

Context of the Chapter

In the seventh chapter Paul begins to address two modes of life described in chapter eight as “walking.” The first, from which the Christian must turn away and leave behind, he calls to “walk according to the flesh” (8:4; Gr. *kata sarka*). The second, which is synonymous with life as a Christian, is to walk “according to the Spirit” (Gr. *kata pneuma*). Paul explains that to “walk according to the flesh,” having never come to Christ or to return to it after coming to Christ, is foolishness. In contrast, to “walk according to the Spirit” is the only real hope.

To understand this chapter it is important to recognize that Paul approaches these modes of living in distinct time contexts. One is a past mode of life—walking “according to the flesh.” The other is (or should be) a present condition—walking “according to the Spirit.” We must note this point because in chapter seven Paul speaks of both conditions as if they are in the present. He does this to warn against returning to a life “according to the flesh.” He is not suggesting that a person can live “according to the flesh” (i.e., in sin) and be right with God. In the previous chapter the Holy Spirit contrasted the past with the present condition of Christians: “you were slaves of sin” (6:20) but now you are in a condition in which you have “been set free from sin” (6:22). Chapter six began with the question: “Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?” (6:1). To which he answered, “Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?” (6:2). In chapter

eight Paul declares that there is “no condemnation to those who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (8:1). He defines both conditions as either setting one’s mind on things of the flesh or things of the Spirit (8:5). The fleshly mind leads to death but the spiritual mind leads to life and



Temple of Hercules in Rome.
Courtesy of FreeStockPhotos.com.

peace (8:6). To the Christian Paul says, “You are not in the flesh, but in the spirit” (8:9). Within this context chapter seven becomes easier to understand. These two conditions of life cannot exist together. One must be left in the past. The other must dominate the present.

Chapter Seven

Sin and Law (7:1-13)

Paul starts with an illustration from the Old Law. Just as the widow was not counted an adulteress if she married another, the Christian who came out of Judaism had been freed, through death from the one to whom he or she was formerly bound (7:1-4).

This change of covenant relationship illustrates some things about the two modes of life described as walking “according to the flesh” or “according to the Spirit.” Paul explains that when we were **in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members** (7:5). Paul addresses a life led “in the flesh” or “in the Spirit.” Those who live “in the Spirit” do not die physically—they still live in a fleshly body. Yet, they do not focus their heart and mind on what the flesh wants. Their focus is not on how to gratify, stimulate, and appease the flesh. Christians must focus on what the Spirit of God has revealed about how we are to be on the inside and how we are to serve Him on the outside. This involves what the flesh does, but it is not dictated by the flesh.

Paul says further, **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** (7:6). This is the second mode of life. This is what the Christian has come to in obedience to the gospel. This is where the Christian must remain.

Divine law does not produce sin, although it may accentuate the desire to commit sin.

Paul calls this deliverance “from the law,” which speaks directly to those Jews to whom the Law of Moses was given. Yet, he also addresses divine law in a general sense. All people are accountable to God’s law.

The Consequence of the Knowledge of Sin

This accountability does not allow us to overcome sin but simply to know what is right and wrong. Paul says **I would not have known sin except through the law** (7:7b). Paul touches here on a philosophical question over which men have pondered for centuries—*if giving law creates an opportunity to violate that law why would God give the law to begin with?* Deity has every right to set the rules for His creation as He wishes. When man violates these rules, the problem is not with the rule or with the One who gave the rule, but with the one who violates the rule!

Paul offers the example of covetousness declaring, **for I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.”** (7:7c). Before law there was covetousness, it was simply not yet defined as sin. Knowledge of divine law didn’t produce the behavior but

the knowledge that the behavior was wrong. When we teach those who are lost, we may be timid about teaching them when we know that learning what the law of Christ says will expose their behavior as sinful. We must recognize that the problem is not with the law of Christ, but with the one who (knowingly or in ignorance) disobeys it.

Divine law does not produce sin, although it may accentuate the desire

to commit sin. Paul says of himself that **sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire** (7:8a). The only sense in which knowledge of law produces sin is the common tendency to want to do what we are told not to do. In 1996 I was diagnosed with diabetes. Although I had never had much of a “sweet-tooth” before, when I learned that I needed to regulate and restrict sugar intake, I found myself desiring “sweets” more than I ever had. Sin and knowledge of God’s law can operate the same way.

Paul says further, **apart from the law sin was dead** (7:8b). The Bible teaches the very important principle that is sometimes difficult to sort out in our minds—“where there is no law there is no transgression” (Rom. 4:15). That doesn’t mean the behavior doesn’t go on without law. It may. But until there is law—“sin is not imputed when there is no law” (Rom. 5:13). So, before a law is given that defines something as sinful or the omission of which as sinful—“sin is dead.”

