

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 28, 1996, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 7:1-13

YOU ARE FREE FROM THE LAW!

The key word in Romans 6 is the word “sin”; it appears 17 times in the chapter. We have seen in previous weeks that we were set free from the penalty and from the power of sin when we became Christians. What that means is that you don’t have to give in to sin any more.

But the key word in Romans 7 is the word “law”; and while Romans 6 is about your freedom from sin, chapter 7 is about your freedom from the law, as a Christian.

In chapter 6:1-6 Paul talks about death to sin; and in chapter 7:1-6 he talks about death to the law; and today we’re going to look at the first 13 verses of Romans 7. This is probably one of the most important chapters in the Bible relating to your Christian life, because Paul is struggling with the place of the law in God’s purpose for His people.

I can hear a converted Jew in Rome say, “How dare Paul be so dismissive of God’s holy law? One has only to read Psalms 19 or 119 to sense the enormous pleasure godly Jews have always derived from the law.” Psalm 119:97 says, “Oh how I love Your law! I meditate on it all day long.” And in Psalm 19:10 the psalmist exclaims, “God’s law is more precious than much pure gold, and sweeter than honey from the comb.”

How then could Paul say that the law promotes sin rather than righteousness, and death rather than life? How could he proclaim freedom from the law? What did he mean when he says that we are “no longer under law”? Does he mean that we can do as we please? And here in chapter 7 Paul anticipates and answers those questions and criticisms.

Now there are three major sections in these first 13 verses:

1. The REASON we are free from the law: Verses 1-3;
2. The RESULTS of being free from the law: Verses 4-6;
3. The PURPOSES of the law: Verses 7-13.

I. The REASON we are free from the law (verses 1-3).

What is the “law”? It is basically the Ten Commandments together with all those other laws God has given us in the Old Testament. Now look at verse 1, “Do you not know, brothers...” Stop right there. Who is Paul talking to? He’s talking to Christians, and he says, “because you are a believer, you can expect some interesting things.” “Do you not know,

brothers — for I am speaking to men who know the law — that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives?” He’s simply saying that the law has no power over a dead man.

For instance, the other morning a man was speeding north on the Washington Parkway, lost control of his car, careened over to the southbound lane, slammed into two other cars, killing two people in them, and he himself was killed. Now wouldn’t it have been foolish if a policeman had put a speeding ticket into that dead man’s hand even though the dreadful accident was his fault? The law has no power over a person who is already dead.

Paul proceeds to use the illustration of marriage to show how Christians are dead to the law. “For example,” he says in verses 2 and 3, “by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage.” That is pretty obvious. “So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive (that is, if she runs out on her husband), she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.”

The point that Paul is making is simply this — that a marriage contract is valid only if the two people are alive. The marriage vow is “till death do us part.” Now, applying that to our spiritual life, if you die to sin, the law has no further power over you. Your first husband was the law. The wife represents a Christian. Now when a Christian is married to the law, that is an impossible situation, because when Mr. Law is your husband, he is perfect! Ladies, how many of you are married to a perfect husband? How many of you are married to a husband who thinks he’s perfect?! Married to Mr. Law you would be the one who was always wrong! And this perfect husband demands absolute perfection of his wife. He makes a list of things for her to do, and before he goes to work he hands her the list for the day, and when he comes home at night he picks up the list and says, “All right, let’s review your day.” And she didn’t get nearly all the things done she should have; and some of the things she shouldn’t have done, she did. And she feels an utter failure!

The point Paul is making here is that the law and the Christian are totally incompatible; and if you try to live the Christian life by a legalistic keeping of the law, you’re in for big trouble because you will be frustrated, and will go around feeling guilty and condemned all your life.

This perfect husband, of course, didn’t lift a finger to help her. He just consulted his list of demands each evening! He set the standard for her. You see, the law doesn’t help you become a Christian; it doesn’t even help you be a Christian. It just sets the standards and shows you where you’re wrong!

So the wife gets to thinking, “How can I get out of this? I could cut his throat! I could divorce him; or maybe I could die; then I’d get away from this man!” Now the teaching here is in verse 4, so let’s look at it. The question is — who has died in this relationship? “So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ.” Who does he say has died? The Christian! You remember how in Romans 6 it says that we Christians are all “in Christ,” and that when Christ died on the cross, we died with Him; and that broke the bondage, and we were set free from the law. And that is what baptism represents — we died to an old way of living; we were buried with Christ, and we were raised to a new way of living through our resurrected and living

Lord. Our old husband was the law; but we died, and by a miracle of grace were resurrected, and our new husband is Christ.

