

## An “East Asian” Response to Shame-full (Mis)Interpretations of Romans 7<sup>1</sup>

ETS 2019 (San Diego)

### INTRODUCTION

Romans 7 has an unmistakable influence on Christian theology and psychology.

Some scholars suggest traditional views reflect the “introspective conscience” of Western theologians like Augustine and Luther more than Paul. Accordingly, interpreters mistakenly overemphasize an individual’s struggle with guilt feelings. This reading effectively sets aside Paul’s collectivistic categories in favor of individualism. Paul’s singular focus becomes the individual.

What then does Romans 7 contribute to our understanding of human nature and the Christian life? Most Christians generally agree that humans are born evil and so have a “sin nature.” Traditional Western interpretations of Romans 7 prioritize the individual and guilt. Unfortunately, such readings tend to foster shame and a sense of humiliation rather than humility.

### KEY QUESTIONS AND THESIS

In this paper, I argue that Paul, in Romans 7, does not prioritize the individual and guilt. What if we read Paul with greater sensitivity to collective identity, honor, and shame, i.e., values that characterize both the ancient world and a traditional “East Asian” worldview?

By so doing, we find that Romans 7 offers a more hopeful anthropology than some might expect. Paul’s perspective helps to bridge the apparent gap between Western and Eastern views of human nature. Furthermore, this reading preserves a focus on collective identity that is consistent with Paul’s broader argument in the surrounding chapters. Accordingly, this paper illustrates interconnections between culture, biblical exegesis, theology, and psychology.

### HOW DOES THE LAW SHAPE OUR IDENTITY?

In Romans 7, who is the “I” on whom Paul focuses in 7:7-25? The struggle to answer this question has led to much speculation and distraction.

What is clear, however, is that Romans 7 draws inferences from previous chapters. The transition “or” in 7:1 indicates that Paul continues to discuss the interrelationship between the law, sin, life, and death from Romans 6. Accordingly, interpretations of Romans 7 should reflect continuity with Romans 6 and 8. Just as honor-shame shapes the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper adapts chapter 9, “Shamed from Birth? (Romans 7)”, in *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL; IVP Academic, 2019). For a fuller argument and documentation related to this paper, refer to the book.

surrounding context, so also we should expect Romans 7 to yield insights related to honor-shame.

At first glance, Romans 7 says little about honor-shame. So far, Paul has largely focused attention on collective identity. However, his extensive use of the first person in Romans 7 raises the question whether Paul now speaks about individuals. He has emphasized the law's covenantal nature and implications concerning ethnic identity, yet Paul now seems to lay stress on the ethical force of the law. To find an answer, we should consider not only what Paul says but what he *does*. The passage serves a distinct function in the flow of Romans 5–8. Once we identify Paul's purpose in the chapter, we then can explore its potential implications.

When reading Romans 7 through an honor-shame lens, an important question emerges: How does the law shape our understanding of identity? We must trace Paul's argument to find an answer.

### NOT "I" BUT "WE"

When Paul uses "I" in Romans 7:7-25, he does not speak autobiographically. In fact, Romans 7:9 *cannot* refer to Paul. He could never say, "I was once alive *apart from the law* but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died."<sup>2</sup> Before following Christ, Paul did not have the anxiety of the "I" in Romans 7. He describes himself in Philippians 3:6, "as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Any Jew who recited Psalm 119 in worship would likewise claim to delight in God's law.

What's more, ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman writers commonly used "I" for rhetorical effect. In fact, Quintilian, a contemporary of Paul, gives reason to think Paul might have used this device to convey a perspective *other than* his own.

Readers should distinguish Romans 7:4-6 from Romans 7:7-25. The "you" and "we" in 7:4-6 are those who "were living in the flesh . . . *but now* . . . are released from the law."<sup>3</sup> Paul includes himself in 7:4-6, whereas Romans 7:9 cannot refer to him, either before or after knowing Christ. Accordingly, we cannot assume "I" in 7:7-25 includes the "we" of 7:4-6.

