

The Law Reveals Sin

Lesson for October 8, 2023

Unit II: Faith Triumphs, Law Falls Short

Adult Topic: A Matter of the Heart

Background Scripture: Romans 7:1-25

Printed Text: 7:1-12

Key verse: *“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.”* (Romans 7:6, NIV)

A duck hunter was with a friend in the wide-open land of southeastern Georgia. Far away on the horizon he noticed a cloud of smoke. Soon he could hear crackling as the wind shifted. He realized the terrible truth; a brushfire was advancing, so fast they couldn't outrun it. Rifling through his pockets, he soon found what he was looking for--a book of matches. He lit a small fire around the two of them. Soon they were standing in a circle of blackened earth, waiting for the fire to come. They didn't have to wait long. They covered their mouths with handkerchiefs and braced themselves. The fire came near--and swept over them. But they were completely unhurt, untouched. Fire would not pass where fire already had passed.

The law is like a brushfire. I cannot escape it. But if I stand in the burned-over place, not a hair of my head will be singed. Christ's death has disarmed it.

Adapted from *Who Will Deliver Us?* by Paul F. M. Zahl.

Key Terms

1. Belong to (verse 4) – To be the property of; to get married; to give oneself in marriage.
2. Bound (verse 2) – To bind tie, fasten ; to bind, fasten with chains, to throw into chains.
3. Covet (verse 7) – The desire for whatever doesn't belong to us; to desire (what belongs to another) inordinately or culpably.

Lesson Background

Romans 6 revealed that those in Christ have died to sin and are no longer slaves to it. Romans 7 begins by showing that, in Christ, we have also died to our obligation to follow the law of Moses. Paul makes clear, though, that the law is holy and good because it reveals to us just how sinful we are. Paul describes how his failed attempts to follow the law convinced him more fully of his need to be delivered from his sinfulness by God through faith in Christ.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul has explained that we are saved by grace, not by observing the law, because Christ died for us. This does not give us permission to sin — rather, we should serve God by being slaves of righteousness. Paul clarifies the relationship between law and sin in Chapter 7. He begins by giving us an analogy from marriage, and he speaks to the Jewish believers, because they are the ones who are most concerned about the law. 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.

Lesson in Depth

I. Death Frees from the Law (Romans 7:1-3)

Paul has spent six chapters showing that all men need the gospel of Jesus Christ and that the Old Law cannot save men from sin. Now he reaches some conclusions about the law. If the law cannot save us, and if God has now given us the gospel that will save us, what is our relationship to the law? The Jews had lived under that law for nearly 1500 years. So, Paul has carefully laid the foundation for the conclusion that no one is subject to the law any longer.

The law has dominion: In Romans 6:14, Paul told us that *you are not under law but under grace*. After the discussion in Romans 6:15-23 regarding practical implications of this, he now explains more completely how it is that we are no longer under the dominion of the law.

That the law has dominion over a man: The ancient Greek wording here has no word “the” before law. This means Paul speaks of a principle broader than the Mosaic Law. The **law** that has **dominion** over man includes the Law of Moses, but there is a broader principle of law communicated by creation and by conscience, and these also have **dominion over a man**.

The law has dominion over a man as long as he lives: Paul makes the point that death ends all obligations and contracts. A wife is no longer bound to her husband if he dies because death ends that contract. **If her husband dies, she is free from that law.**

He begins by saying that he speaks to those who know the law. That is, he assumes they understand the basic principles of law. Specifically, they would know that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives. It follows that the law has no more dominion over him after he dies. He states this fact, then moves on to discuss an illustration before he returns to this principle.

Marriage illustrates the principle that one is subject to law until death but is freed from that law by death. A married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives. This means that if she is married to another man while her first husband is alive, she is guilty of adultery. She is free to remarry without guilt only if her husband is dead because she is released from the law of her husband when he dies.

II. Believers are Dead to the Law (Romans 7:4-6)

You also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ: In Romans 6:3-8, Paul carefully explained that we died with Jesus and we also rose with Him, although Paul there only spoke of our death to *sin*. Now he explains that we also died to the **law**.

Some might think, “Yes, we were saved by grace, but we must *live by law* to please God.” Here Paul makes it plain that believers are **dead to the law** as far as it represents a *principle of living* or a *place of right standing* before God.