This is a challenge for us when looking at Old Testament examples. We often want to look at things that

under Christ are now defined as sin and then look at Old Testament examples and ask, “Why did God allow them to do that?” Or, “Since it is wrong for us under Christ, it was wrong for them!” Not necessarily. We see the problems with this when we apply it in reverse. *Do we sin now if we violate Mosaic dietary or ceremonial laws?* Why should we struggle to see it the other way?

When Was Paul Alive?

The religious world continues to cling to the false doctrine that mankind inherits total depravity. Yet, Paul teaches, **I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.** (7:9). This statement is an important refutation to the false doctrine which teaches that man is spiritually dead at birth. Paul says he was once “alive without law.” *When was this?* All men are accountable to divine law. When was he ever “without law”? It is clear that the only time when anyone is “alive without law” is when he is too young to be held responsible for the violation of law. When he attains an accountable age it is then that “the commandment comes” and sin “revives” (i.e., comes to life in a person as in every other person who has also become accountable) and he dies spiritually.

It is our own personal sin that spiritually “kills us” not Adam’s sin. I die because **sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me** (7:11). There is a deceptive nature to sin. It says to us that “it is better this way,” “go ahead,” “don’t miss out!” But it lies to us. It convinces us that life is better in sin, but it leads us to a slow death. God gave divine law that was **holy and just and good** (7:12a), but we violate this law. Paul asks, **Has then what is good become**

death to me? To which he answers, **Certainly not!** (7:12b). So why was law given? So that sin, **that it might appear sin**, produced **death in me**



Roman hippodrome from Aphrodisias.
Photo: Kyle Pope.

through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful (7:13). This chain reaction of law, leading to sin, leading to death Paul describes in chapter eight as “the law of sin and death” (8:2).

The Reality of Slavery to Sin (7:14-23).

Paul teaches us that divine law is good, and **we know that the law is spiritual** (7:14a). But we are our own worst enemy. When we walk “according to the flesh” we are **carnal**, and **sold under sin** (7:14b). The fact that God’s law informs and defines sin doesn’t make God’s law the problem. Unfortunately, our world has come to think this way in many areas. Parents are told not to point out to their children that something is wrong. Rather they are urged to redirect the child’s attention. They are told that the child will feel he or she is “bad” if the parent frames it in this way. This is ridiculous! Just as in the case of a child who has never been told that being mean to other children is wrong, when God’s word exposes our misbehavior, it isn’t that God is cruel for telling us that some-

thing is wrong. We have simply been ignorant of what is right and what is wrong. What then are we to do when we have learned the truth?

When we learn divine law, yet walk “according to the flesh,” we do what we have learned we should not. Paul describes this of himself, saying, **what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do** (7:15b). The one who is “sold under sin” does those things that his or her mind may hate but the flesh

loves. All of us have done those things that we wish we had not. We knew it was wrong. We hated ourselves for doing it. But we did it anyway. *How is this to be resolved?* First, we must **agree with the law that it is good** (7:16). But then, we must recognize that **now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me** (7:17). *When is the “now” that Paul is discussing?* Paul is addressing the change in understanding that the Christian can have in the present. This understanding recognizes that sin, if given the chance, can reign over us. Thus you must not “let sin reign in your mortal body” (6:12). If we cannot prevent this from happening simply because “sin dwells in us” why give the instruction not to let “sin reign”?

Human Flesh

Paul says, **I know that in me explaining what he means by “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** (7:18). What does Paul mean by saying that

“nothing good dwells” in the flesh? Some would argue that he is teaching that the nature of the physical body is a nature that can do nothing but sin! If that were the case, we would have some serious problems with the One whom we must serve. Jesus, in one sense walked “according to the flesh.” He was:

- Raised of the seed of David “according to the flesh” (Rom. 1:3).
- Born of the fruit of David’s body “according to the flesh” (Acts 2:30).
- An Israelite “according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:5).
- And, Paul once knew Jesus only “according to the flesh” (2 Cor. 5:16).

If nothing good can dwell in the flesh, how could Christ live “according to the flesh”? Paul isn’t talking about having a fleshly body. He is talking about serving the flesh to the extent that one looks to the flesh as the focus of life. One can do this by pursuing sin, but one can also be very religious and walk according to the flesh. This happens when one

Paul isn’t talking about having a fleshly body. He is talking about serving the flesh to the extent that it becomes life’s focus.

trusts in himself and not the sacrifice of Jesus for his salvation.

Paul expands this idea further declaring, **For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice. Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me** (7:19, 20). Here is where it becomes important to recognize that Paul is talking about

the Christian's past condition. He is explaining the reality of this past condition. When Paul says "now...it is no longer I who do it" he is not saying that the Christian can exist in a state in which he is no longer accountable for sin, because it is just "sin that dwells in me." This is what Gnostics and Calvinists both have tried to argue.