If we assume otherwise, only one type of person satisfies all the criteria of the "I" in Romans 7—a Gentile convert to Judaism who then becomes a Christian. Only this person could previously live "apart from the law," then be "released from the law" (Romans 7:6, 9)

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<sup>2</sup> Brett David Burrowes, "From Letter to Spirit: The Transformation of Torah in Paul's Symbolic World as Reflected in His Letter to the Romans." (PhD Dissertation; Durham University, 2004), p. 106.

<sup>3</sup> Brett David Burrowes, "From Letter to Spirit: The Transformation of Torah in Paul's Symbolic World as Reflected in His Letter to the Romans." (PhD Dissertation. Durham University, 2004), p. 106. Also, Rom 7:5–6 seems to preview the division between 7:7–25 and 8:1–11, which likely depicts the "old self" and the "new self" from 7:1–4. See Schreiner, *Romans*, p. 385; Michael Bird, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), p. 224; Jason Maston, "Sirach and Romans 7:1–25: The Human, the Law, and Sin" in *Reading Romans in Context: Paul and Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Ben Blackwell, John Goodrich, Jason Maston (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), p. 93.

yet still attempt to serve the law with delight (Romans 7:22, 25). Paul depicts the “I” positively as a slave to God’s law (within his mind; 7:25). If so, this explains the conflicted Gentile conscience of Romans 2:15.

The problem with this view is that we must then argue “in the flesh” (Romans 7:5, 18, 25) describes the Christian experience despite Romans 6 and 8 and the contrast drawn with those living in/according to “the Spirit” (Romans 8:4, 5, 9, 12, 13). This argument is possible (compare 1 Corinthians 3:1; 2 Corinthians 1:17; 10:2; Galatians 5:13) but unlikely because it allows an abnormal way of speaking to trump the immediate context of Romans 5–8.

The “I” does not fit common theological categories. Paul depicts the response of those trying to obey God’s commands apart from the Spirit’s power. However, his description of “I” in Romans 7:7-25 doesn’t sufficiently describe believers, unbelievers, or any of Paul’s contemporaries. Whatever our interpretation, we can’t be dogmatic because the broader context turns our attention away from the “I.” Paul draws from a collectivistic perspective to characterize the “I.”

When readers concentrate on the “I,” they easily miss how often Paul talks about “we” in context. In Romans 7:4-7, 14, “we” bear fruit for God, previously in the flesh but now released from the law, which “we” know is spiritual. Romans 6 and 8 are chock full of “we” statements. In Romans 7, Paul does not forsake his broader discussion about collective identity. If anything, he continues his argument to ensure his readers reckon themselves “in Christ” and do not define themselves by natural or “fleshly” cultural categories.

Six observations suggest “I” refers collectively to Israel during the exodus rather than an individual.

First, the passage comes in a context where Paul uses Israel’s story as a framework for talking about the collective identity of God’s people. The intensive focus on the law within Romans 5–8 recalls Israel’s arrival at Sinai after leaving Egypt.

Second, the chapter contains explicit and implicit allusions to the Pentateuch. Romans 7:7 cites the commandment “Do not covet” (Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21). Also, many scholars detect repeated echoes to Adam in Romans 7:7-11.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the dual allusions to Adam and Israel reflect Paul’s prior comment,

“for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come” (Romans 5:13-14).

In both texts, Paul highlights the transgression of Adam and those under the law. That is, they both disobeyed specific commands from God. Those who lived “from Adam to Moses”

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Michael Bird, *Romans*, 240.

did not receive direct commands from God; they “sin” but do not commit “transgression” (hence different nouns in 5:14). Paul effectively restates Romans 5:13, 20 in 7:7, 13. This observation suggests Romans 7 builds on Romans 5 and reflects the unique experience of Israel, who, “once alive apart from the law,” died when the commandment came (Romans 7:9).

Given Paul’s distinction in Romans 5:13-14, the “I” does not represent all humanity. Paul’s argument about one’s response to the law does not apply to people living from Adam to Moses (and arguably countless Gentiles after Moses). They did not directly receive commands from God.

Fourth, only Israel as a nation fits the description of Romans 7. As a collective group, Israel experienced the circumstances and conflict Paul depicts. They were once alive apart from the law yet died with its arrival. They confessed the law is holy, righteous, and a delight. Although they “agree with the law, that it is good,” Israel was later enslaved in exile because of sin (compare Romans 7:14; Isaiah 50:1; 52:3).

