

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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I Myself: The I's of Romans 7:1-25

"Who am I?" It's one of the questions we ask ourselves periodically. Mums sometimes wonder if they are just a wife, mother and taxi driver; or the individual they used to be years ago. The answer to "Who am I?" might be complex. Like that mum, I might fulfil several roles, but who is the **real** me deep inside? Today we start a new series with the title 'I Myself' and we'll be finding that the answer the Bible gives us is sometimes quite complex as well!

Our passage for today is Romans 7:1-25 and we will see that the word 'I' occurs dozens of times, especially in the final section. So, prepare for a voyage of self-discovery!

The story so far...

As ever, when we launch into the middle of a book of the Bible, it is good to remind ourselves of the context and the 'story so far'. Paul has been setting out the great doctrines of the Gospel of God. He has proved our universal guilt and sinfulness, and our need of a Saviour. He has established justification by faith, and how that justification is based on Christ's death and resurrection. He has shown how Christ has died for our sins. From Romans 5 onwards, Paul has been setting out how we must reckon (or count) **ourselves** dead to sin and alive to God through Christ and he has outlined some of the practical implications for our lives as believers.

Romans 7

In Romans 7 the Apostle addresses the implications of our being connected to Christ in His death and resurrection on our relationship to the law. Romans 6 tells us that "*he who has died has been freed from sin*" (Romans 6:7), and that "*Death no longer has dominion over him*" (Romans 6:9). The question in Romans 7 is, what is the impact of this on my relationship to the law?

Let's read Romans 7:1-6: "*Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives? For the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the Body of Christ, that you may be married to another - to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter*" (Romans 7:1-6).

The doctrine of the chapter

Romans 7:1-6 set out the doctrine of the chapter. The first simple, but crucial, point is that the Law of Moses only has authority over people while they are alive. The example Paul uses is the marriage bond. While a woman's husband lives, the law of God is very strict about her connection to him. She cannot lawfully marry another man: any attempt to do so would make her an adulteress. But if her husband, dies the situation is completely altered. She is now free to marry again. Death has broken her obligations under the law. When Paul applies this example to our obligations to the law he makes us the women and the law our husband, but he swaps around the person who dies. The husband (law) has not died. The law remains alive, but **we** (the woman) have died. In the example, if the women had died she would obviously not be able to remarry! When Paul says, "*you... have become dead to the law through the Body of Christ*", he is referring to Christ's death, and the fact that we died in Him. In the way Paul applies the illustration, he makes plain that we have both died and been raised again. When we died, all our obligations to the law (our previous husband) were severed. In resurrection, we are free to be "married to another", that is to Christ. In this new relationship we are able to, "*bear fruit to God*" (Romans 7:4). We cannot be married to the law and to Christ at the same time. We died to one husband, and are linked to another in our new, resurrection life.

Paul uses the expression, "*when we were in the flesh*" (Romans 7:5), to refer to what we were like before we became believers. In that condition, the law aroused our sinfulness and we produced a very different kind of fruit, "*fruit unto*

death" (Romans 7:4). We died to the law so that we could serve Christ in the newness of the Spirit. This, then, is the doctrine of our position before the law in a nutshell; we have died to it and it has no more claims on us.

It may be useful, at this point, to make a distinction between dying **under** the law and dying **to** the law; because the outcomes are radically different. If I live, break the law (which we all do) and then die, while still **under** the jurisdiction of the law; the result is judgement and condemnation. Dying 'to the law' means that our death takes us completely out of the jurisdiction of the law. It is only possible if we die, and are raised again, in Christ. In fact, Christ Himself died **under** the law, taking our judgement and condemnation. If we died and rose with Him, then our old life, which was subject to the jurisdiction of the law, is totally gone. Our new life in Christ is not subject to the law and its condemnation at all (see Romans 8:1).

Some questions arising

In the manner that Paul so often adopts in the book of Romans, he goes on to address some potential questions, or objections, that might arise in response to this doctrine. We need to read Romans 7:7-14: *"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just, and good. Has then what is good become death to me? Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful. For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin"* (Romans 7:7-14).

The questions seem to refer to the statement in Romans 7:5, *"For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death."*

Is the law sin?

The first question addressed is, *"Is the law sin?"* (Romans 7:7). The line of reasoning seems to be, "If the law arouses sinful passions, is the law therefore sin?" Paul replies with his characteristic, *"Certainly not!"* (Romans 7:7). The law makes sin evident for what it is, it even stirs it up, but the law is holy and good. In this section sin is personified as a character determined to destroy us. Sin would still have been wrong and guilt worthy without the law but it would not have stood out in the same way.

