

The Christian's Dual Nature

Interpreting Scripture—Part 3

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. (1 John 2:1)

This lesson is easy to understand but hard to accept, the most prominent cause being the widespread acceptance that Romans 7 is speaking of Christians when it is not. We're dealing with the Christian's so-called "dual" nature, where we supposedly sin against our will. The text is Romans 7:14-20:

For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

Paul is saying that he has no control over doing wrong. He wants to do good, but can't; he sins instead. He says he's not even personally responsible—sin is doing it. It's the old "devil-made-me-do-it." Is this a legitimate interpretation? Are Christians hapless puppets, yanked back and forth between doing right and doing wrong? Is the power of the Holy Spirit so insufficient that it cannot give us victory over sin? It's a teaching prevalent in our church today, that may cause folks to justify their wrongdoing.

When we examine Paul's arguments here, we find that the context begins in chapter 6 and ends in chapter 8. So the first problem is that most folks read Romans 7 *without considering chapters 6 and 8*. All three chapters involve a rather long and difficult argument presented by Paul.

For example, let's look at chapter 6, where we see several contradictions to this teaching:

Vs. 1: Shall we go on sinning that grace may abound? *May it never be—God forbid!*

Vs. 2: How shall we who died to sin *still live in it?*

Vs. 4: Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, *so we too might walk in newness of life.*

Vs. 6: ...our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, *so that we would no longer be slaves to sin.*

Vs. 7: he who has died is *freed from sin.*

What was Paul saying in 7:20? *If I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.* It sounds like sin is reigning in his body, forcing him to do things he doesn't want to do. The whole gist of 7:14–20 shows a person being *unwillingly* dragged along by fleshly desires, *unable* to conform to God's law. Yet chapter 6 just said that we've died and been set free *from* sin, not *to* sin. There certainly seems to be a contradiction. So what is Paul saying? Why didn't he write it in clearer language?

The short answer is that chapter 7 is speaking of the *unsaved* person, not the Christian. How do we know this? Paul was writing to Jews who were familiar with the Law. They were Christians but were under constant pressure from non-Christian Jews to either mix the OT Law into Christianity or revert to

Judaism altogether.

To those of us living in modern Western society, Moses' Law doesn't seem like a "big deal." To the Jewish mind, however, the Law was a very precious thing, so Paul had to tread lightly. He couldn't just blurt out, "Look, the Law was great in its day, but we have Christ now." To speak disrespectfully of Moses would have driven his Jewish audience back to Judaism.

We forget that most of the world does not think as we do. We are a get-down-to-business, give-it-to-me-straight culture. We tend to bring this mindset with us when we read the bible. We take it as black-and-white: *the bible says we can't stop sinning...says so right here.* Period. Let's move on.

Paul had to use a subtle approach to this delicate issue. Notice the strategic use of pronouns in his argument. From 6:1 to 7:14, he uses 'we' 20 times, most of them listed here:

- Are **we** to continue in sin...?
- How shall **we** who died to sin still live in it?
- ...all of **us** who have been baptized...
- ...**we** have been buried with Him...
- ...**we** too might walk in newness of life.
- ...if **we** have become united with Him
- ...**we** shall also be in the likeness of His resurrection
- ...**our** old self was crucified with Him
- ...**our** body of sin...
- ...**we** would no longer be slaves to sin
- ...if **we** have died with Christ, **we** believe that **we** shall also live with Him

Paul includes himself along *with* his Jewish brethren. He is showing his *agreement* with them. In 6:15-23, he switches to "you." He's not pointing fingers, but reinforcing what they already knew in their new-found Christian faith: "YOU once were sinners...NOW you're not," is the sense of those passages.

Now begins the apostle's segue into deeper waters in chapter 7:

Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives?

Notice the tender accusation and loving appeal—*don't you know...brothers.* Of course, they knew! Then he includes the reader into this celebrated group—*I'm talking to you who understand the ancient writings.* Another appeal, this time to their human side. They knew the OT and were proud of it. The Gentile Christians knew almost nothing about the scriptures, and so the Jewish Christians were the "go-to" guys in this area.

In 7:7, the apostle suddenly poses a very blasphemous question: *Is the Law sin?* Blasphemy! He quickly puts in, *May it never be! Or, God forbid!* Because of the unthinkable proposal of the Holy Law being sin itself, Paul now excludes all 2nd and 3rd person pronouns. He begins to use the 1st person.