Fifth, Galatians 4 presents Israel in a way similar to Romans 7. Paul says everyone under the law is “enslaved” (Galatians 4:1, 3, 7, 9, 24-25). In context, Paul explains the law’s purpose and clarifies who are Abraham’s offspring. Akin to Romans 7–8, he also contrasts a child “according to the flesh” with one “according to the Spirit,” using the analogy between Hagar and Sarah (Galatians 4:21-31).

Sixth, Paul says, “I am of the flesh, sold under sin” (Romans 7:14). The last phrase echoes Isaiah 50:1 and, more broadly, Isaiah 49:24–50:2.<sup>5</sup> Given Isaiah’s context, “I” is a figure that represents Israel in exile because of sin. The prophet frequently uses Israel’s exodus to foretell her coming restoration.<sup>6</sup> Goodrich adds, “It is, then, Yahweh’s ability to restore Israel that becomes the focus of the exchange in Isa 49:24–50:3.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Paul stresses the fact that “I,” being a slave, lacks the ability to carry out what he wants.

### WHY TALK THIS WAY?

Why does Paul use “I” to refer indirectly to Israel? How does the extended monologue of Romans 7:7-25 relate to the “you” and “we” of Romans 7:4-6?

Paul is mindful not to give wrong impressions about fellow Jews. By speaking in the first person, he lumps himself with Israel, needing Christ’s redemption like all who come from Adam. He does this to guard against potential misunderstandings that could emerge if he

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<sup>5</sup> Also cf. Isa 52:3. John Goodrich offers layers of evidence in his *Ibid.*, pp. 476–95. He follows Marc Philonenko, “Sur l’expression ‘vendu au péché’ dans l’ ‘Epître aux Romains’,” *Revue de l’histoire des religions* 103 (1986): 41–52.

<sup>6</sup> Rikki Watts, “Consolation or Confrontation? Isaiah 40–55 and the Delay of the New Exodus” *TynB* 41, no. 1 (1990): 31–59; Bernard Anderson, “Exodus Typology in Second Isaiah” in *Israel’s Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Bernard Anderson and Walter Harrelson (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 177–95.

<sup>7</sup> Goodrich, “Sold Under Sin,” p. 485.

spoke about Israel directly. For example, it might appear he distances himself from Israel as though he and other readers do not suffer the same inability when in the flesh.

However, he does not magnify Israel's sin beyond that of anyone else. In this way, Paul prevents anti-Jewish sentiments from taking root among Roman Christians.

Additionally, Paul's appeal to ancient Israel serves as a warning to Roman Christians. They ought not to put themselves under the law's authority.<sup>8</sup> Otherwise, they become like Adam and Israel, who died in exile.<sup>9</sup> Paul reinforces a theme that spans the letter, though intensified, since Romans 5. All people—Jews and Gentiles—are in Adam. This common identity is more fundamental than one's culture. In Romans 8, Paul highlights the corresponding positive point about the collective identity of those in Christ.

Paul's indirect appeal to Israel is significant. First, it means Paul simply does not discuss a specific individual in 7:7-25. Neither does he talk about a certain group among his contemporaries. Therefore, debates about the identity of "I" and human nature have little or no relevance to Paul's original point.

Also, Romans 7 does not explain whether people are born "good" or "evil." It is true that Paul does emphasize human weakness or inability under the law, but we should distinguish between being weak and being evil. Even biblical writers call the law "weak," not evil (compare Romans 8:3; Hebrews 7:18; Galatians 4:9).

In summary, Paul's main point concerns neither human nature nor an individual. Instead, Paul's most explicit statements direct attention elsewhere, namely, to sin and the law. He first vindicates the law and then exposes the culpability of sin.

### PAUL VINDICATES THE LAW AND "ME"

Romans 7 expands the discussion from Romans 3, where Paul affirms God's righteousness and upholds the law (Romans 3:3-5, 31). In fact, he leaves verbal breadcrumbs along the way. For example, Romans 7:7, 13 simply repeat similar claims about the law in Romans 3:20; 4:15; 5:13, 20. In each case, Paul explains the law's purpose. Ultimately, he defends the law's goodness.

