat.

This moral law reigns over us and dominates us as long as we are alive, holding us under its condemnation. It is only when we die that we are released from its domination.
The Apostle Paul never makes light or the moral law of God. Neither does he ever seek to dilute it or set it aside. He makes clear that his teaching never subverts the law but simply puts it in its rightful exalted place, “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law” (Rom. 3:31).

(2) ANALOGY (v2-3)

Now, Paul selects a particular example of the general proposition or axiom that he laid down in v1. He takes the example of marriage to be used as an analogy to illustrate the relationship of the law to the unbeliever. An analogy is simply identifying a similarity between like features of two things, on which a comparison may be then be based e.g. the analogy between the heart and a pump.

Paul shows in this analogy in v2-3 that a woman is permanently under the authority of her husband. This is for life, “so long as he liveth.” If she marries another (v3) when her first husband is still alive she is condemned as an “adulteress” by the law. However, if her husband dies she is free from any further obligations to him under the moral law and can remarry without being condemned as an adulteress. In the new marriage relationship she comes under the authority now of her new husband.

Now, I know the world refuses to recognise these truths today and the secular law does not condemn an adulteress. But this is God’s law which is perfect, eternal, and unchangeable.

(3) APPLICATION (v4-6)

In v4 Paul then begins to apply the analogy of marriage to the relationship of the law to the unbeliever. He shows that the unbeliever is in one sense married to the law under the covenant of works. As a husband the law is a perfectionist, tyrannical spouse who holds his wife under his condemnation for failing to match his perfect standards all of the days of the marriage.

Not every aspect of the analogy is carried over for the comparisons to be seen. For instance, we may have expected Paul to say that the law has dies thereby freeing the unregenerate man to be married to another spouse i.e. Christ. Paul, however, is using the analogy to simply show that if one party to the marriage dies then the obligations cease. That is all. Indeed, Paul cannot say that the law had died, as the law still has a part to play in the life of the believer who has been united to Christ. The law is not the problem – the man is and he must change in his relationship to the law.

So, how Paul applies the analogy in v2-3 is this – the unregenerate man is married to the law under a covenant of works. This spouse permanently condemns to the death penalty the failures of the unbeliever. But when the unbeliever dies to the reign of sin, he is united by free grace in the death and resurrection of Christ. This union allows the regenerated man to be free from the penal obligations and condemnation of the previous spouse of the law. The believer is now resurrected to be joined in marriage to Christ.

Now this is not a clever ploy to bypass or ignore the obligations of the law. In Romans 3:26 Paul makes clear that Christ’s sacrificial death declares of God, “that He might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” God does not set aside or dilute the law in order to effect salvation because God is absolutely just. But the wonder of redemption is that God remains just by making Christ the One to take our condemnation and also fulfill our moral obligations to the law so we can be then justified by His righteousness, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). It is all because of Christ, which is why Paul could declare in Romans 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus.”
A believer when he is declared justified is immediately and eternally set free from the penal demands and obligations of the law. This law can never accuse us again. As the hymn writer put it,

**Free from the law, O happy condition,**
**Jesus has bled and there is remission,**
**Cursed by the law and bruised by the fall,**
**Grace hath redeemed us once for all**

Despite this truth, we should never imagine that the law has died and believers have nothing more to do with it. We do not say farewell to the law when we are justified. The object of this marriage union “to another” with Christ has a purpose, “that we should bring forth fruit unto God.” (v4b) What is this fruit?

(a) Conform us to the image of Christ in thought, word, and deed (2 Cor. 3:18)
(b) Fruit of the Spirit flowing out of us (Gal. 5:22-23)
(c) Reflection of God’s holiness (1 Peter 1:16)
(d) Winning others to Christ (Rom. 1:13)

**FRUITLESS UNION**

It is not God’s will for a believer’s life that he or she is fruitless. The first marriage union with the law was fruitless. In fact, Paul points out in v5 that the law aggravated sinful passions in the unregenerate heart, “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.”

