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How Can I Reconcile Romans 6:12-14 with Romans 7:21-25?

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#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about how to reconcile Romans 6:12-14 (where Paul talks about victory over sins) with Romans 7:21-25 (where Paul bemoans sins he still commits) and why Paul uses the Mosaic Law as a starting point for moral instruction if believers aren't under any part of the Law.

* Please help me reconcile Romans 6:12-14 (where Paul seems to be saying we can have victory over our sins) with Romans 7:21-25 (which sounds like Paul is bemoaning sins he still commits).

* How do you reconcile Paul's use of the Mosaic Law as a starting point for moral instruction with the idea that believers aren't under any part of the Mosaic Law?

Transcript

Welcome to Stand to Reason's hashtag-STRask podcast. I'm Amy Hall and I'm here with Greg Kockel. Yep.

I wasn't expecting that. What do you got? Well, Greg, today we have some questions about Paul's theology and Romans, and I don't know how far we'll get, so we'll see how it goes. We're going to get about 28 minutes.

I think that's about how far we'll get. That's a little more than usual, but not too bad. Well, this first question comes from a Buckeye in Columbus.

Please help me reconcile Romans 6-12-14, where Paul seems to be saying we can have victory over our sins with Romans 7-21-25, which sounds like Paul himself bemoaning sins that he still commits. I know they fit together, but I don't quite get it. Okay.

What I'm going to do is start with Romans 7, and I think Romans 7 is a little bit of a difficult passage to make sense of, and classically the debate has been whether Romans 7 is Paul describing himself before he's a Christian or describing himself after he's a

Christian. I know your contribution is going to be, that's the wrong way to approach the chapter. I just want to make a general observation, though, about Romans 7. It is not possible for somebody to read Romans 7, which talks about Paul's struggle with sin, and which he says, famously, I know there is nothing good that dwells in me that is in my flesh.

And by the way, I want to underscore that distinction because I sometimes will use a devotional written by Puritans called Valley of Vision, and there's all this self-deprecating language in there, like I am nothing. Well, that isn't what Paul says. He says, there's nothing good in me that is in my flesh.

My flesh is not good. Human beings are made the image of God, so there's a nobility about them. I don't want to miss that.

He's fighting against this fallen nature that creates a battle with him, all right? And then he describes that he, and this is the concern here, this fight that he's having. What's interesting is the way he concludes, who is going to save me from the body of this death? And then he says, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Because in this struggle that every Christian who's regenerate can identify with, there is a rescue, and that is the rescue in Christ, and there are two aspects to the rescue.

One aspect is the forgiveness, and the other one is the release from slavery to sin. Now, Jesus says famously in John chapter 8, he said, this is the truth set you free passage, which people abuse a lot. He says in the context, if you abide in my words, and my words abide in you, in other words, if you're a follower of Jesus and following his teachings and obviously regenerate, then you will know the truth, then you will know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.

And then he describes that the freedom there is a freedom from slavery to sin. So we have a package here. We have in the teachings Jesus gives, and then in the new birth, which gives us the capability, the rescue, we have forgiveness, and we have a new capability.

We have a capability of defeating the flesh that we didn't have before, but it's a battle. So we read in Galatians chapter 5 that the flesh sets itself against the spirit, Paul says, and the spirit sets itself against the flesh so you cannot do the things that you want. Now, I think that's a double entendre.

He means that when you're in the flesh, you don't do the spiritual things that you want, and when you're walking in the spirit, which is the language or led by the spirit, he is also in that passage, then you are not doing the fleshly things that your flesh compels you to do. So there is a victory that is available in Jesus, but it's a fight. It's a battle.

And this is something that is true throughout scripture. It's described there in Romans 7,

and then also in Romans 6, this is the other passage. Verse 12 says, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lust.

Now here, Paul was talking in terms of the saved, regenerated individual. Now, this is chapter 6, do not let it reign. Why? Because of what he says in chapter 7. I know there's a fight, but there is a rescue, and there's a rescuer in Jesus Christ, the righteous.