Why is this defense necessary?

**First**, Paul addresses an apparent contradiction. As he later quotes, "the person who does the commandments shall live by them" (Romans 10:5; compare Romans 7:10; Leviticus 18:5). Yet Paul seems to imply the opposite in Romans 6:14-15; 7:4-12.

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 14 is a likely application of this point. John Hart goes further than I do in his "Paul as Weak in Faith in Romans 7:7-25," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 170 (July-Sept 2013): 315-43.

<sup>9</sup> If Wright is correct that the "curse" of Gal 3:13 refers to Israel's exile (cf. Deut 28-29), then we have another similarity between Rom 7 and Gal 3-4. See Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 137-156.

**Second**, if the law is sin or brings death, people would certainly question God's righteousness. Therefore, he defends the law's goodness in order to uphold God's honor.

In Romans 7:7-12, Paul mentions the law, sin, and "I." The law and sin are set in opposition. Whereas the law promises life, sin seizes the opportunity to use God's command to deceive and kill "me." This observation leads to the conclusion, "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."<sup>10</sup>

Paul shifts his attention in Romans 7:13-25, contrasting "sin" and "I." In Romans 7:17, 20, Paul exonerates "me" and blames sin by saying "it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me." Paul's sharp distinction seems to excuse sinners from their actions. If Paul didn't repeat himself twice, one might treat it like an obscure passing comment. To complicate the picture, Paul in Romans 8:1-3 says God condemns sin yet never says he condemns sinners.

On balance, Paul paints a generous picture of the "I," who clearly does wrong. Paul says, "I am of the flesh, sold under sin," "I do not do what I want," "I do the very thing I hate," "but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing." He adds, "I do not understand my actions," and "I agree with the law, that it is good." Furthermore, "I" emphasizes he "hates" his evil actions and wants to do good. Verses 21-25 are even more lucid. Paul says "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being.... So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind." In contrast to his inner mind, he vilifies "my members," his "body of death," and "my flesh."

What gets lost amid the shuffle of proof texts supporting one view or another is the fact that "I" presents himself as sin's *victim*, not merely a perpetrator of sin. He is deceived by sin. He has no ability to do the good he desires but is compelled to do what he hates. This slave to sin even confesses his wretched state in 7:24. To be sure, "I" in Romans 7 does wrong by disobeying commands, which results in death (Romans 6:21, 23; 7:4-5, 10-11). Nevertheless, Romans 7:17, 20 are unambiguous. Sin, not "I," is responsible.

Paul in effect puts sin on trial.<sup>11</sup> Having upheld the rightness of the law, he now vindicates the "I," who represents Israel in exile due to sin. Sin enslaves them just as Pharaoh did their ancestors. The prophets foretold a new exodus that would bring God's righteousness. As with Pharaoh, God uses a sacrifice to condemn sin (Romans 8:3). This reflects a purpose of the Passover lamb—to "execute judgments on all the gods of Egypt" (Exodus 12:12; Numbers 33:4). Once sin is put to shame, the Spirit of Glory leads God's children not back to Canaan but into a renewed world (Romans 8:9-30; 4:13). In short, Paul looks forward to the ultimate hope of the "I."

Other signs confirm that Paul seeks to vindicate the "I" of Romans 7. In addition to being a Passover lamb, Christ also is a "sin offering" (Romans 8:3).<sup>12</sup> This sacrifice atones for "unintentional sins," which are committed due to negligence or ignorance.<sup>25</sup> In Romans

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<sup>10</sup> One could argue that Rom 5:13 implied as much since sin was in the world before the Law was given to Moses.

<sup>11</sup> N. T. Wright, *Romans*, pp. 565–68.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *Climax*, pp. 220–30.

10:2-3, Paul describes Israel in similar terms, saying, “I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness.” A few paragraphs later, he adds, “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite” (Romans 11:1).

Paul changes his tone dramatically after his harsh critiques of the Jews early in the letter. He is increasingly explicit in affirming Israel’s election (compare Romans 11:28-29). He repeatedly and fervently identifies himself with Israel (Romans 9:2-3; 11:1, 14; compare 10:1). Therefore, we see why Paul crafts Romans 7 using “I” as he does.

