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FREE FROM THE LAW

Romans 7:1-6

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May 8, 2011

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May 8, 2011
Romans Lesson 36

Free from the Law Romans 7:1-6

In my judgment, one of the most difficult theological issues in the Bible is that of the believer's relationship to the law of God. Since the word *law* is used 19 times in Romans 7, clearly that is Paul's theme. I was hoping that the Lord might come before I got to this chapter! I still have some time to be rescued before I get to the most difficult part! In Romans 7 Paul expounds on his statement in Romans 6:14, "For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace." In 6:15-23, he used the analogy of slavery to show that we will not sin under grace because we have become enslaved to God and righteousness. In chapter 7, he explains what it means to be free from the law and how this relates to breaking free from sin's tyranny.

The theme in chapter 6 was sin; Paul uses that word 17 times there. In his mind, there was a direct correlation between sin and the law. In 1 Corinthians 15:56 he says, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law." So there are several parallels between chapters 6 & 7 (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Erdmans/Apollos], p. 270): Believers have died to sin (6:2) and they have died to the law (7:4). We have been freed from sin (6:18, 22) and we are released from the law (7:6). We walk in newness of life (6:4) and we serve in newness of the Spirit (7:6). Our victory over sin is tied to our union with Christ in His death and resurrection (6:8-11). Our release from the law and its sin-arousing power is because we are now joined to the crucified and risen Lord (7:4).

So if we want to gain consistent victory over sin, we have to wrestle with Romans 7 as Paul explains the purpose of God's law and our relationship to it. His thinking was radically opposed to the common Jewish views of his day. They would have said that the law was given to make us holy, but Paul says that the Law served to arouse us to sin! In chapters 1-5 Paul shows that it is impossible to be justified by keeping the law. Here he shows that it is impossible to be sanctified by keeping the law. In fact, Paul argues that the law

is actually a hindrance to sanctification (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: The Law: Its Functions and Limits* [Zondervan], p. 5).

The chapter falls into three sections. In 7:1-6, Paul shows that we are no longer married to the law. A death has taken place and now we are joined to Jesus Christ so that we might bear fruit for God. But that raises the question, "Then is the law sin?" Paul answers this in 7:7-12, showing that the law is holy and good. It is *we* who are the problem! When our sinful nature comes into contact with the law, it does not obey. Rather, it is aroused to sin. Then in 7:13-25, he shows the ensuing battle that sinners have with the law. This is a very difficult and controversial section, as debate rages over whether the person in view is an unbeliever or a believer. I do not want to raise your hopes that I will solve this puzzle for you, but we will try to work through it as best as we can.

In our text (7:1-6), Paul first makes a general statement about the law's jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives (7:1). Then (7:2-3) he illustrates his point by showing that a woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. He is not giving comprehensive teaching here about divorce and remarriage. Rather, he uses an analogy to make a point: the law has jurisdiction over the living, not over the dead. If a person dies, he is no longer under the law. Then (7:4), he applies the point, showing that we died to the law through the death of Christ. We are now "remarried" to Christ so that we might bear fruit for God. Then (7:5-6) Paul explains verse 4 negatively (7:5) and positively (7:6). We need to die to the law because it aroused our sinful passions to bear fruit for death (7:5). But in Christ we have been released from bondage to the law so that we serve God in newness of the Spirit (7:6). To summarize:

Through our union with Christ, we have died to the law so that we are free to bear fruit for God in the Spirit.

1. Through our union with Christ, we have died to the law, which only produced sin and death.

Many books have been written on what it means for us not to be under the law, so I can only give some brief guidelines here. I offer one negative and three positive thoughts to clarify what Paul means when he says that we died to the law.

- A. Dying to the law does *not* mean that we are free from specific moral commandments.

We need to understand that we did not die to the law so that we could live lawlessly, doing whatever we please. That was the false charge that Paul's enemies leveled against him. But Paul makes it very clear that we died to the law so that we might be joined to Christ, under His authority. Just as a woman is under the authority of her husband (according to the Bible), so we were under the authority of God's law. But when we died to the law, it was not so that we could become free spirits. Rather, it was so that we could now be joined to Christ as our husband.

Paul's analogy is rather confusing if you try to make it say more than he intends. In 7:2-3, the woman's husband dies so that she is free to remarry. But in the application (7:4), it is not the husband that dies, but rather the wife dies to the law through Christ. By implication she is raised from the dead so that she can marry Christ, who died and was raised from the dead. But Paul does not intend this to be a tight allegory, where one thing consistently represents another. Rather, he is making the main point that by being identified with Christ in His death and resurrection, we died to the law so that we're legally free to be joined to Christ.

But, dying to the law does not mean that we no longer are obligated to keep specific moral commandments. As Paul states later (Rom. 8:4), the requirement of the law is now fulfilled in us as we walk according to the Spirit. Sometimes it is argued that the only command under the new covenant is love, since love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14). But this is often misapplied in a simplistic way so that "love" means whatever the person wants it to mean. For example, couples argue that it is okay to have sexual relations outside of marriage because they "love" one another. But the New Testament is abundantly clear that the sexual relationship is restricted to heterosexual marriage (1 Cor. 6:9-10, 18; 7:1-9; 1 Thess. 4:2-8). Love does not mean that we are free to disregard the Bible's moral standards.

