

March 19, 2023

The View

“Sirs, we wish to see Jesus.” — John 12:21

Welcome Visitors

Our goal at the Folsom church of Christ is to do everything according to God's word, including respecting its silence. We are not a denomination, not part of anything larger than this local church; we have no earthly “headquarters.” The five elders oversee this church and, ultimately, we answer only to Christ. The comments you hear today are primarily for the benefit of our own members, as we examine Scripture and seek to be built up in our faith in Christ. If you don't understand something, please do not hesitate to ask the preacher or one of the elders. We welcome and appreciate your comments and questions on any issue and especially if you see or hear anything that you feel does not correspond to God's word. We are here to serve; please help us do that.

**Please fill out a visitor's card and put it in the collection plate when is passed.
We do not solicit donations from visitors. See page 4 for more information.**

Schedule

The Lord's Day

9:30 AM Bible Classes

Auditorium: “Love Your Bible”

Young Adult Class: “Love, Service & Culture”

10:30 AM: Assembly

Preaching Today

Jay Simmons

Clothing ourselves in Humility

Livestream at 10:30 <https://tinyurl.com/5f2cbm3y>

Bible Class: 5:00 PM @ the Building

“Praying the Psalms” (Auditorium)

High School Class @ 5 PM @ David & Christie Posey's home

Middle school class: monthly (contact David Sanderson (david.r.sanderson@intel.com)

or Seth Reagan (sethreagan@gmail.com)

There are several on-going Bible classes in the homes of members. Check with David Posey or one of the other elders if you would like to join one of those classes.

Wednesday 7 PM @ Building

Bible classes for all ages

Auditorium: Love Your Bible

Room 12: Young Adults Class: “Love, Service & Culture”

Articles published in the View reflect only the thoughts and opinions of the author not necessarily the editor or the church at Folsom

Should a Christian ever say, “sin dwells in me”?

DAVID POSEY

ROMANS 7:7-25 HAS BEEN A SOURCE OF DUBIOUS COMFORT TO MANY CHRISTIANS.

I say “dubious” because a careful analysis of the text, in context, reveals that it does not say what many Christians wish it said. For what it’s worth, here’s my commentary on this text.

I’ll begin with some words from Leon Morris (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, page 276): “First, we should be clear that Paul is writing about the law, not trying to answer the questions that modern people ask. The passage is not primarily a piece of autobiography or a psychological study of the Christian experience. *It is a sustained treatment of the place of the law.*”

The context, which starts at least back in chapter 6, seems to support Morris’ statement. Chapter 7 is not about “sinning in spite of ourselves.” In chapter 6, in fact, Paul denied that we should sin for any reason, implying that sin is something totally within our control. We choose to present our bodies as slaves, either to sin, or to righteousness (6:16-17). The reality of being “under grace” should make our decision an easy one – we will present our members as “slaves to righteousness” (6:18).

In the first part of chapter 7, Paul uses an illustration from marriage to demonstrate that we are not bound (married) to the law anymore. Instead, we have died to the law (the “oldness of the letter”) and have been joined to another (Christ) so that we can bear fruit and serve in the “newness of the Spirit” (7:6).

Thus far in Romans, most of the talk about the law has been negative because Paul is arguing that the only way to be saved through law is by keeping all of it, without even one miss. Because of this, some might conclude that the law itself is sin. Paul says “may it never be!” (7:7) and proceeds to develop an argument which demonstrates the value of the law. In doing so, he chooses to speak in the first person. In a study by Werner Kümmel, referenced by Douglas Moo in his *Commentary on Romans*, page 452, it was shown that *ego* (in Greek, the first person singular verb) could be used as a rhetorical device without any personal reference intended at all (cf. Rom. 3:7). So the use of the first person, in itself, is not decisive for determining the meaning of this passage.

In 7:7-13, Paul argues that the law (or “commandment”) is good (v. 12) because without it, he wouldn’t have known about sin. Coveting, for example, is a sin all have committed, but how would one know about coveting except there was a law which defined it as sin? Paul made this point earlier in Romans: “*For through the law comes the knowledge of sin*” (3:20). Law defines sin as sin (violation of God’s revealed will; “missing the mark”).