We observe two familiar goals achieved simultaneously. First, Paul mitigates national prejudice and presumption. Second, he defends God’s glory from accusation. We already saw Paul affirm the law’s goodness. In addition, he anticipates the objection posed in Romans 9–11, where Paul upholds God’s truthfulness. When defending Israel in Romans 7, he previews his conclusion in Romans 11:2, “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.” After all, if God were unfaithful toward the elect, what confidence can readers have in the promises of Romans 8:28-30?

*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

Throughout Romans, Paul defends God’s honor and removes the measures of worth that are based on anything other than Christ.

### THEOLOGY OF CULTURE

What do we glean from Paul’s continued use of a collectivist perspective?

His comments about the weakness of “I” and the law help us understand his critique of human culture. God executes his plan to defeat sin within culture, not merely *despite* culture. The Mosaic law is a concrete expression of that plan. It sets apart a people called to reflect God’s character. In establishing Israel, the law claims a foothold for God’s kingdom in the world. Still, it is insufficient. This is important for grasping Paul’s theology of culture.

Although the law is good, Paul calls its commands “elementary principles of the world” (*ta stoicheia tou kosmou*) that “enslave” people (Galatians 4:2-3). It is like a child’s “guardian” or “manager.” The word *stoicheion* (“elementary principle”) has no inherent negative meaning. Rather, “The significance of the ‘fundamental elements’ for Paul’s description of the past is the genitive ‘of the world’ (*tou kosmou*). It is the world to which Paul will later argue he died (6:14).”<sup>13</sup> Galatians and other New Testament texts demonstrate that the

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Adams, “The Israel of God: The Narrative Rhetoric of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians.” (PhD dissertation; Atlanta, GA; Emory University, 2012), p. 332.

word's root meaning concerns something that is basic or foundational.<sup>14</sup> Hebrews 5:12 uses the word positively: "you need someone to teach you again the *basic principles* [*stoicheion*] of the oracles of God."

"Fundamental elements" are basic aspects of both the physical *and* social world.<sup>15</sup> They are "the foundational character of what is being described," and thus refer to the structure and order that shape creation and culture.<sup>16</sup> This explains why Paul likens *stoicheia* to human tradition in Colossians 2:8. Observe also Colossians 2:16, 20 where "the elements of the world [*tōn stoicheiōn tou kosmou*]" concern regulations that include "questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath."

Paul's seemingly conflicted view of the law resembles what we see in Romans 7. In many respects, he uses "fundamental elements" and "flesh" similarly. Living in "the flesh" is not inherently evil, just as being "in culture" is not evil.<sup>17</sup> Christ is the Son of David "according to the flesh" (Romans 1:3). Paul's kinsmen "according to the flesh" (Romans 9:3, 5) are Jews, whom he calls "my flesh" in Romans 11:14.

Flesh, manifested collectively in culture, should not limit one's values and character. Our "flesh" gives outward expression to inward principles and perspective. Likewise, culture is manifested in practices reflecting a community's collective convictions and assumptions. Paul is concerned that we not be defined by *mere* flesh. When the "fundamental elements" of our (sub)culture define us, we live in "the flesh."

The law is weakened by the flesh when the law becomes a mere social boundary marker. God's law functions as a token of cultural identity. It is a *stoicheion*, an "elementary principle" of the world. Various elements of the law perpetuated the separation that plagued the world since Babel. Even within Israel, it created barriers of shame by labeling some "holy" but others "impure" and "sinful."<sup>18</sup>

If even the law is weak, so are the wisdom and ways of every culture and ideology. This warning applies to Jews and Greeks. Paul's readers are challenged to reconsider their sense of collective identity, pride in tradition, and the conventional things that divide one group from another. This perspective further sheds light on why the law cannot bring God's righteousness.

