

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part fourteen

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SERVING GOD THROUGH THE NEW LIFE OF THE SPIRIT

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? [2] Thus 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. [3] 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.[4] 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. [5] 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. [6] But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit."

Romans chapter seven is one of the most studied and disputed chapters in the whole Bible. Debates rage as to whether it describes a Christian or a non-Christian. If it *is* a Christian being described, what *kind* of Christian is it? A **brand new** Christian? A **normal** Christian? Or is it describing a **back-slidden** Christian? Is Paul describing *himself*? If so, at what point in his spiritual experience?

My own opinion is Romans seven *isn't* describing an individual at all - Christian or non-Christian. It's a passage about the theology of spiritual life. It's about life under the **new** covenant as opposed to life under the **old** covenant. So he's not describing **persons** in this tricky chapter. He's trying to explain the **role of the law** in it's past and then present relationship to God.

What is my relationship to the law of God? If you think about this for a minute you'll see why an answer is so important. Just consider some of the things Paul has already said about the nature and purpose of the law of God:

The law can't produce salvation - Romans 3:20 - "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight...."

The law reveals human sin - Romans 3:20b - "....through the law comes knowledge of sin."

The law condemns the sinner - Romans 3:19 - "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God."

The law brings God's wrath - Romans 4:15 - "For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression."

The law was given to actually increase transgression - Romans 5:20 - "Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more...."

But here's the tricky part. There are still places where Paul speaks of this **same** law in glowing terms:

The law is holy, righteous, and good - Romans 7:12 - "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

This really shouldn't surprise us. We all quote with affection the marvelous words of the Psalmist about the preciousness of God's law - Psalm 19:7-8, 10 - "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple; [8] the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes....[10] More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb."

The life of faith upholds the law - Romans 3:31 - "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law."

So I hope you can see that this is no small issue. How are we going to pull all these threads together? Is the law good or bad? Do we keep it or not keep it? Does it matter for the Christian, or does it not matter anymore?

Taking all of this into account, you can see where people may begin to wonder where does this law fit into Christian experience? That's the nub of the issue. What is **my** relationship to the law of God?

In Romans chapter seven Paul is describing *how the law works*. Particularly, he's trying to explain how a *new relationship with God through Christ* automatically changes a person's *relationship to the law* as well. *It doesn't change the law, but it changes my relationship to the law*. And the place where Paul introduces the nature of this change through Christ's death and resurrection is **Romans 7:1-6**.

Even *these* verses don't just hatch out of thin air. Really, they are a restatement and explanation of the idea Paul put on the table in **Romans 6:12-14** - "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. [13] 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. [14] For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

We've already studied these verses. Paul says we are to *consider ourselves "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus"* (6:11). **Verses 12-13** tell us what life looks like when we're considering this as we should be. It's not just a *mental* process. We *present* our physical beings differently day by day in the real world. We *realign our lives under a new master*. There are only two choices. We no longer present our members to *"sin as instruments of unrighteousness"* (13), but present them to God as *"instruments of righteousness"* (13).

The important point for our purposes today is brought out in **verse 6:14** - "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." We could never accomplish this switching of masters in our own strength. The change, while *involving* our will, is not something we could accomplish by sheer *exertion* of will power. Paul says sin no longer has *"dominion"* over us. But *why* doesn't it? *Why did it have dominion at one point in our experience and not in another?* What has changed through Christ? What's the new factor in the equation? Paul explains: *"...since you are not under law, but under grace."*

So, we *were* under the law before, but we *aren't* anymore. And somehow that shift has brought a new *power* into our lives. When we were *"under the law"* sin ruled and reigned. And because we *aren't* under the law anymore, we can live above the *"dominion"* of sin. Somehow my relationship to the law is at the root of either the rule of sin or the rule of righteousness in my life. And that's a very *hard* concept for us to get our minds around. This is exactly where **Romans 7:1-6** picks up the argument. Paul addresses *three possible attitudes to the law*:

First, there are *legalists* - people who take very seriously Paul's positive statements about the importance of the law - that it is *"holy and righteous and good"* (7:12). So they try to *use the law* as a means of attaining salvation and righteousness before God. This, of course, only leads to despair and deeper condemnation - **Romans 3:20** - "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

Second, there are *antinomians* (or *libertarians*) who see themselves so freed from the law they reject all authority and become a law unto themselves. They equate *liberty* with *licence*. Paul addressed their arguments with the question, *"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means!"* (6:1).

The *third* option Paul delineates is *righteousness as the fruit of the Spirit*. While he never uses those exact words, this is the concept he leads us into with the opening six verses of chapter seven. He wraps it all up with these words: *"But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit"* (7:6). Because the law is powerless to *produce* righteousness, but can only *demand* it, another source of *power* is required to help us with holiness. This is the inward change the Holy Spirit initiates inside the heart of those who co-experience death and resurrection with Christ Jesus.