But Paul affirms another function, or effect, of law: it gives sin its life — “apart from the law, sin is dead” (7:8). That does not make the law sin, but law gives sin the opportunity to do its evil work. Without law, sin cannot exist. Using the example of coveting, Paul says that the sin of coveting took the opportunity created by the law against coveting and produced coveting in him of every kind. Does that mean the law against coveting is bad and therefore should bear the blame when we die spiritually? Of course not! (7:13). It is sin that kills us, through the commandment (because without the commandment, there is no sin). Paul is simply establishing the difficulty of living under law, even though the law itself is holy and righteous and good (7:12).

So Paul, then, argues that the law functions as an identifier of sin (7:13). This holy, righteous and good law is the revealed will of God. So this law — whether the moral law of God or the Law of Moses — identifies any transgression of it as sin, as a missing of the mark of God. It is not just a civil or common law code, but *transgression against God himself*. Therefore sin is “utterly sinful” (7:13).

From verse 14 on, Paul begins what must be a description of the misery of a man living under a law system. He desires to do good, but is unable to do so, because the law keeps driving him further away from God. It’s like a nail in wood, with the law as the hammer. Each blow from the hammer (the law as it is violated) drives the nail deeper into the wood. Even if the blows should stop (by living a sinless life from that point on) there is still no

way out of the wood. Years of living perfectly could not make up for the sins of the past. All you can do is cry, “*wretched man that I am, who will save me from the body of this death!*” (v. 24).

I do not believe this refers to Paul, either in his life as a Christian or before he became a Christian. The language here does not cohere with his statement of Acts 23:1 that he had lived all his life in good conscience. The person described here has a miserable conscience! He knew the right thing to do, but didn’t do it! (cf. James 4:17). This is important: *he seems unable to do good, no matter how hard he tries*, and he is all too aware of his failings. When Paul was living as a strict Pharisee, he did so in good conscience, not second-guessing himself. He thought he “*must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth*” (Acts 26:9), but he had always endeavored “*to have a conscience without offense toward God and men*” (Acts 24:16). Paul was far from distraught during his life as a Jew while this text is describing a man who is tormented by his failure to keep the law. It has to refer to a different kind of person.

Continued on page 3

... the context demands that Paul is addressing the problem of one who is still living under law *because law is not the answer to the sin problem*. Under a law system, sin can only increase since law has no power to take away sin. Consequently, those who are “under law” are still “in the flesh” (cf. 7:5).

However, I'm not convinced that this passage is talking about the average regenerate person either. There may be some comfort in thinking that Paul is describing the Christian life here, that, in reality, we are powerless to keep from sinning (and isn't that what these verses are saying?). This text describes the flesh as winning handily over the spirit. In fact, if this text refers to the Christian, Paul all but says that sin is not really his fault, but just "the way he is" (7:17). Read Romans 6:11-23 and 8:5-8 — does that sound like the same Paul? Or is something else going on here? Yes, there is a battle between spirit and flesh (Galatians 5:17). But if the Christian life is a losing battle against the flesh, we're doomed — e might as well jump feet first back into the world!

If Paul is not saying that, what *is* he saying? The use of the first person to make a dramatic point is a not an uncommon literary device. The subject is *law*. Paul is looking with the eyes of faith back to the time when he was "under law." His perspective is not that of a self-righteous Jew, but of a person who wishes there were a better way. He knows that the law is good because when he does that which he wishes not to do, he confesses that it is good, and that his predicament! (7:16). If he was like the "good Jew," who was keeping the law as defined by Judaism or, like pagans who were ignorant of the law, he would at least *feel* better. But in Romans 7, Paul is viewing himself as a man living under law and realizes the folly of trying to please God in that state. So, while he wishes to do good, sin indwells him (7:17) because he has found no way out from under the crushing burden of law. For this "Paul," the law-sin principle defines his spiritual life and he's miserable. Eventually, as he continues to compare his deeds with the demands of law, he realizes that *nothing* good dwells in him, that is, in his flesh. He *wishes* to do good (that is, fulfill the law) but he cannot achieve it (v. 18-19) — the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

Some feel that Paul is describing his current life as a Christian and simply affirming that there is no good in the flesh (v. 18), but is not saying he lives in the flesh. In that view, Paul is saying that any good that he does is done not "in the flesh," but in the spirit, because the flesh is incapable of doing good. By "flesh" Paul means life governed by fleshly, human appetites and desires. It is "humanness" apart from control of the Spirit. The argument is that everything Paul says in 7:14ff. is true for everyone in their "fleshly" state, even the Christian.

