

Chapter 7

Well, that was the argument I was trying to make. The believers have crossed over. They've changed bosses. The two different ways of living belong in two different realms. For Jesus-followers to do wrong just doesn't belong to their identity. Of course this doesn't mean that they don't do wrong, only that this isn't a reflection of who they are becoming.

This proved to be a difficult set of ideas for people who were used to a system of ethics based on rules. It also raised again some of the questions that were raised before and that I gave some initial answers to. Inevitably, those questions concern the Instruction. By this point in the letter I felt I had prepared the ground and that this was my opportunity to treat the issue in some depth. But it's important to remember that the question of the Instruction is inseparable from the question of Israel or the Jewish people because my own people are the Instruction-bearing people. This means that the people called Israel are always in the foreground of this discussion. To speak about being under the Law is to speak about the condition of Israel.

Verses 1-6 Dying to the old, living in the new

I tried to make it as clear as I possibly could that this section is primarily about the Jewish Christians, those who consider themselves to be part of the people who have the Instruction. But I am also extending the argument from the previous section about having different bosses and about death, meaning you can exchange one boss for another. I contrast the Instruction with the work of the Spirit. As we will see, the former relies for its impact on the outward parts of a person but the Spirit transforms us from within. This is a very important part of the argument of the letter. I address the work of the Spirit in more detail a bit later.

The argument in the last chapter about Jesus-followers having died and been raised remains part of the background of the argument here.

1. This section is addressed primarily to the Jewish Christians and, by extension, to those influenced by Instruction-like understandings of ethics. I point out, as I did in verse 15 of the last chapter, that a Jewish person's relationship with the Instruction lasts only while they are alive. The Instruction is your boss for as long as you live.
2. It's like being married. For as long as your spouse lives, you're committed to them and you have to be faithful to them. However, if they die, you are released from the obligation and can marry someone else if you wish.
3. This means if you take up with another person while your spouse is alive you are committing adultery. But once your spouse dies, the situation changes. You're free to marry someone else and, if you do, you're doing nothing wrong.
4. So it is with the Instruction; if you have been baptised and so have died with King Jesus, then you have died as far as the Instruction is concerned and you are no longer committed to it. It no longer defines you. It is no longer the grounds of your identity. Therefore, you are free to belong to someone else. You can belong to King Jesus, the one who has been raised from the dead, and in this way you are enabled to live in the way that God always intended.

5. In our old way of life, the Instruction worked on the part of us most prone to going against God's intention for us. I call this the 'flesh'. I'm not really talking about the body, though I sometimes use the word that way. What I really mean here is a particular way of living and thinking that is controlled by ideas about physical descent, outward marks, appearances and so on. The Instruction was understood to put an emphasis on this kind of thing and this stirred us up to do things that went against the way of life God originally intended for us, and this led to Death. I can see that this is actually quite a complicated and difficult idea. It's one I only introduced at this point and that I tried to explain a bit later on. The main point is that the Instruction was understood to put a focus on outward things rather than inner ones.

6. But we're released from the Instruction, dead to our old boss, so we can serve in accordance with the Spirit of God – of whom more later. We have moved on from the Instruction, with its focus on outward things, to the Spirit and now the focus is on inner transformation.

You can see I've raised two different issues. One is the question of the Instruction and how it actually served Death, and the other is how the Spirit enables us to live in the way that God intends. You will notice that I have again referred to the Instruction as 'the written code'. I do this when I am particularly referring to its outward manifestations as opposed to its true inner purpose. It is the former that contrasts, as we shall see, with what God does through the Holy Spirit.

The next section of the letter has given rise to some controversy over the years. I can see that it could have been clearer. However, at the time it seemed to make good sense. What you need to understand is that I'm addressing the first of the issues I've just mentioned, the way in which the Instruction, though it was God's good gift, became inextricably linked to Death. In my mind this was obviously an issue about Israel, the people who were given the Instruction, and their experience as they lived with it. Part of the confusion about my meaning is a result of my decision about the best way to tell the story. I decided to tell the story in the first person. This was no problem to me because, as an Israelite, I was part of the story. I could bring my own experience to this. But I was intentionally writing the story of Israel's relationship with the Instruction.

In other words, all those questions about whether I was talking, in this chapter, about my experience before or after King Jesus met me are a little beside the point. The topic is clearly the Instruction and so the one who speaks is the one who knows it. But I'm not specifically talking about me but about the impact of the Instruction on a people. For these purposes I tell some of the story from the perspective of Adam because he was given a commandment that was a kind of forerunner of the Instruction. The idea is that Adam is the prototype for all humanity and in particular for those who live under the Instruction.