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<sup>14</sup> Adams ("The Israel of God", 332) notes the positive use of verb form *stoicheō* in Gal 5:25; 6:16. We can also add Rom 4:12 concerning those "who also walk [*stoicheō*] in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham..." (cf. Acts 21:24).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. G. Delling, "*stoicheō, systoicheō, stoicheiov*," *TDNT*, Vol 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 670–87; J. Louis Martin *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), pp. 125–40; Martinus deBoer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), pp. 252–60. "*stoicheiov*" *BDAG*; Dieter Roth, "What *en tō kosmō* are the *stoicheia tou kosmou*?" *HTS* 70, no. 1 (2014). <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i1.2676>>. The noun describes natural elements in 2 Peter 3:10, 12.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Leithart, *Deliverance*, p. 30. See discussion on pp. 29–42.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 15:35–49 where Paul says different "flesh" have differing kinds of glory. For a helpful discussion, see Leithart, *Delivered*, pp. 75–90. In essence, he explains "flesh" as the creaturely state of vulnerability and need (i.e. finitude) that arouses our desires to exert power, gain praise and secure protection.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Leithart, *Delivered*, pp. 91–138.



## PSYCHOLOGY & ANTHROPOLOGY

So, does Romans 7 tell us whether people are born with a good or evil nature? The above discussion has shown that we can hardly answer this question because it is wrongly framed. We can improve the question by clarifying what Paul does and does not say. By so doing, we can build a bridge of understanding between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions.

As we've seen, Paul presents a more optimistic view of humanity than Western teachers often assume. In Romans 7, he emphasizes humanity's inability, not its evil disposition. The "I" delights in God's law and does not desire evil. It is sin, not "I," that bears the blame for wrongdoing.

Precisely how one reconciles mutual culpability between "sin" and "I" is a separate question. The tension in Romans 7 might be compared to addiction, whereby one is culpable for the decisions that led to the addictive behavior. Over time, the addiction has a destructive impact on a person's neurology, making it increasingly difficult for them to change. Essentially, the addict surrenders control and so becomes a slave to addiction. The person becomes as much a victim as a perpetrator of wrongdoing.

Because these distinctions influence how we see ourselves and others, Romans 7 causes undue shame if misunderstood. Recall the quotations that opened the chapter. People too commonly neglect to see or highlight human goodness, which exists by virtue of our being created in God's image.

In practice, this can cause us to treat people as though *they* were "sin" and not its slaves. Consequently, people do not merely think their *actions* are bad (entailing guilt). They see *themselves* as bad (suggesting shame). Such claims about a person's identity devalue their worth as humans. Actions can be changed, but one has little hope when a person's self is deemed worthless.<sup>19</sup>

This change in perspective tempers much popular teaching that shames people. Such approaches come across as cold, not compassionate. Speaking the truth with conviction should not be set in opposition to tenderness with an eye for restoring those who bring harm to themselves and others. The prophets frequently depict the Lord showing tender compassion to those who spurn him (for example, Isaiah 40:1-2; 54:7-8; Hosea 2:14). Paul in Romans shows similar flexibility. Whereas he calls people "enemies," unbelieving Jews are also regarded as "beloved" (Romans 11:28-29).

## CROSS-CULTURAL MISSIONS

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<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, "wretched" in English often carries strong moral connotations such that 7:25 might imply a wicked disposition. However, *talaipōros* routinely conveys the anguish of one's suffering or state. In this sense, it is "an antonym of *makarios* [blessed]." See *talaipōros*, *BDAG*. That the "I" is a captive needing rescue (7:23-25) confirms this reading of *talaipōros*. Also, cf. Isa 33:1 (LXX); Tobit 13:10; 2 Macc 4:47; 4 Macc 16:7; *Ant.* 1.204

What about the apparent tension between Christianity and Confucian views of human nature? The above interpretation highlights a surprising degree of affinity between these traditions. The common Christian teaching that people are “born evil” can be reconciled with Confucian claims that people are “born good.” Confucian thinkers primarily focus on human potential.<sup>20</sup> Christians affirm a similar idea when saying people have consciences and the ability to do good because we bear God’s image. Likewise, Confucians do not deny that people do wrong. In fact, human weakness is assumed as an encumbrance to virtue. This perspective resembles what we find in Romans 7, which stresses human inability.

Confucian writers agree with Paul’s message in two respects.

