



We're now a little over two weeks into the New Year and so this might be a good time to check up on you and see how you're doing on your resolutions. I'm assuming most of you have a few things you've resolved to do or to not do in 2016. I've already heard of a few:

- I will lose twenty pounds.
- I will get out of debt.
- I will go to the gym five times a week.
- I will spend more time with my kids.
- I will read the Bible from cover to cover.
- I will get organized.
- I will limit myself to five ounces of wine a night.
- I will pray three times a week with my wife.

I'm sure you could add a few things of your own to this list. Now, it's only January 17 so I assume most of you are still very much adhering to your resolutions, but did you know only 55% of Americans keep their New Year's resolution for just one month? It's not that these resolutions are bad, it's just that change is hard. Most of us have discovered we need something more than resolutions if we're going to really change in significant ways. And resolutions rarely deal with the issues of the heart. I've never heard someone say at the start of a New Year: "I resolve to not be jealous this year" or "I'll hunger and thirst for righteousness this year."

In many ways this is similar to what the book of Romans says about our relationship to the law. We've been studying this book for awhile now and we've seen this issue of the law come up quite often. God's law, of course, was given to the Jewish people through Moses. But that law is also reflected in the laws we use to govern our own behavior, kind of like resolutions. You don't have to be Jewish to live under the law. Paul already said in Chapter 2 that, in a wider sense, the Law is present among men everywhere. Have you ever listened to people talking about their experiences and relationships with other people? Listen for a while and you'll hear someone say: "I don't think that's fair." What do they mean? What determines whether a thing is fair or not? It's obviously some unspoken standard of conduct or behavior they have in mind which is universally understood—that's the law.

In Romans thus far, the law has been mentioned in mostly a negative way. The apostle Paul who wrote this letter has said no human being has ever succeeded in obeying the law. The law can't save us, rather it condemns us all as sinners (3:19-20). He's also said there's a way to be made right before God that's apart from the law, and that's through faith in Jesus Christ (3:27). Finally, he's said those who've put their faith in Christ are no longer under the law but under grace (6:14). But what does that mean? Is Paul saying God's law is useless? What's a believer's relationship to the law supposed to look like? This is the issue Paul tackles in Romans 7. As Christ-followers, what's our relationship to the law?

This is an issue that's relevant to all of us. Some Christians are what we might call legalists. Christian legalists rely on Jesus for salvation and forgiveness of sins, but on their own efforts to keep God's law for their growth in holiness or what some call sanctification. While they know in the end God will accept them in Christ, they feel the weight of having to live up to a certain standard they often fail to keep. Some legalists feel crushed and condemned all the time, or at least like God must be a little bit disappointed in them. But other legalists feel very proud of their ability to keep the law, much like the Pharisees in the Old Testament. They usually create lists of rules that are humanly manageable, but they usually ignore the deeper matters of the heart. Legalists often become the greatest critics of others who just can't seem to get their act together and keep the rules like themselves.

On the other hand, there are other believers who are libertines. This is the extreme opposite. They embrace their liberty or freedom in Christ and throw the law out altogether, claiming to be rid of all obligation to its demands. I meet Christians like this occasionally. They seem to think the gospel is a license to do whatever they want because they can always fall back on God's grace.

But in Romans 7 Paul will carve out a different way for us; a way where we can enjoy freedom from the crushing demands of the law, but where we can also enjoy our freedom to fulfill the law in our own lives. Today we're looking at just the first six verses of chapter 7 where Paul explains how we've been released from the law in order to serve God in an entirely new way.

The Legal Principle

Paul begins by communicating a fundamental legal principle.

Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? (v. 1).

He calls them brothers and sisters. He's writing to believers. He's clarifying what a believer's relationship to the law is. He says you are people who know the law, which was true of both Jews and Gentile believers. Jews would have known it since birth; Gentiles learned it after their conversion. He then says the law is only binding on a person while he's alive. And we know that's true. The only thing that can invalidate a law's binding authority is death. Death brings a release from all contractual obligations involving the dead person. So death breaks the law's power! Paul establishes this principle because he's going to show them that their relationship with the law is quite different from what it was prior to coming to faith in Christ.

The Domestic Illustration

But first he offers an illustration of that very principle.

For example, 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 that binds her to him. So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man (verses 2-3).

