

## **The Law: Good or Bad?**

### **Romans 7:1-12**

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Have you ever had the experience of talking to your spouse while they (or you) were walking in the other direction? The conversation just faded away. When they return to the room, they talk to you again, but you are confused because you feel like you were dropped into the middle of a conversation. The truth is, they were not two different conversations; it was the same conversation carried on in two different installments!

As we turn in our Bibles to Romans 7, it feels like Paul is beginning a new conversation . . . but He is not. It is the same conversation but from a different angle. Paul is very aware of how difficult it is for us to grasp this idea that we are dead to sin (or to the Law). Practically it doesn't seem to match up with our experience.

If you are like me, you desperately want to honor the Lord in how you live your life, but some nagging sins keep rearing their ugly head. You think you are making progress, and then, it seems out of nowhere, something triggers that old sin, and you are back at square one. That sin could be lust, impulse control, anger, bitterness, resentment, a critical spirit, low self-esteem, anxiety, materialism, misplaced priorities, taking God's name in vain, or any one of hundreds of other things come storming back and we are embarrassed and ashamed to seek forgiveness again.

Paul understood this tension or frustration. This is why he keeps looking at this subject from different angles. This morning, we want to look at a couple of questions: "What does it mean to be Dead to the Power of the Law of God?" and "If we are dead to the law, is the law of any value to us?"

### **What Does it Mean to be Dead to the Power of the Law of God? (Romans 7:1-6)**

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? <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> So, my dear brothers and sisters, this is the point: You died to the power of the law when you died with Christ. And now you are united with the one who was raised from the dead. As a result, we can produce a harvest of good deeds for God. <sup>5</sup> When we were controlled by our old nature, sinful desires were at work within us, and the law aroused these evil desires that produced a harvest of sinful deeds, resulting in death.

<sup>6</sup> But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer

captive to its power. Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit.

**Cautions.** We have to be careful with this text. It is possible to draw inappropriate conclusions about what this passage is teaching. This passage does not teach us about divorce or remarriage. There have been some who use this passage to draw the conclusion that after a divorce you can't get remarried unless your former spouse dies. Paul is not teaching about divorce and remarriage, he is simply using marriage as an illustration. He tells us he is talking to us about dying to the power of the law (v. 4). It is the same thing he has been talking to us about in all of chapters 5, 6, and now 7. His point is that the promise "to be yours and yours alone for the rest of our lives" is completed when someone dies.

My opening illustration of a husband and wife talking and losing part of the conversation is merely an observation about what sometimes happens in life. It would be inappropriate to say I was teaching about how poor men are as listeners, or how incessantly women talk. It isn't even teaching about differences between men and women. It is just an illustration that helps make the point I want to make. Paul's discussion about marriage is doing the very same thing. We must always be careful to listen to what a text IS saying and not try to make it say what we want it to say.

**Dying to the Law.** Mindful of this caution let's look at Paul's illustration. The principle is this: "The law is binding on a person only as long as they live." When we die with Christ, says Paul, our relationship with the Law is broken. It is no longer binding on us.

The first question we should ask is: What "power" did the Law have over us before we were in Christ? The answer is the Law had the power to condemn us before our Holy God. As we measure our lives against the Law, it is obvious that we are sinful people and deserve God's judgment. This is true whether or not a person accepts the law's authority. In other words, some people say, "I am not a Christian so God's Law does not apply to me."

Suppose you are driving down the road at 90 miles an hour and you get pulled over by the police. When the officer comes to the window, you tell them you weren't doing anything wrong because you do not submit to traffic laws. You explain that you were driving in a way that your conscience approved of. You suggest the officer has no right to impose his rules and restrict your freedom.

What do you think is going to be the response of the officer? Will that officer say, "Oh, pardon me. I didn't understand. You go and have a very nice day?" Nope! He is going to give you a very expensive traffic ticket. If you ignore the ticket, you will face further legal repercussions until you pay your fine or go to jail. Whether you recognize the authority of the law or not . . . you are still under that law.

The same is true for God's Law. The Law defines sin. It shows us what is and what is not acceptable before the eyes of God. People might say, "I don't believe in God." They might say,

“I don’t live by Christian morality because I am not a Christian.” That’s fine but these people still live in His world and are held accountable to His Laws.

