

## **Romans: The Hope of Righteousness (part 7 of 9)**

### **The Law, the Spirit and Christ**

Romans 7:1-4

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*<sup>1</sup> 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> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 (ESV)*

One of the most important transitions in life happens as a child moves toward adulthood. Central to this progression is a change in the relationship between the parent and a child. If you have raised children, you know exactly what I am talking about. When kids are young, a parent's role is to establish and enforce wise boundaries, but this is not a permanent role. At least it shouldn't be. If you are 25 years old and your Mom is still asking you if you brushed your teeth before you go to bed, something is terribly wrong.

Over time, parents have to transition from a rules-enforcement role to a wisdom-enablement role. In other words, the ultimate goal for raising children is helping them to develop a mind and heart that will be able to make the right decisions in the future without the enforcement of parental rules. I have often said it this way to my sons: "I cannot make enough rules fast enough to guide you, and they wouldn't work anyway. But I can give you biblical principles that will guide you as they become your own."

Maturity is the ability to make the right decisions for the right reasons. A child becomes an adult as he or she is governed, not by an external law, but by an internal law.

What I am talking about, however, is not just a parenting issue. This is how maturity works in every arena of life and especially when it comes to spiritual maturity. Parents and pastors have to wrestle with the same question: "How are people motivated to do what is right?" Or to set the question in the context of the book of Romans, you could ask it this way: "How do we achieve the righteousness that God requires?" or "How does righteousness happen?"

## **Our Journey to Romans 7**

Today we are looking at Romans 7:1-6, but it is important to understand where we are in our study of Romans and how Romans 7 is different from Romans 6. Let me give you a very brief review and summary.

Romans 1 laid out the vision of God's righteousness for us. We learned that righteousness was revealed through the gospel (see 1:16-18). But we also observed the tragic unraveling of the human condition from Romans 1:16-3:20. The righteousness of God was set in contrast to the unrighteousness of mankind: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God" (Rom 3:10-11). God is holy, and we are not. That's the problem.

Beginning in Romans 3:21-5:21, we learned about God's solution. We discovered and celebrated that the righteousness that God demands is a righteousness that He gives. Righteousness comes as a gift from God based upon the work of Jesus applied to those who put their faith in Him. The effect of this gracious transfer called justification is that "we have peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom. 5:1).

In Romans 6 we wrestled with the implications of this in terms of what immunity from judgment really means. We learned that freedom from wrath should not create more sin, but that it sets the stage for true obedience and freedom. Believers are to consider themselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus (Romans 6:11).

Now we come to Romans 7. How does this chapter contribute to our understanding of righteousness? The question with which Paul is wrestling in this chapter is the connection between the Law, the believer, and righteousness. What are the implications of not being under the law, but under grace, in Romans 6:15? How does a believer in Jesus obey, and how does that obedience relate to the Law? How does external obedience relate to inward realities? These are the questions behind Romans 7.

This week we are going to look at this issue in terms of the broad categories of the written law and the Spirit's law (Rom. 7:1-6). Next week we'll look at the connection between sin and an external law (Rom. 7:7-21), and after Thanksgiving, we will see the internal law battle that is taking place in the life of every believer (Rom. 7:22-25).

As we walk through this chapter, keep this question in the forefront of your mind: "Where does the motivation and the application of righteousness come from?"

## **The Principle: Death cancels the law's power**

Paul begins this chapter at a very high and philosophical level as he wrestles with the believers' connection to the law. This issue emerged in Romans 6:13-16 as a central reason why believers should not present themselves to sin.

<sup>13</sup> *Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.* <sup>14</sup> *For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.*

<sup>15</sup> *What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! (Romans 6:13–15)*

Hopefully, it is pretty apparent that his argument is as follows:

- Stop presenting yourselves to sin (v 13a)
- Present yourselves to God for the purpose of righteousness (v 13b)
- Because you are under the authority of grace not law (v 14)
- However, the new domain of grace does not give you license to sin (v 15)

Now Paul left this connection between law and sin in Romans 6:16-23 to use the metaphor of slavery, but he picks it up again in Romans 7:1. He comes back to the issue of the Law, and he talks about it in principle form. Simply stated it is this: Death cancels the law's power.