The rebellious nature of the unregenerate is awakened and stimulated when restrictions are placed on him. This inflames his depraved heart to do the very things the law expressly forbids as “forbidden fruit is sweet.” The sinner forgets that this forbidden fruit always has bitter consequences. When God warned Cain about his rebelliousness and anger in Genesis 4, that “sin lieth at the door” this warning was used to inflame greater passions. Instead of humbling himself to repentance, the next verse we read that he rose up and slew his brother.

A classic example of this was the *Prohibition Laws* in America in the 1920’s. These laws outlawed alcohol, but rather than diminish men’s appetite for alcohol the ban inflamed the rebellious hearts of the unregenerate. The result was more alcoholics than before prohibition and the wickedness associated with this in the immorality of the “Roaring 20’s.”

**FRUITFUL UNION**

After giving the negative fruitless life of an unbeliever, the Apostle then demonstrates in v6 how the believer can have a fruitful life unto God. It should be remembered that Christ taught that the secret of fruit bearing is union with Himself (John 15:5-8). Justification means a believer is now, “delivered from the law.” This word “delivered” is in the aorist passive voice indicating that the power, which set us free from the Law was a completed action in the past by God.

However, Paul explains that the believer is now, “delivered from the law” but only in terms of the manner, “wherein we were held.” This word “held” here means, “bound fast, held down, confined or retained.” This bondage is what the law held us under by its condemnation until we died to the law. It is one of the paradoxes of the gospel that we must die in order to bear true fruit.
Christ, not the law, now is to have dominion over me. Christian freedom from the oppression of the law is not a liberty to disobey the moral law of God, but is the power to do as we should. As we are now united to Christ it is “not I, but Christ” as we follow in His footsteps as He lives His life through us. How did Christ live His life? In perfect obedience to moral law of God, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil” (Matt. 5:17). Indeed, Christ warned His disciples that they must live up to every aspect of the moral law, “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:19).

The NT is full of commands revealing the obligation of NT saints under grace to live up to the moral obligations of the moral law, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honour thy father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise.” (Eph. 6:1-2; cf. Rom. 13:8-9) It is worth noting that in Ephesians 6:1-2 that the verbs translated “obey” and “honour” are present imperative verbs indicating that these are present continuous commands.

Paul concludes his remarks in v6, “that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter.” Now, some people erroneously conclude that Paul is teaching here that a believer does not have to live up to the obligations of the written letter of the moral law. They say it is just the spirit of the letter that concerns us today under grace. So how do we respond?

Firstly, this would contradict all the passages of the NT that we have just read e.g. Ephesians 6:1-2. Secondly, it is an absurd argument, as you cannot separate the spirit of the commandments from the letter of them. Can you commit adultery with the right spirit? Can you have the right motivation and attitude in stealing, murdering, and coveting?

Remember in 1 Corinthians 5 when Paul addressed the issue of the man living in an adulterous relationship with his stepmother. Note, the apostle did not say “Never mind. It is not the letter of the law just the spirit that is important as we are not under the law but under grace.” No! Paul said put this man out of the full membership privileges of the church. He went on to command the them to do the same with coveters and idolaters.

So what does Paul mean by “that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter?” He is simply teaching that no longer are we to obey the moral law in the manner of the unregenerate man by striving to live up to the moral obligations of the written moral law outside of him. The depraved unregenerate flesh always believes it can live in such a way that God will accept it like the rich young ruler, “All these have I kept from my youth up” (Luke 18:21). However, the unregenerate heart fails to live up to the spirit of these principles. The best he can do is just mere outward conformity to some aspects of them (cf. Matt 5:21, 27; Romans 3:27-29).

But now as believers we are united to Christ, we are filled with the Spirit of God, and we have the written law engraved in our hearts and minds as per Hebrews 8:10. So the motivation and power to obey the law is from the, “newness of spirit.” That is how husbands can love their wives, wives submit to their husbands, and children obey their parents. This is not through the flesh trying to obey the written letter of the law but by the regenerate man empowered by the Spirit doing it unto Christ.

