

A Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans [7]

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Chapter 7:1-25: Paul's Analysis of the Law and Human Condition

Verses 1-12: Association between Law, Sin and Death: Paul gives his very complex analysis of the working of the Mosaic Law, its relationship to human conduct and what it actually does to human beings. Law is applicable only as long as one lives. Without law there is no awareness of sin. Guilt of sin is generated by the existence of law. Law reveals the nature of sin, sin as self-deception. Adam sinned after the command was given, 'eat of this fruit, you shall die' [Genesis 2:17]. With law Adam sinned and death reigned in him. A Christian dies [spiritual sense] with Christ to sin and the law's claim ends. Using illustration of Jewish marriage law, Paul says that when husband dies, the wife is no longer bound by any law to her husband and she is free. Here the husband is the old self in Adam now put to death in Christ; Christian is now free and in a new realm, as if, married [union] to Christ in his resurrection, in the reign of grace.

Paul admits that law is of spiritual nature as commandments of God and it is good; it doesn't ask anyone to sin, however sin resides in humans; instead of freeing human beings from sin, law became an enslaver. Paul says that 'sin deceived and killed me' like the serpent tempting in the garden of Eden. The 'I' [flesh] represents Israel and the failure to appreciate the spirit of the law; this is humanity within the Adam economy [household]. Adam [ego] tends to rebel against the law which is seen in the history of Israel in worship of the golden calf! The possession of the code of law doesn't save; it just complicated law's affinity with sin and death. In Paul's mind, the law keeps reminding the opposite of what it actually proposes; law has a negative influence on humans. In Paul's own life, before his encounter with Christ, he believed he was fulfilling the law while hunting for Christians. The principle of law, sin and death has acquired a new existence of grace, freedom and life in the Spirit in Christ's death and resurrection. Christian now belongs to Christ and not to the dictates of the law.

Verses 13-25: 'The wretched state of human beings'. Paul moves on to his complex theologizing of the existential situation of humans. Paul is still a 'man of flesh' [Philippians 3:10-21], though a believer and accepted the Spirit. Even my knowledge of the law as good is not helping me to observe it; with law I remain a sinner. V.15, 'I do not understand my own actions. I do not do what I want but I do the very thing I hate'. I sin against my own will. My will see the good in the law but my actions go against the good I perceive. The 'I' is helpless and under the influence of sin/flesh [flesh as my human life]. Law functions as dividing the self into willing 'I' and the sinning 'I' [the willing person and the acting person-a divided-self]. In saying, 'I do not know my own actions', Paul acknowledges the contradictions one sees within oneself [a psychological, philosophical analysis of the human mind]. Law is powerless to stop humans from doing evil; it functions as the weakened will of Adam in every human being!

Israel's law/covenant was needed to be taken to a new level; it could not be a universal norm for human race. Law [Torah] was alien to all outside Israel. Law reminded human as trapped in the flesh/sin/old Adam. A freeing of the 'wretched' has taken place in Christ. How is a Christian free from law, sin and death? Sin/guilt/hopelessness in death is removed by grace of

justification in Christ. Paul says that the power of sin is still in me but it is constantly being absolved by grace. In the new economy [household of Christ, new Adam] awareness of sin leads to repentance, then to restoring grace. God now sees the redeemed humanity in Christ and not as subject to law and old Adam-the new stage in the history of salvation. The old divided-self was defined by law and the new restored/healed self is defined by grace. Deliverance from sin/death in Christ is experienced as a reality already existing but its fulfilment is in the heavenly realm [in theology, this is called 'eschatology-already and not yet]. Spirit is ever present in the one who is in Christ, who lives in the now, in the present, having the freedom to choose the kingdom of God.

Father Jose