That view has merit, especially in light of 7:25b and can be reconciled with some of chapter 8. But if we're going to take the first person literally, then we must also take the present tense literally. If so, Paul is describing a condition that exists in him at the time he wrote. "I am of flesh," he says and therefore, a prisoner of sin. How can we reconcile that with Romans 8:8, for example, which says, "*those who are in the flesh cannot please God*"?

Furthermore, Paul uses terms other than "in the flesh" or "of flesh" to describe this condition. For example, he says he is "sold into bondage to sin" (7:14), that "sin indwells me" (7:17, 21), that "I practice the very evil that I do not wish" (7:19), and that he is "captive to the law of sin" (v. 23).

Those terms suggest that he is incapable of doing what he tells the Romans to do in 6:12: "*Do not let sin reign in your mortal (fleshly) bodies*" and 6:13: "*do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin*" and is in an entirely different condition than

described in 6:14, "*for sin shall not be master over you*" and 6:18, 22, "*you have been freed from sin.*"

Instead, in my view, the context demands that Paul is addressing the problem of one who is still living under law *because law is not the answer to the sin problem*. Under a law system, sin can only increase since law has no power to take away sin. Consequently, those who are "under law" are still "in the flesh" (cf. 7:5). "*What Paul has given us is a description of the ultimate futility of life lived in external conformity to law, even though the law is God's law*" (Manfred Brauch, *Hard Sayings in the Bible*, p. 555).

A person who desires with all his heart to please God will begin to search for God in His word. When he discovers God's law, he will begin to understand how inadequate he is, that he is an utter spiritual failure. The more law he learns, the more intense the knowledge of his spiritual bankruptcy. It will drive the spiritually sensitive person to his knees which, in fact, is a chief function of the law. Paul's "*Wretched man that I am!*" is a dramatic way of restating the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit. . . blessed are those who mourn.*" Until this person experiences his complete spiritual bankruptcy, he will never answer Paul's question: "*who will set me free from the body of this death?*" But if he keeps looking into God's will, he find the good news — "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*"

I admit that the latter part of 7:25 is problematic for this view. It seems that Paul should finish with his answer, "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" but he goes on to say that he serves God with his mind, but with his flesh, the law of sin. My only explanation is that he is staying on course with his argument and simply repeating it: under law (i.e., "in the flesh"), we serve sin — there is no possible alternative; this is so even though we are seeking to serve God in the mind. The implication is that we must go back to the answer of 7:25a — through Jesus Christ, we can be more than conquerors! (8:37) That is why he can say with confidence in the next verse (8:1) that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ (as there is for those who remain "in the flesh" — 8:8; cf. Paul's argument in Gal. 5:16-18).

This interpretation harmonizes best with Paul's view of Christianity as a life of uncompromising holiness (I Corinthians 6:18-20). We are held responsible for our needs (Romans 2:6-8) and will give an account for how we lived (II Corinthians 5:10); if Christ dwells in us, we are pure and holy; we have no fellowship with the works of darkness (Ephesians 5:11) but walk as children of light (Ephesians 5:8). Since we have been raised with Christ to sit in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:6) we seek those things above, where Christ is (Colossians 3:1). We are heavenly citizens (Philippians 3:20). We have put off the old man and put on the new and put to death the members which are on the earth (Colossians 3:5-11); we have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires, and walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:24-25).

Given those descriptions of the Christian life (and that list is certainly not exhaustive), can or should any of us say, "sin dwells in me"? I can't see how that is possible.