This is obedience to the law by the power of the Spirit is what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 9:21 when he wrote, “To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law.” MacArthur explains it this way,
The law is still important to the Christian. For the first time, he is able to meet the law’s demands for righteousness (which was God’s desire when He gave it in the first place), because he has a new nature and God’s own Holy Spirit to empower his obedience. And although he is no longer under the law’s bondage or penalty, he is more genuinely eager to live by its godly standards than is the most zealous legalist. With full sincerity and joy, he can say with the psalmist, “O how I love Thy law!”
“VINDICATION OF THE LAW” (Romans 7:7-12)

Paul is concerned in Romans 7 to correct a misunderstanding as to his teaching on the law. To his Jewish readers it is bad enough that Paul has taught that the law cannot justify (3:28) and that believers are “dead to the law” (7:4). But in v5 of chapter 7 he implies that the law arouses or encourages sin. Surely, they would question, if being “dead to the law” means we are “dead to sin” (6:2) then Paul must be teaching that the law is sin?

So how does Paul respond to this objection? The Apostle Paul never avoids his reader’s objections but meets them head on. He will use this section v7-12 to vindicate the law and demonstrate that there is nothing wrong in the law itself. It perfectly fulfills the function that God ordained - to fully reveal and condemn sin. The law should not be held responsible for our failure to keep it. It is not sinful but rather, “holy, and just, and good” (v12).

As he often does so, Paul uses the literary device of a rhetorical question and answer to deal with the anticipated objection. He will then give a detailed explanation of the reasons for this answer in v7b to 12.

(1) ACCUSATION & ANSWER (v7a)

Paul begins by anticipating the objection in the form of a rhetorical question, “What shall we say then? Is the law sin?” His immediate response is the strongest form of absolute negation in the Greek, “God forbid” or literally “in no way.” The idea that the law is sinful is unthinkable to Paul.

Now, rather than just leave it at this point, the Apostle will take the rest of this section v7b-12 to give a more in-depth treatise of explanation. He will show that any reader that imagines that he is teaching that the law is imperfect or even sinful has completely misunderstood his reasoning.

(2) REASONS FOR ANSWER (v7b-12)

From v7 to the end of this chapter, Paul will use his own personal experiences to illustrate the truths about the nature and function of the law – hence the change in the pronoun from “we” in v5-6 to “I” from v7 onwards.

(a) THE LAW REVEALS SIN (v7b)

The first thing that Paul explains the law does is that it reveals the reality of the true nature of sin. Being perfect itself, the law exposes any imperfection in man. It is like a spiritual x-ray machine revealing plainly what has always been there. This Paul discovered personally, “Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.”

Now, Paul is not saying here that before he was saved he was not aware of the fact of sin but that he did not realize the full extent of the depravity of his own heart. In Philippians 3:6 he gives us an insight of how Saul of Tarsus saw himself before the law revealed his sinfulness, “Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.”

Paul then describes how the 10th commandment awoke him to the fact that the law was a spiritual instrument whose obligations covered both the inward motives of the heart as well as the outward actions, “for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.” This is not unique Pauline teaching but what Christ pointed about the Pharisees in Matthew 5. He warned His disciples then that transgression of the law
cannot be reduced to the mere outward actions. So a person who hates a brother without a cause is guilty of transgressing the sixth commandment and a person who lusts in his heart is an adulterer, “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her bath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:28).

This truth awoke the proud self-righteous Saul of Tarsus as he was on his way to Damascus. The Risen Lord pointed out the conviction he was under, “it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.” (Acts 9:5) This conviction clearly included the convicting work of the Spirit of God in his heart for failing to live up to the law’s demands. In particular, he testifies that the force of the 10th commandment, which deals explicitly with the motivation of the heart, blew his self-righteousness away.

Paul is not denigrating the law. No, he is thankful for it, as his personal testimony is that the law was the instrument that God used to expose the sinfulness of his proud heart.