Okay? Thank God there's a rescue is what he's saying, and therefore, even though these are kind of in reverse order, his point is, don't let it reign because, look at this, I don't understand the battle, but we have a victory in Christ. Now, not letting it reign doesn't mean that it doesn't have an influence. And this is where we have to go back to Galatians 5 and see there is a back and forth, there is a fight, and we always have to be on the alert because sin is always crouching at our door, because the flesh is always there to drag us out.

And so, this is, it's just a battle. There is a doctrine, or I should say a way of thinking theological point of view, the holiness, a holiness tradition in Christianity that suggests that you can kind of pass a point in your commitment and dependence on Christ where you just stop sinning. I think John 1 John makes it pretty clear that that's not going to be the case.

It's not going to be the pattern of the Christian's life to sin because the pattern is victory, but that doesn't mean sinlessness. I write these things to you, so you do not sin, John says in 1 John chapter 2, but if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father in Jesus Christ, the righteous. So, there's this interplay between these facts here.

I'm not parsing out the whole chapters here, I'm just trying to show how they actually fit together. And when we consider things that Paul says, especially in Galatians 5, and then John writes in 1 John, and I cited chapter 2 in the first verse, couple verses, we see that how the dynamic goes together. And so, we have safety in forgiveness with Christ, but we also have an ability to be victorious in the battle that will always rage until the resurrection, until our bodies are resurrected, sans flesh without the flesh.

Flesh doesn't get resurrected, that sinful compulsion. Different people characterize it in different ways, but anyway, it's resident in our bodies. And when we get new bodies, we will not have that fleshly cell.

So, it is like we are utterly deplorable, and this is where some of the writers sometimes characterize that the Puritans even, and it bothers me. But what Paul says is there's nothing good in me that is in my flesh, and that's where the battle rages. So, Greg, I don't really have too much to add to that.

I'm just going to summarize a little bit and just add a couple more details. But I think in the main, that's the answer. That's a good framework there.

One important thing to remember here is that in chapter five, Paul is explaining that we are justified by grace. So then, this whole section, six through eight, this is kind of an aside. All of this goes together, six, seven, and eight go together as a response to an objection that someone would have to having our justification be by grace.

Because it almost sounds like antinomianism. Now you can send it up as much as you want. Exactly.

That's what Paul responds to. So, the very beginning of six starts, what should we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase, may it never be? Heck no. So, then he goes through chapter six and he says, don't let sin reign in your body.

And then he goes into seven, and the point he makes there is that we, the law does not have the power to enable us to kill our sin. All it can do is stir up our sin even worse. But the good news, he says, at the beginning of chapter seven, is that just as when a husband dies, the wife is released from that law, so we have died with Christ so that we are released from law so that we can be joined to Christ.

And because of this, now we do have the ability to kill our sin through the spirit. So, while we were under the law, because it couldn't enable us to follow the law, what it says is that we bore fruit for death. But now we're able to bear fruit for God because we are joined to Christ.

You know, the new spouse, so to speak, we're wedded to law, we're wedded to Christ. Right. So, what I think the second part of chapter seven is doing is just illustrating the fact that the law cannot enable us to follow what we know is good.

And at the very end of the chapter, he says, so then on the one hand, I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other with my flesh, the law of sin. So, he's showing that we know that God's moral law is good, but we are serving the law of sin and death in our flesh by sinning. But then he brings in a third option, the very beginning of chapter eight, and he says, therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus.

Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. Now, the law of sin and of death, he just said in verse 25, was the sinful nature of our bodies. So, he's not saying it's set us free from God's morality.

Right. He's saying, now we are free to follow God's moral law because the spirit comes in, we have a new covenant with the spirit in Christ who enables us to put our sin to death. And to bear fruit for God.

And this goes throughout the rest of chapter eight. So, hopefully, I mean, I don't know if you have anything more to add to that. Well, just that in a sense, not exactly sure how to put this.

What the word that came to mind is the abstract. In other words, this is in the abstract, but that's too distant. I don't mean it quite like that, but what he's done here in Romans seven is he's laid out the nature of things and the rescue in principle.

And the application we see in chapter six is don't let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey us lost. But the experience of that paradigm is an experience of battle of warfare, which is what he focuses in on in Galatians five, where he contrasts the deeds of the flesh with the fruits of the spirit. And that's the battle to produce the fruits of the spirit rather than to walk in the deeds of the flesh, which by the way, just for the record is what Paul refers to as being led by the spirit in that passage.