In fact, the New Testament gives many detailed commands about love. Love speaks the truth. Love does not steal, but rather labors so as to be able to give. Love speaks wholesome, edifying words. Love is not bitter or angry. Love is kind and forgiving. Love

does not engage in immorality or greed (see Eph. 4:25-5:4). Many more specific commands on other topics are given throughout the New Testament to believers who have died to the law (see Romans 12). So we would be mistaken to think that dying to the law frees us from the obligation to obey specific moral commandments. So what does it mean?

- B. Dying to the law means that we are free from the demands of the law as an impersonal system for approaching God.

While salvation has always been by grace through faith, not by works, many who were under the Mosaic law wrongly thought that they could be right with God by keeping the law. It was true: Keep the law perfectly and you will live (Matt. 19:17; Gal. 3:12). The problem is, that system brought everyone who tried to live by it under a curse, because no one could keep the law perfectly (Gal. 3:10). As a Pharisee, Paul thought that he was blameless with regard to the law (Phil. 3:6), but at best he was “blameless” only in the sense of outward obedience to the ceremonies and rituals that the law prescribed. The truth was that in his heart, he was proud of his blameless obedience, and pride is the root of all sins before God. When he met Christ, Paul came to see that he was actually the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15).

So dying to the law means that we do not approach God by an impersonal system of performance, where we try to earn right standing with Him. That is the way of virtually every religion in the world, including many that go under the name of “Christian.” The good news is that God justifies sinners by grace through faith alone and that the core of saving faith is to know Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:5; Phil. 3:2-10). And, as I said, Paul’s point in Romans 7 is not only that we are justified by grace through faith alone, but also that we are sanctified in the same way (see Col. 2:6).

- C. Dying to the law means that we are free from the condemnation of the law.

Paul says (Rom. 7:6) that the law held us in bondage. It did so by putting us under a curse because of our failure to obey it perfectly (Gal. 3:10). Peter refers to the law as “a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). The law closes every mouth and makes us all accountable to God (Rom.

3:19). No one is able to be justified by keeping the law; rather, the law brings the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20) and puts us under God's wrath (Rom. 4:15). The law increased our transgressions and held us under the reign of sin and death (Rom. 5:20-21). Attempting to be right with God by law-keeping is doomed to failure. The only benefit of the law with regard to salvation is that it shows us God's impossible standard of holiness and thus drives us to Christ as our only hope, so that we will be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24).

D. Dying to the law means that we are free from the inability of the law to produce obedience.

This is Paul's primary focus in Romans 7:5: "For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death." In this context, being "in the flesh" means, before we were saved, before we received the Holy Spirit. As Thomas Schreiner puts it (*The Law and Its Fulfillment* [Baker], p. 133), "The law apart from the Spirit does not produce obedience. The law apart from the Spirit does not save but kills."

Paul will explain this further in 7:7-11, where he says that coveting was not a problem until he read, "You shall not covet." That commandment triggered something in him that made him covet all over the place. The problem was not with the law, which is holy, but with his sinful flesh. We can all relate to what he is saying. I wouldn't think about walking on the grass if it weren't for that annoying sign that says, "Do not walk on the grass." The commandment makes me want to walk on the grass!

So the law is *not* the answer to our sin problem. Trying to keep the law can never reconcile us to the holy God, because we've all violated His law many times over. Posting a list of God's commandments on the refrigerator and trying to keep them by our own strength won't work, either, because the law just incites our sinful passions. It does not quench the desire to sin. The oldness of the letter was a "ministry of death" (2 Cor. 3:6, 7). We need a more powerful solution, which Paul gives in 7:4 & 6.

Paul says that we were "made to die to the law through the body of Christ" (7:4). That's an unusual phrase, referring to Christ's physical body. Paul is calling attention to the fact that in

His human body, Jesus satisfied the demands of the law on our behalf, so that He “canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). So when Jesus died to the demands of the law, we died in Him. In summary, this means: We are free from the demands of the law as an impersonal system for approaching God. We are free from the condemnation of the law. The power of the law to arouse our sinful desires is broken, because being joined to Christ, we now have the Holy Spirit to give us the power to obey.

2. Having died to the law, we are now joined to Jesus Christ, which produces fruit for God in the Spirit.

As I said, God does not free us from the law so that we can live any way that we please. Rather, He frees us from the law (7:4) so that we “might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God.” Restating it in a slightly different way (7:6), this release from the law enables us to “serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.” So our union with the risen Savior through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit works in us to bear fruit for God. Note six things about this union or marriage to Christ:

A. Our union with Christ is a transforming relationship.

In verse 6, Paul uses the same contrast that we saw in 6:22, “But now.” It points to the great change from before we met Christ to afterwards. Before we met Him, we were in the flesh, enslaved to sin, and under the condemnation and power of the law. “But now we have been released from the law, having died to that by which we were bound” (7:6). If I have broken the law and am facing a prison term, but before I go to prison I die, they aren’t going to take my corpse to prison! My death released me from the power of the law. It changed everything.