(1) First, laws are insufficient to bring about the harmony God desires for the world. For instance, Confucius says,

If the people are led by laws, and uniformity among them be sought by punishments, they will try to escape punishment and have no sense of shame. If they are led by virtue, and uniformity sought among them through practice of ritual propriety, they will possess a sense of shame and come to you of their own accord.<sup>21</sup>

(2) Second, as in Romans, “the classical [Confucian] texts indicate that their concern was not just to instill a deeper sense of shame but to *change the things for which people feel shame.*”<sup>22</sup>

The point of this comparison is **not** to equate Confucian and Christian teaching. Rather, when seeing through an East Asian lens, we observe more of what Paul says about the human condition in Romans 7. Even in the face of our inability, we are reminded that good can be redeemed within humanity. A more balanced reading of Romans 7 can prevent miscommunication between Christians and non-Christians, especially those from East Asia.

To be sure, Paul’s message contradicts certain *applications* of a Confucian view of human nature. For example, “Parents tend to blame their children’s misbehavior on the influence of their children’s bad neighbors, poor teachers, and bad classmates.”<sup>23</sup>

Also, since human inability limits human potential, people should reassess their expectations of themselves and others, knowing that impatient, high-pressure tactics do not guarantee the changes they want.

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<sup>20</sup> *Mencius*, 6A2, 6A6, 6A7, 6A15, 7B24. Even Xunzi, who argued that human nature was born evil, is often misunderstood. See Hung-Chung Yen, “Human Nature and Learning in Ancient China” in *Education as Cultivation in Chinese Culture*, ed. Shikuan Hsu and Yuh-Yin Wu (Singapore: Springer, 2015), pp. 31–42.

<sup>21</sup> *Analects* 2:3 as quoted in Zhang and Baker, *Think Like Chinese*, p. 136. They cite *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, n.p. <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/confucius>>.

<sup>22</sup> Italics original. Nathaniel Barrett, “A Confucian Theory of Shame,” *Sophia* 54 (2015): 146. He lists examples from *Analects*, see 4.9, 4.22, 5.15, 5.25, 8.13, 9.27, 13.20; *Mencius*, 2A7, 4B18, 5B5, 7A6, 7A7. Given Rom 6:22, the nonbeliever is not necessarily ashamed. Rather, shame comes after following Christ.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Strand, “Explaining Sin in a Chinese Context,” *Missiology* 28, no. 4 (Oct 2000): 431. *jiao bu xin shi zhi duo* and *yang bu jiao fu zhi guo* similarly blame parents and teachers for a child’s failings.

## **CONCLUSION: WHEN “I” INTERPRET THE BIBLE**

We have further seen how an individualistic or collectivistic lens influences our interpretation. In recent times, many people hesitate to speak broadly about entire groups to avoid stereotypes. Nevertheless, one’s self-perceptions—especially in non-Western contexts—are intricately tied to larger groups regardless of individual distinctions.

Countless times I’ve heard someone say, “We Chinese all . . .,” usually followed by a patently false overgeneralization about Chinese people. A young Chinese man recently told me, “We believe people are born good because that is what Chinese philosophers teach us. We don’t have individual thoughts about it.” That is what individuals tend to accept in collectivistic cultures. Tradition and culture are powerful authorities.

A perspective that prioritizes “us” and “them” influences our interpretations in subtle ways that a focus on “I” might not. Romans 7 is such an example. A group’s history and patterns of behavior will not fit every individual’s experience, yet we must not underestimate how easily we are affected by social trends and cultural patterns of thinking.

What happens if we ignore a collectivist perspective due to differences among individuals?

We miss potential warnings and encouragements. Twice Paul says ancient texts are written for the sake of his readers (Romans 4:23; 15:4; compare 1 Corinthians 10:11). No sweeping characterization of ancient Israel perfectly fits each member of the nation. One could say Moses, Phineas, Caleb, Joshua, and others had faith and were righteous, yet countless others turned to wickedness and idolatry. Paul quotes Elijah to say God has not rejected his people, though some individuals were unfaithful, since the Lord preserves a remnant (Romans 11:1-5). Despite individual exceptions, Paul’s interpretation of the Old Testament tells how God works in a world made up of Jews and Gentiles, not individuals.