And notice that the people who would object to saying our salvation is by grace in chapter five, anyone who would object to that because this is what he's responding to here. His whole point is you don't understand if this is the only way to bear fruit for God. We're not making it harder for people or worse for people or creating more sin in people.

This is actually the only way you can kill your sin is by having the spirit. And he says that those who are in Christ have the spirit and this is how we know that we are in Christ because we're able to kill our sin with the spirit. And that doesn't mean every sin we have, as you pointed out, because we have plenty of sin to go around that will be working on forever.

Okay, let's go into a question from Jim Carpenelli. And he's got a few questions here. We might not make it to the last one.

I'll leave that one in case we have time. But he says, please clarify how believers are not under any part of the Mosaic covenant slash law. And yet the Apostle Paul uses the law as a starting point for moral instruction.

For example, 1 Timothy 1 5 through 11. Then Romans 10 for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes also Galatians 3 23 through 25. Well, it seems that the just say was it Galatians 10 for Christ is the end of the law.

I mean, Romans 10 for Romans. Oh, yeah, I have that here. I just I mean, it seems to me that were verse that works consistently with the view I've expressed.

Let me review that just for the sake of those who may not be familiar with it. The Mosaic law is a covenant slash contract, if you will, that is binding on those people who are signatories to the contract. Okay, those that are signatories are God and Israel.

Okay, it is a contract that is intended to accomplish a number of purposes. One, it provides structure for the government of the people. And it also provides means for litigating grievances and also provides kind of a like a law for behavior, like criminal behavior.

Okay, and then ways to adjudicate that. All right. And famously, the core is the 10 commandments, but it turns out some people say, well, that's the moral part of the law.

The entire law is moral for the Jews. They are morally obliged to keep the whole thing. All right.

And my point in the past, pardon me, has been, and I still stand by this and I just think it's very sound. This is a law that God made with Jews and not with Gentiles. And therefore, no Gentile was under that law.

No external Gentile was under the Mosaic covenant unless they came into the Commonwealth. And when they were in the Commonwealth, they were under the provisions of the law that governed the Commonwealth. That's it.

So we are not part of the Commonwealth as Gentiles here in our era. And so the law, and I want to be careful. I put this, no feature of the law is incumbent upon us to keep in virtue of it being in the Mosaic law.

And that's why I compare states. I live in the state of California. There's a series of laws here.

When I am in the state of Illinois, I am not under any law in the state of California under the laws of the state of Illinois. Let me make that the state of Wisconsin because I like Wisconsin better than Illinois. Okay.

Now it turns out that both states have laws against homicide. So I can't commit homicide in Wisconsin because it's against the Wisconsin law. Not because it's against the California law.

All right. Which means that in any in any jurisdiction, you're going to have laws that reflect transcendent moral obligations. Things that are right for everybody to keep.

Okay, regardless of where they live. So in the 10 commandments, I think nine of the 10 commandments are like that. They are in the 10 commandments because they are transcendent.

They are universals. And so they show up there. And those same nine that the Sabbath would be the exception.

Also show up in the New Testament as moral obligations that were under different covenant. Okay. It's because those moral obligations transcend any particular covenant or agreement.

This is for humanity and it shows up in the moral commands of the Mosaic covenant. And so therefore the Mosaic law as such does not apply to us. People who confuse about tithing, you're robbing from God.

A Gentile can't rob from God by not tithing because that is a provision of the Mosaic covenant for Jews to help run their country. It was the taxation system to help run the government. But we're not in that theocracy anymore.

So tithing is not the New Testament standard. Don't you mention once? And it's really in the context of as obligatory and it's in the context of the Old Testament law, Matthew 23, I think, in any event. That's not obligatory.

Giving is, that's a different thing. They're kin, obviously, but tithing is tempting. All right.

And there are different commands in the Mosaic covenant. How that all works out. That doesn't apply.

We're supposed to give because we should be generous and help the ministry, for example, et cetera, et cetera. But we already taxed by our governments who run because we're not under theocracy. We're not under the commonwealth.

Okay. No. So that's that position, meaning that the law as such is not what guides us.

