

Sin and The Law

(Romans 7: 1-25)

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Introduction

In chapter 7 Paul at last returns to the great theme of the relationship between sin and the law. We have already mentioned that he divided the history of human sinfulness into two parts – stage one, which covered the period from Adam to Moses, and stage two, which dealt with the period from Moses to Christ. In this chapter we shall have to consider whether he envisaged a further stage three, embracing the period since the coming of Christ, or whether he regards this history as having come to an end. Paul spends a lot of time developing stage one, because of all the stages it is both the most fundamental and the most universal. At this stage, there is no difference at all between Jews and Gentiles. It is curious, given the extensive discussion in chapter 4, that Abraham nowhere figures in this story. As the ancestor of the nation of Israel, one might think that he would have some claim to be considered, particularly in view of the covenant which God made with him. Yet if we consider the question from the point of view of sin, we realize that this omission is in natural one. What Abraham received was the promise of forgiveness, not a pardon for sin. The need for sacrifice remained, although Abraham was allowed to substitute a ram in place of his own – an exact reversal of what God would eventually do for us.

Furthermore, it is Paul's purpose to emphasize that in Abraham, Jews and Gentiles are one. Not only was Abraham the ancestor, both physically and spiritually, of many Gentile nations, he himself was a Gentile, at least until he received the sign of circumcision. Even then, he would certainly not be thought of as a Jew in the later meaning of the term, since he had never heard of the law by which the Jews of Paul's day defined their national and spiritual existence. In patriarchal terms, and indeed, up to and including the youth of Moses himself, it was natural for the people of Israel to marry outside the immediate family, and this practice was never criticized. Only with the coming of the law, and the attendant definition of the boundaries of the nation can it be said that the identity of Israel started to become an exclusiveness which finally separated the Jews from the Gentiles round about and led to the religious mentality which Paul identifies and condemns in the opening chapters of the epistle. Here Paul sees no need to repeat that well-known history – instead he gets straight to the spiritual issues at stake.

The Marriage Analogy

Paul begins his discussion of the law by comparing it to a husband. The law therefore has the same relationship to Israel as a man has to his wife. This marital imagery is very frequent in the Bible, and it tells us a great deal not only about the nature of our relationship with God, but about the true meaning of marriage. It also tells us about the relationship between the law and Christ, and between both of these and God. For the true meaning of the bridal imagery in scripture is found ultimately in the relationship which God has established with his people. It is no accident that Paul understands the submission of a woman to her husband as being analogous to the man's submission to God (1 Timothy 2: 11-15), because the two things are closely connected in this way throughout the Bible. The sanctity of marriage, as well as the significance of male headship within it, derives ultimately from its link with God's revelation of the relationship between him and his people. This relationship is designed to be one of lifelong fidelity. When that principle is broken, the consequences are as serious in their way as those which followed on Adam's sin in the garden. The relationship is also designed to include the principle of obedience in a spirit of fellowship. God associates with us as a friend, and calls us to share in his heavenly life, thereby exalting us to a kind of equality with himself. By coming to die for us, the Son of God sealed the meaning of that relationship by taking our place on the cross. In exactly the same way, husband and wife are meant to share a common life based on the principle that each is equal to the other in the sight of God. Yet this equality is not to be manifested in a way which fails to do justice to the principle of submission and obedience, since it is by them that the wife honours both her husband and herself. Today we have degraded marriage and denied its spiritual character, so much so that when we return to these biblical principles, many people think we are speaking a strange language, and some even complain that we are tied to an outmoded way of thinking which is inappropriate for twenty-first-century Christians.

The devaluing of the spiritual character of marriage is tragic in itself, because it leads, as we see all around us, to a moral disorder which is typical of pagan cultures generally. Tales of sexual licence which were once associated with lurid accounts of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire, or the state of aboriginal tribes before

their conversion by muscular and/or virginal Victorian missionaries, are now the stuff of daily newspaper reading and television soap-operas. No doubt real life continues to lag behind *Dallas* or *Dynasty*, but the image is there, and the conviction that such behaviour is wrong is gradually fading away. Certainly almost nobody nowadays would stand up and condemn it as been dishonouring to God.

