

RELEASED FROM THE LAW TO BELONG TO CHRIST

Romans 7:1-25

Key Verse: 7:4

“So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.”

In chapter 5:20-21, Paul talks about the power of God’s grace. When God’s grace reigns in us we experience eternal life that overpowers all the elements of sin and death. In chapter 6, Paul taught that we should not misuse or abuse God’s grace to justify living in sin. We are united with Christ in his death and resurrection. We died to sin and live with Christ. This is God’s grace. God’s grace is not cheap, but costly. God’s grace is so powerful that we have a new life and are able to bear good fruit. As we live by God’s grace we are joyful, peaceful, loving, growing in holiness and inherit eternal life. This is the normal Christian life. The question is, “Am I joyful and peaceful? Am I loving others and growing in holiness?” If not, we need to examine ourselves to see if we really are living a grace-based life.

It is so easy for us, after receiving grace, to allow our old mentality, lifestyle and habits to set the pattern for our lives. We depend on our own hard work more than God and live as competitive adversaries with others. If we do something well, we feel victorious. If we fail, we become nervous and anxious. We feel that we must always be doing something. This is a performance-based life which leads to pride, frustration, fear and anxiety. On the other hand, living by God’s grace bears the fruit of joy and peace, growing in holiness, and loving others. We want to live by God’s grace. To truly live by God’s grace, we need to know how to apply God’s law. Two misuses of the law lead us astray from grace. One is legalism. The other is licentiousness (antinomianism). In chapter 7, Paul teaches us that we have been released from the law, yet its function is still important in our lives. Grasping the deep meaning of his teaching will help us live a grace-based life.

First, that we might bear fruit for God (1-6). In verse 1 Paul expresses his concern that his readers know the limitation of the law. **“Do you not know, brothers and sisters - for I am speaking to those who know the law - that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives.”** In this chapter, Paul uses the words **“law”** 23 times and **“commandment”** seven

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times. Generally, these refer to the Mosaic Law. Yet here in verse 1, the fundamental character of law is emphasized. The law is in effect only when a person is alive. When a person dies, the law no longer has jurisdiction over them. That is why the maximum punishment of the law is death. This is a universal truth for all mankind. Paul offered a practical example in verses 2-3. By law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive. In Paul's time, a woman was not free to divorce her husband and had to submit to his authority even when he was harsh. But if her husband died, she was released from the law of marriage. There is an interesting story. My maternal grandmother was happily married to my grandfather for 70 years. When he died, everyone expected her to be overcome with grief. To their surprise, she said, "Of course, I love him, but now I am free!" She meant she was free from the law of marriage. In verse 3, Paul goes on to say that if a married woman has sexual relations with someone else while her husband is alive, she is an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry another man. By using this analogy Paul explained how we died to the law.

Let's read verse 4. **"So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God."** When we are united with Christ, we not only die to sin, as explained in chapter 6, but we also die to the law. Martin Luther wrote this: "Sin and wrath come from the Law. Hence, no one dies to the Law who does not die to sin; and whoever dies to sin, dies also to the Law. As soon as a person is free from sin, he is also free from the servitude of the Law."¹ Paul proclaims release from the law. It is like President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Why is this so important? Without this deliverance we would still be bound to the heavy chains of the law. But Christ releases us from the law (Gal 5:1).

What is Christ's purpose in releasing us? It is so that we may belong to him. Paul used the analogy of marriage to help us understand our relationship with the law and Christ. The law is like an ex-husband. Jesus is our new husband. Our ex-husband, the law, looked very good at first, even perfect. He worked hard without any rest, did his duty without fail, and was never late. He had perfect integrity of word and deed. We might have felt that we were so fortunate to be married to him. The problem was that he demanded the

¹ Luther, Martin, Commentary on Romans, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), p.108.

