

Romans 7:7-13 A defence of the law

Introduction

I cannot remember all the details as I was a small boy aged probably around five years old, but the basic outline of the story lived with me clearly for many years. It was an exciting time as my great-grandma who was in her 90s and walked on her sticks had come to visit and was staying with other family members next door to my own home. She took a real interest in me and my little brother and played with us as much as she was able. However, the incident of interest to our study today came on one of the exceedingly rare walks we took as a family at that time. Living and working on a busy farm meant that time off naturally was less likely to include country walks. But on this particular day the adults decided to go across to the other side of our valley and take a short walk along a lengthy farm track that would allow good views back across towards our home. It was a bleak and quiet place with possible rights of way and public footpaths a matter for debate. The path we took that day seemed appropriate for all our walking abilities, but I doubt we got more than a few hundred yards before the (to my mind elderly, but actually in his 60s) angry voice of the farmer who owned the land was heard ordering us off his property with a threat of using the law against us if we did not comply. Trying to view matters objectively as an adult many years later, I doubt whether he could have enforced his threat as I think it likely that this path was a public right of way. However, under the circumstances we all left quietly and as quickly as a mixed aged group of people could do so! I was horrified that anyone would speak so disrespectfully to my great-grandma! In that context the farmer concerned believed that the very mention of 'the law' would frighten us all into complying with his request. It was, in context, a misuse of the law, but all concerned wished to honour the law of the land and although in that setting our family group believed that the path was a public right of way, almost certainly correctly, we chose to retrace our steps to our vehicles and return home, an hour or so sooner than we had expected!

Paul's hearers and readers had noted the apostle in the previous few verses explain that Christian believers had *died to the law* (Romans 7:4) in order to give our full allegiance to Christ. We could not be living our lives following a lengthy checklist of Jewish rules and regulations and under grace at the same time. In the same way as a husband or wife cannot simultaneously and appropriately be married to a different /additional spouse at the same time! Paul has also reminded us in Romans 7:5 that exposure to the law ensured that *sinful passions* were *aroused*. However, the good news is that *we have been released from the law so that we can serve in the new way of the Spirit...* (Romans 7:6). To make statements such as these naturally and inevitably results in the questions that arise in the next section of Romans 7. But before we look directly at them it is important to ask about the identity of the person or persons whose experience is being described in Romans 7:7-13- is it purely autobiographical information from Paul or is there a wider frame of reference to consider here?

1. Whose story is told in Romans 7:7-13?

A quick glance through the remaining two sections of Romans 7 will result in any reader noting the large number of times the word 'I' appears in these verses. A good storyteller of a murder mystery such as Agatha Christie in her Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot series gives clues to what has happened but keeps the readers (or viewers of the films) in suspense until near the end of the story when all is revealed. Often in a good story there are several plausible ways in which the evidence can be interpreted. It is clear that in Romans 7:7-13 that in

addition to Paul's own personal faith journey there are other references in his mind as he unfolds his message. It is clear that this is not a rhetorical device to make a theological treatise more exciting. What he describes is something he feels passionately about and his own experience of this subject has a deep influence on what he has to share with us. He is probably aware of his own general faith journey from childhood as he moved from innocence through to a greater grasp of moral choices, of right and wrong, in particular with respect to God's Moral Law, the Ten Commandments. As a young child he simply followed the guidance of his parents without thinking why he was being directed in this particular way. However, as he got older and wiser he began to grasp the significance of it, but at the very same time felt a growing desire within his inner being to rebel against these restrictions, to do his own thing, to go his own way. Until he had grasped what he was not supposed to do he didn't want to do it, but now he did, suddenly he was drawn to want to go against what he had known to be the right way to go.

