

## Romans 7:14-25 The weakness of the law

### Introduction

In his 1786 poem 'To A Louse' Robert Burns wrote these words: O wad some Power the giftie gie us To see oursel as ithers see us! It wad frae mony a blunder free us, An' foolish notion... We thank God for the special people in our lives in our families or close friends who feel able to tell us at times what we need to hear not what we necessarily want to hear. 'How do I look?' 'Should I do...' these are sensitive areas and only when a relationship is strong and important will the other person feel free to give an honest opinion to us. We all want good news all the time, but life isn't like that. All of us make misjudgements; every one of us says or omits to say the appropriate words in particular contexts, together with a mix of choices of actions. Sometimes we do better than anyone could reasonably have expected; on other occasions we disappoint because our behavioural preferences or course of action could have been improved. It is not an issue here of knowledge of the law or a set of rules, instead it is about an ability to fulfil what that law or set of rules commands us to do. In simple terms in the words of Jesus to His followers in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:48: *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.* The only person who has a right, in principle, to a place in heaven on merit is the one who has met this standard set out by Jesus –in thought, word and deed! Any reader or hearer of this letter of Paul to the Church in Rome knows that no-one who has walked this earth, apart from Jesus, has fulfilled this criteria! The apostle has spent a great deal of time covering the problem of sin faced by humanity; the glorious gospel of God's grace and now in chapters six and seven addressing issues raised by the challenges of honouring God in our lives. Yet by the end of Romans 8 the apostle pictures us as those who have accomplished our calling - to become like Jesus, who one day will be perfect like Him beyond this life. It is easy to see in Romans 7:7-13 that in order to truly grasp our need of salvation we must see the seriousness of our personal sinfulness, not just that we have committed sins against God, but that in our inner person the desire to sin is more serious than we had ever imagined. God's law could condemn me by confirming my shortcomings but it could not save me. Its purpose was to show clearly my need of salvation in Jesus and to point me to the cross and the wonderful good news of forgiveness and redemption through His sacrifice in our place. Who then is Paul describing in Romans 7:14-25 –is it people yet to come to faith, Christians weak in their faith or is it part of the normal Christian life for mature believers?

### 1. The identity of the person described in Romans 7:14-25

In the Anglo-Saxon world generally, following both Augustine and the Protestant Reformers, the third view I will mention has been largely adopted- and I think rightly so! But it is important to mention the other views that have been suggested here and why.

(a) A person who is not a follower of Jesus? Proponents of this view indicate that there are three statements in this section of Romans 7 which they doubt could be true of Christians. (i) Verse 14: ... but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin; how is this consistent with Romans 6:17-18: *But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance.*<sup>18</sup> *You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.* How can this be true of a believer in the light of what Paul stated in the previous chapter? (ii) Verse 18: For I know that good itself does not dwell in me... yet in II Corinthians 6:16 Paul declares that: (Christians) *we are the*

temple of the living God, a point made to stress the importance of holy living. (iii) Verse 24: What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? Could a Christian who knows the good news of the gospel utter such a cry of frustration? These points seem quite powerful until we stop to think more carefully to reflect on the fact that this passage is both autobiographical for Paul and also takes account of the experience of other people as well. (iv) How did Paul view himself before he became a Christian? Philippians 3:4-6 gives this clear answer. *If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, **faultless**.* It must have been an unnerving experience to have met the young rabbinical student Saul of Tarsus. His brilliant mind, his rigorous self-discipline and boundless enthusiasm for his Jewish faith were open for all to see. His assessment of his spiritual state at that time was **faultless**. This pre-conversion attitude was ‘a million miles away’ from the one displayed here. All of us know good-living people who are quite happy with how they are living their lives; to the best of our knowledge they have no consciousness of sin and consequently cannot see a need for Jesus in their lives. Notice also (v) The attitude of the person described to God’s law Romans 7:16: *I agree that the law is good.* Romans 7:22: *For in my inner being I **delight** in God’s law;* at a push someone outside the faith might view the Bible as ‘the good book’, but taking active ‘delight’ in reading and reflecting on its contents is the experience of one who has come to faith in Christ. (vi) The change of tense from Romans 7:7-13 to Romans 7:14-25 In verses 7-13 the Greek aorist (past) tense is used consistently; in verses 14-24 Paul uses the present tense to describe current experience. The only serious and convincing explanation here is that Paul has moved from talking about his pre-conversion struggles with sin and accepting God’s grace to his current present-day Christian experience.