(b) THE LAW AROUSES SIN (v8)

Paul reiterates in his second reason that the law is not to be regarded as sinful. He explains that, “sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead.” This expression, “taking occasion” means “to use as a base or a starting point.” This word translated “concupiscence” denotes strong desires or lusts.

So, what Paul is teaching here is that sin takes the law with its clear prohibitions as a basis or launching pad to rebel as deeply as possible against the holiness of God. This is the characteristic of the depraved unregenerate heart, “the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Rom. 8:7).

When the law confronts a man with its moral demands and obligations, man’s proud and rebellious heart is aroused in antagonism against God. Man hates the idea of having to submit to God, as man boasts in his wisdom, abilities, and knowledge. Pharaoh’s reaction typifies the unregenerate heart when confronted by God’s commands, “And Pharaoh said, Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the LORD, neither will I let Israel go” (Exod. 5:2). Spurgeon put it well,

That must be a very terrible power which gathers strength from that which should restrain it, and rushes on the more violently in proportion as it is reined in. Sin kills men by that which was ordained to life. It makes heaven’s gifts the stepping stones to hell, uses the lamps of the temple to show the way to perdition, and makes the ark of the Lord as in Uzzah’s case, the messenger of death. Sin is that strange fire which burns the more fiercely for being damped, finding fuel in the water that was intended to quench it. The Lord brings good out of evil, but sin brings evil out of good.

That is why Cain refused to submit to God’s command in Genesis 4 and instead his proud heart was aroused then to commit murder. When a man’s heart is confronted by God’s law the forbidden fruits seems more attractive and pleasant, as it serves then as a channel to flaunt the rebellious nature of man’s will against God’s will. We witness this tendency from young in our children. The moment that you tell them not to touch something or do something invariably they will test you. Steadman described it like this,

Sin lies silent within us. We do not even know it is there. We think we have got hold of life in such a way that we can handle it without difficulty. We are self-confident because we have never really been exposed to the situation that puts pressure upon us - we never have to make a decision against the pressure on the
basis of the commandment of the Law “Thou shalt not...” But when that happens, we suddenly discover all kinds of desires are awakened within us. We find ourselves filled with attitudes that almost shock us - unloving, bitter, resentful thoughts, murderous attitudes - we would like to get hold of somebody and kill him, if we could. Lustful feelings that we never dreamed were there surface and we find that we would love to indulge in them if only we had the opportunity. We find ourselves awakened to these desires.

This truth is why you can never ultimately legislate morality – man always seeks to rebel against it! All legislation can do is hinder the spread of sin but it cannot eliminate it. Only the gospel can truly change the hearts of men and women and make bad people good.

Now this arousal of sin by the confrontation of the law is grace to us as it reveals the power and true nature of the latent sin beast within that we think we have under control. When the right occasion occurs, sin rears its ugly head in rebellion and great force. In Paul’s case the revelation of the law worked in him all manner of other sins as he saw the power of sin. The more he understood the reality and depth of the tenth commandment the more his rebellious heart coveted and lusted, “sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence.” He repeats the same thought in v11, “For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.”

(c) THE LAW CONDEMNS SIN (v9-12)

The law not only revealed the true nature of sin to Paul and aroused his rebellious heart, but another thing it did was to condemn him. For a time he basked in his self-righteousness “alive without the law once.” He was ignorant and unconvicted; not cognisant of the great death sentence that he was under by the law. Then the law became real to him. It was at this point he felt the conviction of the law by the statement, “I died” (v9) and “the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death” (v10).

In v9-12, the apostle will fluctuate in contrasting his pre-conversion experience as a self-righteous Pharisee and the time when the law came in great conviction and revealed the true nature of sin in his heart. You could simply divide Paul’s experience here as seen in the sharp contrast between the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18. The Pharisee was just like Saul of Tarsus when he prayed, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.” The publican was similar to Saul of Tarsus, when the law came in conviction, when the publican cried, “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

When he died to the law, Saul cried for mercy and like the publican, “this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.” Seeing his helplessness and hopelessness in light of the law’s perfect demands, which included the inward desires of the heart, Paul’s self-righteousness collapsed. He saw himself as God saw him not as man regarded him. He was now truly “poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3). The law destroyed his self-confidence and pride. Our Lord taught the same truths to the Pharisees in John’s Gospel,

If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin: but now they have no cloak for their sin. He that hateth me hateth my Father also. If I had not done among them the works which none other man did, they had not had sin: but now have they both seen and hated both me and my Father. (John 15:22-24)

It was not that the Pharisees were not sinners before but just that the effect of the
presence of the perfect Son of God exposed and revealed the depth of the depravity of sin in their hearts.