The law has coercive power in that it can define certain actions and motivate based upon consequences. For example, during the time of the English Reformation, it was very dangerous to be the wife or the counselor to King Henry VIII. He was well-known for the execution of his wives (beheading two of them) and those who he suspected of treason. One such counselor was Cardinal Wolsey, a cardinal in the Catholic Church. When he failed to support King Henry's desire to annul his two-decade-long marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Wolsey was called to London to face charges of treason, as well as a likely beheading. But Wolsey died of natural causes on his trip back to London, and King Henry could no longer charge him or punish him. Wolsey's death put him out of King Henry's reach. King Henry, while a powerful king, had no power over someone who was dead. Death canceled Henry's power.

Every law has power, but its power is directly tied to the life of the person to whom the law applies. That is what Paul says in the second half of verse 1: ". . . *the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives.*" The law's power is limited to those are alive.

Now I keep using the word "law," but I need to define this term in context. One of the challenges in interpreting the word "law" in this text and in other places is determining if Paul is referring to the principle of law in general or if he is referring specifically to the Mosaic Law. The problem is that the Greek word can be used either way, and the Greek language does not capitalize words like "law" even when it is clearly referring to the Mosaic Law. That is why different translations make

different decisions about whether or not to capitalize the word “law” in this context. For example, the NASB translation does not capitalize “law” in verses 1-3 (viewing “law” as the law principle), but it is capitalized in verses 4-6 (pointing to the Mosaic Law).

For those of you who are wondering why this is important, let me tell you. Paul will argue in verse six that believers are released from “the law.” And to what is he referring? Is he referring to the principle of law, or is he referring the Mosaic Law? Underneath that question is another question. Namely, how does a believer relate to the Old Testament Law? When you read the Old Testament, what behaviors and actions are still relevant for today?

My view of Romans 7 is that Paul’s primary reference to “law” means the Mosaic Law. There are a few reasons that I believe this:

- 1) The Mosaic law was the focus of the discussion on chapters 2-5 (see Rom. 5:20)
- 2) Paul specifically mentions the tenth commandment in 7:7
- 3) He affirms the holiness of the Law in 7:12, which must mean the Mosaic Law

Next week we will look at the implications of this (“Is the Law, Bad, Good or What?”), but today I simply want you to see this principle as it relates to Paul’s argument in verses 1-6. The point here is simply that death cancels the power of the law.

### **An Illustration: The law of marriage**

To make this point even clearer, Paul uses an illustration. Like all illustrations, what Paul shares is helpful, but it is not perfect. Illustrations are meant to shed light on a subject, not to be the exact representation of what has been posited. Such is the case here.

Paul’s aim is to illustrate the point that death cancels the power of the law, and he uses the laws of marriage to make that point clear. Verses 2-3 should not be read as Paul’s teaching on divorce or on divorce and remarriage. For that material, you need to study 1 Corinthians 7. This text is simply about the legal power of marriage when both spouses are living.

Verse two lays out the power of the marriage law. “A woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage” (Rom. 7:2). The power of the law, as it applies to the woman’s freedom to enter into another marriage, is limited to her husband’s life. After he dies, she is free to remarry. Seems clear enough.

However, Paul really wanted to emphasize this, so he states it negatively in verse three. A woman who chooses to live with another man while her husband<sup>1</sup> is still living will be called an adulteress. But if the husband dies, she can marry another man and not be considered an adulteress. Do you see the point?

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<sup>1</sup> This is one reason why this passage cannot be referring to divorce since her spouse is called her husband.

The power of the marriage law is directly tied to the life of the parties involved. After death, the power of the law is canceled. A person is not obligated to act as if he or she is married after the death of his or her spouse. Death cancels the marriage covenant, and it negates the power of the law of marriage.

