

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 7:7-9

Student Notes

Given all of the difficult things about the Mosaic Code that Paul has already expressed, the next question he asks in verse seven in this: "What shall we say, then? Is the law sin?"

Once again, Paul finishes a question by making a strong statement to the contrary. He says, "Certainly Not!" So given the vast difficulties of keeping the Law, why does Paul say this? It's because he sees the Law functioning in several areas. Let's look at them together:

- **The Mosaic Law Reveals Sin: v. 7**

In Romans 3:20 Paul has already told us, "... Through the law we become conscious of sin". Now he expands on that statement when he says, "I would not have known what sin was except through the law."

One of the effects of the Mosaic Code is that it unmask and exposes sin as a rebellion. Paul found himself under the conviction of sin by the Mosaic Code.

Paul's illustration: The Tenth Commandment; "You shall not covet" -- "For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "Do not covet."

Legalistic Righteousness versus Internal Righteousness: Paul wasn't perfect and had never been perfect. Yet he says ... as to the Law, he was "legalistically righteous".

John Stott: Paul may certainly have been outwardly righteous ... as far as the Mosaic Code went ... but inwardly, that wasn't the case.

Greek word here for "covet" – any illicit internal desire. The word is used to describe a drive, a lust, an illicit desire. It has the overtones of idolatry –

because what is desired is actually something put before the desire for God.

- **The Law Provokes Sin: v. 8**

“But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.”

Greek word for “opportunity”: “Aphorme”. It was used of a military base, “the starting-point or base of operations for an expedition.” It’s also pictured as the “springboard” for further advance.

Sin establishes within us a base or foothold, by means of the commandments which provoke us. He sees this provocative power of the law as our daily experience.

In Paul’s view, ever since Adam and Eve, human beings have been enticed and drawn by what we are forbidden to do or have. In Adam and Eve’s case it was “forbidden fruit”.

“Contra-Suggestibility” – a propensity to react negatively to any directive we are given: “Keep Out”; “Road Closed”.

Augustine: Sometimes it’s not the item we want, it’s just the excitement of getting away with something sinful.

Sin, not the Law is the real culprit. John Stott: “Sin twists the function of the law from revealing, exposing and condemning sin into encouraging and even provoking it. We cannot blame the law for proclaiming God’s will.”

- **The Law Condemns Sin: v. 9**

“Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.”

Is Paul talking about himself, the Jews, his pre-Christian experience, or his current struggle with doing the wrong things?

We can only conclude that Paul is including himself in everyone else’s experience of sin and temptation. As one scholar put it, “Paul is in solidarity with both the human and Jewish race”.

Breaking down the verse:

Once I was alive apart from law....

When was Paul alive apart from the Mosaic Law?

- **In Adam?**

Some have suggested this was in the person of Adam ... whom we could say at one time was in a state of innocence. Before his rebellion, he had a perfectly holy and righteous life, but without the Mosaic Law.

In Israel?

Some see this as referring to Israel before they camped at the foot of Mount Sinai and God gave Moses the Law.

Before that time, the sons of Abraham did have The Law. Paul says they had general revelation – the law of nature. They also had the Abrahamic covenant – one that involved circumcision, sacrifices, and several duties.

Genesis 18:19; “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.”

It is possible to see Paul's words as referring to that moment when the Law came from Mount Sinai. At that moment, a people who had lived apart from the full Law being revealed now came under its full, binding effects.

At Conversion?

Albert Barnes: Paul is speaking of the moment when his outward conformity to the Law came into crisis.

As Barnes puts it:

“While a Pharisee; who, though he was born under the law... yet was without the knowledge of the spirituality of it.

[The Law] had not as yet entered into his heart and conscience; and whilst this was his case he was "alive", he did not know that he "was dead in trespasses and sins".

“But when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.”

Albert Barnes says that the Apostle who had lived an outwardly righteous life was suddenly immersed in “power and light from above”.

A graphic picture: “Sin sprang to life”. “Sin lifted up its monstrous head ... and exerted itself ... its rebellion and corruption were seen and felt, which show that it was not dead before, only seemed to be so.”

During his life as a Pharisee Paul actually believed that because he was outwardly conforming to the Mosaic Code, sin was not a real issue. Outward conformity had “tamed the snake” – if the snake was even alive.

Ephesians 2:1-3:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh[a] and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.”

Paul saw himself as dead in sin, dead in law, under a sentence of death which he now had within himself. Before, he saw himself as faultless – following the exactness of the external law. Now he saw himself as under the penalty of death.

What did all of this teach him? He learned that there can be no justification of a sinner by the deeds of the law, because the law not only gives us the revelation of sin – it judges us for it.

More on this next time