Yet dishonouring it is, and dangerous for us as we try to understand the relationship between marriage and the Christian life. If a spouse can be traded in at regular intervals, why not do the same with God? How can we inculcate a sense of permanence of a spiritual covenant, for better and for worse, when we despise and reject its earthly counterpart? It is not an accident, after all, that in Scripture adultery should be equated with idolatry, and be condemned in the same terms. Here in Romans 7 we are reminded of the permanence of marriage straightaway, when Paul tells us that just as a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives, so a man is bound to the law as long as it is in force. The Jewish people were married to the law of Moses, and to depart from it was to commit adultery – to go a-whoring after other gods, as the Old Testament so colourfully puts it.

Christ's Death and the Law

There is, however, one important qualification to the bond of marriage, and that is that its permanence is restricted to this life. When a partner dies, the bond is broken, and the surviving partner is free to enter another such relationship, or to remain independent. This qualification applies to the law as well, which reminds us that although the Old Testament law is symbolic of our relationship with God, it does not possess the eternal quality which is so fundamental to God's own character. Now the good news of the gospel is that our bondage to the law has been cancelled, not because it has died, but because we have died in Christ. Christ's death freed him, as it frees us from the obligation to submit to the law, and that the same time it provides us with another husband – Christ himself.

Paul's language in verse 4 is paradoxical, and does not exactly correspond to what has gone before. Logically speaking, if the law is the husband and we are the wife, it is the law which should have died so that we might be free to marry another. This is no doubt the way in which many Christians actually interpret the passage, and it certainly seems to fit the general pattern of our spiritual existence. Yet in actual fact it does not correspond to the Bible's teaching, which is both more complex and more subtle than this. First of all, we need to remember that Christ was born under the law and submitted himself to it. He took the place of the wife before taking that of the husband, in order to demonstrate, by his sacrificial death, just how all the old system of things had given way to the new. From the

moment of his Incarnation, the Son of God took our place with respect to the Father, and thereby prepared the way for his atoning death by establishing the principle of submission (that is, taking our place) from the beginning.

When Christ died on the cross, after a life of submission to the law – though to the law itself, and not to the interpretations put on it by the scribes and Pharisees – he broke the marriage bond and became free. This freedom could not be realized in death, nor would it have happened if he had merely been resuscitated after experiencing what we might nowadays call 'clinical death'. Only the resurrection, which marked the beginning of a new kind of life, a kind of life which in Adamic terms is still death, could give the new freedom to remarry its abiding validity. We who have died with Christ (not physically as yet, but spiritually), are likewise free to remarry, though the choice of bridegroom is limited. For the death and resurrection of Christ is different from ours in that he is no longer substituting for us, but for the law. In other words, his relationship with us has evolved from being identified as one of us to being identified as the God whom we are called to serve in the new marriage relationship.

Though Paul does not explicitly say so, there can be few verses in his epistles which bring out more clearly than this one the reality and importance of the divinity of Christ. The law, during its reign, stood over against us in the place of God, revealing both his commands and his holy character to us. Now, however, its place has been superseded by Christ, who not only fulfils the same role as that law, as the mediator between God and man, but does so from the standpoint of eternity, not within the limitations of time! He is therefore not just the temporal manifestation of an eternal reality, but the living incarnation of that reality. To put it another way we are no longer dealing with a description of God – we are dealing now directly with God himself.

The full significance of this for us is that whereas before we were servants of the law, and therefore agents of sin, now we have been set free from that and given the power to become agents of righteousness. This is fairly simple and straightforward as far as it goes, but Paul realizes that it is not the whole story. He has explained what the function of the law is, but he has not yet considered the relationship between that function and the law's intrinsic character. How is it possible for the law to bring out sin in us if it is God's self-revelation to his people? Can the law be sinful and holy at the same time? Faced with this possibility, Paul's reaction is a bold NO, the same reaction we observed when he was confronted with the suggestion that if we sinned more, God's grace could be poured out more abundantly on us. The relationship between right and wrong, between the law and sin, cannot be expressed quite as crudely as that!

Blinded by Darkness

To understand what follows next, we need to remember that stage two in the history of sin builds on stage one; it does not replace it. Sin entered the world through the transgression of Adam, and it spread by descent to the whole human race, which inherited this fundamental rebellion, this broken relationship of obedience, which cuts us off from God. But being cut off from God, mankind had no knowledge of him, and therefore was not conscious of sin. What we do not know does not hurt us – this is the essence of what Paul is saying here. The giving of the law was the granting of this knowledge, without the power to do anything about the spiritual power which it revealed. Because it had this function, the law was in fact a revelation of God, bringing God closer to us by making us conscious of his presence for the first time. But instead of solving the problem by reconciling us to God, the law could only make us more aware of our separation from him. As a result, the rebellion which was dormant in us and unable to express itself coherently, for want of a framework in which to operate, now acquired new life and purpose. Every commandment of the law became a challenge to the rebellious spirit to reveal itself by taking up a position with regard to the law – in other words, breaking it!