Paul chooses marriage to illustrate his point. Marriage is a binding legal relationship. He uses a married woman as a case in point because Jewish law didn't allow a woman to divorce her husband, but a man could divorce his wife. A woman was bound to her husband as long as he lived, which is exactly what Paul says here. But if her husband died, she was released from that binding relationship. That law of marriage no longer applied to her. And his death would make all the difference between whether another relationship she has is considered adulterous or a legitimate marriage. So death changes not only the obligations of the dead person, but also the obligations of any survivors who had contact with the dead person. In the case of the wife, her husband's death frees her. The release from that obligation is complete. Paul uses a very strong word when he says, she is released, which means to annul or destroy. The woman's status as his wife has been abolished, completely done away with, and she's free to marry another.

The Personal Application

Then Paul applies this to us in v. 4.

So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.

Paul's application of this illustration isn't perfect, but it works. While it's the husband's death that frees the wife to remarry, in this case it's our death that frees us to remarry. So, in this case **we** are the one who died. He says, you, as a follower of Jesus, have died, which we already learned in chapter 6 where Paul said we died with Christ. That's why he says here we died to the law through the body of Christ. His death was our death. The old person we were is no longer living. That old person wasn't only a slave to sin, but he or she was bound (married) to the law, but now that we've died we've been released from it.

What does it mean to be released from the law? Well, first it means that the law's curse or condemnation of us has been broken. That's one of the things the law did—it condemned us. It constantly reminded us of how short we fall and how unacceptable we are to God. We've been set free from that. Later in chapter 8 Paul will say there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But it also means we no longer rely on the law to keep us in line. That's also one of the things the law did—it was a taskmaster that tried to get us to do the right thing. But it didn't work. The law could only tell us what to do, it couldn't give us the power to do it. So when it comes to our growth in holiness and becoming more like Jesus in our character we're released from the law.

Notice also the result of all this. He says the purpose is that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. You see, our death frees us to be bound to another, or to extend the analogy, to remarry. And who are we remarried to? To Christ! To be a Christian is to fall in love with Jesus and to enter into a binding relationship with him, much like marriage. When you get married, everything changes. Anyone who's been married for any length of time knows that. No part of your life goes unaffected. Whenever I marry a couple I remind them of this as they repeat the words of the vows: From this day forward... Prior to this day, they could speak of my time, my money, and my plans, but now, from this day forward, all that changes. Now it's our time, our money, our plans. But, unlike being married to the law, it's not a burden. Because of our love for that person, it's a joy. You get joy from serving and blessing the one you love.

When you think about this, it's kind of like, who do you want to be married to? Do you want to be married to a man you can never please, who keeps a list of demands you must keep every minute, who gives you a performance review at the end of every day, who perhaps even is abusive? No excuses will be tolerated by him, no concessions to weakness will be made. Or do you want to be married to One who loves you unconditionally, who'll never leave you nor forsake you, who'll bring change in your life not through coercion but through love?

I remember when our son was young it was always a chore to get him to do the necessary things related to personal hygiene like brushing his teeth, combing his hair, washing his neck and wearing something besides gym shorts. But then I remember the remarkable day we found a transformation of attitude had taken place, which required new rules about how many showers he could take in one day, how long he'd spend in the bathroom, and how much he could spend on expensive jeans. Where it once was a battle to apply the comb to the hair, now it was a battle to be able to afford the exotic shampoo and deodorant necessary for a young man in love! In the same way, we have a new motivation of love to please the Lord.

Paul describes the result of that this way: that we might bear fruit for God. That's the ultimate purpose for which we've been married to Christ—it changes us. There's fruit that results from being married to Jesus. If you want to extend the analogy even further, there's offspring or children that are born. And what is that fruit? It's a life lived for God. It's a life that reflects his character of Jesus. So being released from the law doesn't result in a life of sin, but rather a life of goodness and holiness. Both chapters 6 and 7 have reminded us of this. In chapter 6 Paul said you're no longer slaves of sin but of God. Here he says you're no longer married to the law but to Christ. In both metaphors, death with Christ resulted in new life. In the first, we got a new master. In the second, we got a new husband. And this makes all the difference in how we live our lives.

The Fundamental Difference

For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. 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 the written code (verses 5-6).

Paul shows the fundamental difference here between our old and our new lives as those married to Christ rather than the law. Our old life, which he calls being in the realm of the flesh, was such that our sinful passions were aroused by the law. And those passions were at work in us so that we bore fruit for death. He describes that at the end of v. 6 as serving in the old way of the written code.