If you've been following the story so far, and have noticed the things I've said about the inner and outer aspects of the Instruction, then you already have a strong clue about the way the argument is going. The argument works like this; the Instruction is given by God and intended to do good. However, it becomes corrupted by Sin. The outcome of this is that the Instruction has a double effect; it is both good and bad. And this, in turn, produces a double impact in those who try to live by it. We discover that a part of us wants one thing and another part wants another; it causes a crisis in the human heart. It plays havoc with

the human will. It generates conflict between different desires within us. The split in the Instruction causes a split in the will of those who live under it.

Verses 7–11 The Instruction is good but gets corrupted

The Instruction is a good thing. It is a God-given thing. But it gets corrupted because its focus is on the outward rather than the inward. I said a couple of verses back that the Instruction arouses a desire to do the wrong thing. I'm going to try to spell out how this comes about.

7. Let's be clear. The Instruction is from God and therefore it is categorically not Sin. Nevertheless, it is not unrelated to the wrong ways in which humans have decided to live. Certainly, without the Instruction, there would have been no transgressions and we would have had no idea that there was any such thing as Sin. Or perhaps I should say that any awareness humans might have had of Sin would have been extremely vague and tenuous. For example, the Instruction is very clear about coveting. It refers to desiring things that belong to other people. However, if the Instruction had not pointed out that this was wrong, I'd have had no idea that this is what I was doing. Yet coveting is obviously a problem. When you think about it you can see that it's the root of lots of actions that are more obviously wrong. People murder, steal and commit adultery because they want things or privileges that are not theirs to take. Remember the story about the garden and the fruit that belonged to God? And how Adam and Eve were provoked to desire the fruit and then to act on that desire? In one sense what I describe in these verses is Adam's experience and I suppose I'm putting these words into his mouth. If it hadn't been for the commandment, he would not have known it was wrong to desire the fruit. Adam's story sums up the story of those who live under the Instruction.

8. However, Sin, or we might speak of the serpent in the Genesis story as Sin's agent, made the most of the possibilities given by the commandment. This resulted in Adam, or all those he represents, which is all of us – though, for the purposes of my argument, Israel in particular – giving in to all kinds of wrong desires. If it hadn't been for the commandment, Sin wouldn't have got a grip. Sin needs the Instruction to bring it into the open.

9. Adam had once known Life without the commandment. This may seem an odd way to read the text in your day, but it was fairly standard at the time I wrote. Leaving aside for the moment the story of creation in Genesis 1:1–2:3, Adam had been created as the first human in 2:7. This was before the planting and growth of Eden and the placing of Adam in the garden. Only then, at 2:16 does the commandment arrive. But when it arrived, Sin soon got a grip and the result was that Adam died. Of course, he did not physically die at that point but he did lose access to the tree of life and so death became a reality for him and his descendants.

10. The commandment promised life. If Adam had been obedient, he would have remained at work in Eden, he would have had access to the tree of life, and he would have developed in the way that God intended. That is, Adam was promised that he would experience Life if he kept the commandment. Instead, the commandment resulted in Death.

11. Death came because Sin tricked Adam. It took advantage of the opportunity presented by the commandment and brought him Death.

That's my retelling of the story of Adam. I tell it in the first person because it's my own story too. Indeed, it's the story of everyone who's ever lived under the Instruction. I suppose that in an extended sense, it's the story of everyone else too. I need to stress that it's not the fault of the Instruction – which is God-given. It's the fault of Sin because it distorts the way that human desire works so that we end up conflicted. Thankfully, God, acting through King Jesus, has provided a solution to our quandary.

Verses 12–13 A conflicted Instruction means conflicted people

In these verses I will spell out the problem with the Instruction and its consequences. The Instruction is conflicted and it leads to conflicted people. The Instruction is good but can be manipulated to provoke bad. This leaves those who try to follow it unable to choose to do the right things.

12. So, let me be clear. There's nothing wrong with the commandment. There's nothing wrong with the Instruction. They came from God. Their purpose is good. Their goal was to promote holiness and lead humans to Life.

13. It wasn't the commandment that caused the problem. It was Sin that did that. Sin is so pernicious, so dangerous, that is able to pervert or twist something good in such a way that it actually ends up doing the opposite of what was really intended. Something that was supposed to offer Life ended up bringing Death. Astonishingly, what the commandment does achieve is to demonstrate just how awful sin is.

This is how commandments work. That's how the Instruction works. You can see it in Adam's story. And in Israel's. And in mine. And, I suppose, in all of humankind.

Verses 14–25 Being conflicted

You can see these things at work in Israel's story. You can see them in my own story. I suppose most of us can see something of it in our own lives. The Instruction is good but it's become twisted. It's as though there are two sides to it. And the result is that there are two sides to me. The perversion of the Instruction leads to the corruption of human desire.