As sin sprang to life, so we who dwell in its power were condemned to death, and the law, which would have given us life had we been able to keep it, turned out instead to be an agent of death. What should have set us free ended up by chaining us more effectively to the condition which we had inherited from Adam. There are two points here which we would do well to consider in passing. The first is that salvation can never come through knowledge alone. Paul does not deny the value of knowing the law, but he demonstrates that this knowledge led in the opposite direction to the one which was intended, because something more fundamental was wrong with the human race. The same lesson needs to be learnt today by those who put their faith in science and technology. The people who turned scientific and technical progress into a god of salvation in the nineteenth century could at least claim ignorance as to where it would all lead. But today, after two world wars and the invention of apocalyptic means of self-destruction, with mounting evidence that our technology is wreaking havoc with the ecology of our planet, how can anyone seriously maintain such a view? Yet faith in progress continues to be our official cultural ideology, pumped out by its representative organs regardless of whatever doubts might be expressed when the facts are considered. It is a classic case of being trapped in a mindset from which the only escape is to be born again in Christ.

Blinded by Light

The other point we need to remember is that we may be blinded by the light as much as by the darkness. The Jews had the light of God's law, which as Paul reminds us, is holy, just and good. What more could anyone reasonably want? Yet the Jews were not enlightened by this fact, they were blinded by it. Instead of living it out in their lives, they became fanatical defenders of it, and persecuted anyone who did not live up to their standards of observance. Christians are unfortunately not immune to this tendency, and we need to be on our guard, not to turn our confession of faith into a legal code which will then become an instrument for persecuting others in a spirit far removed from that of Christ. Heresies must certainly be countered, but the way in which we do this must reflect the life we have in Christ, not the bondage which the Jews suffered in relation to the law.

The real trouble with the law, as Paul points out in verse 14, is that it does not get to grips with our fundamental problem. The law reflects the character of God, which is spiritual, whereas we are cut off from God, a state which Paul describes as 'carnal', or being in the flesh. When we become aware of spiritual things, but lack the power to overcome our carnal state, we find that we become subject to a life crisis which effectively divides our being in two. We are aware of the requirements of the law, and because we are submitted to the law, we assent to its demands and want it to rule in our lives. But because our lives are unchanged, we cannot accomplish what the law requires, and we are frustrated by the inconsistency which we observe between what we want to do and what actually emerges in practice. This is the tension which we live with in a world governed by sin, and it is the immediate cause of the despair which Paul confesses in verse 24.

The Big Question

The major problem we face in trying to understand verses 15-24 is that of knowing whether Paul is speaking in practical terms about our present state as Christians, or in theoretical terms about the state of a man under the law. In expressing himself so vividly in the first person, is he speaking about his current experience or about something which he went through before his conversion? The answer we give to this question will determine not just the way we analyse the psychology of Christian experience, but also of the way in which we relate to the law of God now that we are Christians.

To solve the problem this section presents, we need to go back to the way Paul structures his understanding of the history of sin. We have already seen that stage two, the time from Moses to Christ, does not so much replace as reinforce stage one, the time from Adam to Moses. Certainly, in dealing with the nature and extent

of salvation, we need to consider both stages, since both are relevant to the work which Christ has come to do. We know from what Paul says that the experience recounted in verses 15-24 is characteristic of stage two; the question is whether, in the light of the coming of Christ, this stage has been abolished, or whether it has been subsumed into a stage three, rather in the way that stage one was previously subsumed into stage two. If there is a stage three, stages one and two continue to have a validity within it, and these verses apply to our present experience as Christians. If stage two has been abolished, then stage one has gone as well, and sin is no longer a problem for us.

