

Romans Chapter Seven

Introduction:

Many people are confused about just exactly what Paul is speaking of in Romans chapter seven. Some believe that the “first husband” is our pre-conversion condition, and that Paul is speaking specifically of his own personal experience. Others claim that the “first husband” is the moral law which is contrary to us and needs to be gotten out of the way because it condemns us. The first theory leaves us in despair of ever overcoming sin; the second condemns the law of God as being the root of the problem. But there's a third option which offers better “good news” than these two ideas. Does Paul here have a larger perspective in mind?

Professor A.B. Bruce says that he does: “To shut men up to the way of faith there is needed a demonstration of the inherent sinfulness of human nature. This demonstration the apostle supplies in his statement as to the sinful proclivity of the flesh. The relative section of the Epistle to the Romans [chapters 6 and 7] is not indeed a formal contribution to the doctrine as to the universality of sin; it rather deals with the flesh as a hindrance to Christian holiness.”

“Personal in form, the confession is really the confession of humanity, of every man who is *sarkinos*, living in the flesh. The *ego* that speaks is not the individual *ego* of Paul, but the [corporate] *ego* of the human race. It is idle therefore to inquire whether he refers to the period antecedent to his conversion or to the post-conversion period.” Romans chapter seven therefore is addressing the “highly idealized representation of human weakness in the moral sphere. ... We miss the didactic significance of this passage if we take it as merely biographical, instead of viewing it as typical and representative. That it is meant to be typical is manifest from the abstract manner in which the flesh is spoken of. It is not St. Paul’s flesh that is at fault, it is *the* flesh, the flesh which all men wear, the flesh in which dwells sin.” (*St. Paul’s Conception of Christianity*, pp. 138-139; 1896 ed.).

Important concepts about sin:

1. Sinless nature — a character that has never been tainted by sin and its effects; possesses no constitutional inclinations or propensities toward sin; is holy, pure and in harmony with God’s will and character (i.e. God’s moral law). Unfallen angels possess a sinless nature. Adam and Eve were created by the hand of God with sinless natures. The Son of God, as God before His incarnation, intrinsically possessed a sinless nature.
2. Sinful nature — a nature that has been corrupted by sin, and is fully capable of committing acts of sin. Sometimes used to refer to the fallen, sinful flesh, but the concepts of character (attributes that make and distinguish us as individuals) and flesh (Gr. *sarx*; “the concrete form of human nature marked by Adam’s fall” — Karl Barth) must not be confused. Sinful nature possesses the proclivity to sin which is inherited from Adam, and has been passed through our human ancestry in an exponential fashion, increasing in power with each

generation. When Adam chose to rebel against God in the Garden, his God-given sinless nature was corrupted through sin; it became bent toward self (“iniquity”), and thus began the sinister career of increasingly corrupt influence upon the moral character of all humanity. Adam’s revolt against the expressed will of God effected his posterity’s physical being (flesh) and our moral character.

3. Sinning nature — the principle of sin manifesting itself in the life as active rebellion against God’s law; it is the sinful nature expressing itself and influencing our characters. The sinning nature develops as we intentionally and deliberately choose to yield to the proclivities of the sinful nature. Indulging the inclinations and propensities of our sinful nature enhances and reinforces them making them harder to deny in the future. Thus we become slaves to sin through our indulgence of and yielding to the clamors of the sinful nature, and our characters are damaged as a result.

Four consequences resulted from the fall of Adam that effected our character and nature:

1. Shame — sense of humiliating disgrace caused by a consciousness of guilt for intentionally violating a trust or commitment. The immediate result of taking the forbidden fruit was that Adam and Eve recognized nakedness in themselves. Adam’s mind straightaway experienced a sense of guilt as a result of his willful (with knowledge of truth and its consequences) rebellion against God’s explicit instruction regarding the tree in the “midst of the garden.” In an attempt to avoid this new conviction of guilt, Adam and Eve hid themselves behind fig-leaved garments and lurked in the shrubbery of the Garden.
2. Fear — the anticipation of danger, and the ensuant desire to avoid that which will bring harm. Encountering their former Friend who visited with them every afternoon in the Garden was now to be avoided.
3. Barrier — an obstacle (physical or cognitive) that impedes movement of objects, or free association between parties, ideas, or conversation. When Adam sinned, he immediately found himself unable to realize his guilt and confess it, so he erected an unconscious mental barrier against the unwelcome truth of his sin. Barriers exclude accountability and responsibility for one’s own actions. Blaming Eve as the source of the problem was the “natural” process ensuing from this barrier.
4. Enmity — actively hostile toward another, often without reasonable foundation. Friendship, companionship, and selfless love were replaced by suspicion and hatred. Just as Adam blamed Eve, she in turn blamed the serpent and, ultimately, God who created the serpent. Now, when Christ approached them in the Garden, they viewed Him as an interloper who, by His very presence with them, would bring condemnation for their transgression against Him.