All right. But that doesn't mean there's things about the law for one that can't be instructive to us in moral living. Even though we're not under that covenant and Paul makes this point.

And we also see that sometimes Paul, when he talks about law, he is referring not just to the Old Testament, I think, not just to the Mosaic law, but he's referring to any system of self-justification. And that's why if righteousness comes through law, then Christ died needlessly, he said. It's salvation.

It's either by grace or it's by law. And now I think he's speaking in very general terms because if Christ got died, I think that's actually in Galatians. And Galatians are Gentiles.

So he uses law language even with Galatians, identifying that we're not under Mosaic law, and therefore needing circumcision, which is the issue in the Galatian controversy. But if we're going to do that, we are under obligation to keep the whole law. Galatians five and Christ is nullified.

Okay. So it's one or the other. So now we know we're not under the Mosaic law.

That's kind of a fixed piece of theology. Now we've got to understand the other comments that are said, made about law. And we can get to some of those and the way they work in light of that very solid foundational fact.

So before you get to the specific verses, I just want to underscore this. And we mentioned this in the last question, and this is Romans chapter seven, it's very clear that we are not under the law. Listen to what it says.

Verse four, therefore my brethren, you also were made to die to the law through the body of Christ so that you might be joined to another. And then it says again in verse six, but now we have been released from the law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the spirit and not in oldest of the letter. And remember, if you want to be under the law, you do not have the help of the Holy Spirit and you will fail.

So his whole point is, if your worry is that you want to bear fruit for God, you want to have your character change to be like Christ, then the way to do that is to die to the law, be joined to Christ, receive the Holy Spirit, put your sin to death. Okay, Greg, so now why don't you take on those verses? And Galatians, and I don't know if I have this marked, I don't know if you mentioned that yet, Galatians, go away. First Timothy, first Timothy, one five through eleven.

Okay, five for them. But the goal of our instruction, well, actually, the issue, he says, for some men straying from these things, let me back up. The goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

For some men straying from these things have turned aside to fruitless discussions, wanting to be teachers of the law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they are making confident assertions. Now, this, I think, is setting up the law in kind of a negative voice. We're not under that.

And look at these guys are trying to pursue legalistic things and they don't get what the point was. They want to be teachers of law. They don't understand it.

But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that the law is not made for a righteous person. But for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly incentives, the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers, et cetera, et cetera. There's actually a whole list of sins that are there.

What the law does is it identifies with clarity that these things are sin. Again, if you're a righteous person, then this doesn't apply to you. Actually, in Galatians chapter 5, it's just the point he makes.

Those who are walking by the spirit are led by the spirit. It uses both phrases in there. They are not under the law.

Well, why not? Because they're already fulfilling the demands of the law in their spiritual life with the help of the spirit. Okay? That's the point he's making there. And so this is an important point that the law identifies sin.

In Galatians, I think this is one of the other verses he has, Galatians chapter 3. What is the rule? 23 through 25. Before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law because being shut up to the faith, which was later to be revealed. By the way, I need to

read verse 22 because it actually adds a lot.

Here's what it says. But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law being shut up to the faith, which was later to be revealed.

Therefore, the law has become a tutor to lead us to Christ so that we may be justified by faith. And which is exactly the point that I'm making. This fits perfectly into the broader conceptual apparatus, so to speak, that we're talking about here.

What law does is it shows us that we're sinners, that we can't keep it. It's constantly the more we try, the more we fail. And so, in a certain sense, it's like an instructor, a tutor, as the way Paul characterized as Galatians, that it helps us to see our need for a justification by faith because justification by law is not possible.

So these all seem to fit together to be consistent with the point that we've been able to be making. The Galatians passage says it's our tutor to lead us to Christ and we're no longer under the tutor. So it reveals our sin.

This is what Paul talks about too in chapter 7 of Romans. When he asked the question, first he explains, look, the law reveals my sin. Not only does it reveal my sin by showing me what's good, but it reveals my sin by stirring up sin in me when I see what's good because I rebel against it.

But then he says, so does that mean the law isn't good? And he says, no, this is not because the law fails. This is not because of a failure of the law. This is because of failure in us.