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same perfection from us. He never allowed or overlooked even one small mistake. He criticized each and every mistake without mercy. It was so hard to bear, and we wished to escape from him. It was a loveless, miserable marriage with death as the only way out. But Jesus had mercy on us. He died for us so that we may be set free from the law and belong to him. In other words, he bought us with his own blood and became our new husband. He is not like the law; he is gracious. He understands, forgives, and embraces us as we are. Furthermore, he heals us, and helps us to grow. Under the law we were choked to death due to our sins. But under the loving care of Jesus, we became alive. Now we have peace; we are joyful and can live meaningful and fruitful lives. Our marriage with Jesus is so happy! Thanks be to Jesus!

In verses 5-6, we can find a great contrast between our old life under the law, and our new lives in Christ. We were in the realm of the flesh but now we are in the realm of grace. We were controlled by sinful desires which worked so powerfully in us. But now we are led by the Spirit who gives us freedom (2Co 3:17). We were under the law and bore fruit for death. But now, we are set free from the law and can bear fruit for God (5). We have freedom - not to sin, but to serve (Gal 5:13). We used to serve in the old way of the written code, but now we serve in the new way of the Spirit (6). Our motive and the means of our service have completely changed. We no longer serve because the law is our master and we have to, but because Christ is our master and we want to. Christ empowers us to serve willingly and joyfully.

Second, the function of the law (7-25). Until now, Paul's expressions about the law have seemed rather negative: **“you are not under the law, but under grace”** (6:14), **“you also died to the law”** (7:4), **“sinful passions aroused by the law”** (7:5), **“by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law”** (7:6). When we hear these words, the law sounds like an enemy that must be removed. We feel that we should exclude the law from our Christian life. But Jesus taught that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17). Paul also taught that our Christian faith does not nullify the law but upholds it (Ro 3:31). Now, in verse 7a, Paul begins to defend the law: **“What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful?”** His answer was very clear, **“Certainly not!”** Then he explained the function of the law in verses 7b-13. In doing this, Paul does not take a theological approach, but rather a testimonial one; he uses personal pronouns **“I,” “me”** or **“my”** 52 times in verses 7-25. Why does he do this? Though release has been

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proclaimed, we do not suddenly experience the full effect. Just as after the Emancipation Proclamation a great struggle ensued, so also after hearing that we are released from the law, we go through a very practical struggle.

Verse 7b reveals that Paul's personal struggle was with the sin of covetousness. He had been a Pharisee who conformed to the strictest sect (Ac 26:5). As for righteousness based on the law, he was faultless (Php 3:6). But he could not control covetousness in his heart. The tenth commandment says, **"You shall not covet."** Before knowing the commandment, Paul did not know that it was sin. But as he heard the law declare, **"you shall not covet,"** he realized it was sin. Then sin produced in him every kind of coveting (8). To **"covet"** is to have an extreme desire to possess what belongs to another. It may be their spouse, possessions, talents or achievements. Covetousness is related to envy and jealousy. This commandment is different from other commandments, in that it deals with the motive of the heart rather than actions. Though it is unseen, it works powerfully to affect every area of life. It produces guilt and shame and leads to death. For example, the movie "Amadeus" reveals that the court composer Salieri was insanely jealous of Mozart's talent. Because of this he tormented Mozart at every opportunity and claimed to have finally killed him. In truth, Salieri was tormented by his covetousness.

In verses 9-13 Paul shared how the law functioned in his own life. Before he was aware of the commandment, he was alive. But when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and he died. He realized that it was not the commandment that brought death, but sin. Sin deceived him by using the commandment and put him to death. Sin, by its nature, is deceptive. It promises that we will be like God and enjoy power and freedom. But actually, we become miserable slaves of the devil - tormented by condemnation and guilt, and eventually we die (Gen 3:4-5). Paul concluded that the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good (12). As we confront the reality of sin in our lives, we tend to blame the law, and God who made the law. This tendency goes all the way back to Adam. Many people say, "If God had not commanded us not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we would still be in paradise. Why did God do that? God is the cause of all our trouble." Paul answers by saying that the law is good. This means that God who gave the law is also good.