There is another possibility here that Paul the Pharisee through iron self-discipline and determination had managed to keep all the Jewish rules and regulations and had been at peace with this state of affairs (Philippians 3:4b-6). But his encounter with followers of Jesus showed him that they had a level of spirituality and a relationship with God that was of a deeper quality than his own and this completely unnerved him and caused him to fight against it with all his might (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2). This is not new in church history. In 1732 two young Anglican clergymen, John and Charles Wesley, take a decision to go to serve God as evangelists to the Indians in the new colony of Georgia, USA. They were key leaders of the religious club at Oxford University that imposed very strict rules about the conduct of its members in relation to the practice of their faith. However, unable to find peace with God these brothers thought that missionary service overseas would be the best way to get closer to God. They set out in October 1735 on a ship carrying eighty English colonists and twenty-six Moravians. The Wesleys appreciated the deep faith and spiritual joy that radiated through their Moravian friends. On the lengthy journey at sea a terrifying storm arose one evening and they, together with the other English passengers on board feared that their imminent death was near. An overwhelming fear of death gripped them. Yet on board that ship a small group of Moravian Christian missionaries were calmly holding an evening service praising God with their psalm singing and praying as if it was a typical gathering for worship under more comfortable circumstances. After the storm was over John Wesley asked one of the Moravians: 'Weren't you and your women and children afraid?' 'No' was the reply, 'we were not afraid to die'. After the ship arrived in Georgia, the impact of that encounter deeply moved Wesley's heart. He had a series of conversations with a Moravian minister August Spangenberg, the founder of the Moravian movement in America, who gently asked John some questions about his relationship with God. 'Have you the witness within you?' 'Does the Spirit of God witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?' Wesley had no idea what to respond. The pastor continued: 'Do you know Jesus Christ?' At last Wesley felt able to respond: 'I know he is the Saviour of the world'. 'True', the pastor acknowledged, 'but do you know he has saved you?' [Various sources record this story]. The self-disciplined lives of these two brothers was similar in many respects to the Moravian Christians, but what the latter possessed and the Wesley brothers had yet to experience was a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Observation of and fellowship with the Moravians showed them that the law of God could be externally obeyed but to know peace with God and the joy of what He offers comes only when we commit our lives totally to God through faith in Jesus and what He has done for us on the cross.

Bible commentators have noted a possible reference back to Adam and Eve who were tempted by Satan to disobey God and eat of the fruit of the tree God had placed out of bounds

in Eden. They coveted the experiences Satan suggested would be theirs, but failed to grasp the consequences of disobedience and the loss of fellowship with God that inevitably followed (Genesis 3). The pattern of temptation, giving in to it and its consequences can be seen in this passage, but because Paul does not specify that this account was behind his choice of words it is best to suggest that it illustrates in a practical setting what he is describing for us. Other Bible commentators have raised the possibility that the illustration in Paul's mind is actually the nation of Israel. The law was not formally given until Moses received it on Mount Sinai (see Exodus 19-20). Prior to that time although sin was as prevalent in human society, it was not recognised to be as serious a matter with respect to the relationship of God and His people Israel. Within the Jewish community over the centuries the people of faith identified with their forefathers and, for example, recall and recite details of the exodus from Egypt when the annual Passover meal takes place. The youngest person asks their four questions of the leader beginning with 'Why is this night different from all other nights?' [www.Judaism.about.com section on Passover]. Paul, in I Corinthians 10:1-13, uses the story of Israel's faith journey to instruct followers of Jesus, of both Jewish and Gentile heritage, about their own relationship with God. *For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea.* ²*They were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.* ³*They all ate the same spiritual food* ⁴*and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.* ⁵*Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.* ⁶*Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did...* ¹¹*These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come.* ¹²*So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!* ¹³*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.* It seems best to understand this passage as both Paul's personal experience of his spiritual struggles, but also it equally applied to the struggles of first Adam and Eve and then later the nation of Israel and by implication to us in this generation as well, as we too acknowledge our own battles and temptations with respect to sinful thoughts and words and actions.

2. The Purpose of God's Law in our lives (Romans 7:7-12)

(a) God's Law reveals the seriousness of our sin (Romans 7:7) *What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'* Is there anyone here who has not wanted to say or do something simply because someone or some people have told you that it was not allowed? Augustine the well-known North African Christian leader (350-430AD) told of a story from his teenage years when he and a group of friends at night dared each other to steal some pears from a neighbour's garden. They carried off a large quantity of the pears, but didn't eat them. In fact most were thrown to some pigs as they made their way home. These young men were not hungry. In fact, they already had access to more tasty pears which they could have eaten. The issue was simply that breaking the law and stealing some pears was exciting. Augustine [*Confessions*, Book II] later wrote: 'I only picked them so that I might steal...I loved nothing in it except the thieving.' I am sure each of us can give personal illustrations of times when we too faced real temptation to say or do something wrong simply because we had been told it was wrong. One of the signs of God's presence our lives is the sensitivity of our conscience. We become more aware of God's standards and their application to our daily lives to a degree not previously experienced. This is a good thing. Toothache is unpleasant but without the sharp

reminder of a problem with, for example, a bacterial infection, we might not sense our need to visit the dentist! The pricking of our conscience, something Paul had experienced on the famous occasion on his Damascus Road journey (Acts 26:14) reveals spiritual life being awakened within us.

