



# An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

## (7) The Law and the Christian

Romans 7

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This is sermon number 7 in our series of sermons covering the letter of Paul to the Romans, one chapter at a time, so our text this morning is Romans 7. Romans is the part of the Bible that most systematically summarizes the gospel – the good news of salvation from sin and the wrath of God through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. From 1:18 - 3:20, Paul deals with sin and the wrath of God which teaches the need for salvation. From 3:21 to the end of 4 he shows how we can be made right with God through believing in Jesus and receiving his righteousness as our own as far as our standing with God is concerned. Chapter 5-8 work out some of the further details of the good news. In the first part of chapter 5 Paul speaks of some of the subjective blessings of salvation, peace, hope, joy in suffering and confidence. In the second part of chapter 5 he shows how sin and death came into the world through the sin of Adam and he teaches that Adam was our representative so that the consequences of his sin have passed to the rest of the human race. He also shows how by the same principle of representation, the righteousness of Christ is transferred to believers.

Then in chapter 6 he deals with union with Christ and shows that those who believe in Jesus are united to Christ which means that they participate in his death and resurrection which means that they are dead to sin and alive to God which means that obedience to God's law is one of the inevitable and invariable benefits of salvation. The bottom line here is that being declared righteous so that we are right with God and being transformed to want to obey God go together and it is impossible to have one without the other.

Chapter 7 deals with the law. And as I have done all the way along, I want to explain why this is important and why it matters to you and why you should not tune out just because we will be talking about the relationship of Christians to God's law. Again the reason that this is important for you, even if you are not naturally attracted to theological discussions, is that your relationship with God is the most important relationship in your life and since God is the ruler of the world and your ruler in particular, how you relate to God's law is much more important for you than whatever you are planning to do after this worship service or the thing that you have planned for next week that you are really looking forward to – or really not looking forward to. This is important because God is important for your life and for my life.

So, the law. The law was very important for the Jewish people because God was very important to the Jewish people. God had given them his law through Moses. They had for the most part failed to obey God's law and because of that they had been taken into exile as punishment from God. They knew that pleasing God through keeping his law was important for all kinds of reasons and so the law and how it applied to their life was important to them. And this is part of the background to the gospel because the gospel is about how we can be right with God and the role that God's law plays in our lives is very, very important because God is very, very important.

Now I am told that the Inuit people, the people who live in the far north, have 17 words for snow. And the reason for that is that snow is a very important part of their lives and they need to distinguish between different kinds of snow. Well the law was something like that for the first Christians and especially the apostle Paul because the subject that he had to understand thoroughly and teach to the church all had to do with our relationship with God and the law is a very important part of our relationship with God because as I have said, God is our king and our ruler and he has a law. Paul does not have 17 words for law, but he does use the word law in a number of different ways and he expects us to pick up the differences in meaning from the context. All this to say that the word "law" in Paul's explanation of the gospel is used in a number of different ways and knowing those ways is important for our

relationship with God. And this is what chapter 7 of his letter to the Romans is largely about.

So, this is about the most important relationship in your life - your relationship with God.

The first point that Paul makes in Romans 7 is that believers are released from the law in some sense – not in every sense, but in a very important sense, believers are no longer under the law. They are released from the law of God in a very important way – actually a couple of important ways.

The illustration that he uses to help us understand this is the example of a marriage in which one of the partners dies. The surviving partner is free from that marriage. He says in verse 2, “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.” This, by the way, is one of the passages in Scripture that teaches that marriage is meant to last for life. But that is not the point that Paul is making here.

The point that Paul is making is that since Christians have died with Christ they have died to the law. In verse 4 he says, “you ... have died to the law through the body of Christ...” and in verse 6 he says, “we are released from the law....” This corresponds to what he had written back in 6:14 where he had said to believers, “you are not under the law but under grace.”

Now there are two very important ways that Christians are free from the law of God. First, we are free from the curse of the law. The law does not condemn us. That is a very important way to be free from the law. The law comes with punishments attached to it. Jesus has taken upon himself those punishments and so we are free from the law in that the punishments no longer threaten. The law does not condemn us. We are not obligated to keep it as the way to be right with God. We are right with God through believing and not through keeping the law.

A second way that we are free from the law is that we are free from all the laws that were part of the special temporary relationship between God and Old Testament Israel. That whole arrangement is sometimes called the Mosaic covenant or the Mosaic administration because God

gave it to Israel through Moses. In the Old Testament, God administered his relationship with his people through a whole complex of laws, but with the coming of Christ and the beginning of the new covenant administration, believers are freed from all of those Old Testament laws. This does not mean that we are free from the law in every sense, but it does mean that we are free from the law in these two very important senses. The law does not condemn us if we are trusting in Christ and we are in a different era of salvation history and so the laws of the old covenant no longer apply to us. We don't have to offer sacrifices at the temple and we are free to eat pork.

