Was the apostle Paul a slave to sin or not?

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The key question here in Romans 7 is: Does Paul describe his life before he met Jesus, was born again and filled with the Spirit? Or does he describe his present life? Or does he describe a person other than himself who is a slave to sin as he tries to live under the law without being born again?

Romans 7:14-15 is a very famous and hotly disputed passage. Let me quote it here from NIV 2011:

*We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual**, sold as a slave to sin**. I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.*

In some church traditions this is considered to be a description of Paul at the time of writing around 57 AD after many years of ministry as an itinerant apostle, preacher and teacher. Consequently, it is also seen as a description of the Christian life. However, we have the principle that Scripture interprets Scripture, and this principle is of higher value and importance than church tradition.

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I can recommend especially two books that deal with this question:

Michael Eaton: Living Under Grace - Preaching through Romans. Nelson Word Limited (1994)

Douglass J. Moo: The Epistle to the Romans. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (1996)

Moo puts focus on the words *sold as a slave to sin*. Let me quote Moo:

"...it is the additional description, "sold under sin," that clinches the argument for a description of a non-Christian here. Cranfield is representative of those who argue that this language can appropriately be applied to the Christian, inasmuch as the Christian continues to be sinful, and can therefore be said to be "under the power of sin." However, while it is true that Christians are still very much influenced by sin, and will, perhaps, never finally overcome sin's influence in this life, Paul appears to say more than that here. His language points to a condition of slavery under sin's power. And I question whether Rom. 6 allows us to say that the Christian is "under the power of sin" in this sense. In fact, Paul is saying just the reverse in that chapter; Christians have "died to the power of sin" (v. 2) and are therefore no longer "slaves of sin" (vv. 18, 22)."

What Moo is pointing out here is that Paul has repeatedly said in chapter 6 that **a Christian believer is not a slave to sin**, so how can he possibly say in chapter 7 that he himself as an apostle is a slave to sin? It makes no sense that Paul should contradict himself in this way. Here are some of the things Paul is saying in chapter 6 (quotes from NIV2011):

6:6-7: *For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that* ***we should no longer be slaves to sin****— because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.*

6:16-18 *Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are* ***slaves to sin****, which* ***leads to death,*** *or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though* ***you used to be slaves to sin****, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance.* ***You have been set free from sin*** *and have become slaves to righteousness.*

6:22-24 ***When you were slaves to sin****, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of?* ***Those things result in death****! But* ***now that you have been set free from sin*** *and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness,* ***and the result is eternal life****.*

In order to understand Paul in Romans 7, we need to look at this chapter in the context of chapter 6 as well as chapter 8. We also need to understand the Jewish way of arguing in circles, i.e. in an overlay pattern. The key verses in chapter 7 are verses 5-6:

For ***WHEN we were in the realm of the flesh****, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that* ***we bore fruit for death****.* ***But NOW****, by dying to* ***what once bound us****,* ***we have been released from*** *the law* ***so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit****, and not in the old way of the written code.* (NIV)

It is clear that "being in the flesh" is describing the same situation as being a "slave to sin". In that state, the law gave fuel to sinful passions and it resulted in death. Paul expands on v. 5 in chapter 7:7-13 where the topic is that the law aroused sin to result in death. Paul talks about (spiritual) death as a result of sin no less than 4 times in these verses:

10: *the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought* ***death***
11: *sin… deceived me, and through the commandment put me to* ***death***
13: *Did that which is good, then, become* ***death*** *to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my* ***death****.*

Section 7:14-25 covers the same ground from a different perspective. Section 7-13 talked about the *power of the law* to bring about death as the law aroused the sinful passions.

Section 14-25 talks about the *power of sin* in a person who is a slave to sin. This kind of life results in death and misery.

7:24-25 *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to* ***death****? Thanks be to God, who* ***delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord****!*

The solution is to be delivered through faith in Jesus Christ and acknowledging Jesus as "my Lord." Chapter 8 expands on this new freedom from the law and from the power of sin.

8:1-2 *…there is* ***now*** *no condemnation for* ***those who are in Christ Jesus****, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life* ***has set you free from the law of sin and death.***

So, if we read Paul's own words in these chapters, it is clear that he cannot be talking about himself as a Christian in 7:14-15. So what is he doing? He is probably referring to some Jews in Rome whom he suspects still live under the Jewish law and experience the same battle with sin that he himself had before he met Jesus and was transformed. He is not speaking directly to them, because they might be offended, if he told them that they were slaves to sin. Paul does say clearly in 7:1 that he is speaking to those who "know the law", i.e. Jews who uphold and live by the law. Paul is not describing his life before he became a Christian as he saw it at that time. He is describing it in the hindsight he has now as a person who has been set free from the law and is no longer a slave to sin. Using the first person "I" is a rhetorical device to soften what might be seen as too strong a confrontation and rebuke of the hearers of the letter. Paul often puts himself in the shoes of those he speaks to in order to bring them gently into a fuller understanding of what it means to be free in Christ. He needs to be especially gentle towards the Romans, because he has never met them personally and therefore does not have an established relationship with them. This is in stark contrast to how he earlier spoke to the Galatians on the same topic, freedom from the law and from sin.

Michael Eaton also comments at length about these chapters and verses. For instance, on page 194:
"This person under the law is also 'sold into bondage under sin'. He is utterly and totally a slave (and therefore this is not the normal Christian). It is neither the normal Christian nor the normal non-Christian. It is rather the unconverted person unusually and powerfully under the law."

The description can also fit people who grow up in a church and are taught the 10 commandments and many other church rules, but if they are not born again and released from the power of the law and the power of sin, they may well be frustrated with their unsatisfactory life as a nominal Christian.

The idea that Romans 7 talks about normal Christian life can be traced back to Augustine in the 5th century. Early Greek speaking church fathers did not see it this way, and it is foreign

to Paul himself. It is worth noting that Augustine wrote a commentary on Romans three times. In the third commentary, he said that Rom 7,19 describes a Christian, but in the first two he says that it describes a non-Christian. The idea of describing a believer as “always a sinner” is based on Ambrose and Augustine, and it is an innovation from around the time the church became a state church. It is a foreign concept to both Paul and the New Testament.

When Paul says in Rom 5:8 *While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,* the implication is that we no longer belong to the category of sinners. This does not mean that we cannot commit a sin, but it means we have changed position from “sinners” to “saints”, from belonging to the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

(Iver Larsen, October 2019, slightly revised 2026)