Gnostics. The Gnostics rose up in the centuries after the New Testament and argued that the physical world was naturally corrupt and sinful. They held that only if a person could obtain a mystical knowledge (i.e., *gnōsis* in the Greek) could he be saved. The logical consequence of this teaching held that man is not accountable for sin because sin "dwells in him." He can't help it.

Calvinists. In more recent times those who follow the teachings of John Calvin are just Gnostics with a different twist. They argue that man inherits Adam's sin and is born totally depraved and incapable of doing any good, unless God empowers him to do so. The logical consequence of this teaching again, convinces people that it's not their own choice to sin. Rather, it is simply sin that "dwells in them."

This is not what Paul is teaching. He is describing what the Christian must understand about where his past life of sin led him. He does this so that the Romans will understand what their present condition would be if they return to sin. If they return to sin they are allowing sin to "reign" in their members (see Rom. 6:11-13). When Paul says, "It is no longer I who do it, but sin that

dwells in me" he is describing the realization that the Christian should have of what sin is and how it operates. Committing sin is not just breaking a rule, it is allowing sin to "reign" over us and "dwell" in us. This is not a condition that Paul is saying is acceptable and how a child of God can live, so long as "he has faith." Rather, he is showing that this is the way of death.

He explains, **I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good (7:21).** Without the forgiveness that is offered in Jesus, it doesn't really matter how much we want to do what is right, we will never escape the fact that sin "dwells in us" and that "evil is present" with us. The non-Christian may be like Paul was. He said, **I delight in the law of God according to the inward man (7:22).** Paul describes this former "delight in the law of God" in Philippians 3:4-9. Yet, it was not sufficient. He counted it "loss" for Christ because it didn't free him from sin. He saw the problem that law alone didn't overcome. He goes on to say, **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 (7:23).** Outside of Christ, without forgiveness of sins, the war between what we want to do and what we know is right is a hopeless battle. Only when one comes to Christ can this battle be victorious. Not because we will never sin again, but

because only in Christ may true and full forgiveness be found. Only in Christ is the way to freedom from bondage to sin and death made available. When we allow Jesus to pay the price for our sin and to act as intercessor to the Father on our behalf, we can be freed from bondage to sin and death.

Despair in the Flesh but Joy in Christ (7:24-25).

Paul ends this illustration with a declaration of the utter desperation left to the one who would walk "according to the flesh." He cries out, **O wretched man that I am! Who**

If we live in the flesh we are clinging to a dead body that offers no hope.

will deliver me from this body of death? (7:24). If we live in the flesh we are clinging to a dead body that offers no hope, but only the certain and imminent threat of punishment and eternal death. In Christ, however, there is joy. Moving to address the present condition the Christian enjoys Paul cries out further, **I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! (7:25a).** He explains this, **so then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin (7:25a).** Paul is not expressing some dualistic "out of body" Gnostic spirituality. He is describing the two modes of life between which man must choose to live. Either we will choose to submit our mind to the law of God through obedience to the gospel of Jesus Christ or we will pursue the flesh unto spiritual death.

Questions

1. What two modes of life defined in the next chapter as “walking” help to explain the point Paul makes in this chapter (8:4)?
a. _____ and b. _____
2. With what two figures are these two modes of life described in chapter six (6:20, 22)?
a. _____ and b. _____
3. At the beginning of this chapter, what does Paul use as an illustration of the change in covenant relationships when one comes to Christ (7:1-4)? _____
4. What does Paul teach that the knowledge of sin “produced” in him (7:8)? _____

5. Fill in the blanks from 7:9: “_____ was alive _____ without the _____, but when the _____ came, sin _____ and I _____” (NKJV).
When was Paul “alive once”? _____
6. What does Paul say that sin did to him after the commandment came (7:11)? _____
_____ What does this indicate about the false doctrine of inherited depravity? _____

7. What does Paul teach that sin becomes “through the commandment” (7:13)? _____

8. Under what does Paul say the “carnal” man is “sold” (7:14)? _____

9. When Paul says that in his flesh nothing good dwells, is he teaching that the “flesh” is sinful by nature (7:18)? _____
Why or why not? _____

10. List what each of the following texts illustrate about Jesus’ “flesh”:
_____ (Rom. 1:3); _____ (Acts 2:30);
_____ (Rom. 9:5); _____ (2 Cor. 5:16).
11. Explain how the teachings of the ancient Gnostics and modern day Calvinists are similar and how they differ:

12. What does Paul call his flesh, which leads him to call himself a “wretched man” (7:24)? _____

13. Explain the phrase “with the mind I serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin” (7:25)? _____