(b) A person who is a ‘weak’ and struggling Christian Those who hold this opinion place a big contrast between the weak and defeated believer in Romans 7:14-25 and the Christian living the victorious life in the power of the Holy Spirit in Romans 8. They would tell the ‘defeated’ Christian of Romans 7 to ‘let go and let God’ take control of your life. It’s your choice whether to lead a defeated life or a successful Spirit-empowered life. After all does not Paul say in Romans 8:37: *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.* Every day should be a victory day for the Spirit anointed and equipped Christian! Proponents of this view make reference to I Corinthians 3:1-4 and suggest that those verses strengthen their interpretation of Romans 7:14-25: *Brothers and sisters, **I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly – mere infants in Christ.** <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. <sup>3</sup> You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? <sup>4</sup> For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere human beings?* In its favour those who hold this view recognise that the tense has changed which is key in Romans 7:14 onwards. However, are they right to contrast Romans 7:14-25 with Romans 8 and suggest that these are two versions of how a Christian might live their life? No! It is wrong to have two grades of Christians, the saved but struggling and the Spirit-empowered who have acknowledged Jesus as Lord as well as Saviour. They are reading this view into the text. The chapter divisions are artificial put in many centuries later. Paul’s description of his (and ours?) experience of God as a follower of Jesus continues from 7:14 to the end of chapter eight. The references to people living according to the sinful nature (for example in Romans 8:5-8) are to people outside the faith who have no desire to follow Jesus. No-one reaches perfection in this life so they are using false contrasts. Paul is teaching very clearly here that a mature follower of Jesus Christ will

face struggles and battles within from now to eternity. This same believer, empowered by the Holy Spirit can win victories over sin, over temptation and all kinds of challenges through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit –both are true.

(c) **A person who is a ‘normal’ maturing Christian** Romans chapter seven is about the limits of God’s law and its implications for our lives. It cannot save us nor can it make us holy. It can only draw attention to how far we fall short of where we ought to be. Only the Holy Spirit within us can help us grow in our faith and become more Christ-like in our character and conduct. Paul did say in Romans 6:6-7: *For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin –<sup>7</sup> because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.* Here looking back to the promises made at our baptism when we identified with Christ. However, just a few verses later Paul writes: *Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires* (Romans 6:12). These words only make sense if in practice we still have battles with sinful attitudes or speech or actions. In the light of Paul’s purpose of addressing the limitations of the law it makes sense to retain the traditional understanding of this passage as referring to the normal Christian life of each disciple of Jesus.

## 2. **Fighting the Good Fight of Faith** (Romans 7:14-19)

*We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.<sup>15</sup> I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.<sup>16</sup> And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good.<sup>17</sup> As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.<sup>18</sup> For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.<sup>19</sup> For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.<sup>20</sup> Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

(a) **Quick fixes to avoid** (i) **A superficial slogan to follow** In the modern era people want instant everything, not just their coffee. Instant health- just eat your five a day (fruit / veg) and all will be well. Or following a particular dietary regime- to fix a weight issue in a few weeks; such superficial thinking gets into churches as well. Just ‘let go and let God’ or stop living in Romans 7 and be a Romans 8 Christian! There are no quick fixes to being like Jesus. We are His disciples on a lifelong journey of discovery of what it means to be Christian men and women between the day you professed faith and the day you enter eternity. (ii) **An experience that will vanquish the struggle** some charismatic Christians have advocated ‘the second blessing’, an experience of the Holy Spirit that enables you to overcome all these struggles; the fact that some sections of the same constituency have advocated a ‘third blessing’ to make us holy or go from special experience to more of the same in the hope of getting that special ‘something’ indicates that although we need the empowerment of the Holy Spirit on a daily basis it does not minimise the need for spiritual self-discipline Paul repeatedly advocated in his letters. You cannot read I Corinthians 9:24-27, where the apostle uses language coloured by his observation of the training routines of Olympic athletes, to describe his own spiritual fitness programme: *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.<sup>25</sup> Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever.<sup>26</sup> Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.<sup>27</sup> No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave **so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.** This is hard graft whether he felt like it or not. An athlete in fitness training and a Christian with their Bible reading and prayer times, or church attendance will both have days when they don’t feel like being*

disciplined. It is what we do on those days that make the difference! (iii) A pretence that all is fine Imagine an athlete thinking I look good all I need to do is turn up looking trim in my new sporty gear for the Olympic 10k or marathon. How long would such a person last! Its no different in our walk with God.