Hopefully, you will remember what I said at the beginning. This text is about the difference between the written law and the law of the Spirit, and Paul is starting at the top – very philosophically. He has yet to even make the connection to the gospel and practical righteousness, but that comes next.

### **Three Lessons:**

In verses 4-6 Paul makes the turn from the philosophical reality of the cancelation of the power of law to his ultimate point about the Law, the Spirit and Christ. Let me show you three really important lessons that are developed. Listen carefully, because these three points are very basic when it comes to what it means to be a follower of Jesus.

#### **1. Something spiritually significant happened to you**

Verse 4 starts with a very important word: “Likewise.” That single word connects the previous philosophical ideas about death canceling a law’s power to the lives of his readers. Everything in verses 1-2 was written to get us to this truth.

What does verse 4 say? It lays out a spiritual reality that has happened to those who are considered “brothers.” Something spiritually significant – in categories of life and death – happened to those who are followers of Jesus. Notice the five things related to this is verse four:

- **Believers in Jesus have died to the Law.** This is a new application of an idea that we learned in Romans 6 where Paul said: 1) we died to sin (Rom. 6:2), and 2) we shared in the death of Jesus (Rom. 6:8). But this is a different nuance. Believers in Jesus have a different relationship with the Law. They died to its power.
- **A believer’s death came through the body of Jesus.** The death of a believer is not a physical death, but a death that happens because of a union with Jesus. The physical death of Jesus became the satisfaction of the Law’s demands (see Rom. 3:23-26), and those who are “in Christ” live under the blessing of Jesus’ work.
- **A believer belongs to Jesus not the Law.** Here is where the marriage illustration appears again. A believer is married to Jesus because the power of the Law has been broken. A believer’s spiritual death in Jesus broke the power of Law by satisfying its demands, and now we belong to Jesus. The Greek word “belong” means to become or to be created. There is an identity element here. Believers no longer identify with the Law; they identify with Jesus.
- **A believer shares in the greater power of the resurrection.** Paul trumps the power of the Law with the power of the resurrection. The Law was not weak, but it was not ultimate. The

Law and death are so closely connected that for Jesus to defeat death meant that the power of the Law was canceled.

- **The end game is spiritual fruit that glorifies God.** The reason for all of this marvelous spiritual activity is not to liberate people so that they can go on sinning. That was the underlying charge that Paul was dealing with. Rather, this beautiful grace was destined to produce God-glorifying fruit in their lives.

One of the most important lessons in the Bible is simply that something amazing happened to you through the work of Christ, but it is not about you. You are precious and special, and God loves you, but God only treats us that way because He is precious and special and full of love and grace.

So if you are believer in Jesus, and as you consider the beauty of what I'm talking about today, always keep two things in mind: 1) Something unbelievable happened to you and 2) It is not about you. Don't make the mistake of minimizing the beauty of the gospel. And don't make the mistake of magnifying yourself.

## 2. Your former life did not work

Verse five features a significant contrast to Paul's previous points. He reminds us about the end product of our former way of life. He used the same appeal in 6:21, when he said "*what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed?*" Paul uses a reflection on the past to make his point even clearer.

In 7:5 Paul reminds the readers about the process and effect of the power of the Law in their lives:

*<sup>5</sup> 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. Romans 7:5 (ESV)*

This should sound somewhat familiar, because in Romans 6:12-14, we learned about the connection between the realm of the flesh, sinful passions, specific body parts, and the effect of death. The new piece that is added is the phrase "aroused by the law." That was not a part of Romans 6, and Paul adds it here to show us the connection between our past and the law.

As we will see next week, the Law only added more fuel to the problem of the collusion of the flesh, passions, and physical parts of our body. In other words (and this is very important), the Law was not helpful in the restraint of sin. It is only made things worse. The Law was a magnifier and clarifier of the issue of sin.