I hope you can see the deceptive power of sin. A man can sit on the point of eternity thinking he is a righteous man. When the holiness of the law is seen it allows the sinner to see the real power of sin in himself. It is similar to the analogy of someone who unwittingly has a dirty face looking into a mirror for the first time. This person did not realise the dirt was there until the mirror exposed it. Cursing the mirror will not take the dirt away just because you do not like the reflection.

What is remarkable about Paul’s personal testimony here that “I was alive without the law once” is that Paul was trained in all the finer points of the law. He excelled in his knowledge and practice above his peers. So, he knew the law intellectually but not experientially. Sin is not only powerful, but terribly deceptive. Religion is the most powerful delusion of all. All over Singapore today in churches people are trusting in their own self-righteousness “alive without the law” but on their way to hell!

**CONCLUSION**

Paul after delineating in v7-11 that the law is not sinful but does exactly what God intended for sinners in that it:

(i) Reveals sin
(ii) Arousos sin – thereby revealing the real nature and power of sin in us.
(iii) Condemns sin by convicting or slaying us.

In light of this great defence and vindication of the function of the law in his life before he was saved, Paul then brings his arguments to a conclusion in v12 by the use of “wherefore.” Rather than being unholy or sinful the law he concludes is, “holo, and just, and good.” The law is not sinful and imperfect, but because man is a sinner in nature and action.

It is “holy” because it perfectly reflects the character of God. It is “just” because it demands the right and appropriate punishment for sin. It is “good” because the law is that schoolmaster that drives us to see our need of Jesus Christ as a Saviour. The law’s condemnation slays our self-righteousness and pride by revealing the power of sin in our hearts,

But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith. (Gal. 3:22-24)

(1) Christian – If the law is holy and I am commanded to “be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:16) – what does that tell you about your life? It must line up to God’s holy and eternal moral standards. The Scriptures know nothing about moral relativity. Don’t underestimate the deceitfulness of sin. Now the law cannot make you holy as it does not have that power – that comes from our union with Christ.
“THE CIVIL WAR” (Romans 7:13-25)

Romans 7 is a passage that grips us because we understand exactly what it is saying. The battle that is raging against sin is a real one for every believer in a congregation like this. I know we may dress in our Sunday best; sing with triumphant voices; pray in pious tones, but behind every clean and smiling face is a story of a week just passed of struggle, disappointment, and even defeat with sin. This battle is not for a few inferior saints but something that is the common experience of every believer.

George Muller was known for his faith and prayer life all over the Christian world. For more than 50 years he fed hundreds of orphans by simple faith in God’s promises. His books were sold in the hundreds of thousands. Yet, as an old man, Muller still knew the power of sin and he prayed every day, “Lord, don’t let me become a wicked old man.”

After dealing with the function of the law in the life of an unbeliever in v7-12, Paul will do the same in the life of a believer in v13-25. He has demonstrated that the law cannot justify an unbeliever in v7-12 and here in v13-25 he will show that the law cannot sanctify a believer. The power of deliverance from sin Paul will show will come from the union with Christ in v25.

Now there are differing opinions about who this man is in v13-25 but I believe it is Paul citing his personal experiences of the struggle with sin in his life as a mature redeemed apostle. This is not some theory that Paul is propagating to others. I say this for a number of reasons:

(a) **BELIEVER** – Paul makes a number of statements that characterises only a believer such as “I delight in the law of God after the inward man” (v22), that he desperately desires to be delivered from the power of sin, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (v24), and that he is humble and thankful for the power of God through Jesus Christ in his life (v25).