“Believers are through with the law. It is not for them an option as a way of salvation. They do not seek to be right with God by obeying some form of law, as the adherents of almost all religions have done.” (Morris)

That you may be married to another: However, we are not free from the law so we can live unto ourselves. We are free so we can be “**married**” to Jesus and so that we can **bear fruit to God**.

When we were in the flesh: Under the law, we did not *bear fruit to God*. Instead, we bore fruit to death because the law aroused the passions of sins within us.

to bear fruit to death: We only come fully to the place of *bearing fruit for God* when we are free from the law.

But now we have been delivered from the law: Here Paul summarizes the theme of Romans 7:1-5. Because we died with Jesus at Calvary, we are dead to the law and **delivered** from its dominion over us as a principle of *justification* or of *sanctification*.

The law does not *justify* us; it does not make us right with God. The law does not *sanctify* us; it does not take us deeper with God and make us more holy before Him.

The woman whose husband had died was freed from subjection to her husband; likewise, we are dead to the law and delivered from it (verses 4,6). Note that we are not just free from the condemnation of the law or traditions about it, but we are free from the law itself. We are “delivered” from it (NKJV, KJV), “discharged” from it (ASV), or “released” from it (NASB, ESV).

And just as the woman could then be joined to a different man, we are now joined to Christ. That is, we now are subject to the gospel, the New Testament, which was revealed by Christ. We leave the old covenant and enter the new covenant relationship, based on the death and teachings of Christ. See other passages listed previously. This is like being spiritually married to Christ.

When we were in the flesh: “In the flesh” appears to refer to the mindset of people who are more concerned about their own material, earthly, personal desires than about spiritual concerns. It is contrasted to the spirit (and “carnal” or “fleshly” is contrasted to “spiritual”). The physical body and its desires are not inherently good or bad (despite the theories of Calvinism). But the tendencies of the body must be controlled by the spiritual nature of man to abide by God’s word. Without this guidance, the flesh will surely do wrong, since it has no sense of right or wrong. So a carnal, fleshly (“in the flesh”) person is one who simply follows his own natural tendencies and desires, without being guided by spiritual concerns or properly submitting to spiritual principles according to God’s word.

Such a person will eventually be led by his “passions” or desires to allow sin to work in his members or body. The result will be sin, which leads to death. This is exactly what has been discussed in chapter 6 describing the condition of people before they are converted by the gospel. They present their members as instruments of sin, rather than as instruments of righteousness. The end result is spiritual death Romans (6:21,23; James 1:15; Ephesians 2:1-13). But the point of Chapter 6 was that the gospel can deliver us from this, and conversion must lead us to refuse to allow sin to reign in our mortal bodies (flesh). See 6:11-23. And note again that being “in the flesh” here refers to their past condition, when they were under “the law” – not their condition now that they have been “delivered from the law” and married to Christ.

So that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit: Our freedom is not given so we can stop serving God but so that we can serve Him better, under the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.

This is “new” in that most Jews under the law did not emphasize proper spiritual attitudes as they should have. The law did teach good attitudes, but chapter 2 shows that the Jews did not generally emphasize them. They thought they were pleasing to God because of their physical lineage through Abraham and their physical circumcision, etc. But when they sinned, the law could not forgive their sins. Proper attitude is much more emphasized in the gospel, and so is “new” in contrast to the old emphasis on outward ritual under the law.

So, the point would be that to be truly accepted by God in the judgment day, our service and covenant relationship to God must truly come from the heart, from the inner spirit (1 Peter 3:4) according to the teaching of the gospel. It is not just the practicing of outward rituals of physical lineage or physical possession of Divine law. It is a contrast between sincere obedience meant from the heart and outward rituals that lack proper attitudes and motives.

How well do you *serve in the newness of the Spirit*? It is a shame that many serve sin or legalism with more devotion than those who should serve God out of the newness of the Spirit. It is unfortunate when fear motivates us more than love.

III. The Law Incites Sin (Romans 7:7-12)

Is the law sin? Paul insisted that we must die to the law if we will bear fruit to God. Someone must think, “Surely there is something wrong with the law!”

I would not have known sin except through the law: The law is like an x-ray machine; it reveals what is there but hidden. You can’t blame an x-ray for what it exposes.