Definitions of Paul's terminology:

1. Carnal mind (Romans 7:4; 8:7; 1 Corinthians 3:3, 4) — the mind and thoughts continually focused on the things of this fallen, evil world, and the ardent desire for “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life” (1 John 2:16). The carnal mind is selfishly motivated in all that it thinks and does, therefore, it is at direct odds with the will of God in all things.
2. Enmity (Romans 8:7; Ephesians 2:15-16; cf. James 4:4; Genesis 3:15) — actively hostile, an adversary (as Satan), animosity and antagonism toward another, often without reasonable foundation. It is the direct result of the carnal mind being bent toward self.
3. Old man (Gr. *paleo-anthropos*; Romans 6:6; Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9) — literally, the antique, or worn out man. It is a phrase that describes man's condemned, unregenerate self when under sin's control. In the soteriological context of his letter to the Romans, Paul coined this phrase as a metaphor for the *sinning* nature of man, the nature which willfully and continuously commits acts of rebellion against God. Note that Paul is not speaking of the *sinful* nature of man, but the *sinning* nature; this is clear from Colossians 3:9 where he speaks of “putting off the old man with his deeds.” We will not “put off” the sinful flesh until the second coming of Christ (2 Corinthians 15:53-54). However, we can “put off” the deeds or acts of sin and rebellion against God which constitute the sinning nature.
4. Body of death (Romans 7:24) — synonymous with sinful flesh because the body of death “houses” the sinning nature that rebels against God's character and will.

The carnal mind, old man, and sinning nature are synonymous concepts in Paul's theological presentation of the concept of sin in his letter to the Romans.

Application:

The discussion in Romans chapter 7 is not about whether or not Paul (or any individual) is converted or unconverted. The apostle is speaking about the broader concept of the sinning nature in contrast to the righteous law of God. He is addressing the universal problem of our fallen and condemned condition, and the remedy for it.

The illustration in Romans 7:1-3 is intended to clarify what Paul has been talking about in chapter 6 about “the old man,” slavery to sin, and freedom from sin through the death of Christ as our sacrificial Lamb. In 6:6 Paul tells us that “our old man is crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (cf. Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 5:14, 15). This idea is paralleled by chapter seven's marriage metaphor and the necessity of the first husband's death.

There are four elements in chapter seven's illustration — the law, the woman, and the first and second husbands.

Some have defined the first husband as the Ten Commandment law of God, basing their opinion on verses 1 through 3 in which Paul states “the *law* has dominion” over the woman, and that the woman must be “loosed from the *law* of her husband,” that “if her husband be dead, she is free from the *law*.” Superficially, these verses seem to correlate the law and husband as one element of the story. However, from Paul's own declaration, we cannot charge the law with being the faulty husband, because Paul states that “the law is holy” (vs. 12). There is no fault to be found in any aspect of the law, which is a transcript of God's holy character.

Paul defines what he means by the law in verse 7 showing that he is referring to the Ten Commandments of God in which lust and covetousness are condemned. The righteous law of God is impersonal, detached, high and lifted up, condemning our “marriage” to first husband. The moral law has no grace, no mercy, and no power to forgive. By itself, it can not justify or “make right” our crooked character; it can only condemn that which is in opposition to it. But this does not make the law evil or necessitate its removal or change.

Let's examine the remaining three elements. It is understood that we (corporately speaking) are the woman involved in the bad marriage. The second husband (the “good husband”) is obviously Christ, as Paul indicates in verse 4 (“even to Him that is raised from the dead”). Paul makes it clear that we cannot marry the second husband so long as the first husband is living; to attempt to do so is adultery. All through the Bible God has declared that He will not participate in a meretricious relationship (cf. Jer. 3:9; 13:27; Eze. 16:17; 33; etc.).