(b) **God's Law provokes sin** (Romans 7:8) ⁸ *But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. When we know what we ought to do our desire can be to do the very opposite. The gift of our rule book in first year at the high school I attended was a clear case in point. It recorded at some length rules about how we should behave in the classroom or sports field or changing rooms; it certainly covered just about every appropriate activity that took place in the school community. However, the detail given was possibly unnecessary as my peer group, and I suspect most others as well, played immature games of seeking to break the rules without getting caught. There was no way they could all be enforced even if each guideline was a sensible course of action to follow. There was nothing wrong with those school rules. They were all reasonable boundaries that enabled nearly a thousand pupils and the staff members to get along appropriately in that environment. The law was not the problem, but our reaction to it was the issue. Similarly God's Law is not a problem; instead it is the sinful reaction in human beings' hearts to His claims on our lives that is the problem to face.*

(c) **God's Law forces us to acknowledge our spiritual state** (Romans 7:9-11) ⁹ *Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.* The law of God condemns sin but it also acts as a mirror to make us aware of the seriousness of our problem. Paul in Romans 7:9 lists four stages in this process. Stage one: a complete lack of awareness that I had a sin problem. Many people in our society are in that position. *I was alive apart from the law;* we need to pray for family and friends and work colleagues who are in this position, praying that God the Holy Spirit will open their eyes to see their need of Jesus. This will only come about when a man or woman acknowledges that they have a sin problem. *but when the commandment came,* when I came to the conscious realisation that I had a choice to make and possibly a need to change the way I was living my life, I was confronted with what God had to say about where my life was going without consideration of His purposes for me. Then stage three: *sin sprang to life* – the battle was on; did I want to take it seriously enough to make the changes needed to be made? Sometimes the answer is 'yes' and sometimes 'no'. Many of us will have spoken to someone making a mess of their lives and urge them to deal with the issue so obvious to us and possibly other people as well- but just as a person with an alcohol issue has to admit and confess: 'I am an alcoholic' they cannot begin adequately to address their predicament. Each human being has to reach that place where they admit: 'I am a sinner'. It is my sins, my wrong choices that have separated me from God. Stage four is the consequence of inaction: *and I died.* No-one can be converted for another person however much we would like. No parent could swap places and endure an illness for their child or some other similar kind of scenario. It is very personal for each one of us. Have you consciously turned from your sins and trusted Jesus as Lord and Saviour? If not why not today?

(d) **God's Law is both good and useful for our lives** (Romans 7:12)¹² *So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.* Paul in Romans 7:7 asked a question which many of his readers and hearers would have been asking: *What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful?* His answer in that verse was robust and firm: *Certainly Not!* By contrast the law of God is good and useful for our lives. However, we need to acknowledge what it can and cannot do. The law cannot save anyone. The sinful human heart deceives itself into thinking

that as long as I keep out of trouble with the authorities and my outward conduct is as good as my neighbours everything will work out fine. Yet forgetting that God judges our thoughts and inward desires just as much as our actions! Sinful desires within us might tell us that we can never be as good as God so there is no point even trying to trust Jesus and go to church and any other kind of Christian duties. Or that it doesn't matter whether we are living a holy life, after all God's amazing grace will cover all our shortcomings. Sin within us warps our sense of perspective on God and His commandments to make Him appear repressive and legalistic. Yet the boundaries earthly parents place on their young children outside the home appear to be just as restrictive, but are for the wellbeing of their offspring. We want the best for them and our heavenly father wants the best for us. In Galatians 3:23-25, Paul uses vivid language to describe the purpose of the law in shepherding us towards faith in Jesus. he wrote these words: *Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed.* ²⁴ *So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith.* ²⁵ *Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.* Human sinfulness convinces us that following God's way will be narrow and repressive and prevent us enjoying ourselves, and can paint a bleak picture of Christian discipleship. Sadly sometimes Christians can confirm such a picture when the Rev. I.M. Jolly or his equivalent is our role model! Sin also minimises the eternal consequences of rejecting God's claims on our lives. The lie of the evil one to Eve in Eden: *You will not certainly die,' the snake said to the woman.* ⁵ *'For God knows that when you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'* (Genesis 3:4-5). Our calling as Christians is gently and graciously to enable people outside of faith in Christ to see the seriousness of their sin problem and the wonderful blessing of faith in and fellowship the Saviour who redeemed us from our sin the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. **The Law of God as a mirror on our lives** (Romans 7:13)