Now this freedom from the law has the very opposite result from what you might expect. You might expect that freedom from the law means doing whatever you please, but according to the logic of the gospel it leads instead to bearing fruit for God, which is what Paul writes in verse 4 and it means serving God which is what Paul writes in verse 6.

According to verse 4, we die to the law through our union with Christ and the result of that is that we belong to Christ and that we bear fruit for God. According to verse 6 we are 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." This last clause gives us the principle that is operating here. Paul makes a distinction between serving God in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

What this means is that believers have the Holy Spirit who gives them an inner desire to serve God and that is contrasted with "the old way of the written code." In the old way, the letter of the law dominates. Serving God is more of a legalistic thing motivated by fear. But since Christians are free from the law, serving God is much more motivated from within, by desires worked in us by the Holy Spirit, so that there is a much greater emphasis on serving God because we want to rather than serving God because his law with its threat is hanging over us.

So, believers are free from the law in the sense that the law does not condemn us and in the sense that we are no longer under the Mosaic covenant. But that freedom leads to bearing fruit for God and service to God rather than living sinful wicked lives.

So that is the first thing that Paul teaches about our relationship to the law in this section. We are free from it.

The second thing that he teaches about the law in this chapter is closely related but focuses more on the perverse relationship between sin and the law. He makes the very surprising claim that there is a sense in which the law stimulates sin. The reason for this is not that the law itself is evil, but that it is the nature of sin to be stimulated by the law. Verse 5 says “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.”

He says that our sinful passions are aroused by the law. That is the nature of sin. It is the nature of sinful passions. They are roused by the law. Our sinful nature wants to break the law. It is a rebellious nature. And so, it is stimulated by the law because it wants to do what is forbidden. It delights in refusing to do what is commanded. That is the perverse nature of sin and I’m sure that we are all familiar with this phenomenon.

We see it in an exaggerated form in toddlers, because they have not yet mastered subtly. We have often seen it in grandchildren who so clearly share the sinful nature of their grandparents. We say, “Don’t touch Grampa’s books” and the little hand reaches for the books. Before the command came, the books were no attraction, but when the law was given it aroused the desire to break it.

This is not the law’s fault. This is the nature of sin. What the law does is expose the sin that is there in the heart of the sinner. That is what Paul goes on to say in verses 7-13. Verse 7-8, <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.”

This is part of the way that the law shows us our sinfulness. It not only shows us our sinfulness by being the standard that shows sin to be sin, it also shows us our sinfulness by provoking us to sin. Again, Paul stresses that that does not make the law evil, rather it is sin that is evil, and

which is provoked in the presence of the law. So, Paul describes how this had worked in his own life. In verse 9 he says, “I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died.” That is, he thought that he was spiritually alive before he understood how far-reaching the law is.

Paul was a pious law-abiding Jew before his conversion to Christ. He thought that he was doing quite well as far as keeping the law was concerned. So, he considered himself to be spiritually alive – in good shape before God. But then the commandment came – that is, God showed him what the commandment really meant, and he began to see how sinful he really was. That is what he means when he says, “sin came alive and I died.” He saw how the law provoked his sinful rebellious nature and he died – that is, he died in his own estimation – he realized that he was dead before God – he realized that he was dead in sin.

In his case it was the tenth commandment, “You shall not covet.” That commandment addresses our desires. We are not to desire anything that is off-limits to us. Once God showed him what that meant, he saw how his sinful nature was provoked to coveting by the law against coveting and he came to understand that he was dead in sin. He came to understand that he was a sinner, he came to see that he was dead in sin rather than alive to God.

So, you see how significant the law is in our lives. Because God is over us as our King and our Lord, his law is a key reality in our lives. It is one of the ways that God is present in our lives. We live in the light of the reality of God. We live in the light of the law of God. And that is the case whether we realize it or not or whether we consciously think about it or not. This is the meaning of our consciences. Our consciences are a response to God’s law. They tell us if we are doing is pleasing to God or not pleasing to God.

So far in this chapter Paul has discussed two ways in which we relate to God’s law. If we are believers, we are free from the curse of the law and the result of that is a desire to serve God which we do by keeping the law. It is very significant that we need to be free from the law in order

to keep the law. Once the law no longer condemns us, we desire to please God by keeping his law. That is the logic of the good news.

The other point that Paul has made is how our sinful nature responds to the law. Our sinful nature is provoked to sin by the law because we are rebellious at heart. If we see a law, we want to trample it. But that is also the way that God brings us to see how sinful we are. Once we understand how the law provokes us to sin we come to see how profoundly sinful we are, and we realize that we are dead in sin and that we need to be made alive to God which of course is exactly what God does to us through our union with Christ when we believe.