This is because of our sin. The reason why the law cannot enable us to follow it is not because it's bad. It's because we're bad.

So that's the distinction that he makes. But what we do learn from the law, well, that's the first thing. We learn our own sin and that leads us to Christ because it helps us to realize our only hope is the grace that's in Christ.

That's the tutoring the law does for us. And that's why Christ is the end of righteousness to all who believe. The righteousness is not found in the law.

There's another verse in Romans that says the problem was that the Jews were pursuing the law righteousness as if it were by law and not by faith. Because the law was always there to help us to submit ourselves to God in faith asking for his grace because we realize we cannot fulfill the law. So the law reveals our sin and points us to Christ.

But the law also shows us who God is because there are principles behind all of the laws,

even the laws that we no longer follow. The laws of the temple were revealing God's righteousness and our need to be cleansed in order to come before him. And it was all pointing towards what Jesus would eventually do.

So we can learn moral principles. We can look at God in the law and see who he is. So it doesn't just reveal our sin.

It also helps us to worship him. And if our goal is for God to make us like Christ, then the more that we look at the character of God, the more that we will be shaped into that character. As Paul explains, as the Holy Spirit is praying for us, as we are groaning in our sinful bodies, he will shape us.

He works all things together for good to make us like Christ. This is all connected in Romans 6 through 8. So it's a package. It is a package.

Did you have anything else to add? No, it's just interesting though that he makes clear in Romans. This is the flow of thought of the book. Our sinfulness Romans 1 and 2 and 3, and then the rescue by grace in 4 and 5, and then through Jesus and then these other issues that come up to clarify in 6, 7 and 8. So there is a flow of thought here in Romans and our fall in this God's rescue through Christ and then now navigating the struggle when we are regenerate and the flesh is still alive.

And that navigating that is a challenge. And he's writing those chapters to give us the proper perspective and help encourage us. And think about this too, because we know, as he explains in chapter 8, that we are adopted, that God is our Father, this is not going to change, we can look at God in the law without fear.

When you know you can't live up to it, that's when you start rebelling against it and saying, well, who cares? I must go all out on this. But when you know that you are adopted, you're forgiven, you can look at it and see the beauty of it rather than just the fear. There's no fear in grace.

So that's when we can actually look at the beauty of the law in God's moral character without fear. I think there's one other element and I'm just doing this in terms of reflection of my own kind of inner life as these facts apply to that. And I find that what has happened to me over the years, it isn't just like an energy that allows me to defeat the sit in my life, like a person takes the right vitamins and drinks so he can run faster around the track.

If I'm going to use that running kind of illustration, who was the famous guy in Chariots of Fire, who said when I run, I feel his pleasure or something like that. Lidal? Yeah, yeah, Eric Lidal. Because what I find as I grow, I just have more of a desire to do what's good.

I have, it's satisfying to do the right thing. Now, of course, there are deviations from that. I get angry, whatever, and then I act in a fleshly fashion.

Okay, but the point is it's not just like I'm capable of living better than I used to be. I enjoy living better than I used to be. So there's on a different level that the new birth has generated something else in me.

And I remember many years ago, in the 80s being on a radio show with Dennis Prager, and Dennis said, I know Christians who believe in the security of salvation through their faith in Christ. I realized that they don't believe in sinning it up. Like, now they're free to do whatever they want.

But I can't understand why they wouldn't if they, there's no consequence to them sinning. And I said, the thing you haven't taken into consideration, Dennis, is the new birth. Because the new birth changes our nature and aligns our hearts with the things of God.

And so as we grow spiritually, we have not only a deeper desire to obey God, but a deeper satisfaction. In our souls when we do. And isn't it interesting that Paul anticipated the exact objection that would come up? That's right.

I mean, this is why Romans is so brilliant. He does this over and over throughout the book. He anticipates how people will object.

He asked the question and then he answers it. Well, thank you, Buckeye and Jim. Greg, we went over even the 28 minutes.

But that's what you get when you ask about Romans. Would you ask Amy about Romans? That's right. Well, thank you so much for listening.

We would love to hear from you if you have a question. You can send it on X with the hashtag STRask or you can go through our website. Just look for our hashtag STRask podcast page.

This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.