But notice — Christ’s demands are even greater than those of the law. The law said, “Go one mile.” Christ says, “Go two miles.” But what Christ tells us to do, He enables us to do. He says to us, “We have a joint bank account, and anything you need, you simply write a check for it, and the bank will honor it!”

II. The RESULTS of being free from the law (verses 4-6). Now what does it mean when we say we are “dead to the law”? There are four fantastic results:

a. You have a new freedom. Verse 4 says, “You died to the law through the body of Christ.” Vance Havner, that great old Southern preacher, used to tell about a lady who owned a big plantation prior to the Civil War. She was a bit loony, and when her husband died, she had him stuffed, and he sat in his favorite armchair in the parlor. And when you walked into the room there was John as large as life! The neighbors thought she was losing it, so they encouraged her to take a vacation. So she went abroad for two years; and while she was in Europe, she met a man, fell in love, and got married. They decided to come back to the plantation! When they got there, the new husband unlocked the door, carried his bride over the threshold, walked into the parlor; saw this guy smiling at him from the rocking chair; and promptly dropped her exclaiming, “Who’s that?!” She said, “Oh, that’s John, my old husband!” He said, “Well, John’s got to go!” So they arranged for a hasty funeral!

Now the point is — you’re not married to the old law any more. You have a new husband.

b. You have a new relationship. Paul says, “You died to the law through the body of Christ that you might belong to another.” Circle that word “another.” There are two different words in Greek for “another.” One is the word “allos,” which means “one of a same kind.” When Jesus was about to return to heaven he said, “I will send you another Counselor, the Holy Spirit” (John 14:16), and the word is “allos” because Christ and the Spirit are “of the same kind.” But here in verse 4 the word is “heteros,” which means “another of a different kind,” as in “heterosexual.” Now, says the Apostle, you have a husband of a different kind. In other words, your relationship with Christ is going to be totally different from your relationship when you were married to Mr. Law. It’s not a case of rules and regulations and legalism: It’s a new relationship -- a different kind of marriage, a marriage of freedom and love.

c. You have a new purpose. What’s the purpose of becoming a Christian? “...that you might belong to Him Who was raised from the dead in order that we might (what?) bear fruit to God.” Freedom from the law doesn’t mean freedom to sin. The purpose is to enable us to live a more fruitful, productive life. You will never be a productive Christian if you try to live by the law. You will be a productive Christian only if you live in a love relationship with Jesus. You don’t produce “the fruit of the Spirit” — “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” — by keeping rules. (You know, “I’m going to be patient with that jerk in the office if it kills me!”) Will power doesn’t work, folks. The fruit of the Spirit grows when we are in this love relationship with the Lord. We are saved in order to bear

fruit.

d. You have a new motivation. What is the new motivation? Look at verse 6, “But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of (what?) the written code.” We’re not released from doing the good things the law requires, but now, under our new Husband, our attitude toward all these tasks has changed. We do the good things but we do them out of love, not out of fear or guilt or obligation. Now that I’m a Christian, does that mean that I don’t need to keep the Commandments? No. I’m still to keep those good laws, but my motivation has changed. I do those things because I love the Lord, and I want to do what is right because it pleases Him when I do them. It’s not a matter of “I should”; it’s a matter of “I want to, and I can.”

So why did God make you a Christian? Was it just to keep you out of hell and get you into heaven? No. Why doesn’t God just take you home to heaven the moment you become a Christian? He leaves you here for two reasons:

- (1) So that you may bear fruit and thus grow in Christ-like character; and
- (2) To serve Him and your fellow human beings.

And here at Faith Church we have lots of places for you to serve. And if you are not doing these two things, you’re not doing what Jesus left you here to do. And the real motivation for serving God is because we love Him and we love His people, and we love those who are unsaved at home and overseas.

So since we are dead to the law we have (1) a new freedom; (2) a new relationship; (3) a new purpose; and (4) a new motivation.

III. The PURPOSES of the law (verses 7-13). Paul, always anticipating criticism, thinks ahead, and he says, “I know what some of you are going to say.” You’re going to say, “If we’re not under the law any more, why don’t we just throw it out? Why even keep the Old Testament in our Bible? If we’re free from the law; if keeping the law doesn’t make God love us any more or any less; why don’t we just get rid of it?” And Paul answers that question; and he says there are still very specific and very important purposes for the law. What are those purposes?

1. The law defines sin. It shows us what sin really is. Look at verse 7, “What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet.’ You see, the law shows us what’s wrong. A lot of people today say, “Oh, that may be wrong for you, but it’s all right for me.” There are no moral absolutes. A professor said in class one day, “There are no absolutes.” And a Christian student raised his hand and said, “Sir, are you absolutely sure?!” The law shows us clearly what’s right and what’s wrong. It reveals and defines sin.

There’s a classic illustration here. Paul talks about coveting. He says, “I wouldn’t have known what coveting was if the law had not said, ‘Do not covet’”. Now you know that the tenth and last Commandment is about coveting. Paul, being a strict Pharisee, didn’t have much of a

problem with any other Commandment, because they all had to do with outward appearance. He didn't murder or steal or lie. He could keep his actions pretty clean. But it was Commandment 10 that bothered him. Why? Because number 10 is the one that deals with inward desires. Indeed, it includes every kind of illicit desire and is itself a form of idolatry because it puts the object of desire in the place of God. Paul could well have obeyed the other nine commandments in word and deed; but covetousness lurked hidden in his heart, as did other evil thoughts of which Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 15:17-19). So it was the command, "Do not covet" that opened Paul's eyes to behold the depravity of his heart. So number 10 is the basic commandment because when we have evil desires in our heart we will lie and cheat and steal and murder and all these other things. So Paul says, "I didn't know I had all these wrong desires until the commandment told me, 'You have wrong desires.'"

2. The law arouses sin. Look at verses 8 and 9, "But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died." He's saying, "The law incites people to sin." Now how does the law provoke me to do what's wrong? Folks, do you know what unregenerate human nature says? The moment you tell somebody — "Don't do that!" — there is a natural desire to do it. God told Adam and Eve, "You may eat fruit from every tree in the garden except one tree." And which tree did they head for?! That's the human nature that we inherited from Adam. All of a sudden, the wrong things seem to be the neat things to do! It was certainly someone with a human nature inherited from Adam who said, "Rules are made to be (what?) broken"! Tell a child not to do a certain thing, and immediately he will want to test your regulations! A smoker may forget how much he wants to smoke until he sees a sign which says, "No Smoking"!

Augustine, in his "Confessions," gives us a good example of this perversity. One night, at the age of 16, in company with "a gang of naughty adolescents," he shook a pear tree and stole its fruit. His motive, he confesses, was not that he was hungry, for they threw the pears to the pigs. "I stole something which I had in plenty and of much better quality. My desire was to enjoy not what I sought by stealing, but merely the excitement of thieving and the doing of what was wrong. Was it possible" he asked himself, "to take pleasure in what was illicit for no reason other than that it was not allowed?" In all such cases the real culprit is not the law but sin which is hostile to God's law.

3. The law judges and condemns our sin. Look at verses 10 and 11, "I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death." He's saying that keeping the law can never give you life. It only shows our guilt and our need of a Savior.

Let me give you an example. Here in the USA right now we have never had more laws on the books. They're always adding laws, and we need all sorts of corporate, criminal, divorce, tax lawyers — you name it. Now, even though we have more laws, does that make people any better than they were fifty years ago? No, it doesn't because the law was never meant to change human nature. The law cannot change you. Some people think, "Oh, I'll just clean up my act by keeping the Ten Commandments." No. All the laws in the world won't keep my sinful nature in

check. In fact, the more laws you have, the more inclined you are to break them. You see, the law has no power to keep us from sinning. It is simply a mirror that shows us how guilty we are when we have sinned. You don't live a victorious Christian life by trying to keep a bunch of rules. You must have a personal relationship with Christ.

4. The law shows us the character of God. It shows us what God is like, and that's verse 12, "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good." Why? Because God is the Author of the law, and He is holy, righteous and good. The law is fair in all that it demands. There is nothing wrong with the law, but there is plenty wrong with us.

5. The law shows us how bad sin really is. Look at the last phrase in verse 13, "...so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful." He's saying that the law shows how bad badness really is. Sin is bad, bad, bad. And when you hold up a perfect standard, then sin really looks bad.

Now, what's the solution? Look at Galatians 3:23 and 24, "Before faith came, we were held prisoners by (what?) the law, locked up until faith should be revealed. So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law." He's saying that the whole purpose of the law is just to point out that you can't make it on your own. You can't be good enough to get to heaven. To be good enough to get to heaven you'd have to be as good as God Himself. You'd have to be perfect, and nobody is perfect. So when we look at the law it says, "You can't make it by trying to fulfil all my demands"; and it forces us to depend on God's grace in Christ, and to realize that God loves us unconditionally. So does that mean that I can ignore the law and do just what I want to? No! Paul says, "We have a new freedom; but we have a new relationship, and it's a relationship of love to the Lord Jesus Christ; and why would I want to do anything that would be out of character with Christ? My motivation has changed. The true Christian doesn't feel any pressure in serving the Lord. A Christian serves the Lord because he loves Christ and because he realizes how much Christ loves him; and that's what it means to live under grace. And when you understand that, then you begin to live the abundant, victory-filled Christian life.

AMEN.