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Blame must be placed elsewhere. So, Paul asked, **“Did that which is good, then, become death to me?”** The answer is, **“By no means!”** Then he explained the function of the law: **“Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful”** (13). Through the law we recognize sin as sin. The law does not cause sin; it exposes and condemns sin. The law does not cause death; sin does. So we need to recognize sin as our enemy. The law is God’s good gift to help us recognize sin so that we may come to the Savior Jesus.

In verses 14-25 Paul explained how the power of sin worked in him. It seems complicated. But we can understand it simply. The word **“I”** refers to Paul himself and **“sin”** is living in him as an independent power. **“I”** have the desire to do what is good. But **“sin”** overpowers this desire. There was a power struggle going on within Paul, and the sinful nature always won. That is why he said in verses 19-20, **“For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do - this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”** Through this he found a principle: **“Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me”** (21). He summarizes in verses 22-23: **“For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me.”** Here, **“another law”** refers to the power of sin within him. It was a fierce power struggle, and sin was holding him hostage. He said in verse 25b, **“So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.”**

Paul’s testimony reveals the universal truth about mankind. Everyone has holy desire to do good. But the power of sin within us is stronger and it crushes our desire to do good. We tend to categorize people as fully “good” or fully “evil.” We assume that the fully “evil” have no holy desire, no hope and no remedy. But that is not true. Every “evil” person has a holy desire. And also, everyone has a sinful nature, including “good” people. The sinful nature in each person is more powerful than our holy desires. That is why everyone needs Jesus. Jesus saw people like a medical doctor sees his patients. He saw that everyone was sick with sin, but also that everyone could be healed and restored through the gospel of his grace. This is the Biblical view of human beings. Everyone has hope in Jesus.

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In verses 24-25 we can see how Paul's inner struggle was resolved. He realized that he could not do anything with his own strength and willpower. It was like being trapped in a quagmire. The more he tried to get out of the power of sin and death, the more tightly he was bound. He desperately needed help from outside. So, he cried out, **“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?”** (24) It was the emergency cry of a dying man. Where did help come from? It was from Jesus our Savior. In verse 25a Paul exclaimed, **“Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!”** When he found salvation through Jesus Christ, his mourning turned to thanksgiving. Who can rescue us from the power of sin and death? Only Jesus who died for our sins and was raised from the dead. This is not just Paul's personal story. Numerous people throughout history have found Jesus as their Savior after a fierce struggle with the power of sin and the law, including Augustine, Luther, and John Wesley. When we sincerely struggle with the power of sin and the law, realize how helpless we are, and cry out to God, he will surely rescue us through Jesus Christ.

As I was preparing this message, one of my family members pointed out that I was deficient in loving and caring for them. At first, I wanted to defend myself by talking about all that I had done for them. But I could feel a hollow self-righteousness coming into my heart. Then I wanted to determine to do better. But I could feel despair coming into my heart, knowing my weakness. Then, I cried out to Jesus for help and he filled me with grace and strength. Now I am sure that I will joyfully make progress. Many mothers and fathers have worked hard and sacrificed a lot only to discover that they made mistakes with their children or Bible students. We struggle with body image, addictions, lustful desires, bitterness, rebellion, prejudice, covetousness and more. Trying to justify ourselves is futile. Resolving to do better in our own strength will lead to frustration and despair. But when we cry out to Jesus, he will rescue us and enable us to make real progress in spiritual growth.

In today's passage we learned that we are released from the law. The law cannot be our master any longer. Still, we need the law. Legalists say that we must obey the law for salvation. The problem is that no one can do so. On the other hand, licentious people want to completely ignore the law and live as they please. The problem is that it leads us back into slavery to sin. True

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believers are united with Christ in his death and resurrection and depend on God's grace. They realize that the law is a guide to Jesus. Through the law they can recognize sin as sin and come to Jesus who gives us grace. By the power of God's grace, they are able to bear fruit for God. This is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, such as love, joy, peace and holiness. Those who live this way naturally fulfill the law (Mk 12:30-31). Let's renew our relationship with Jesus and enjoy a happy marriage with him and bear fruit for God.