(b) **Biblical principles to accept** (i) We have a daily lifelong battle to overcome sin These verses in Romans 7:14-20 indicate that this battle will at times be a real struggle to think, say and do the right things. if you are finding it easy to be a Christian year after year and never find it difficult then you might need to ask Lord am I missing something? An effective witnessing disciple of Jesus will have their times of doubts, fears and struggles, because we are in a spiritual battle. Philippians 2:12-13: *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – **continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,*** <sup>13</sup> *for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.* The verb Paul uses here is in the imperative mood ie a command and is in the present tense – ie no limit of time to carry it out. As one Bible commentator (writing on Philippians 2:12) put it ‘obedience to Christ cannot be separated from obedience to His messengers and to the message they proclaim’ [see P.T. O’Brien, *Philippians*, p.275]. Some Christians have the strange notion that there is a ranking order of authority in the Bible with the teaching of the Gospels ahead of the Epistles and the Old Testament next. The whole of Scripture is God’s Word, and when rightly understood in its context is authoritative for our lives. Here Paul gives a command to the Christians in this church he planted in Greece, and by implication to us, about the importance of disciplined Christian lives. (ii) We cannot be victorious by self-discipline and sheer determination alone ‘You can do anything you want to do’; ‘when the going gets tough the tough get going’; images of John Wayne, Rambo or some super heros are fictional characters. In Luke 22:31-34: <sup>31</sup> *‘Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat.’* <sup>32</sup> *‘But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.’* <sup>33</sup> *‘But he replied, ‘Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.’* <sup>34</sup> *‘Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.’* Peter had to learn this lesson the hard way and many of us as Christians have been in the same place. Zerubbabel, the inspirational leader of the Jewish people after the return from exile in Iraq, around 500 years before the birth of Jesus, was reminded by the prophet Zechariah: *‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: “Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,” says the Lord Almighty (Zechariah 4:6).* (iii) When we are victorious over temptation or over trials remember to give the credit to God We are His servants doing His bidding through the power of His Spirit. Its not because we are special that we succeed but because He is glorious. Like the heavenly creatures, portrayed in Revelation 5:12 let us declare: *In a loud voice they were saying: ‘Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!’* <sup>13</sup> *Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: ‘To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!’* (iv) We keep on focussing on Jesus and His mission for us There are many passages of Scripture we could cite here: *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,* <sup>2</sup> *fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy that was set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* <sup>3</sup> ***Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart*** (Hebrews 12:1-3). Or Paul’s words in Philippians 3:12-14: *Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.* <sup>13</sup> *Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and*

*straining towards what is ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. Is this what you are doing? Is this what I am doing? Do we need to recommit our lives to Him afresh today if we cannot affirm this has been our focus in recent days?*

### 3. **The battle within** (Romans 7:21-25)

Paul has spoken about the battle within the life of the believer, though it is an incomplete description as he is yet to speak about the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, which he does in Romans 8. In these verses, Romans 7:21-25, he spells out in more detail what it means for a genuine believer in this situation.

(a) **Two egos** (Romans 7:21) *So I find this law at work: although I want to do good, evil is right there with me.* Conflicting desires have been within all of us on many occasions as we felt under pressure to do something that wasn't quite right rather than do something that we believed was the best choice. It doesn't have to be something major. The temptation in business to reduce the quality of goods provided to increase profit margins and hope the customers don't notice. The temptation to an employee to use their employer's time and goods for personal use without making it up later; the temptation to a witness in court to alter the truth of what happened despite taking the oath to speak only the truth in their testimony. Motivation can be very mixed at times, but we all recognise these battles. We need God's help to make the right choices when we feel seriously pressured to do wrong.

