

Romans: The Good News of God

Released from the Law

Romans 7:1-6

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Released from the Law

Scripture

Let us read Romans 7:1-6:

¹ Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? ² For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. ³ Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

⁴ Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. ⁵ For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶ But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code. (Romans 7:1-6)

Introduction

Romans 7 is one of the most challenging chapters in all of Scripture.

The apostle Paul is talking about sin in this chapter. But is he talking about sin in the life of a Christian, or sin in the life of a non-Christian? And if he is talking about sin in the life of a Christian, is he talking about a Christian who is mature or immature, growing or backsliding, “spiritual” or “carnal”?

There are so many different schools of thought about this chapter that it is important to understand it correctly.

The focus of Paul’s attention in this chapter is to explain the

place of God's law in God's plan of salvation. Paul uses the term "law," "commandment," or "written code" in each of the first fourteen verses of Romans 7, and a total of thirty times in the entire chapter.

But before we examine Paul's use of the term "law" in Romans 7, we need to notice how Paul used the term in the previous six chapters. Paul explained that the law reveals sin (3:20), condemns the sinner (3:19), defines sin as transgression (4:15; 5:13), and brings God's wrath (4:15). In other words, the law reveals sin, not salvation; it brings condemnation, not justification; and it brings wrath, not grace.

According to Paul, the purpose of the law is to show our utter inability to obey it and merit favor with God. By his amazing grace, God has credited Christ's obedience to the law to our account. Thus, we are justified by faith alone in Christ alone through grace alone. Hence, we are "not under law but under grace" (6:14).

Now, some people misunderstand what Paul is teaching when he says that we are "not under law but under grace." Paul is *not* teaching that the law has no place in the life of a Christian. Instead, he is simply teaching that in regard to *justification*, the Christian is not saved by obedience to the law, but by God's grace alone. So, for justification we are not under law but under grace.

It will help you to understand this difficult chapter if you know that there are three possible attitudes to God's law—attitudes represented by the legalist, the antinomian, and the law-lover.

First, the *legalist* is in bondage to the law. That is, the legalist imagines that his relationship to God depends upon his obedience to the law. He seeks to be justified by works of the law. But he finds that the law is a harsh and inflexible task-master. In Paul's terminology, he is "under law."

Second, the *antinomian* goes to the other extreme. Antinomian literally means "against law," and antinomians are sometimes also called "libertines." The antinomian rejects the law, and views it as no longer applicable, necessary, or even as wicked. He blames the law for most of his—and mankind's—moral and spiri-

tual problems.

And third, the *law-lover* preserves the balance. The law-lover takes “delight in the law of God” (7:22), and recognizes that he can only fulfill the law by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

So, the legalist fears the law and is in bondage to it. The antinomian hates the law and repudiates it. And the law-lover loves the law and fulfills it.

Directly or indirectly, the apostle Paul portrays each of these characters in Romans 7. Roughly speaking, Paul addresses the legalists in Romans 7:1-6, the antinomians in Romans 7:7-13, and the law-lover in Romans 7:14-25.

John Stott suggests that these three paragraphs may be titled as follows:

1. “Released from the Law” (7:1-6), in order to serve God in the Spirit,
2. “A Defense of the Law” (7:7-13), against the misrepresentation that it causes sin and death, and
3. “The Weakness of the Law” (7:14-25), because it can neither justify nor sanctify sinners.¹

Lesson

So, today, the apostle Paul explains in Romans 7:1-6 how we are “Released from the Law” in order to serve God in the Spirit.

In his explanation he presents the principle (7:1), illustration (7:2-3), application (vv. 4-5), and affirmation (v. 6).

I. The Principle (7:1)

The tactful and rhetorical question, “**Do you not know?**” in verse 1 indicates that Paul is once again using a self-evident truth (i.e. axiom) as the foundation of his argument.

The term **brothers** refers to Paul’s Jewish brothers (i.e., **to**

¹ John R. W. Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 192.

those who know the law).

It should be obvious, he was saying, that any **law**—whether Roman, Greek, or even God-given biblical law—**is binding on a person only as long as he lives**. And that is the principle: **the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives (7:1)**.

If a person convicted of a crime dies, he is no longer subject to prosecution and punishment, no matter how numerous and heinous his crimes may have been.

For example, you may recall that Deborah Jeane Palfrey (the so-called D.C. Madam) committed suicide on May 1, 2008. She had been convicted the previous month of racketeering and money laundering. Even though she had been convicted of a crime, she died before she could carry out her legal sentence. Because she died, the law no longer has any claim on her.