But, who is the *first* husband?

Contextual evidence indicates that Paul is drawing his imagery in chapter 7 from what he previously said about slavery to sin in chapter 6. The force of sin is metaphorically called the “law in my members” (vs. 23). It is the “old man” spoken of in chapter 6 working through the sinful nature (that every person is born with), seeking to express itself through acts of rebellion against God (see James 4:1-4). He has identified “the old man” as that which needs to die. It is the old man, the sinning nature which remains continually in rebellion against God, that keeps us in bondage to sin and death.

From this morbid discussion in chapter 6, Paul quickly moves on to proclaim the glorious news that the old man, our “body of sin,” should not have dominion over us (vs. 14). We have been set free from bondage to sin, and by faith in Christ, we will serve Him in righteousness (vs. 22). From this declaration of our freedom from sin's power — through death to sin — and to come at the same point from a different angle, Paul then transitions into his illustration using marriage as his metaphor.

In chapter 7 Paul says the first husband needs to die so that the woman can be released from a marriage which produces bondage (vs. 3). What the first husband represents in this metaphor is indicated in verse 5: “*for when we were in the flesh* [i.e. yielding to the clamors of the sinful nature; these words do not imply that there is ever a deliverance from the sinful nature prior to the second coming of Christ], *the motions of sins* [sinful passions which produce sinful acts], *which were by the law* [i.e. defined by the Ten Commandments; see vss. 7-8], *did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death.*” It is our succumbing to the demands of the flesh (i.e. sinning nature; see discussion above) that brings forth the “fruit” of the second death (James 1:14-15).

Since both the old man and the first husband bring bondage, and both must die, the first husband and the “old man” emerge as parallel concepts in Paul’s thinking.

The Biblical concept of marriage is that the two parties should become one flesh (Genesis 2:24; Mark 10:8). To be bound in such a manner (and for it to be a happy union) means that the two are of one mind. If they are to walk together peaceably, they must be in agreement about how life should be lived (Amos 3:3). This is precisely the condition Paul speaks of between the woman and the first husband. We are born in sinful flesh with inclinations and propensities toward sin and rebellion against God. Indulgence of these inclinations and propensities ripens into a *sinning* nature as habits of sin are developed and our character is deranged. We become married to the *sinning* nature, enjoying the “pleasures of sin” that come from this carnal union.

There is no hint in verses 1-3 that the woman is unhappily married to her first husband. It is Paul’s outside observation that such a marriage is an illicit one and should be dissolved, though he admits that this dissolution can only come about through the death of the parties involved. The plot thickens when Paul reveals that there is a second Man who wishes to marry the woman, but He cannot while the first husband lives (introduced here, Paul expounds this idea in chapter 8).

The whole of chapter 6 speaks of the necessity of death to an old way that is slavery and misery under bondage to sin (vss. 6, 7, 11-12, 14). As Paul stated in these verses, in order to be free from sin and death, we must reckon ourselves dead to sin. The old man must die. But we must die also. In Galatians 2:20, Paul makes this point emphatically clear when he states, “I am crucified with Christ.” When we die to sin, our old man (the sinning nature) also perishes. Thus, by faith in Christ’s power over sin, we surrender to Him; we identify with Christ in His death on the cross (vs. 3). Through baptism, which is a public declaration of our willingness to die to sin and self (vs. 4), we are found alive in Christ (vs. 5, 8). We are become His servants in righteousness, and are no longer earning the wages of sin (vss. 22, 23).

Paul admonishes us to “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5; Rom. 12:2) The carnal (sinning) nature and the mind of Christ are in bitter opposition to one another. “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” (Romans 8:7). The battle is for the mind and it is our choice which mind we will possess, the mind of Christ that is in alignment with all the will of God, or the mind of Satan that is at enmity

with the will of God.

Paul put it this way in his letter to the Ephesians: “This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: who being past feeling have given themselves over unto lasciviousness, to work all uncleanness with greediness. But ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard Him, and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus: that ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.” (Ephesians 4:17-24).

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