Paul says the Law no longer has any power to condemn us when we become followers of Christ because when we trust Christ, we die to our old life and are raised to a new life. Therefore, just as marriage vows are no longer in effect at the death of one of the partners, so the Law no longer has power over the one who has died in Christ.

Paul says in some respects, the law aroused our sinful desires, which led to sinful acts, which led ultimately to eternal death and destruction.

If we see a sign that says “Wet Paint” we instinctively want to touch it. If we are told we are not to do something, the desire to do that which we have been told not to do becomes strong and difficult to resist. There seems to be this notion inside of us that says, “If I am being told not to do something, it is because somebody doesn’t want me to have any fun.” We assume the goal of law is to restrict our freedom and diminish our lives rather than protect and enrich our lives.

Think of a little boy or girl . . . you may need to coax them into taking a bath. They play in the dirt all day long and seem to think that taking a bath is going to destroy what they have worked all day to produce! They fight you. They cry. They resist. They pretend they are sleeping. All to get out of taking a bath. Then they become teenagers. Body odor and dirt now are barriers to attracting that boy or girl you find interesting. Now as the teenage years move on, you find you have a different problem. Now you must plead with your child to get out of the shower!

That bath and shower is like the law. When we are in our sinful nature, we rebel against it. But when we meet Christ, the law is no longer distasteful. It transforms into our friend rather than our enemy, our guide, rather than our accuser.

### **What is the Role of God’s Law?**

But there is still a question. In what sense are we dead to the law? Does this mean the Old Testament is essentially irrelevant to us? Does it mean that all the laws can be thrown out and we can do whatever we want? I don’t believe that is at all what Paul is saying. He continues in Romans 7:7-12.

<sup>7</sup> What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” <sup>8</sup> But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. <sup>9</sup> I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. <sup>10</sup> The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. <sup>11</sup> For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. <sup>12</sup> So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Don't miss the last line: "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." But this just seems to muddle things further. Are we dead to the law or aren't we? If it is holy righteous and good, why would we want to be dead to it? The answer is first and foremost that we are dead to Law's ability to condemn us.

When it comes to some of the laws we find in the Bible, they now no longer apply to us. Old Testament Laws fall under three basic headings: Moral Laws (like the Ten Commandments), Civil Laws (kind of like a constitution for Israel), and the ceremonial laws (the laws for conducting sacrifices, setting up the tabernacle/temple, and feast day celebrations). We are not bound by the civil law (we are not a citizen of Israel) and the ceremonial law was pointing to Christ so they no longer are binding on us. Only the moral law still has any authority over us. It no longer condemns us (once we are forgiven in Christ), but it does inform and lead us. In fact, most of the moral laws in the Old Testament are reaffirmed in some way in the New Testament which shows they are meant to be timeless.

This does not mean we can toss aside all that's in the Law or the Old Testament. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:17-20)

So, what is the balance? We are no longer condemned by the Law (as if it were leveling charges against us). In fact, I would say as believers, we discover that the Law is no longer our adversary; it is our friend. It does not condemn us, it guides us. The Law of God does this in three ways.

First, the Law leads us to Christ. The Law of God shows us our sin so we will see our need for a Savior. In other words, God's law is designed to lead us to Christ and to a restored relationship with God. The prophets pointed to the people's sin so they would repent and seek God's forgiveness.

If you will, the Law is like a mirror to our soul. It tells us the truth in a world that surrounds with justifications and lies. Some of that truth is painful. But we need to see the truth before we will do what is necessary to correct what is going on. We need to understand how badly we have "missed the mark" so we will know how desperately we are in need of help.

One of the things I don't like about looking at our live stream each week is that it shows me things I don't want to see: the truth that I am carrying too much weight, my hairline is not getting better, and I am looking more and more like an old man. And don't get me started on

the mirror in the bathroom. Who's idea was it to put a mirror so you could see yourself getting out of the shower or bath? I pull the curtain back after my shower and I can only hope the mirror is steamed over because otherwise, I am not going to like what I see. I am going to see that the notion that I am in pretty good shape is a lie I have been telling myself!