The 'abolition of sin' theory is one which has been held by those who believe that in Christ we need no longer sin at all. They believe that when we were set free we were completely liberated, so that what is spiritually true in heaven is also physically, or carnally, true on earth. To think otherwise would be to introduce a division between heaven and earthly reality, or between theory and practice, which effectively pushes the freedom of Christ out of sight and leaves us in a bondage to the law justified by circumstances, if not by theological principle. It may be the case that views of this kind are most widely held in circles where theological principles are discounted in favour of a simplistic, 'Bible-based' faith, in which the text of Scripture is treated more or less like a law. When this happens, we either have to keep the principles of the New Testament to perfection, or else convince ourselves that we have the spirit of perfection dwelling within us, so that we can formulate our own way of life and relegate what the Bible says to that special oblivion which goes under the name of 'cultural conditioning'. It will even be claimed that just as Paul was a man of his time, working out an ethic for his contemporaries, so we, as men of our time, must do the same. In other words, it may be necessary, if we are to do justice to the principles of the Bible, for us to ignore what the Bible actually says!

The second viewpoint is more complex. It says that in Christ we are liberated spiritually but not yet resurrected physically. Because of this our dying and rising again with Christ is not yet completed. Spiritually we're alive to God, as Paul demonstrates in verse 22, but physically we cannot put the spiritual life into effect. Sin is obviously still with us, and the spiritual life continues to be a struggle against it. We cannot claim to have obtained a final victory in this life, since that would imply both that we have already achieved our resurrection and that sin is no longer a reality in our lives. Since both of these assumptions are obviously false, the second point of view must be regarded as the one which is more faithful to Paul's actual teaching. That means that we must regard these verses as a description of our present experience, and that we must find some role for the law in the life of the Christian. It also means that we must accept that there is a stage three in the history of sin, which is the stage characterized by Christian spiritual warfare.

Working it out

To understand how these different stages function now, we must remember that although they have succeeded one another in historical time, each successive stage has absorbed the previous one and adapted it to its own principles. In the case of stage two, this means that the broken relationship of stage one, though it has been partially overcome by the renewed contact with God which we have by knowing his law, continues to manifest itself in the way sin actually functions in our lives. The main difference between the stages is that those in stage two no longer have the excuse of ignorance which protected those in stage one from appreciating the full consequences of their actions.

Stage three is characterised by the fact that the law has been fulfilled in Christ, and we have been given a new relationship with God to the extent that we share in Christ's death and resurrection. This is the key to our understanding of the relevance of stages one and two to our present situation. In Christ we have spiritual contact with the resurrection life, and to that extent we share in it here and now. But our Adamic nature, described in the Bible as flesh and blood, which stands for a spiritual state fundamentally opposed to God's purposes, has not disappeared. We are still exposed to temptation, as Christ was exposed to temptation, and although in him we have the resources we need to defeat the wiles of the devil, it is not guaranteed that we will always draw on those resources as we should, and as he did. We remain imperfect creatures, subject in our human nature to the law of sin and death, but no longer condemned for this, because in Christ we have a Saviour who forgives us when we sin and who helps us to grow in grace, so that as time goes on we learn to rely on his power more fully and more effectively in our lives.

The law therefore continues to exist and to be studied by Christians. The Old Testament, right down to the cultic sacrifices of Leviticus, continues to be recognized as canonical Scripture in the church, because like the New Testament, it was inspired by God and reveals his character and his purposes to us. The law which it contains is therefore just as holy, just and good as it was on the day it was first given to Israel. The difference between stage two and three is that now we read that law in a different way. For us the law speaks of Christ, and Christ is the filter through which its light reaches us. When we read of cultic sacrifices we do not rush out to kill lambs; we give thanks to God that in Christ he has provided the true Paschal Lamb who has done once and for all everything which the Levitical law envisaged and commanded.

Similarly, when we read the Ten Commandments, we realize that Christ has taught us that they do not refer just to civil or communal order. They must be internalised by being applied to the thoughts and attitudes of the individual believer. Murder, theft and adultery are therefore more meaningful to us who have the

light of Christ, just as they were more meaningful to the Jews after they had received the law. From the ignorance of stage one we have progressed through the impotence of stage two to the knowledge combined with power of stage three. Sin remains the same as long as we remain creatures descended from Adam, but our ability to define it and to deal with it has increased beyond recognition. This is not because we have achieved anything by ourselves, but because the grace

of God has been given to us so abundantly in Christ, that we are able to overcome the natural limitations to which we are subject, and reveal the miracle of new life, the life of the resurrected Christ, at work in the world in and around us.

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