14. We know that the Instruction is good, but Israel is not. It is supposed to be a spiritual entity, but Israel is human and there's a part of it that is prone to disobedience, susceptible to getting things wrong. Israel tends to define itself in terms of the physical rather than the spiritual. The result is that Israel has sold out to sin; it practices the wrong way to live human lives. Let's face it, part of us is prone to desiring what we should not; Sin has got its grip on us.

15. The truth is that when we live under commandments like this, we get really mixed up. Part of us wants one thing and part of us wants another. For example, part of me wants to do the right thing but I end up doing the opposite. I don't seem to know my own mind. I seem to be capable of wanting to do one thing but actually doing another.

16. You see, and remember that I'm speaking as Israel, part of me agrees with the Instruction and longs to live it out; it acknowledges that the Instruction is good and right. But, though I think it's good, I can't actually do it. Basically, I'm conflicted.

17. My problem – Israel’s problem – is that Sin has a grip on part of me and it does things the better part of me doesn’t want to do. There’s an ‘I’ that wants one thing and another ‘I’ that wants another. The true ‘I’ agrees with the Instruction but Sin lives in me, and acts through me, and so I do something else. A part of me longs to live up to the Instruction but there’s another part of me that wants other things.

18. So there’s nothing good in that part of me, the part that’s prone to distorted desire. One part of me can desire what is right but the other part of me can’t deliver on it. I desire to do right but cannot. I can want it but I cannot accomplish it. Israel’s problem is that it is conflicted. You might say that its physical side is not under the control of its spiritual side.

19. The result is that I end up not doing the good I want to do but instead the harm I don’t want to do. This is Israel’s condition.

20. In other words, under the Instruction, Israel is conflicted. Sin has managed to get a grip. It’s not the better part of Israel that does wrong. But Israel, like everyone else, is ruled by Sin and its better part is not the bit that controls everything it does. Remember, this is about those who live under the Instruction. Those without the Instruction usually don’t even want to do the right thing. You can see that I think humans are in a mess. Even the best of us are conflicted. We’re divided. The better parts of us are at odds with other parts of us.

21. So, this is the impact of the Instruction. The best part of me may want to do what is right, but there’s evil, always on hand, to make sure I get it wrong. It’s like the story of Cain who is warned that sin is crouching by his door and longs to capture him. And, as we know, it did just that.¹ It’s as though the Instruction has two distinct parts and two distinct effects. One aspect of it leads to Israel going wrong and this frustrates the other, better aspect of it.

22. So, we have a divided Instruction and a divided Israel. You see, the better part of me, my inner being, delights in the Instruction, which is to say, the inward part of the Instruction that conforms to its true purpose. I call that part ‘God’s Instruction’. My heart loves it.

23. But there’s another aspect of the Instruction that has got hold of another part of me and it’s like being at war. The better part of me, my mind or heart if you like, with its delight in the Instruction, is held captive by the other aspect of Instruction. This latter aspect is the part of the Instruction that’s been corrupted by sin – Sin’s Instruction – and that has a grip on the other part of me. Remember, I’m still talking about Israel. There are good and bad aspects of the Instruction and good and bad aspects of Israel. I tend to categorise the good as ‘inner’ or ‘inward’ and the bad as ‘outward’.

What this amounts to is that, as for Adam, as for Israel and as, we might add, for code or rule-based approaches to ethics too, everything ends up conflicted. We, as people, get conflicted because we cannot be what we long to be, and the Instruction gets conflicted too; part of it is true to its origins and is good and delightful. And part of it gets coopted by Sin and works against our best interests and truest desires. We’re in a right mess.

¹ Genesis 4:7.

24. So, still speaking as Adam and as Israel, and so for humanity in general, I acknowledge that I need rescuing from this mess.

25. Thankfully, God, acting through King Jesus, has done exactly this. He has rescued us. Just to get the point across again, I stress that the best part of me serves the good part of the Instruction but the other part of me serves the wrong part of the Instruction. One is the Instruction as God intended it and the other is the Instruction as Sin has corrupted it.

So, what have we demonstrated? Firstly, that because of our weakness, the Instruction is not fit for purpose. Next, that Jews can, if they are following King Jesus, be set free from the Instruction's negative impact. Meanwhile, non-Jews can also be liberated from their false gods and false ways of being human. Now, all this raises the question of how we can be human in the way that God intended and that's the theme of the next section. Try to keep in mind that the impact of Sin on the Instruction is to send it in two different directions – one good and one bad, one inward and one outward. The outward aspect of the Instruction leads Israel astray but the inward part of the Instruction continues to appeal to the inner part of Israel. The result of this split in the Instruction is that those who live in it end up conflicted. This is an issue that God has sorted out through Jesus, as I tried to explain in the next section of the letter.