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EXPOSITION OF ROMANS 7:7-25

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*A good paraphrastic  
presentation*

.. To gain a proper background from which to approach this passage, let us review briefly Paul's chain of thought thus far developed in this Epistle. The Epistle to the Romans gushes out of Paul's full heart. He longs to see this Roman Church and to join its fellowship for a season in the anticipation of a gracious mutual benefit. But Rome is the center of the world's culture and civilized life. There may be a Church there, but how will Paul's Gospel fare in Rome? Fully aware of the significance of the statement, he writes that he is "not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation".

Paul knows the structure of that Greeko-Roman culture. He knows that at its heart it is pagan. He draws a picture of that pagan world as only a heart submitted to the righteousness of God could see it. Below the veneer of a finished world culture is moral decadence and spiritual darkness. For such a condition, the pagan world itself was to blame, for, "when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened".

Paul continues to write from a full heart. It is not only the pagan world that has sinned, there is a universal condition of mankind which gives a universal meaning to the Gospel Paul preached. "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God". When, how, under what impelling power, Paul does not here concern himself with. Only this--all have sinned. And the human heart does not have it in itself to deny the statement.

So Paul goes on to unfold the heart of the Gospel--a universal remedy for a universal malady, "even a righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ to all that believe".

What then of the law? Was it not given that men might thereby be saved? No, says Paul. And he goes on to write of sin and death, and works and grace, and law and faith. The law reveals God's standard of righteousness. "Thru law is the knowledge of sin". We know wherein we come short of God's character as we line our actual life up against the demands of God's righteousness revealed in the law. The law will reveal failure, but it cannot empower.

But a man, having once seen the demands of God's righteousness and committed himself to it, can never have peace of heart or conscience until somehow God's righteousness becomes his. To have that as an ideal and yet to ever be falling short, struggling, waring, striving with one's own heart in a seemingly hopeless, unequal warfare is the tragedy of Romans seven. As tragedy, there is hardly anything to equal it in all literature. There is the upward onward tug of the ideal, the man I would be, and there is the ever present weight and drag of the man I now am. In me lies the cause, the blame. I cannot blame my environment, my heredity, my social heritage. I find it not in me to blame anyone or anything, and so the tragedy deepens, becomes almost unbearable. "Wretched man that I am!--who will deliver me from the body of this death?"

Now then to the text: (Scriptures quoted are from the American Bible Union Version)

7 For our starting point we take the question, "Is the law sin?" The law makes us conscious of our sin. Is it then sin? Lies the cause of our sin in the law? "Far be it!" God forbid. Let us entertain no such thought. To the Jew and Christian alike, such would be sacrilege. Wherein then lies the explanation? In this, that the law reveals sin, but does not make it. "But I should not have known sin, unless through law". And as an example, "for I should not know coveting (desire), if the law did not say,

thou shalt not covet". When the law says that I must not covet, I know that if I do, I sin. The object desired is immaterial, good or bad. The point is that a standard of righteousness is here set up which demands an absolute contentment with what God has seen fit to give. Eve's sin lay not in that she desired an evil thing, but that she desired something upon which God had placed a prohibition. So when a man squares his life up with such a standard, one of two things result--either he stands vindicated, or he is shown to come short and is a sinner. Paul says the second alternative is a universal experience.

8 Paul goes on to develop a tremendous truth. "But sin, finding occasion thru the commandment, wrought in me all manner of coveting." "But sin", a germ, a certain evil something, "wrought in me", down in the well-springs of my heart, "all manner of coveting". The moment the law said thou shalt not, that moment this sin in me said, thou must. That "sin" wrought in me the very longings the law forbade. The thought here is tremendously basic. Whatever theory may be held to explain the presence of evil in the world, it must be admitted that Paul believed that the sources of a man's action lay within his own inmost self, and that that inmost self was not basically right. His mind here is essentially the same as expressed by Jesus Christ in Mark 7:21-22: "For from within, out of the heart of men, evil thoughts proceed, fornications, thefts. . . .etc". The mainsprings of men's actions lie in the attitudes and the commitments of their inmost being. And that inmost being is morally wrong.

Now the true character of a man's heart, or the content of it may not always be evident. Before the law awakens it, sin lays dormant. "For apart from law, sin is dead." But when the heart is truly awakened to the consciousness of the deep spiritual meaning of the law, sin springs to life.

9 Paul continues and speaks of a time in his life when historically it could be truly said that the law had not fulfilled its mission in his life and the true character of his own heart had not yet been revealed to him. "And I was alive apart from law once". He felt no condemnation. But a time came when he did see, and that moment he realized himself under the laws condemnation. "But when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died".

10 "And the commandment which was unto life, that I found to be unto death". There is such a thing as spiritual blindness, and Paul deals with it elsewhere (See I Cor. 2; II Cor. 4:3,4). Here he speaks of his own experience. He is as a man who had looked into the quiet waters of his own heart and had imagined them pure and sweet. But those waters have now been stirred by the staff of the law and have cast up mire and dirt.

11 "For sin, finding occasion thru the commandment deceived me, and through it slew me". Paul here carries his thought on a little further. Sin, taking the statement of the law (thou shalt not covet) as an occasion or starting point, deceived him. He could not rest contentedly in the will of God. Sin's suggestions forbade it, deceived him into thinking that that will was not a good will. Still more must be had, self-will must be satisfied. It is Eden and the tree of life and sin, all of it, all over again in Paul's heart.