It reminds me of something I read recently. Robert Cialdini, an expert on the theory of persuasion, did an experiment at the Petrified Forest National Park in Arizona. The park had a problem, as it made clear on a warning sign that said, Your heritage is being vandalized every day by theft losses of petrified wood of 14 tons a year, mostly a small piece at a time. The sign appealed to the visitors' sense of moral outrage. Cialdini wanted to know if this appeal was effective. So he ran an experiment. He seeded various trails throughout the forest with loose pieces of petrified

wood, ready for the stealing. On some trails, they posted a sign warning not to steal; other trails got no sign. The result? The trails with the warning sign had nearly three times more theft than the trails with no signs. How could this be? Cialdini concluded that the park's warning sign, designed to stop theft, in fact increased the temptation to steal.

That's what the law does—it doesn't eliminate our sinful desires, it arouses them, and it ultimately bears fruit for death. That's what legalism does, and that's because the law can only tell us what to do, it can't give us the power to do it. But notice Paul introduces another way to serve. A way that bears fruit for God. He calls it: serving in the new way of the Spirit. What does that mean? It means that God gives us himself, living within us, empowering us to do that which we could never do on our own! Fruit can't grow on its own; it only grows by staying connected to the source. That's the good news of the Gospel—we're connected to the Source and we're given a resource, the Spirit of the Living God, to live within us and empower us to bear fruit and grow to reflect the character of Jesus.

It is like that story of Jesus feeding the 5,000. The crowd has been listening all day and they're hungry. Philip came to Jesus and said, "Send them away. We have no bread to feed them with." Jesus said to him, "You give them something to eat." And what was Philip's reaction? He said, "We don't have money and the stores are all closed and we can't get a loan from the bank and there's no way we can do this." Philip is counting on his human resources. Here's the Lord Jesus, who he's seen do many miracles, standing in front of him, but he didn't look to him at all. He just looked to the normal resources of life. If Philip had been an atheist, he'd have responded to the situation in exactly the same way. There's no difference between a believer and an unbeliever in the way he acts.

How often are we like this? God tells us to do something and we start immediately saying, "I don't have what it takes." And that's true, we don't have what it takes. But that doesn't mean we don't do it; it means we look to him to do it in us and through us. That's the difference between being married to the law and being married to Christ. Being married to the law means everything comes from me, it all depends on me. If I don't have what it takes, it can't get it done. On the other hand, being married to Christ means he not only tells me what to do, but he gives me the power to do it. Being married to the law produces what Paul calls in Galatians the acts of the flesh, which are easy to recognize. He says, "*The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like*" (Galatians 5:19-21a). But being married to Christ means being inhabited by his Spirit. Paul says, "*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness*

and self-control. Against such things there is no law" (Galatians 5:22-23). In other words, with the Spirit you don't need the law. The law kills but the Spirit gives life.

When I first discovered this truth, it changed my life. You might say I've had two conversions. My first conversion came when I was just 17 and I discovered Christ had died for me, that he loved me with an everlasting love, and that he'd never leave me. That set me free. I'd never experienced the joy and the freedom of that kind of love, and I was a new person. I wanted nothing more than to please him and to live my life for him. For me, there was never any question that whatever work I did would be in service of him.

But before long that desire to please him and serve him and live for him became a huge burden. I wanted desperately to change but the only way I knew how was to live by a rigid set of rules. It crushed me. It brought me to the edge of despair because I couldn't conquer my sinful desires.

But then something happened. It was like another conversion. This time I understood that not only had Jesus died for me, not only did he love me forever, but he also freed me from the

crushing weight of the law. His Spirit lived within me, and he was working in and through me to reproduce his character. It happened often when I wasn't even aware of it, when I wasn't even trying to be like Jesus. Someone would come up to me and say, "You know, what you said that day really impacted me." Or I'd just realize out of the blue one day that I'd been set free from an area of my flesh that had a grip on me, and I hadn't even really tried. For example, I used to just fret constantly about other people's opinion of me; it was a paralyzing insecurity, but one day I woke up and it was gone. Not that I'd never have to deal with it again, but something had really changed and I hadn't even been trying.

God wants to release you from living as if you are married to the law. He wants to free you from its crushing demands. He wants you to know that when Jesus died, you died, and now you are married to another—to the One God raised from the dead. Not only does he love you and forgive you, he lives within you. Not only does he tell you how to live, he gives you the power to do it.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2016 Central Peninsula Church North, San Bruno, CA
Catalog No. 1418-15N