(b) **Two laws** (Romans 7:22-23) <sup>22</sup> *For in my inner being I delight in God's law; <sup>23</sup> but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.* As a Christian I am delighted that God has made plain how I should live and the boundaries for the fulfilment of His plan for my life. However, in a society that has rejected much of the biblical standards there are constant pressures to give in to alternative views. The pressures on our young people today to engage in inappropriate sexual activity outside of marriage is one obvious example, when other people supposedly are having fun-but nothing like as many as are claimed at the time! Will we follow God's law or will we go with the flow? The pressure to water down the truth in conversation for a whole variety of reasons; it can be more subtle than the old tales of 'the cheques in the post' when someone doesn't want to settle an overdue account; there are occasions where we may omit to provide some information that allows a misleading impression to be given that alters how a person behaves in a particular situation –maybe to our advantage. I know how God wants me to behave but am I willing to make the right choices?

(c) **Two cries** (Romans 7:24-25a) *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!* These cries are both from the same person. Frustration that we keep making the same mistakes or saying/ doing the wrong thing again! The pressure is on to get it right. The detailed challenge may be very different for each one of us. However, we all know our own areas of weakness and it can be a real battle sometimes to make the right choices. Our sin nature is part of who we are this side of heaven. This is the bad news, in fact we become more aware of it as we grow in our relationship with the Lord. However, there is also good news: <sup>25</sup> *Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!* My situation is not hopeless. I can overcome whatever I need to work through with His help. Is there something just now you are struggling with? Take it to the Lord in prayer, because we have got a special friend in heaven, the Lord Jesus who is on our side willing us on in our faith journey. Hebrews 7:25 declares: *Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them.* What wonderful news this is for us!

(d) Two slaveries (Romans 7:25b) ...*So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.* My moral sense of obligation is to honour God and to keep His laws. I know what is morally right and wrong in most situations because God has given each of us a conscience that works pretty well most of the time, as long as it is respected and cared for! If we abuse it by neglecting to heed its warnings when we stray its voice gets weaker. That is the danger time in someone's life when the boundaries of right and wrong get increasingly blurred. The sin nature within urges us to think of what is best for self at the expense of what honours God or is good for other people. Which voice will I heed most this year? May God help us to heed His guidance for our lives.

#### 4 . Our victory in and through Christ (Romans 7:25)

<sup>25</sup> *Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.* This section of Paul's letter can appear gloomy and negative –its not! However, the apostle wants to end on an upbeat note to encourage his hearers to go on growing in their faith and trusting God for their future. He knows that many Christians struggle with particular sins whether in their minds or words or actions. The devil wants to discourage us – 'you call yourself a Christian and you think... say... or do...?! God loves me unconditionally as His child, because of Jesus, but because of the investment He has made in my life He is not content to allow me to fail, but will do all that is necessary to assist me to live a victorious Christian life. There are three things that we ought never to forget.

(a) Deliverance from the penalty of sin When Jesus cried out *It is finished* (John 19:30) He meant it. If Jesus has paid in full the penalty for your sins and mine then God the Father cannot and will not demand payment again from you or me! On the day when we stand before the Lord after leaving this life we need not fear the future or our eternal destiny, because we have been delivered from the penalty of sin –eternal separation from God. The good news gets even better!

(b) Deliverance from the power of sin This fact relates to our lives here and now. We need not yield to temptation and fall into sin. We will have many temptations, but remember this warning against complacency together with a wonderful promise given in I Corinthians 10:12-13: *So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! <sup>13</sup> No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* What wonderful words of encouragement for us –do you need to hear these words of warning or this wonderful promise?

(c) Deliverance from the presence of sin This is not now, but beyond this life. What God has started He will finish in your life. Philippians 1:6 states: *being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.* These are words to pass on. II Timothy 1:12 Paul indicates the cost of honouring His calling from God, but he also rejoices in the fact that God will complete what He has begun in his life. *That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet this is no cause for shame, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day.* Do you share his confidence? If you are a child of God who has placed your life in His hands then this can be your experience too, for Jesus' sake, Amen.