Paul says he would not have recognised sin for what it was without the law. He would have still had a sinful nature, and evil desires, but he would have not recognised them for what they were unless the law had forbidden them. Once the law told him not to covet, not only did he recognise coveting as wrong, because it broke the law, he also found that the very prohibition made him covet more and more! In this way the sin that might once have appeared dead, was now very much alive. We are like little children who, as soon as they are told not to do something, have an overwhelming urge to do just that one thing! The very forbidding increases the urge to disobey.

The fault is not in the law. It would make no sense if I were to put a thermometer in my living room, find that it was only 10°C, and then blame the thermometer for making the room cold! The thermometer is doing precisely that for which it was designed, the problem it is exposing lies with the heating system!

The law, Paul states is, *"holy, and the commandment holy and just, and good"* (Romans 7:12). The problem lies in my sinful nature that the law exposes and even provokes.

The other, unnamed, actor in this drama is my conscience. Once the law is clearly seen, it shapes my conscience to condemn the sin that it forbids. So, not only am I condemned before God for breaking the holy, just and good law (Romans 7:12), but my own conscience agrees with the sentence of death and I am thoroughly condemned.

Does the law produce death?

Sin and death are linked closely together. Sin always produces death. So, *"sin revived and I died"* (Romans 7:9). The end result is death. This gives rise to the next question, "Does the law produce death?" Nobody should be surprised that the answer is, "Certainly not!" But surely, if the law is truly good it should produce life, not death. In Leviticus 18:5, God says, *"You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgements, which if a man does, he shall live by them."* Jesus Himself appears to quote this verse when He says, to a questioning Jewish lawyer, *"You have answered rightly, do this and you will live"* (see Luke 10:25-37). So how can the end result be, not life, but death? The answer, once again, is sin. To quote our passage, *"But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is*

good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful" (Romans 7:13). It was sin that produced death. "*The wages of sin is death*" says Romans 6:23. Sin, again personified as our enemy, takes the good law and, by it, produces the terrible outcome of death, both in my conscience and in judgement and condemnation by God.

We are all too familiar with how a wicked person can use almost anything to bad effect. A hammer is a very useful tool when used for its intended purpose, but it can easily be turned into a murder weapon. It doesn't need to be modified or distorted, just used by a bad person with evil intent.

So the law, that, if it could have been kept, would have produced life, instead is used by sin to produce death, that the sin might be seen to be "*exceedingly sinful*" (Romans 7:13).

The law then is spiritual. It comes from God. It is holy, just and good because God, its Author, is these things. It is spiritual because God is spirit. There is no hint of fault or imperfection in the law of God. The problem is that "*I am carnal, sold under sin*" (Romans 7:14). Sin is the murderer: the law is the innocent weapon!

Personal experience of this doctrine

Now we are coming to the passage that suggests the title of this morning's talk. We will read Romans 7:15-25

"For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practise. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin" (Romans 7:15-25).

We have found so far that we have died to our harsh first husband (the law) and been 'remarried' to a gracious new husband (Christ). We have transferred completely from one husband to another. We have further seen that the law was not flawed, sinful or inherently deadly. The real problem was sin, and our sinful nature. We have had doctrine and explanations. The outstanding issue, and it is a big one, is the question of our own experience of reality.

The earlier parts of Romans dealt with our sins and their guilt. It might not be comfortable to have our guilt pointed out, but once we have seen it clearly, and faced the dreadful implications, we are ready to accept the forgiveness based on Christ's sacrifice of Himself. It is comparatively easy for us to understand that the guilt for those past sins is gone, and we are able to enjoy the liberty and release this brings. The teaching of this chapter is that we have completely died to the law and that the person who was under its jurisdiction is dead and gone. The difficulty is that this does not appear to agree *at all* with our everyday experience. It is soon abundantly clear to us that we are still very capable of sin on a daily, hourly basis! It is much harder for us to grasp how this can be reconciled with God's statements about our current position, and this can be very disturbing.

A revealing case study

This final section describes the experience of a person who fully accepts the spirituality and goodness of the law, and has a desire to do what it says, but finds that it is perfectly impossible to make human nature obey it! This person's position is exquisitely uncomfortable. They have a will and desire to do what the law requires, but find that they are quite incapable of putting that into practice. They hate the sins that break this good law, but find it is simply impossible to stop doing them. They can no longer understand what they are doing.