All of this shows us how important the law of God is in our lives. Because it is God's law, it is an important part of the way that we relate to God. When we are responding to the law we are responding to God. And this is the context in which we live. Our lives are fundamentally God-related and that means that how we relate to God's law is an important part of the way that we relate to God. And so how we relate to the law of God is very significant in our lives. It is an important part of the meaning of our lives. How we relate to God's law tells us some very fundamental things about ourselves and our relationship to God.

Which brings us to the last section of this chapter, verses 14-25. In verses 7-13 Paul had been showing how the law provoked his sinfulness and how it showed him that he was dead in sin and thus in need of salvation. In verse 14 to the end of the chapter he describes his relationship to the law as a believer. He does not make the transition obvious, but there are reasons in the way that he speaks in verses 14-25 which lead us to the conclusion that he is speaking as a believer in these verses.

Now these verses are particularly important because they help us to understand the bewildering reality of continuing sin in the lives of those who believe in Jesus. When you look at some of what happens in salvation, you might be tempted to think that believers are finished with sin. Remember how Paul in chapter 6 had spoken about being dead to sin and alive to God. In the first part of this chapter he had taught that we are free from the Law and that the result of that is bearing fruit for God and serving in the new way of the Spirit. Something marvelous

happens in believers' lives through believing in Jesus. We are changed. We are transformed in our inner being. We have a totally new perspective on God and on obedience. God is good. His law is good and right. And obedience is wonderful and life-affirming and the way we want to live.

But the bewildering reality is that we are not completely free from sin. We love God. We love his law. We think obedience to his law is wonderful. And yet we still sin. This is what Paul deals with in verses 14-25.

In verse 15 Paul says "For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate." This is the dilemma. On the one hand we love the law. On the other hand, we do not keep it. This is the struggle of the Christian life. Verse 19, "For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing."

In discussing this struggle Paul refers to sin dwelling within him. Verse 17, "So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me." Verse 20 "Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me." Now Paul is not excusing himself by speaking in this way. He is responsible for the sin that dwells within him. That sinful principle is his sinful principle. But on the other hand, it is not who he is at the deepest level. At the deepest level he loves God's law and wants to keep it. That is the renewed Paul. That is Paul as a result of the gospel. He loves God. He loves his law. He wants to obey it. But there is still apart of him that is attracted to sin. There is still a sinful principle within him. And therefore, there is this struggle with sin.

And so, he calls himself a "wretched man." Verse 24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death." And here is the answer. "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" He turns to Jesus. His faith is that Jesus will deliver him from this body of death – he will do that gradually throughout his life and he will do it completely at the point of death or when he returns at the end of the age.

Now Paul is being very pastoral here. Ongoing sin in the lives of believers is a real problem for them. There is this war going on within them between their sinful nature and their new spiritual nature. A real



transformation has happened so that they are dead to sin and alive to God and yet a principle of sin still remains. And the result is struggle. Paul summarizes this same struggle in Galatians 5:17 when he says, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do.”

This is the nature of the Christian life as long as we are in this life. And knowing this is very important for our spiritual wellbeing. On the one hand, knowing this keeps us from despair and unrealistic expectations in the Christian life. It is not easy. There is struggle involved. We will not be able to do what we would like to do. But on the other hand, knowing this also helps to guard against presumption and easy-believism. If there is no struggle - if there is no longing for holiness and obedience – if there is no delight in the law, but rather a delight in sin, then we are not living the Christian life. As we have been seeing from Paul’s explanation of the gospel of salvation, it includes a change in attitude towards God and sin and obedience. It involves being dead to sin and alive to God. It includes loving God’s law and a genuine desire to keep it. And if those things are not there to some extent, whatever faith we may have is not true saving faith.

And this is why Jesus continues to be central and needed in our lives. Paul’s struggle with sin, leads him to Christ – for on-going forgiveness, but also for ongoing strength to fight against sin and to fight the good fight to growing in obedience and Christ-likeness and character change.

So, the law and our relationship to it is not some abstract theological subject far removed from our lives. How we relate to the law is how we relate to God and just as God is at the center of the good news, so is his law. We are free from the condemnation of the law. We are free from the Mosaic covenant. The law shows us our sin and our need of salvation and as Christians we have this struggle with the law because love that law, but we fail to keep it as we would love to. And that brings us back to Jesus who is both the author and the finisher of our faith. We need him for our initial salvation. And we need him for the outworking of that salvation until we are perfected when we die or when Christ returns.

So, let us live the Christian life – loving God – loving his law – pursuing obedience and engaging in the struggle against sin in and through the grace and power of our Lord Jesus Christ through his Spirit.