When did these things take place in Paul's life? Moule states: "till we close verse eleven, certainly we are in the midst of the unregenerate state." Godet suggests it happened when Paul, as other Jewish boys, was put under the law and made a son of the law at twelve years of age. Stifler suggests: "most likely he refers to his history on the Damascus road, when the light struck him". Paul speaks for himself in Philippians three wherein he describes himself in his Phariseeism, "touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless". The rich young ruler stood before Jesus Christ and spoke of his life and the law and said, "all these have I kept from my youth

up". Jesus looked upon him and loved him. He placed his finger on the one thing he lacked as he spoke of his riches and asked him to part with them. That moment sin revived, and he died.

12 "So that the law is holy". The question of verse seven has been answered. "And the commandment (is) holy" tho it reveals sin, "and righteous" tho it condemns sin, "and good" for it aims at life.

13 "Did then that which is good become death to me?" Can a thing good in itself work evil in its administration? Can bread, which aims at life, bring death? "Far be it!" If death results, the cause is not here. "But sin, that it might be shown to be sin, by working death to me through that which is good; that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful". Sin worked the death in me by use of the law which in itself was good. And so sin was revealed in its true character and becomes "exceedingly sinful".

From here on, Paul writes of the great moral conflict that rages deep down in the inner being of a man who, awakened to the righteousness of God, longs for it, feels he cannot live without it, yet is powerless in the grips of the lower life which he despises. That Paul is writing autobiographically goes without saying. No one can so write who has not so experienced. But Paul also writes universally. Here is the story of every man similarly situated. A serious question is here raised. Is this the biography of a regenerate, or an unregenerate man? Great names may be mentioned as champions of each side. Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Beza take the former view. Meyer, Gœdet, Stuart and Tholuck the latter. Paul himself did not say. We may say this, that Paul is writing of a man who has been awakened. He sees God's righteousness, and he sees his own self. His soul is in the throes of a great conflict. He knows what he ought to be. After his inmost self he desires it, cries out for it. But in his actual life and experience he is falling short, doing the things he does not want to do, and failing in the things he delights

in. The man he has in his inner being identified himself with is not the man he actually is--yet. It is the situation of any man, regenerate or otherwise, seeking the solution for the great problem of the sin within his heart apart from the Holy Spirit's enabling. The Holy Spirit is not operating in Romans seven, and there is no victory. It is man in self-effort, and it is man in miserable defeat.

14 "For we knew that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal". It is only the spiritual man, the holy man, that can keep the law, and I am carnal. There is a great gulf fixed. "I am carnal, sold under sin", an unhappy slave to a dominion I despise.

15 "For what I perform, I know not"--I am driven on my way, I know not why; "for not what I wish, that do I practise; but what I hate, that I do". My desires and my actions do not conform. What I am doing is not the thing I desire. The thing I desire I do not do.

16 In such a confession is an acknowledgment of the goodness of the law. "But if what I wish not, that I do, I consent to the law that it is good". My heart is lined up with the law, it is the thing I would love to do. But I don't do it.

17 So I conclude it is not really I myself who am so acting. My heart does not say amen to the works of my hands. It is the sin which dwells in me. "Now then, it is no longer I that perform it, but the sin that dwells in me".

18 "For I know that there dwells not in me, that is, in my flesh, any good". The springs of any good are not in my flesh; "for to wish is present with me; but to perform that which is good is not." To desire, I am able, but I am enslaved, and I do not have it in me to perform the good my heart assents to.

19 More specifically, "for the good that I wish, I do not; but the evil that I wish not, that I practise".

20 Now from this it can be concluded that if my actions do not conform to my desires, it is not I who do them. "But if what I wish not, that I do it is no more I that perform it, but the sin that dwells in me". Yet there is no absolvment of responsibility. He cannot absolve himself. Any interpretation of this awful conflict which makes a man irresponsible for his actions is definitely wrong. That is not Paul's mind. That is no solution for the problem. No man honest with his own soul will ever take that ground. But the sin within is the cause of the condition: "I find then a law, that, when I wish to do good, evil is present with me." Sin dwells within, is ever present, never leaves him alone, gives a wrong direction to every action, perverts every natural endowment, degrades every affection.

21 In plain terms, "I find then the law, that, when I wish to do good, evil is present with me". Law here is a principle. Evil is present to defeat any effort of good.

22 "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man". His inmost being delights in a law which he knows to be the law of God.

23 But in his members, his various capacities, is another law (principle, or force) which wars against that of his mind, bringing him into slavery (making slavery effective) to the law (power) of sin in his members. "But I see a different law in my members, waring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members". It is not his wrong-doing that he deploras quite as much as the slavery he is under. He would break the chain if he could. The actions are bad, but below and beneath the actions is a law, a force, a power which drives him to them, before which force he is helpless.



24

"Wretched man that I am!" Who will deliver me from the body of this death?" No anguish is as great as this which finds its reason within a man's own heart. To be the cause of the undoing of one's own soul is nigh unbearable. It is the heart-rending regret of an intemperate man broadened to the breadth of life itself. But in the darkest hours of a man's life, God steps in and the Gospel speaks.

25

"Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord".