



The New Life 3: Freedom from the Law

Romans 7:1-6

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This morning we will be looking at Romans, chapter 7, the first six verses. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 7, beginning at verse 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? 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. 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. 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. 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. 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."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we ask this morning that you would open up your Word to us, that as we look into your Word our eyes would be fixed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, for there is indeed none like him. We long to see the Lord Jesus. We long to be made more and more into the image of Christ. So we are thankful for your Word, Lord. We're thankful for your Holy Spirit who illuminates our minds and guides us into all truth. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We are continuing this morning in the second main section of the book of Romans. You may recall that in the first five chapters of Romans Paul has set forth what it means to be right with God, how to be justified. He sets forth our need for salvation and the provision of that salvation in Jesus Christ. Then, beginning in chapter 6 through chapter 8, Paul answers the very practical question that comes next. "So what? What does it mean if I'm saved? How do I live as a result of being saved? How do I relate to God because of the work of Jesus?"

He begins, then, talking about the consequences of salvation, the implications of salvation, and the main one we have been looking at is freedom. In chapter 6, verse 14, he showed us that we are free from sin, and we are free from sin because we are not under the law but under grace. What he did after that point was to give us an illustration to show us what it means to be free from sin. You recall that illustration was difficult for us to get our arms around, because Jesus tells us the only way we can be free from sin is to be a slave to righteousness.

Paul is just following Jesus here. It's what Jesus said in the Gospels, and Paul lays this out very clearly. In order to be free from sin, you must be a slave to God. There's no other way. He uses that illustration as an explanation. Now Paul is going to take us back up to verse 14. What we have to see is that the question Paul raises in chapter 7, verse 1, actually follows chapter 6, verse 14.

It's as if someone in the back of the room where Paul is teaching says, "Excuse me, Paul. I get this illustration about freedom from sin, but can you go back? My notes are kind of empty here. You need to explain to me what it means not to be under law. Help me out here." Paul anticipates this objection and begins to give another illustration of what this looks like.

Now, if you thought *last* week's illustration was difficult, we're really going to be challenged with *this* week's illustration. You need to do something for me here. If you're the type of person who gets caught up in the details, that when you see something or hear something you want to know every little bit about it, you're going to get lost here. If you're the type of person who is locked in and all of a sudden says, "Squirrel!" you need to avoid that.

We're not going to go down rabbit trails here with Paul. Paul is not lighting the way toward rabbit trails. We're not going to trail-blaze. We want no flashlights. We're going to stay on the main path so we get Paul's main point. He's trying to explain to us what it means not to be under law. So in this text this morning I'd like us to see three things.

First, Paul tells us about *a previous bondage* we had. Secondly, Paul explains to us *a new freedom* we have in Christ. Then thirdly, he tells us *how to know the difference* between bondage and freedom. Often we think we understand what the difference is, but as we've already seen in chapter 6, our concepts are not always biblical concepts. So we're going to look at a previous bondage, a new freedom, and how to know the difference.

A Previous Bondage

Paul begins by recapping where we were. He is going to answer the question... *What does it mean to be under the law?* If we're no longer under the law, the first thing we should understand is what it meant to *be* under the law. He wants us to understand that we once *were* under the law, to spot what that looks like so we can see the difference in our lives today.

He says, "Or do you not know, brothers..." We might translate it, "You're not really ignorant of this" or "Surely you know this is the case. I'm talking to people who know about the law." He's saying to us, "You're not ignorant of the law. You know what the law is. I've spent five chapters explaining to you what the standards of a holy God are and how we fail to meet them. This is not coming at the beginning of this letter."

What does it mean for Paul to say, "You're not ignorant of what it means to be under the law"? Why is it important for us to understand this? Well, what Paul wants us to remember is our life before Jesus Christ.

Paul wants us to remember the oppression and the guilt we were under. He wants us to remember why we left the oppression and guilt. He wants us to see the difference Jesus makes.

So he's dealing with the negative aspect of the law as a way of salvation. He's talking about the law as a way of salvation, as a way of earning favor with God. He's not talking about just the Mosaic code or just the statutes and rules of the Old Testament. He's talking about what he spent a great deal of time on in the first five chapters: how people naturally try to earn their way to heaven. What he wants you and me to see, although he wouldn't have experienced it exactly this way, is a treadmill.

Have you ever watched somebody on a treadmill? They run and they run and they run and they run. Imagine that that treadmill doesn't stop. It's always going. You can't set the timer for 15 minutes. It's always going. Perhaps it's always picking up speed. I don't care how good a runner you are. There's something that's going to happen on that treadmill. You've seen it in the YouTube videos. You're going to slip and trip and fall and hit your face on the treadmill and skid off the treadmill.

You can't stay perpetually on the treadmill. That's what Paul is saying to us here this morning. If you are under the law, you're on the treadmill, and you can't survive like that. You may think for the first few minutes you can. You may even think you're doing a great job until somebody comes up and punches the incline and makes it go faster. Then you realize you can't do this. You *thought* you could, but you can't.

What Paul is telling us is there is no way of escape. There is no way of success under the law. You are bound to the principle of "Do this and live," but you can't do this, so you have no hope of living. You have no way of shedding the law. The law is actually a part of your problem, so it can't be a part of the solution. The law has already condemned you because you have already broken it. As long as you were living, the law was binding on you. It ruled over you, Paul says. This summarizes our great problem.

Now what does this look like in our lives? What if I say to Paul, "Oh no, Paul. Not me. I'm not under the law. I don't need to worry about this problem"? What does it look like to be under the law? Let me give you a couple of examples.

First, we never want to admit our failures. We never want to admit that we're wrong. This assumes we know there's a standard we're supposed to meet, but we know we haven't met it. There's something we're obligated to do, and at the same time we realize we are unable to fulfill it and we want others to overlook our failures. What we do is we say things like, "Nobody is perfect" or we look around and hope no one has seen us just mess up. We act as if somehow God is blind to what we are doing.

The second thing we notice is at the same time, when we're living under the law under this standard, we are so often critical of others breaking the standard. The irony is that we are critical of others for doing the same things we do and we want other people to overlook. Have you ever noticed that? People who play a little bit

fast and loose with the truth all of a sudden become indignant when a salesman lies to them or people who are doing the wrong thing become angry when they see that politicians do the wrong thing.

They're fast and loose with their taxes, they take some things from work, but, oh, these politicians are crooks, they are thieves. We lay our sins upon them. This is a time-tested pastime. I don't even need to give you examples from out there. You see this in your homes all the time, don't you? When one of the children, for example, has done something that is worthy of discipline and Mom and Dad come up and say, "We've seen you do such-and-such," what's usually the response?

"Well, did you see what my brother did? Look at my sister." If a child has taken the advanced training in excuse-making class, he'll look at Dad and say, "You know, Dad, that's kind of like what *you* did last week." Whoa! Now we're *really* caught flat-footed. You see, that's what we do when we're under the law.

A third thing we see of a life marked by being under the law is that we are proud of what *we* have done, and we want to make sure everybody knows it. You know how this works. You tell the story in such a way that you get to bring up the part where you were the hero. When you explain the story, you downplay everyone else and treat them a little bit worse so you can up-play yourself and be just a little bit better. This is what we do. We recognize there's a standard, but we know we don't meet the standard, so we bring up excuses. We try to dodge the issue.

It's not enough to have done something good and right; everyone else has to know it. This is what Paul has been telling us over and over again. This principle is applied to people who have tried to suppress the truth of God. It applies to people who try to do the good thing. It applies even to those who have been given the law of Moses. All of them were under the law. In every instance, they were trying to earn a relationship with God by their deeds, and the outcome is always the same. It's always failure, sin, and death.

Paul then moves to an example of what it looks like to be bound to the law, an illustration of the authority of the law. 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. 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 illustration can get a bit tricky, because what we have to do is look for Paul's main point. If we are focused on that, we won't get lost in the details, but if we start to pluck every thread, we will get lost. Have you ever had the occasion of trying to tell someone a story or something that was going on and they keep interrupting you with sidebar questions? You're talking about a vacation you took, and you drove to the airport and got ready to get on the plane. They say, "Now wait a minute. Which highway did you take to the airport?"

"I don't know. I-10."

"Did you take the toll road or did you go...?"

"I don't know. We went. We went and we parked..."

"Where did you park? Did you park at the Park 'N Fly? Did you park at The Parking Spot?"

"Does it really matter? I don't know. I think it was the Park 'N Fly."

"Well, did you park in covered or did you park in uncovered?"

You're sitting there like, "Do you want to know what I'm telling you?" We need to avoid doing that to Paul. He has one main point he wants us to see here. This is not an allegory. We're not trying to assign meaning to every single detail. It's like a parable. We are looking for the main point Paul is putting across here. The main point is our relationship with the law is permanent, but a change can occur that breaks that relationship.

Paul is taking the most permanent kind of relationship he knows of and using it as an illustration of our relationship with the law. Now this is our first problem, because marriage isn't so permanent anymore in our society, is it? We don't really think about marriage as something that lasts a lifetime. We sort of hope it does, but we see so many people around us with broken marriages.

There's also a second problem here. Paul is trying to illustrate that we, as the wife, are under the authority of the law. So he's following on his biblical advice in the book of Ephesians that when a man and a woman get married the woman is to submit to the man and that the man is to love the woman in Christ. The problem is we don't believe in *that* anymore either. We've taken "obey" out of our vows. We don't want any kind of submission.

We don't want submission to a spouse. We don't want submission to a government. We don't want submission to a church. We don't want submission to parents. We want to do away with the whole thing. That makes it difficult for us to get this illustration. That's why I'm tracking it for you. So we have this illustration through Paul's understanding of marriage, that a woman who is married to a man is under his authority, that that relationship is lasting and binding. It is not just set aside at will, but it is not permanent in the sense that there is no possibility of entering into another relationship.

There's a reason why in our marriage vows we say, "Until death do us part." What happens upon a death? The marriage is done and we are free to enter into another marriage. That's what Paul is doing here. He wants us to see that picture. This is where we can get confused, because Paul has said earlier that we have died to sin in Christ. You remember that from chapter 6. Now here he sets up the law as the husband and us as the bride.

He says if the husband dies the bride is free. We want to say, "Paul, you just told us *we* died to the law. The law didn't die to *us*. Why can't you be logical, Paul? It should be the wife who dies here. If you're really following logically, that's what it should be." Paul says to us, "Well, there's one small issue here. I don't know any wives who die and then get remarried. It doesn't work that way. When you die you don't get remarried again. You're dead."

So Paul has to take this illustration and kind of turn it on its side. That's what can be confusing to us. That's why we don't want to make this an allegory. The main point Paul is getting across here is when you have a death in the marriage the marriage is no longer and there can be a *new* marriage. That's what he wants us to see. He wants us to see that our marriage under law is dead and that our marriage under grace can follow. We expect this from Paul.

A New Freedom

Now that you have Paul's main point, hold on to it. We were bound to the law. That relationship was lasting and binding, but now we're not under the law, Paul says in chapter 6, verse 14; we are under grace. Now how has that happened? What has happened is we have died to the law, severing that relationship, just like a death in marriage. We have a new freedom. We are freed by death. This is where Paul moves on to describe the new freedom we have in Christ.

He signals it in verse 4 with his first word: *likewise*. This could also be translated *therefore* or even *for this reason*. He wants you to see that you're not under law but that you have been set free from the law fundamentally. You have died to the law, Paul says in verse 4. You're like that widow who's no longer married. Now in what way are we dead? Well, we're dead to the law as a way of salvation. We have been released from that relationship, and Jesus has accomplished this through his death on the cross.

Paul is very explicit about it. He says we are dead to the law through the body of Christ. He wants us to think about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Well, what is the result of that death? This is where Paul picks up something from his illustration. It's so we can belong to another. We can be in relationship with another husband, as it were. Now you can see why Paul is using this illustration, even though he has to turn it a bit on its side.

We're no longer bound to the law as a way of relating to God. We are freed, but we are now bound to Christ. He is our new husband. We are united to him in his death, and your death to the law brings about a new marriage. You are not freed in the sense that you are left alone; you are freed so you might belong to another, Paul says, and that "another" is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just like in a marriage, you take his name. You have a completely new relationship with all of the blessings and privileges that come with it. Just like in a new marriage, you have a new home. You have new relatives. You have a new status. You have new provisions. All of these come to us in Christ. Now keep with our main

point here. Remember, you are no longer under the law as a way of relating to God. Now you are under Christ, and you relate to God through Jesus.

This is not about being freed from God's commands. That's sometimes how we think about it when we hear the phrase *not under law*, but I have news for you. If you were to do a study, the New Testament is about a third to a fourth of the size of the Old Testament. Do you know that there are more commands in the New Testament than in the Old Testament?

You see, it's not that we're freed from God's commands. It's not that somehow we float off by ourselves and don't have a relationship with God. No, instead, it is about us being taken out of a covenant of works, "Do this and live," and we are put into a covenant of grace: "Believe and be saved." This is Romans 5 all over again. You remember what I told you when we looked at Romans 5: if you want to see how good of a theologian a man is, you go to his Greek Bible and find out how worn the pages of Romans 5 are.

Romans 5 is not only the center of this book; it is at the center of all of the Bible. It describes how we are saved, that we're taken out of Adam where there is sin and death and placed in Christ where there is righteousness and life. What Paul is doing here is just giving us yet another picture of this by means of a marriage illustration.

Our union with Christ is with one (in verse 4) who has been raised from the dead. Paul could have described this "another" (Jesus) in any number of ways. He could have called him the "crucified one." He could have talked about the resurrection itself, but he describes Jesus as the one who has been raised from the dead, the one who is resurrected...the resurrected, living Christ. Our union with Christ is not just in his resurrection, which it is, but it is also in his resurrected self, in his living self.

Why did Jesus die? Why did we die with Jesus? If we ask that question, usually our first answer is something like, "So we could escape the penalty of sin." "Jesus died, Pastor, so I don't have to go to hell. I don't have to pay the penalty of my sin." Then if I probe deeper and say, "Well, yes, but what's at the core of this? Why did Jesus die?" you might say, "Oh, I know the answer, Pastor. It's so I could be in heaven with God. It's so I can receive all of the blessings that are mine in Jesus and can be at the wedding feast of the Lamb and I can be with God."

But look at what Paul says. Paul says Christ died so we could be transferred from the bondage of salvation by works to the freedom of salvation by grace. He says, "...to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God." Our view of salvation is often us-ward. It is me-centered. The biblical view of salvation is God-centered.

Paul emphasizes the resurrected Christ because we live with Christ and there is a purpose to our lives. There is a purpose to salvation by grace, and it is not primarily toward us; it is primarily toward God. The purpose

of your salvation is that you might bear fruit for God. This puts the entirety of freedom from the law in perspective.

Freedom from the law can't be so I can do whatever I want, because that's not the purpose of my salvation. The whole intent of freedom from the law is so we would live *for* God...not for ourselves but for God. Let me ask you this. How often do you think about this? Are you focused on what God is doing in your life? Are you bearing fruit for the one who saved you? That's the purpose of your salvation in Christ.

How to Know the Difference

Paul next shows how we can know the difference of living under the law or living under grace. Again, he's correcting our initial assumptions. Our initial assumption here is that the dichotomy is between following the rules and doing whatever we want, but that's not the difference. Paul instead reminds us of how we lived under the law, and he tells us how we are now to live under grace.

He first describes our life in the flesh. This word *flesh* is another word that shows the importance of Bible study, of context, and of understanding meaning within context. We saw this similarly with the word *law* that Paul has used in the book of Romans. When Paul says *law*, sometimes he means the Ten Commandments, sometimes he means the Mosaic code, sometimes he means natural law, and sometimes he means a system of salvation by works. We have to get the meaning from the context.

This is also true with the word *flesh*. Sometimes in the Bible the word *flesh* means all people. Isaiah says this, and Peter quotes him: "All flesh is as grass." A fancy way of saying everybody dies, talking about everybody. Sometimes *flesh* means the physical part of our bodies as opposed to the immaterial part of us, our souls. Often, as it is here, *flesh* refers to the unregenerate part of us. It's not the physical part. It's not that the physical is bad and the spiritual is good. No, it is the entire part of us, both body and spirit, that is unregenerate.