That is the principle the apostle Paul is pressing: **the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives**.

II. The Illustration (7:2-3)

The apostle Paul uses marriage to illustrate his principle that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives.

Paul calls attention to the fact that marriage laws are binding only as long as both partners are alive. The law is binding only on the living.

Paul says, **“For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage” (7:2)**. Some of you have had your spouse die. At some point after the funeral, you have to notify all kinds of institutions (the government, banks, insurance companies, and so on) that you are no longer legally married. Your husband has died, and you are now **released from the law of marriage**.

But, if your husband is still alive and you have an affair with another man, Paul says you are committing adultery. **Accordingly**, he says, **she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is**

free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress (7:3). A woman whose husband has died and who marries another man does not commit adultery.

How is it then that in one instance the woman is an adulteress but not in the other? The answer of course has to do with her husband's death. In one case, the woman is still married to her husband—he is still alive—and so she has legal obligations to him and to that marriage.

But in the other case, the husband has died. There is no legal obligation. And so she is free to remarry. Only death can secure freedom from the marriage law and therefore the right to remarry.

These references to death, freedom from law and remarriage already hint at the application which the apostle Paul is about to make.

III. The Application (7:4-5)

“Likewise, my brothers” (7:4) marks the transition from Paul's principle and illustration to his application.

Paul turns from human laws to the law of God. Just as the death of her husband frees a woman from the marriage that had bound them together, Paul declares, **you** (that is, Christians) **also have died to the law.**

What does **“have died to the law”** mean? Commentators are divided. But it seems to parallel the idea that Christians are “dead to sin” mentioned in Romans 6:11. The **law** shows us our sin, and by faith in Christ we have not only died to sin but **also have died to the law.**

The law has power only to condemn us to death for our sin (6:23), but no power to save us from sin. Paul has already pointed out that God's grace extended by faith in Jesus Christ brings death to sin *and* freedom from sin (Romans 6:3-7). He now declares that faith in him also brings death to **the law** and consequently freedom from the law's penalty.

Through the body of Christ, who suffered the penalty of

death on our behalf, we Christians are freed from our relationship to the law just as a widow is freed from her relationship to her former husband. And like that widow we are free to **belong to another** husband, as it were, to Jesus Christ, **to him who has been raised from the dead.**

Salvation brings a complete change of spiritual relationship, just as remarriage after the death of a spouse brings a complete change of marital relationship. We are no longer married to the law but are now married to Jesus Christ, the divine Bridegroom of his church.

One underlying emphasis of the book of Romans is that salvation produces total transformation. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God "made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

The purpose, Paul says, of our being joined to Christ is **in order that we may bear fruit for God** (7:4b). "For we are [God's] workmanship," Paul tells the Ephesians, "created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). In other words, a person who becomes a Christian *will* be transformed, and will **bear fruit for God.**

The great theologian Charles Hodge wrote, "As far as we are concerned, redemption is in order to [produce] holiness. We are delivered from the law that we may be united to Christ; and we are united to Christ, that we may bring forth fruit unto God. . . . As deliverance from the penalty of the law is in order to [produce] holiness, it is vain to expect that deliverance, except with a view to the end for which it is granted."²

Now godly fruit exists basically in two dimensions: in attitudes and in actions.

The fruit of the Holy Spirit in a Christian's life is manifested internally in his *attitudes* of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

² Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co. n.d.), 220.

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

As far as godly *actions* are concerned, Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:1-2).

In Romans 7:5 Paul reminds the Romans—and us—of four truths that characterized our old lives as non-Christians.

First, **we were living in the flesh**. The unredeemed, unregenerate person can operate only in the area of **the flesh**, the natural and sinful sphere of fallen mankind.

In Scripture, the term **flesh** (*sarx* in Greek) is used in several ways. It is used in a morally and spiritually neutral sense to describe man’s physical being. In that sense, when he became God incarnate, the Lord Jesus himself “became flesh (*sarx*) and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In fact, one of the certain marks of a true believer is that he “confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (*sarx*)” (1 John 4:2).

But **flesh** (*sarx*) is also used in a moral and ethical sense, and always with an evil connotation. Paul repeatedly uses it in that way in Romans 8, Galatians 5, and Ephesians 2, and in every instance it refers to man’s unredeemed humanness. A person who still lives according to **the flesh** cannot belong to Christ. “You, however, are not in the flesh (*sarx*) but in the Spirit,” Paul says of Christians, “if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Romans 8:9).