(b) **MATURE BELIEVER** – In his spiritual autobiography Paul is speaking of his present experiences as a mature apostle at this time. He makes this clear by the use of the present tense throughout. By contrast in v7-12 he uses the past tense, as this describes his pre-conversion experience as Saul of Tarsus.

This ongoing struggle is also entirely in keeping with Paul’s teachings in other passages. In Galatians 5:17 he argues, “For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would.” To the Corinthians he writes of the same civil war, “I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.” (1 Cor. 9:26-27)

We see many illustrations of this truth in Scripture. King David fell into adultery and murder as a middle aged man. Noah got drunk when he was over six hundred years old and after living through the pre-Flood generation as “a just man and perfect in his generations.” Moses was the meekest man on the earth yet lost his temper at 120 years of age and smote the rock.

The problem with sin is not merely an outward problem. The life of a believer is one long internal battle between the flesh and the spirit. This civil war between the new man in Christ and the flesh principle working in our bodily members rages every day until we are delivered from what Paul called this “vile body” (Philp. 3:21). No one will be able to boast that they are free from this inner conflict. The evangelist D L Moody
recognised this spiritual struggle and once said, “I have more trouble with D. L. Moody than with any man I know.” Paul describes this condition and its causes, before giving the cure for this condition in v25.

(1) CONDITION (v13-14)

The v13 is a transitional verse from the previous section. It reiterates that the law is not the problem and does not cause death, but sin does. Paul restates that sin misuses the law to work death in us and this has the effect of exposing the real power and deceitfulness of sin. “But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.”

Then in v14, Paul explains that the law is a spiritual instrument as the law reflects the holy character of God. However, although the law is spiritual it does not create spirituality or holiness in a believer. Why? The reason Paul says is because there is a carnal or fleshly principle which is a force that makes his mortal body susceptible to the domination of sin in his members, “For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.”

Now, there is no contradiction between what Paul said in Romans 6 when he told us that when we are justified we are dead to the reign of sin, the old man has been crucified, and we are united with Christ. This happened positionally, but Paul did warn us in Romans 6:12-13a that we could still yield the members of our mortal body as instruments of unrighteousness, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God…”

This is because the carnal flesh principle is still at work in the members of our mortal body seeking to lead us into sin. It can never dominate the new man in Christ but it has the capacity for enslaving our members at any point. The more the apostle Paul saw himself in light of God’s holy law the more he recognized the power of sin seeking to take control over his bodily members. This is why he could testify, “but I am carnal, sold under sin.” Morris makes an interesting point, “It is worth bearing in mind that the great saints through the ages do not commonly say, ‘How good I am!’ Rather, they are apt to bewail their sinfulness.”

We must always remember that our mortal body has not yet entered into the full benefits and privileges of Christ’s resurrection power. This vile mortal body is groaning, as it is still susceptible to disease, physical death, and worst of all – temptation and sin, “And not only they, but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.” (Romans 8:23)

(2) CAUSE OF CONDITION (v15-24)

Paul then in v15-24 describes the causes of this great inward conflict that he daily experiences. It’s a struggle that nobody else ever sees. This section may appear repetitive but you can observe three distinct cycles within it:

(a) v15-17
(b) v18-20
(c) v21-24

In each of these sections the apostle will state the problem, then describe the conflict, and finally then explains why the conflict is there. Now, although these 3 sections are similar and related there are differences.
Paul clearly recognizes the tremendous importance of this teaching and is going to great lengths to ensure clarity. In v15-17, Paul states the matter in general as a struggle to live up he knows he ought to be. In v18-20 his emphasis is more on the fact of his doing what he does not want to do, whereas in v21-24 it is more of him finding it impossible to do what he does want to do.

But how does this relate to the function and purpose of the moral law? What Paul is doing here is to demonstrate that the law has great benefits in the life of a believer. It sets forth absolute and perfect standards of holiness, it exposes sin in our lives, and it convicts us when we fail God. However, what the law cannot do is to empower us to be sanctified and live up to its demands.