It refers to that point in time when we were unregenerate. It describes, then, a way of relating to God before we knew Jesus, before we had been saved, before we had been given life by God. So what characterized such a time? Well, first, Paul says the desires we had, the passions we had were sinful. *Passions* is another word. It could be a positive word. We talk about our passion in life, and we want to work in a field that is our passion, and it's good and we go after it.

But that's not what the word *passion* means here, because here, literally, Paul is saying, "The passions of our sins." We might even put it this way: it's the desires we have that get sin excited, that sin knows it can use. It's what we desired because of our sin, and it feeds our sin. Paul says something interesting here. He says our sinful passions were aroused by the law. They were actually fed by the law.

This is a critical point. Paul is not saying the law itself is responsible for our sin. The problem is not the law; the problem is sin. The law is not bad. We're going to see in weeks to come Paul tell us about how the law is

good and holy and just. What it means is that when we were unregenerate, when we were unbelieving, our nature was to sin. That's who we were. When the law told us what we were not to do, we took that as an occasion to rebel.

It goes like this. Do you know what rebels do? They rebel. That's who they are. When you tell a rebel, "Don't do that," what does he do? "Oh, I'm going to do it, and I'm going to do it right in front of you so you can see me do it, because you can't tell me what not to do. I'm a rebel." That describes our lives before Jesus.

Do you remember the concept of reverse psychology, how you get someone to do something by saying, "Now don't do that. You don't want to do that"? Perhaps the most famous example in American literature is old Brer Rabbit. "Don't throw Brer Rabbit in the briar patch. Oh no, whatever you do... Do anything, but don't throw me in the briar patch."

"Do you know what we ought to do?"

"What?"

"Let's throw him in the briar patch."

That's how sin works in our lives. The more the law tells us that we are not to do something or that we *are* to do something that's commanded, the more our sinful, unregenerate hearts rebel against it. That's life in the flesh. The end of this kind of living is death. That's what Paul said in Romans 6:23, that the wages of sin is death.

Again, this is a bad bondage being described by Paul. If even the law of God leads to more sin and that leads to death, where is our hope? Our hope is found in this great word in the Bible that begins verse 6: *but*. I think *but* is my favorite word in the Bible. We have no hope, but let God tell you where your hope is. We've been changed by the life and the death of Christ.

"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." That which held us in bondage is no more. We have died to it. Our relationship with it is gone forever. There's a second great word in the Bible. It's the word that comes right after *but*: *now*. Do you see that? This is not something we have to just hope happens sometime in the future. It's not something we need to work so we can try and obtain it.

Paul says, "But now..." It's something you have *right now*. You are free *right now* if you have believed on Jesus Christ. This is also important for anyone who's here this morning who doesn't know this freedom, who doesn't know about Jesus. What it means is if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, all of your sins being placed on him, all of your hopes being set on him, you can know the forgiveness of sins *now*. You don't need to wait.

You can know freedom from guilt and from shame, from sin and from sorrow *now*. There's no waiting. There's no proving yourself. You can pass from death to life, from the flesh to the Spirit right *now*. What Paul is really describing here is a brand-new dynamic. The way we bear fruit for God is not by thinking we can do things to please him. It's when we know we're already loved by him and that he has blessed us with his Spirit and he can bring about fruit in us.

We serve in the new way of the Spirit, Paul says, and not in the old way of the written code. Does this mean we ignore God's written law because it's written, that we should try to find our own way to please God? No. The law is the expression of the character of God. If you want to know what God is like, one of the ways you can see it is in his law.

God is truth; therefore, don't lie but tell the truth. God is generous; therefore, do not steal but give. God is holy; therefore, worship him. The law tells us who God is, and we should long to know more and more of God and the character of God. We're going to see this in weeks to come as Paul lays this out for us: the purpose of the law of God for the Christian.

What we need to understand now is that Paul is telling us we are not under the law as a way of salvation. We need to give up on trying to earn God's favor. We need to rest in him, secure that he has given us his Spirit, who enables us to keep his law. We serve in the liberty that is found in Jesus Christ. He is our new husband. Praise be to God for releasing us from the law and binding us to Jesus.