¹³ *Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognised as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.* (Romans 7:7-13) The simple test is to look at God's mirror, the Ten Commandments and ask have I kept them all or am I a sinner who has fallen short and need a Saviour to redeem me?

Commandment One: Putting God first. Exodus 20:3: *You shall have no other gods before Me.* In the New Testament this commandment is explained in more detail. Luke 10:27 reminds us: *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind";* Has God had and have first place in every area of your life, guiding your choices at home work social life or any other aspect of your life? First place in everything every time on every occasion- is anyone present who had kept this first commandment fully in your thoughts words and actions?

Commandment Two: Exodus 20:4 *You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below.* ⁵ *You shall not bow down to them or worship them;* To limit this to physical bowing down to carved images of a god made out of wood or silver or any other material is to miss the point here. It is first violated when the image or representation of who God is in our minds is inadequate. It is then broken when in our affections we desire some work or pleasure activity or whatever more than honouring Him? A quick check of how we use our limited free time will give us a clear picture of what matters most to us. Where is God on your priority list?

Commandment Three: Exodus 20:7 *You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses His name.* How many people violate this commandment multiple numbers of times on a daily basis 'Oh my God!' is a conversation

interjection or as ‘omg’ in text messaging! God regards each commandment as equally important. We need to grasp that! Yet as Christians we may not misuse His name in spoken words as described or similar ones, but do we invoke His name in promises we don’t intend to fulfil, but utter to get out of a tight corner? Do we use His name in prayers that we are saying as prayers but without really praying? We need to use His name carefully

Commandment Four: Exodus 20:8: *Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.* This commandment is the longest in terms of its application which hints that God knows this one will be one we try to evade and ignore. It applies to ourselves and our families; our employees even the animals who are used in the workplace. God modelled time for work and also time for adequate rest in life. I am sure I am not the only one who struggles to balance this one week by week. I know from conversations with other people that some of you also struggle to balance work, family church and other responsibilities. We can only ask God for wisdom and strength to try and get it right!

Commandment Five: Exodus 20:12: *Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.* Do we give appropriate time to our parents if they are alive? It can by implication be applied to appropriate acknowledgement of other members of our close families. Each family has different ways of relating to one another and there maybe geographical or other issues that prevent us seeing people regularly, but there are other ways of communicating with one another that we can have access to.

Commandment Six: Exodus 20:13: *You shall not murder.* Phew an easy one at last? Jesus in Matthew 5:21-24 stated: *‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” ²² But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, “Raca,” is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell.²³ Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴ leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.* Wilful breaches of fellowship and in effect treating someone as if they were dead by not talking to them or being unwilling to work with them is a breach of this commandment. Do I have attitude issues I need to repent of towards another brother or sister?

Commandment Seven: Exodus 20:14: *You shall not commit adultery.* Jesus in Matthew 5:27-28 declared: *You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* Abuses in our minds words or actions of this good gift of God of sexual expression to be enjoyed within the context of marriage. Chastity before and faithfulness after marriage is only the outward action. The challenge within our minds on this one may be the toughest fight some of us face to honour God. Do you need another person of your gender to pray with you through issues on this one?

Commandment Eight: Exodus 20:15: *You shall not steal.* The obvious acts of theft are just the start. The theft of time or an employer’s resources or an employees fair remuneration or selling goods to a customer that are not as good as described as just some of the challenges of obeying this commandment.

Commandment Nine: Exodus 20:16: *You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour.* The oath at the start of a court case reminds us that there as well as in regular speech we must be careful to represent the views and actions of other people as accurately as possible.

Commandment Ten: Exodus 20:17: *You shall not covet your neighbour’s house.* It lists people, property, everything! The law is a good mirror –the question is will I, will you respond appropriately to what we see in front of us as we look into God’s mirror? Amen.