The law is holy and good and the new man in Christ delights in its instruction and wants to do its commands. It is one of the distinct marks of a believer. However, knowing and doing are two distinct things. We still find that the principle of the flesh in our members wars against the law’s requirements. It is a kind of spiritual paralysis. We know the right thing to do but we do the wrong thing! One writer illustrated this from the viewpoint of a person who has been paralyzed in an accident or has had a stroke – their mind wants to do certain actions but their body refuses.

I am sure every Christian in this room knows all about this. You hear a sermon about prayer, reading the Bible, giving, witnessing and your mind concurs with the truth of it. You are convicted by it and you feel the power of guilt and shame. In your heart you vow, “I am going to change” and “I am going to be consistent now.” What happens? A few days later and you are back on the merry-go-round or misery-go-round of Romans 7:15-24! That is the truly human experience for each of us.

What has happened? You have tried to keep God’s holy law by the power of your own strength. The more you strive by following the obligations in the power of the flesh the more you fail because of what Paul says, “sin that dwelleth in me” (v20). Sin has infiltrated into our very being and the overall feeling is one of powerlessness. If you continue to resolve by the power of your own strength to live up to the moral obligations of the law you will end up defeated and discouraged and echo the heart-rending cry of Paul, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (v24)

(3) CURE FOR CONDITION (v25)

What Paul does as a faithful pastor and a man of like passions as we are is to describe a real problem that exists both for his readers and for himself. Some people see Romans 7 as a very pessimistic chapter. They almost see it as defeatist and Paul excusing sin of, “not I but sin” instead of “not I, but Christ.” If I may use one of Paul’s favourite expressions – God forbid!

A defeated Christian does not have to stay in despair in the mire of sin and temptation. Romans 7 does not end at v24 – there is a v25. Paul does not stop here – there is a solution, which he mentions in v25 and unfolds more fully in chapter eight. This solution is tied up in the power of the resurrected Christ living in us to deal with the power of sin. He is the answer to everything. That is why the despairing man cried victoriously, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Pritchard comments,

There’s a provision for victory, there’s a provision for walking in the spirit, there’s a provision to help you win the struggle with sin. It’s all right there. Just remember this. It’s not a formula; it’s a person. It is not something on the outside. It is moment-by-moment dependence on Jesus Christ and realizing that his power is enough to rescue you.
Any preacher that leaves his hearers in the misery of v24 has failed to preach the whole counsel of God. He has only given part of the story. There is an answer to the temptations of sin raging in your mortal body. However, the believer must come to an end of himself and trust in Christ for the deliverance. Others are not even bothered about avoiding sin at all. Deffinbaugh points out “The problem with many Christians is not their despair, like that of Paul, but their lack of it.” However, the issues of Romans 7 have to be faced up to before we see can experience the deliverance of Romans 7:25 and Romans 8. Paul tells us this is a real war against a foe we have to resist, “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” (v23).

Simon Peter denied the Lord three times when he tried to live a holy life in the power of the flesh. However, when he stood before the Sanhedrin he boldly preached of Christ. What was the difference? In Acts 8:4 we are told, “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Ghost, said unto them.” In his first epistle the aged Peter writes about the secret to the Christian life, “Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation” (1 Peter 1:5a).

Did Peter in 1 Peter 1:5 or Paul in Romans 7 teach sinless perfection? No, because we find that after the incident recorded in Acts 4 that Peter failed in Galatians 2, “But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.” Sin is so deceptive, even to a believer that it can easily lead us to trust in ourselves at any moment.

What Paul is doing in Romans 7 is stripping us bare of self-reliance and self-confidence and making us face up the reality of the daily struggle and warfare with sin. He is leading us to where we are truly “poor in spirit.” Such as man Jesus taught is blessed because when we see and believe our spiritual impotency, then we will flee to the only deliverance in this battle – Jesus Christ and Him alone. You can only have consistent victories over sin when you use God’s resources in God’s ordained manner.