

# **Belonging to the Family of Christ**

## **Reflections on Romans Chapter Seven**

So much of who we are has to do with the family we come from. It is impossible to escape this fact. It is in the family that genetic makeup is created, values are instilled, and where character is formed. Even in our culture, where the family is breaking down, and individualism is the prevailing fact and philosophy of life, we are direct products of our families. We may reject or rebel against our past, but we are still defined by it, and can never whole free ourselves from it.

St. Paul acknowledges this fact in the Book of Romans. In the beginning of the book, he declares that all men, whether they are gentiles or Jews, ultimately belong to the Family of Adam. Adam was a rebel against God's laws. That is why the gentiles failed to keep what commandments God instilled in their consciences. That is why even the Jews, in spite of their illustrious history, relationship with God, and reception of the law of God at Sinai, rebelled against God as well. Now it is true that God saved individuals through His grace within these two groups in prior ages; there were always those who embraced God through the truth God revealed to them, but as groups they both failed God. This is because they both came from the same family; they belonged to Adam's family.

What does it mean to belong to a family? It means that critical elements that are true about the head of the family are true of all his descendants, much like belonging to a genetic pool. Specifically, everything about Adam is true about the gentiles and the Jews. Adam was a rebel, a failure, irresponsible, became helpless and naked, embarrassed, relationally impoverished, self centered, death ridden, and the list goes on and on. These things are common between Jews and gentiles because they belong to Adam's family. Proof of this for Israel was the fact that like Adam their father, they failed the commandments given to them, and are now living in exile from their land much like Adam was banished from the garden.

This hopeless family situation is finally resolved in chapter five of Romans where we find that Christ came into the world as a “second Adam” to create a new family. Those who embrace God by faith through Christ undergo a most extraordinary family change. Now, being “in Christ” rather than being “in Adam”, everything that is true of Christ is now true of them. A whole new people group is created that didn’t exist before! Christ was obedient to God’s law, a successful Son to His Father, responsible, powerful in the Spirit and clothed with dignity and honor, relationally connected, selfless, and defeated death by His resurrection. Now all these things, and this is only a partial list, are true of us as God’s new creation, the family of Christ.

Now all this is background for the great chapters six, seven, and eight. It has often been noticed that chapters six and eight are exuberant and spiritually uplifting, positive and full of optimism and possibilities for the Christian life, while chapter seven tends to be a downer, perhaps even a “reality check”. So often we hear the words “... but I am carnal, sold under sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do”. These words are usually spoken with a spirit of defeat, often in connection with the Calvinistic doctrine of “total depravity”, and used to defend the fact that we can only go so far in this earthly life because of our sinful natures.

It is at this point that we must ask a serious question. Does this interpretation of Romans seven jive with what St. Paul so elaborately developed earlier in Romans? Does this defeatist attitude belong more to Adam and his family or to Christ and His family? What about the exhortations in chapter 6? “What shall we say then, shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?” No! “For he who has died has been freed from sin.” Death no longer has dominion over Christ, and the same is true for us who are in Him. We therefore must “reckon” ourselves “dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord”. “For sin shall no longer have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.” Paul then goes on to say that they were once slaves (i.e. belonging to Adam’s family), but now are made free.

And what about chapter eight? “There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.” Before Christ, the law could only condemn humanity, whether Jew or gentile, because they were weak in Adam’s flesh, carnally minded, which brings death. Defeat was inevitable! There was no hope! Now in Christ, defeat is not inevitable because those who belong to Christ’s family do not operate carnally, as if sold in slavery. If what St. Paul is saying in chapter seven applies to the Christian, then nothing he is saying makes sense. It only makes sense if one has embraced a certain theology that is very pessimistic about spiritual growth and godly aspirations.

Granted, what St. Paul is saying is very complex. However, to help us along the way, he gives us another example that is familial in the first six verses of Romans seven. To understand his thinking, we must keep in mind the Adam imagery, which Paul calls the “old man”. Before, we were married to this old man Adam through the law. The Law acted as a binding legal marriage document, so to speak, because it was the law that Adam broke in the first place, and the only way out of our relationship with death and the old man was by obedience. As long as the old man was alive, the law bound us to this old man in marriage. But when the old man died in us by the work of Christ, we were then free to marry another. This other is Jesus Christ who is the very embodiment of the Law and the image of God. It is the Spirit who unites us to our new husband before the law bound us to Adam and death. Now the Spirit binds us to Christ, and since Christ is the law, we do by nature what we could never do before. This union with our new Spouse brings supernatural fruit onto life.

What then is Paul saying in verses 13-25 of chapter seven which seem so negative and out of step with what he has been trying so forcefully to establish? Is he speaking of the normal Christian experience? Again, this cannot be so, or else Paul is hopelessly contradictory. Is he speaking of his own feelings about his spirituality before his conversion? Given his own self satisfaction with his former life as it is recorded in Philippians 3, this is doubtful. Paul of Tarsus thought himself to be on “top of the heap”, so to speak. The best way to look at these verses, therefore, is

to consider them his own reflections *as a Christian* looking back at what life was once like for him as an unconverted Jew. He loved God's law and wanted to obey it with all his heart, but he was carnal like the rest of humanity, for in the end, he belonged to Adam's family.

Now we must take in the implications of this deeply to heart. Though we do still have the "old Adam" hanging about us, St. Paul tells us that it has been "crucified" with Christ (6:6). He may still be around, but he is in a bad way. You are to consider this old man writhing in pain upon the cross with Christ. We must not let him down! He is not our true self! The only power he has is what we give him. The hardest thing for new members in Christ's family (and many seasoned family members) to do is "to reckon ourselves to be indeed dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

In other words, God "reckons" us as members of his family, just like he reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness (4:3). So we must reckon ourselves to be righteous in Christ, and furthermore, to reckon everything that is true about Christ to be true of us. To think of ourselves in our old identity is to be defeated and hopeless. True, we certainly continue to sin, but this is not a reflection of who we are in Christ and where we want to go, nor yet the possibilities of where God wants to take us. We confess our sins, but do not wallow in them. It is certainly good for our humility to remember from time to time who we were, and how we still have not yet reached our high aspirations, but we forget what lies behind, and go forward to what is ahead (Phil. 3).

Dear readers, I challenge you to think of yourselves as God thinks of you. You belong to his family! To think any less is to think a lie about yourself. You have a completely new identity in Christ. Grow into your understanding of this! The possibilities are endless!