To keep it as simple as possible, we will divide Paul's argument into three basic parts: the *principle*, the *illustration*, and the *application*:

1) THE PRINCIPLE IS LAWS ARE ONLY BINDING ON THE LIVING - NOT THE DEAD

Romans 7:1 - "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?"

This is not complicated. Laws are for the *living*. If I'm caught speeding on the way to the funeral home with a corpse in the back seat, I will get the ticket, not the corpse. The traffic laws have no application to the dead. If you have a legal contract with me and I die, you may go after someone *else* for financial satisfaction, but you have no claim at all on me. Death frees

from law, every time. Law is for *life*. Death *annuls* it.

2) **THE ILLUSTRATION PAUL CHOOSES TAKES THE ABOVE PRINCIPLE AND EXTENDS IT TO LIVING CHRISTIANS**

Romans 7:2-3 - "Thus 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. [3] 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."

This is a brilliant stroke by Paul. Most of us can understand how the law has no claim on the dead. But we aren't *dead*. We're all trying to serve Jesus while we're *alive*. So how is it possible for *our* relationship to the law to be transformed so we're no longer, to use Paul's terms, "under the law"(6:14), or "held captive" by it(7:6)?

This is why Paul chooses the illustration from *marriage*. Because, not only is the deceased *husband* released from the covenant of marriage, but so is the living *widow*. This is why she is called "*an adulteress*"(3) if she lives with another man while her husband is still living, but is "*not an adulteress*"(3) if her husband has died. Her relationship to the marriage covenant is changed by the death of her husband. She is *released* from the law of that marriage by the death of her husband. It no longer has any *condemning* power over her life.

3) **THE APPLICATION OF THIS TRUTH TO THE CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN THROUGH THE DEATH AND LIFE OF CHRIST AND THE FRUIT-PRODUCING POWER OF THE SPIRIT**

Romans 7:4-6 - "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. [5] 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. [6] But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit."

There are so many things that could be said here, but I want to wrap up with only the *two* most basic issues:

First, we "died to the law through the body of Christ"(4). Obviously, Paul is looking back to the general principle from the first verse - the law only has authority over the *living*. But, he says, I am *swept up into* Christ's death.

We spent the last two weeks studying this very theme: **Romans 6:3-5** - "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? [4] We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.[5] For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

In Christ's death, and in my *participation* in Christ's death, *the demands of the law have been fully satisfied*. Nothing has been ignored or overlooked: **Galatians 3:13-14** - "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"— [14] so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."

This is Paul's response to the *legalist*. The law can't be used to *earn* merit before God because there is nothing left to be *paid* from my account. Christ's death did *two things*. First, He *bore the curse* of the law for me. And second, He *opened the door for the promised Holy Spirit to work in my heart*. But the central point for now is *I am now a dead person to the condemnation of the law*. It can no more pin anything on me than the laws of the land can condemn a corpse.

I said there were *two* issues in this application segment of **verses 4-6**. Here's the *second* point:

We died to the law so we could be united to Christ - Romans 7:4 - "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."

In our last point we saw Paul's response to the *legalist* - the one who would *earn* God's favor through the works of the law. Now we see Paul's response to the *libertarian*. True, we died to the law, but we are not *unattached*. We died to the law so we might be *joined to Christ* - "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....(7:4). So, while I'm no longer attached to the **law**, I'm called to be faithful to my new **spouse**. This is why Paul chose the illustration from **marriage** in the preceding two verses. There is still a **covenant**, though it is no longer through the law.

So the **legalist** is wrong and the **libertarian** is wrong. Then what is the position of the Christian with regard to the law of God? In short, regarding holiness, the Christian becomes **fruitful** where he used to **fail**. And he or she does this by the inward power of the Holy Spirit:

Romans 7:5-6 - "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. [6] But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit."

The new life of the Spirit is manifested in a new set of **desires**. The nature of these desires is **different** from my existence under the law. The law only has **negative** power. It is always **restrictive**. It only tells us what **not** to do. These new desires of the Spirit are **positive desires rooted in love for my Master**. These desires are in the direction of what I **ought to do** rather than just what I **shouldn't** do.

Here's another place where Paul tries to sum up this complicated concept - **Romans 10:4** - "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes."

When we were outside of Christ the law of God only aroused **rebellion** in some deep level of our hearts. Paul says it actually **increased** sin. And it **exposed** sin I hadn't even been thinking of.

That's why Paul's marriage illustration is so brilliant. The coming of the Spirit of God does to my **holiness** what a loving marriage does to my physical **faithfulness**. I don't live my married life under the weight of the law telling me I **have** to be faithful. That law is true and that law is good. In fact, it's the will of God. But, through the power of my love for my wife, I spend my energy, not on **keeping the law**, but on **enjoying the love of my wife**. In delighting in the love of my wife, I keep the law. But it's not a condemning chore. It's a **fruitful** delight.

Here's how Paul will summarize it later on in this very letter. It's a perfect description - "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"(14:17).