

Romans – Justified through faith

Week 13 – Romans 7 (God’s law and Christian discipleship)

Introduction

The chapter breaks down into three sections, the first about our release from the law, the second is a defence of the law and the third is about the weakness of the law. Paul is once again trying to show that the gospel is a radical third alternative to both the legalists (those in bondage to the law) and the antinomians (those who hate the law) in that followers of Jesus are free to fulfil the law without being subject to it.

1. Release from the law: a marriage metaphor (v1 – 6)

a. The legal principle (v1)

The law is only binding on those who are alive.

b. A domestic illustration (v2 – 4)

Just as death of the husband frees the wife to re-marry, so our identifying with Jesus’ death frees us from the ‘marriage’ to law. We are now free to be part of the bride of Christ – and live under grace.

c. The fundamental contrast (v5 – 6)

We used to be controlled by our sinful natures but those have been put to death – and now we can serve God in the way of the Spirit not out of legalistic required duty.

2. A defence of the law: a past experience (v7 – 13)

a. The identity of the ‘I’

Paul uses the personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’ a lot in this section. Paul is not exclusively referring to himself but universalising it to include us all. His experience of the sequence of events (comparative innocence, law, sin and death) is the same as everyone’s from Adam & Eve onwards, including us.

b. The law, sin and death

Is the law sin? (v7)

- i. No the law is there to reveal sin. Without law we wouldn’t know completely what sin was.
- ii. The law provokes sin. We’re always enticed by forbidden fruit. Sometimes the fruit itself is not especially important to us - it’s just the fact that it’s forbidden.
- iii. The law condemns sin. (v10) the commandment intended to bring life, actually brought death.

Did the law become death to me? (v13)

- i. No! It’s the sin that causes the death, the law simply reveals and condemns the sin. It’s like a criminal caught red-handed breaking the law blaming the law for his imprisonment – the law is may have been the cause of his conviction and sentence but he has no-one to blame really but his own criminal behaviour.

“Nothing is so good but a corrupt and vicious nature will pervert it. The same heat that softens wax, hardens clay. Food or medicine when taken wrong, may cause death, though its nature is to nourish or to heal. The law may cause death through man’s depravity, but sin is the poison that brings death. Not the law, but sin discovered by the law, was made death to the apostle. The ruinous nature of sin, and the sinfulness of the human heart, are here clearly shown.”
- Matthew Henry’s Commentary on Romans 7

3. The weakness of the law: an inner conflict (v14–25)

Paul now shows that although the law isn't responsible for sin and death it cannot make us holy either.

The commentary suggests that the last section of Chapter 7 relates to those people who love the law and the church but do not yet have the indwelt Holy Spirit to assist in the battle against sin. Romans Chapter 8 is the solution.

It also discusses whether the "I" referred to is pre-conversion experience or post conversion experience and leans towards the "churchgoer", who accepts that the law is good and tries to live by it but cannot ultimately be saved by it.

"This passage does not represent the apostle as one that walked after the flesh, but as one that had it greatly at heart, not to walk so. And if there are those who abuse this passage, as they also do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction, yet serious Christians find cause to bless God for having thus provided for their support and comfort. We are not, because of the abuse of such as are blinded by their own lusts, to find fault with the scripture, or any just and well warranted interpretation of it. And no man who is not engaged in this conflict, can clearly understand the meaning of these words, or rightly judge concerning this painful conflict, which led the apostle to bemoan himself as a wretched man, constrained to what he abhorred. He could not deliver himself; and this made him the more fervently thank God for the way of salvation revealed through Jesus Christ, which promised him, in the end, deliverance from this enemy."

- Matthew Henry's Commentary on Romans 7

Q1. Is the experience of 'not doing what I want to do' and 'doing what I hate' yours too? Can we tackle this on our own – or do we need help?

Q2. Do we use Paul's statement of his own weakness as an excuse for those times when we do sin?

Memory Verse:

"Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!"
– Romans 7:24b-25a