It is possible, of course, for a Christian to fall back into some of the ways of the sinful nature, which he does whenever he sins. This is a demonstration of the presence of sin in every believer’s life. However, a Christian no longer lives in the flesh.

Second, our old non-Christian life was characterized by **our sinful passions**, the impulses to think and to do evil that are generated in those who are living in the flesh.

Third, our old life was characterized by our sinful passions continually being **aroused by the law**.

How can a good thing, such as the holy **law** of God, arouse that which is sinful. **The law**, in declaring what is wrong, arouses evil in the unregenerate person because his naturally rebellious nature makes him want to do the very things he learns are forbidden.

And fourth, our old life was characterized by the unceasing **work** of our sinful passions **in our members, to bear fruit for death**. **Work** is from a Greek verb meaning “to operate with power.” We get our word *energy* from it. The phrase **in our members** sums up the whole person in all our components as being the victim of sinful passions energized to produce the fruit of ultimate and eternal divine judgment in death.

IV. The Affirmation (7:6)

The transitional phrase “**But now**” introduces the heart of this brief passage, which presents a radical contrast to the description just given (v. 5) of the non-Christian.

Paul says, “**But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive.**”

Remember, Paul has just pointed out in verse 1 that “the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives.” Therefore, when a person dies, he is discharged of all legal liabilities and penalties.

Because we, as believers, died in Jesus Christ when he paid our sin debt on Calvary, we were thereby **released from** our moral and spiritual liabilities and penalties under God’s **law**. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Galatians 3:13).

Paul has already declared as forcefully and unambiguously as possible that freedom from the law’s bondage does *not* mean freedom to do what the law forbids (6:1, 15; cf. 3:31). Freedom from the law does not bring freedom to sin but just the opposite—freedom for the first time to do what is righteous, a freedom the unregenerate person does not and cannot have.

Paul’s point is not simply that the redeemed person is *able* to

do what is right but that he *will* do what is right. In response to our faith in his Son, Jesus Christ, God releases us from our bondage to the law **so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.**

Many English renderings of *douleuo* (**serve**) are somewhat ambiguous and do not carry the full force of the Greek term. This verb does not describe the voluntary service of a hired worker, who is able to refuse an order and look for another employer if he so desires. It refers exclusively to the service of a bondsman, whose sole purpose for existence is to obey the will of his master.

Kenneth Wuest gives this accurate and beautiful rendering of verse 6: “But now, we were discharged from the law, having died to that in which we were constantly held down, insomuch that we are rendering habitually a bondsman’s obedience.”

Service to the Lord **in the new way of the Spirit** rather than **in the old way of the written code** is the *necessary* fruit of redemption, not an option. As already noted, a fruitless Christian is not a genuine Christian and has no part in God’s kingdom.

“I am the true vine,” Jesus said, “and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:1-2).

The law is still important to Christians. For the first time, we are *able* to meet the law’s demands for righteousness (which was God’s desire when he gave it in the first place), because we have a new nature and God’s own Holy Spirit to empower our obedience.

And although we are no longer under the law’s bondage or penalty, we are more genuinely eager to live by its godly standards than is the most zealous legalist.

With full sincerity and joy we can say with the psalmist, “Oh, how I love your law!” (Psalm 119:97).

Conclusion

As Christians, we are dead to the law as far as its demands

and condemnation are concerned, but because we now live **in the new way of the Spirit**, we love and serve God's law with a full and joyous heart. And we know that to obey his law is to do his will and that to do his will is to give him glory. May that be true of every one of us here today. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

From Ray Ortlund's, *A Passion for God*:

O dear Lord, we would never have taken this risk. If we had been the Savior, we would have kept the threat of eternal condemnation hanging over the heads of our people until they were safe in heaven.

We would have kept them constantly off-balance, always uncertain. We would have exploited their fear of damnation as the whip to keep them in line.

But your grace and wisdom are far superior to ours and your resources far richer.

All we can do is threaten. But by your Spirit, you can indwell. You can renew. You can impart a joyful love for holiness.

Teach us, Spirit of Christ, who we are and whose we are.

Teach us what it means to live in vital union with our crucified, buried and risen Head.

Let us leave the past behind and move on to new things with him. Let us obey your law out of gladness rather than dread.

O Holy Spirit, put your glorious life deep down within us as Christ's forever.

And all of this we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.