For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, “You shall not covet.” The law sets the “speed limit” so we know exactly if we are going too fast. We might never know that we are sinning in many areas (such as covetousness) if the law didn’t show us specifically.

But sin, taking opportunity by the commandments: Paul describes the dynamic where the warning “Don’t do that!” may become a call to action because of our sinful, rebellious hearts. It isn’t the fault of the **commandment**, but it is our fault.

Sin, taking opportunity by the commandment: The weakness of the law isn’t in the law – it is in us. Our hearts are so wicked that they can find **opportunity for all manner of evil desire** from something good like the law of God.

“The word *opportunity* in the original is a military term meaning a base of operations. Prohibition furnishes a springboard from which sin is all too ready to take off.” (Harrison)

Apart from the law, sin was dead: This shows how great the evil of sin is – it can take something good and holy like the law and twist it to promote evil. Sin warps love into lust, an honest desire to provide for one’s family into greed, and the law into a promoter of sin.

I was alive once without the law: Children can be innocent before they know or understand what law requires. This is what Paul refers to when he says **I was alive once without the law.**

“He is not alive with the life that the New Testament writers so often speak about. He is alive in the sense that he has never been put to death as a result of confrontation with the law.” (Morris)
ii. “He was quite secure amid all his sin and sinfulness. He lived in the sense that the deathblow had not yet killed him. He sat secure in the house of his ignorance like a man living on a volcano and thought that all was well.” (Lenski)

But when the commandment came, sin revived and I died: When we do come to know the law, the law shows us our guilt and it excites our rebellion, bringing forth more sin and death.

And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death: Sin does this by *deception*. Sin deceives us:

- Because sin falsely promises satisfaction.
- Because sin falsely claims an adequate excuse.
- Because sin falsely promises an escape from punishment.

For sin... deceived me: It isn't the law that deceives us, but it is sin that uses the law as an occasion for rebellion. This is why Jesus said, *you shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free* (John 8:32). The truth makes us free from the deceptions of sin.

And by it killed me: Sin, when followed, leads to death – not life. One of Satan's greatest deceptions is to get us to think of sin as something *good* that an unpleasant God wants to deprive us of. When God warns us away from sin, He warns us away from something that will *kill* us.

Therefore the law is holy: Paul understands how someone might take him as saying that he is against the law – but he isn't at all. It is true that we must die to sin (Romans 6:2) and we must die to the law (Romans 7:4). But that should not be taken to mean that Paul believes that sin and law are in the same basket. The problem is in us, not in the law. Nevertheless, sin corrupts the work or effect of the law, so we must die to both.

Lesson Summary

In this week's lesson, Paul tackles the relationship between the law—the commandments given by God—and human sinfulness. He begins by making it clear that those who are in Christ have been released from any obligation to the law of Moses. This is for the same reason that we have been released from our slavery to sin: We died, and death breaks those obligations. Those who come to faith in Christ are so closely associated with His physical death and resurrection that we experience a kind of spiritual death and are resurrected into a new spiritual life. This is how we are freed from our responsibility to the law.

Paul uses the illustration of the law of marriage. A woman whose husband has died is no longer obligated to remain faithful to him. She is free to marry another man. In a similar way, our death with Christ freed us from our obligation to the law and allows us to serve God in what Paul calls the new way of the Spirit (Romans 7:1–6).

The close association between the law, sin, and death in Paul's argument up to this point does not mean that the law, like sin and death, is evil. The law is God's word and therefore is completely good. However, the law has no power to overcome sin in the weak, sin-prone human being, and in the face of sin's power it becomes a tool by which sin deceives the human being into persistent disobedience to God.

Some apparently thought Paul's teaching about freedom from the law meant that he believed the law itself to be sinful. He insists that he does not. Instead, it was the law that revealed his own sinfulness to him. He learned that he was covetous after being told by the law not to covet. Worse, as a sinful human being, merely knowing that covetousness was a sin made him *want to covet!* Our rebellious nature often chooses to break rules just for the sake of breaking rules. The law promised Paul life if he could keep the commandments, but he discovered he could not do it. In that sense, the law doomed him to death. Still, though, Paul describes the law as holy, righteous, and good (Romans 7:7–12).