

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)

In lesson 1 (rated 'easy'), we used *The Rich Man & Lazarus* to demonstrate taking scriptures at face value. Taking the simplicity of Jesus' narrative without reading between the lines will help us avoid controversy. However, this approach is only useful for "babes" in Christ who are learning elementary principles. Like the 5-year-old who puts on mommy's make-up and high heels, Christian "babes" try and understand difficult passages using simple interpretations. Likewise, they end up with immature (and incorrect) conclusions.

Lesson 2 (rated 'medium') showed us that by mixing personal values with scripture we get biased conclusions. We couldn't ascertain the Woman of Samaria's true character; there was no black and white or right and wrong. In such cases, judicious clarification is needed. Applying our own spin will result in a flawed inference.

This last lesson (rated 'hard') is not so difficult to *understand* as it is to *accept*. It is somewhat analytical, but easy to digest. It deals with the so-called "dual" nature of the Christian, where we supposedly sin against our will. What does the bible say?

Our text is Romans 7:14-20:

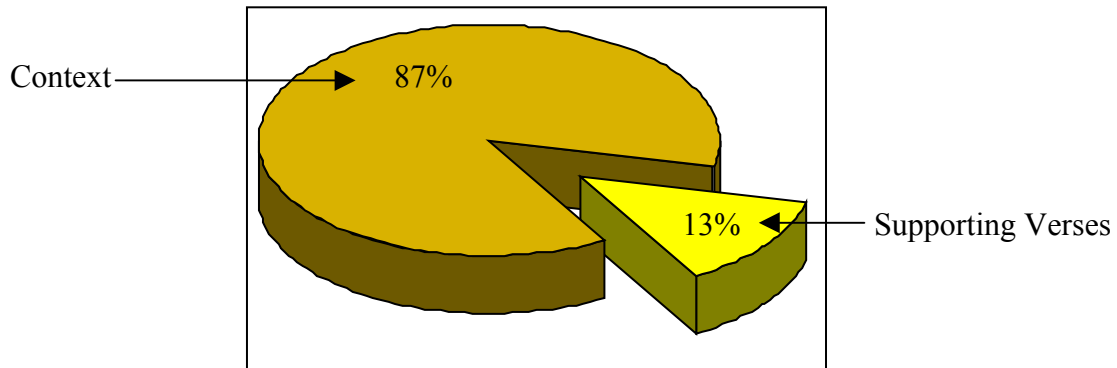
For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the 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" cop-out.

Is this a legitimate interpretation? Are Christians hapless puppets, yanked back and forth between doing right and doing wrong? It's a teaching prevalent in our church today, providing easy justification for sin.

As you know, most false teachings stem from taking verses out of context. When we examine Paul's arguments here, we find that the context begins in chapter 6 and ends in chapter 8. That

context is made up of 2,124 words. In the text where the “doctrine” is formed (7:14-20), there are only 163 words. A graphic view would look something like this:



The greater the ratio between context and verses supporting a teaching, the greater the chance for error.

I'm not trying to impress you with fancy formulas but to make a point: *most read Romans 7 without considering chapters 6 and 8.* Yet it is part of a rather long and difficult argument presented by Paul. This is one of those areas to which Peter refers:

...our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2 Peter 3:15-16)

Beginning at chapter 6, 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.* Sounds like sin is reigning in his body, forcing him to do things he doesn't really want to do. The whole gist of 7:14–20 shows a person being unwillingly dragged along by their 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 answer lies in hermeneutics—to whom was Paul writing? 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 back to Judaism altogether.

One of the major things we neglect in our study of the bible is forgetting to *whom* these things were written. To the modern man, Moses' Law isn't a big deal. Then, when we run into a section like this, we scratch our heads and can't understand why the writer wasn't more clear or straightforward. The Oriental mind (the Jews in this case) did not think like we do. We are a get-down-to-business, give-it-to-me-straight culture. Thus, 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.

The Law of Moses was a very precious thing to the Jewish mind, so Paul had to tread lightly. He couldn't say, "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.

Notice the strategic use of pronouns in his argument. From 6:1 to 7:14, he uses "we" 20 times. Note:

- 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 is including 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 newfound Christian faith: "YOU once were sinners...NOW you're not," in 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 subtle accusation and loving appeal—*don't you know...brothers*. Of course they knew! Then Paul 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. 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, this is what we get:

- 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 at them with seeming accusations: *what YOU are doing, YOU do not understand...*

SCRIPTURAL EVIDENCE

Once you see Paul’s approach, you can then look at the plain scriptures to see why the “Christian In Sin” teaching is false. 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?

On the one side is chapter 6. Note:

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

¹ The 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 typify an inflated ego. (Dan 4:30; Luke 12:16-19, etc)

- 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 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, in order 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 false doctrine.

When we look at chapter 8, there is complete agreement with the ‘Stop Sin’ teaching and complete *disagreement* with the ‘I Can’t Help Myself’ false 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.

Not 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.

We are not obligated to sin, so using Romans 7 to support that notion is patently false. This is not to say that Christians never sin. Writes John:

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

I hope you learned something from these studies. I know I did. All we did in all three lessons was take a chunk of scripture and looked at it without having to jump all over the bible to prove our points. Only in certain instances—Revelation for example—does one have to do a lot digging to find out the meaning. In most cases, however, the answers can be found in the text. In summary, there are a few simple rules that you can follow to keep yourself in God's word and therefore in His will.

Rule #1: Never trust the preacher—he's as fallible and opinionated as the rest of us

Rule #2: Read the context

Rule #3: Read the material if it repeats itself in other books (such as the Gospels)

Rule #4: Don't be like the three blind men and the elephant. For example, there are several scriptures that cite how to be saved: confession, repentance, faith, baptism. Don't use one while ignoring the others. They are usually different parts of the same animal and need to be put together to make a whole.

Terry DeLaney
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