The better their desires and intentions are, the more frustrated they will become by their inability to enact them. The more they struggle to restrain their sinfulness the more it bursts out from under the restraints. It is plain where this person is focussed. I can count around forty uses of the words 'I', 'me' and 'my' in Romans 7:15-25. This poor person is looking in at themselves in horror, and becoming more and more frustrated with all that they see. They are starting to distinguish two persons, two 'I's within themselves. One 'I' (or 'I myself' as some translations put it) is agreeing with the claims of God's law, but every attempt to impose them on the 'I' that represents the 'flesh', or the old nature, is ending in failure. They arrive at an important turning point, however, when they reach the conclusion, "*That in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells*" (Romans 7:18). They recognise a 'me' that has no good at all connected with it. This isn't just hyperbole or exaggeration; it is a fundamental discovery that the old human nature has not a single shred of good in it, and can never be compelled to fulfil the law. Any attempt to please God along these lines is totally doomed to failure.

The distinction starts to become clearer when the man says, *"Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me"* (Romans 7:20). Plainly there are two actors here. An 'I' that does not will the evil and an 'I' (synonymous with 'the sin that dwells in me') that actually does the evil. This is then stated as a principle of action, or law, in the phrase, *"I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good"* (Romans 7:21). The 'I' who wills to do good, finds that evil is always present with him. It is so definite; it can be stated as a clear 'law'. This law should not be confused with the law of God that has been the subject of the chapter so far. This law of God is mentioned again in the next sentence, *"For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man"* (Romans 7:22). So the 'I myself' identified as the 'inward man' approves and delights in God's law.

But there is a rival law operating in this person's life mentioned in the very next clause, *"But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members"* (Romans 7:23). This *"law of sin... in my members"* (Romans 7:23) is in opposition to the "law of my mind" and the law of God, and is routinely victorious, bringing the person into captivity. It is clear then, that there are two 'I's: one who agrees with God's law and wishes to obey it, and one which can only sin. And the one who can only sin does not appear to be the least bit dead!

It is no surprise that this man is starting to despair! He cries out, *"O wretched man that I am!"* (Romans 7:24). No wonder he is wretched, since he can get no peace and no victory! Finally, he looks outside of himself. He doesn't ask, "What can I do? or "Where should I turn", but, *"Who will deliver me from this body of death?"* (Romans 7:24). His condition is so hopeless, he recognises that he needs somebody else to step into the situation and deliver him. It is at this point that he realises the deliverance has already been accomplished! He doesn't need to be delivered, so much as to recognise a deliverance that has already occurred, and he breaks out into praise, saying, *"I thank God - through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* (Romans 7:25).

While he was only looking at the law of God, and his own capabilities, he was trapped in an endless cycle of frustration. At the end, he looks up and sees the grace of God in Christ Jesus. He recognises that his enslavement to both, the sin that is in his nature, and the law that perpetually condemns him, have been broken by his own death. He is like the wife with the new husband: a husband with a very different character!

Lessons learned

But this man has learned some very important truths through his struggles. He has learned:

1. That his sinful nature (the flesh) cannot be improved and contains *"no good thing"* (see Romans 7:18);
2. He can distinguish between himself, who wills to do good, and the sin that dwells in him, that wills the reverse;
3. He knows that the sin in him is always too strong for him to resist by himself, without outside help; and
4. Most crucially, and central to this whole chapter, he has learned that deliverance is already a fact, because he is not really alive in the flesh any more. He has died to the law which condemned him and is now risen, and married to Christ in a new life. He is no longer in the flesh at all, he is dead to sin.

The final remark of the chapter is, *"So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin."* (Romans 7:25). This verse sets out plainly the two 'I's. What we might call the 'old I' is our sinful nature, which will always, and can only, obey the principle of sin. This is no longer to be considered as the 'real me', since God has declared it dead and buried! The mind is the true seat of 'I myself', the new, real 'I', the inward, or new, man who has the resurrection life of Christ. This 'I' is not wedded to the old husband of the law, but to the new husband, Christ.

The power in which this new life is lived, and how it pleases God, is the subject of Romans 8, which is beyond our scope for today, but well worth reading later on, if you have time!

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we give thanks for the deliverance You have given us in the death and resurrection of Your Son, the Lord Jesus. Preserve us from the frustration of seeking to keep the law through our own efforts, and enable us to enjoy the freedom of serving you, in the power of a new life, so bearing fruit to God. Amen.

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