Once again we have started basketball season, and our lives are busy with early morning practices, smelly gyms, and fast food. But one of the reasons that I love basketball is because it tends to surface who you really are. A bad call by a ref, a scoreboard that malfunctioned causing you to lose the game, a team-mate who will not pass the ball, and a coach who takes you out well before you are ready are all things that make it clear what kind of person is underneath that uniform.

Basketball is just a game, but the dynamic that is created is a powerful force to show a player who he really is. That is what the Law does. It reveals things that we'd like to keep hidden.

The point in verse five is simply that like a really bad moment when you lost your cool, got a technical, or were thrown out of a game, the Law aroused the worst in us, and we would be wise to remember how quickly and bad things can get.

Without making you feel overly guilty, I'm sure that you can think of situations and results in your past that bore the fruit of death. Our godless, law-breaking actions result in death: the death of trust, the death of a relationship, the death of a career, the death of a marriage, the death of joy, and any number of negative consequences. Everyone knows what I'm talking about at some level.

Paul wants to highlight that the former life, trying harder or finding a new "law," did not work. It only produced more and more death. So where does that leave us?

### **3. You must live by the Spirit**

Verse six is the most important verse that we have covered today, and it is where Paul was going from the very beginning of chapter 7.

*<sup>6</sup> 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 7:6 (ESV)*

Paul restates what he previously said about believers being released from the law and its control, and then he highlights a contrast of serving "in the old way of the written code" versus "the new way of the Spirit." In other words, Paul is inviting and challenging followers of Jesus to live by the law of the Spirit. What does that mean?

First, it means living in light of the new covenant and not the old covenant. The presence of the Spirit is a marker for the inauguration of the new covenant as promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-27, both of which featured an inward law written on the heart and empowered by the Spirit.

*<sup>26</sup> And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. Ezekiel 36:26-27 (ESV)*

Second, to live by the law of the Spirit means that there is new ability to truly obey, not just because you have to, but because you want to. The old covenant was characterized by an external code with no internal motivator or power to keep it. But the new covenant is characterized by Spirit-empowered motivation and internal righteousness. As I have said before, the change that God brings in your heart is such that the Law that used to make you mad now makes you glad. You see the wisdom and the beauty of holiness and righteousness.

Third, to live by the law of the Spirit means that what is produced in your life is the fruit of the Spirit. Because of the love that you have for God and His grace, there is a new motivation for obedience that creates the kind of actions that would have been impossible before. And this fruit is an entirely different way to live.

*<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Galatians 5:22–23 (ESV)*

In other words, to be a follower of Jesus means that there is an inhabited presence of Christ in you who is at work in you to create the glory of Christ in you and through you.

Fourth, to live by the law of the Spirit means that you really truly have life! Here is how Paul said it in 2 Corinthians 3:5-6 –

*<sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. 2 Corinthians 3:5–6 (ESV)*

It means that when you are converted by the blood of Jesus, when you have been cleansed of your sin, when you have been granted immunity from wrath, and when your heart has been changed that you can truly live. It means that you can now take the beautiful transforming reality of Christ into every aspect of your humanity. It means that every aspect of who you are is transformed by the power of the Spirit. Your identity, gender, sexuality, career, relationships, money, aspirations, dreams, communication and actions are all embedded with new meaning, new power and new life.

So if you are not a follower of Jesus, I implore you to put your faith in Him and to stop living for death. And if you are a follower of Jesus, you should throw yourself into the stream of the Spirit's work in your life. Facilitate His work in your life through worship, prayer, the Scriptures, accountability, giving, and service. Allow your life to be led and filled by the Spirit, not just so that you can NOT do what you know you shouldn't. Open your life to the law of the Spirit because this is what it means to truly live!

One of my favorite John Bunyan quotes goes like this:

*Run, John, run, the law demands  
But gives us neither feet nor hands,  
Far better news the gospel brings;  
It bides us fly and gives us wings.*

Church, let us live by the law of the Spirit!

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