Also, our death to the law freed us to be joined in marriage to the risen Christ (7:4). This implies that we have new life in Him, because Jesus doesn’t marry a corpse. We have a new relationship of love with our Bridegroom, who gave Himself on the cross to secure us as His bride. (By the way, it’s difficult as a guy to think of myself as “married” to Jesus, but think of it corporately, not indi-

vidually. The biblical analogy is that the church *corporately* is the bride of Christ.) Our new union with Christ changes everything.

There is one thing certain about marriage: it changes you forever! Suddenly, you are not your own. You have to think about your wife before you make plans. You have to think about what pleases her. You have to take her into account in every decision that you make. You have to work at staying close in your relationship to her. But in spite of these new responsibilities, I can say with gusto that marrying Marla changed me for the good! In the same way, being joined to Jesus Christ changes everything. It gives you new responsibilities, but it transforms you decidedly for the good.

B. Our union with Christ is a love relationship.

As I said, the phrase “through the body of Christ” points to the cross, where Jesus died a horrible death to secure us as His bride. He paid the price that the law demanded for our sin. “Christ ... loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25). So now we willingly submit to Him, not out of duty, but out of love.

Picture a woman married to a demanding, perfectionistic man. He’s the kind who takes a white glove and wipes it on the top of the door molding to see if it has been dusted. She lives in constant fear that she will not please him. But then (much to her relief) he dies. Sometime later, she meets a loving, kind, and caring man. They fall in love and get married. Now she still cleans the house and cooks the meals, but she does it joyfully out of love, not dutifully to meet the demands of an impossible tyrant.

The analogy breaks down, in that the law did not die. Rather, we died to it. But, we no longer have to strive in vain to meet its impossible demands as the grounds of our acceptance with God. Rather, Christ met those demands for us and we are joined to Him in love. We still live to please Him, but our whole motive has changed from duty that condemned us to love that accepts us.

C. Our union with Christ is a liberating relationship.

Before, we were bound by the law, but now we are released from its condemnation and domination (7:6). The picture is that of a prisoner who has been set free. I’ve never been in prison, but I got a feel for what it must be like when I was in boot camp. We were in captivity in every sense of the word. The Coast Guard de-

terminated our schedule, our activities, what we wore, how we looked, and what we ate. Boot camp was on an island in the Oakland Bay. From our upstairs barracks window, I could see cars stuck in rush hour traffic out on the Oakland freeway. I thought, "Those drivers are probably grumbling about the traffic, but if they only knew how free they are to be able to drive their own car wherever they want to go, they'd quit complaining!" Before Christ, we were bound by the law, but now we're free.

D. Our union with Christ is a fruitful relationship.

The reason we are joined to Christ is so "that we might bear fruit for God" (7:4). When you compare that to 7:6, "so that we serve in newness of the Spirit," it probably refers to the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), or "the fruit of the Light," which is "all goodness and righteousness and truth, trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord" (Eph. 5:9-10). If you're not bearing fruit for God, you are not fulfilling the purpose for which He saved you.

E. Our union with Christ is a powerful relationship.

The law was impotent to help us obey, but Christ gives us the Holy Spirit to indwell us and empower us to overcome sin. To be under the law is to be "in the flesh" (7:5), which has no motivation or power to overcome sin. But the Spirit enables us to put to death the deeds of the body, so that we will live (8:13; Gal. 5:16-23).

F. Our union with Christ is a holy relationship.

I mentioned at the outset that being free from the law does *not* mean that we are free to disobey the moral commands of Scripture. But I mention it again as we close, because it is so often misunderstood or ignored. The word "serve" (7:6) is the same Greek word translated "enslaved to God" (6:22). So Christ frees us from the law to which we were bound, but not to do as we please. We're freed from the law so that we can be enslaved to God in the newness of the Spirit. Being a slave of righteousness is true freedom!

Conclusion

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (p. 84) says, "You are either a Christian or not a Christian; you cannot be partly Christian. You are either 'dead' or 'alive'; you are either 'born' or 'not born'. Becoming a

Christian is not a gradual process; there is nothing indeterminate about it; we either are, or we are not Christian.”

If you're not a Christian, you are under the condemnation of the law. But if you put your trust in Christ, who bore the curse of the law, you are released from the law and joined to a loving husband so that you can bear fruit for God. That's even better than the best of earthly marriages can be!

Application Questions

1. Why is the notion that love is the only command for those under grace inadequate and misguided?
2. If the law was impossible to keep and actually stimulated our sinful passions, why did God institute it?
3. Can there be such a thing as an unfruitful Christian? Include John 15:1-8 in your discussion.
4. Are Christians obligated to keep the Ten Commandments? What about the Sabbath command?

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