DON'T MISS THIS, BECAUSE THIS IS WHERE PEOPLE TRIP OVER PAUL'S JUDICIOUS USE

OF PRONOUNS TO AVOID OFFENDING HIS JEWISH READERS.

From verse 7 to the end of the chapter, he uses ‘I,’ ‘me,’ and ‘my’ 46 times to illustrate the effects of sin on someone *under the Law*.¹ On the heels of such a hostile question—is the Law sin?—he seeks to exclude his fellow Jews so as not to cause offense. If we change the pronoun, we get a very accusatory tone, which Paul wanted to avoid so as not to cause offense and thus lose his audience:

- Sin, taking opportunity through the Law, produced in YOU coveting of every kind...
- YOU were once alive apart from the Law...
- When the Law came, sin became alive, and YOU died...
- (The law) proved to result in death for YOU...
- Sin...deceived YOU and through (the Law) killed YOU...

He had just posed the question, *is the Law sin?* That explosive question would have shut out any good Jew from listening further. So Paul launches into this diatribe, using himself so as not to offend his brothers:

- I am of flesh
- What I am doing, I do not understand
- I am not practicing what I would like to do
- I am doing the very thing I hate
- If I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law
- No longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me
- I know that nothing good dwells in me

You can keep on going, but you see the point. He is using tact and humility instead of aiming accusations at them: *What YOU are doing, YOU do not understand...*

Scriptural Evidence

If we, as born-again believers, are still sinning against our will, then what use is Christianity? Where is the power of the Holy Spirit? Chapter 6 contradicts the idea that “we can’t stop sinning”:

Vs. 1: We are NOT to continue in sin so that grace may increase

Vs. 2: We who died to sin SHALL NOT still live in it.

Vs. 6: Our old self was crucified with Him...so that we would NO LONGER BE slaves to sin.

Vs. 7: The person who has died is FREED from sin.

Vs. 11: Consider yourselves to be DEAD to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Paul then says, “Therefore—after all these things I just told you—do not let sin *reign* in your mortal body *so that you obey its lusts*, and do not *go on* presenting the members of your body to sin as

¹The inspired writers never used the 1st person to such an extraordinary degree, as it would have painted them as being self-centered. Other scriptures where 1st person pronouns are used always demonstrate an inflated ego. (Dan 4:30; Luke 12:16-19, etc)

instruments of unrighteousness...sin shall not be master over you.”

There is another eye-opener in 7:4:

Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined (*MARRIED*) to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, so that we might bear fruit for God.

Being married to Christ means that we are to be pure and undefiled.

I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a *pure virgin to Him*. (2 Cor 11:1-2)

Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure. (1 John 3:3)

These and other verses are meaningless and contradictory in the face of this teaching. When we look at chapter 8, there is once again complete disagreement with the ‘I Can’t Help Myself’ teaching. Some of the verses in chapter 8:

- The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus *has set you free from the law of sin and death*.
- ...the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, *who do not walk (live) according to the flesh* but according to the Spirit.

Note the comparison between the old man of chapter 7 and the new man of chapter 8:

OLD: Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on fleshly things pursuits.

NEW: Those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

OLD: The mind set on the flesh is death.

NEW: The mind set on the Spirit is life and peace.

OLD: The mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, *for it is not even able to do so*—“I can’t do good!”—and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

NEW: You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.

Paul then sums it up in verses 12 & 13:

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—*for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*

Christians don’t sin against their will. This is not to say that Christians never sin:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8, 9)

Both Paul and John speak of *practicing* sin—making it a hobby that we devote ourselves to. Christians are not engaged in willful sin. But we do miss the mark. We get angry, say things we shouldn’t say, etc.

When we go to God through Christ asking for forgiveness, “He is faithful and just to forgive us.” That is much different from the person in Romans 7, who can’t do good even though he wants to.

Conclusion

The ancient philosophers used subtle techniques in their oratories and debates, something which Paul apparently used in his preaching and writing. Our modern culture is rather unsophisticated in these debate styles, preferring blatancy over subtlety.

When I accepted Jesus Christ and was baptized, I immediately ceased from drinking, cursing, and looking at pornography. Twelve years have passed, and I’ve never returned to the trough. That, my friend, is what it means to have the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christianity has power over sin. We’re not poor schmucks being dragged into the pig pen against our will.

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