We need this dose of reality. We live in a world that lies to us continually. It says we are independent and self-sufficient (even though we do not even control our own breath). The world tells us we can find our own happiness if we work hard enough and are true to ourselves (whatever that means). Essentially, the world around us says we are fine and don't need God. The Law of God confronts that nonsense and affirms that there is an objective truth that weighs our lives.

We need also to point out that the Law does say some positive and true things. We live in a world where too many voices say, "You are not enough." "You are not pretty enough," "You are not smart enough." "You don't fit in." These voices are broadcast loudly over social media. These voices have led too many people to take their own lives. The Law of God tells us that we matter to God. It tells us that God created us for a purpose, and that purpose is to glorify Him. We are told that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. The Law tells us that beauty and value significantly differ from our society's ever-changing fads.

Second, the law serves to restrain sin and lawlessness. Imagine if there were no speed limit signs. The roads would be a mess! It is true that people don't obey the signs to the letter. If the speed limit is 55 people tend to drive 60-65. If the speed limit is 65 people will drive 70-75. However, the law is still limiting the drivers. No one wants to risk a ticket for driving 30-40 miles over the speed limit. It is too expensive! The Law restrains sin.

Laws help keep order. Some people say we need fewer laws. Laws, they say, inhibit our freedom. The opposite is true. When there are no laws (anarchy), everyone's freedom is threatened. It is utter chaos.

The Law of God is like a set of train tracks. These tracks help the train (our lives) run as they should. Can a locomotive run without the tracks? I suppose the answer is yes . . . but it won't get far. The Law of God is like those tracks; it keeps some semblance of order in a world that would be out of control without those laws.

Third, the Law of God reveals the heart of God. Through the Law we see what God intended life to be (it is kind of like an "owner's manual for life." The Law shows us what great lengths God has gone to to guide our lives.

Through the Law of God, we know that God is holy. We know He takes sin very seriously and will deal with those who spurn His commands. We know God wants us to respect Him and each other. He has given His law so we might be more outwardly focused than inwardly focused. God is concerned about justice and fairness in life. He cares about the poor, the needy, the

forgotten. God's Law shows us that God is not some ogre trying to control our lives, He is loving and compassionate trying to guide our lives.

The Law reminds us that God is in charge. His law doesn't just speak in generalities. He speaks specifically so we understand what appropriate and inappropriate behavior looks like. The Ten Commandments are very specific. But the law of God found in the Bible is filled with these kinds of specific explanations of what God wants from His people. We are not left to guess what God wants from us. He has shown us what He designed us to be, through His law.

## Conclusions

I have two conclusions: **First, we died to the condemnation of the law, not so we could be lawless but so we could honor God in our living.** The Bible tells us we are freed from the curse of the Law so we can bear a great harvest of good deeds for the Lord. Christ has set us free not so we could continue to destroy ourselves but without guilt. He died so we could be free to serve God joyfully and abundantly.

The Bible gives us good news. You can leave the guilt behind. You can ignore the accusations of the Devil or the voice of your own sense of failure. These things are both dealt with at the cross. You have died to these things. We can stop beating ourselves up for our foolishness in the past and can now live joyfully before the Lord.

The gospel's good news is that God loves those the world considers misfits and outcasts. He heals the broken and brings peace to the troubled. He can and will take the broken pieces of our lives and put them back together again. We are made new because of the cross. We can take off the shackles and run and dance with the freedom that comes through Christ.

**Finally, The Old Testament is our friend rather than our accuser.** The Old Testament Law not only shows us how much we need Christ; it also shows a way to a better way of living. The Law may have shown us that we deserve condemnation in the past, but now it shows the path to living a life that pleases God.

The Old Testament Law, combined with the teaching of our Savior, shows us a road to the life we were meant to live. We should view it not as a weight that holds us back, but as a map that leads us to the greatest treasure there is. And even when we miss a turn on the map (and we will do so often), the path is still there, and we can get back on it at any point.

Yes, some of the Old Testament is hard to read. But we need to stop looking at it as an assignment we need to learn and instead see it as a gift that points us to the life we have always dreamed of but didn't think was possible to find. When we put the teachings of Jesus and his disciples together with the Old Testament writers . . . we have all the pieces of the treasure map. Now, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can discover what life was actually meant to be.