

“Old and New”

Lesson Text: Romans 7:1–12 **Devotional Reading:** Jeremiah 7:1-15

Background Scripture: Romans 7:1-25

Romans 7:1–12 (NIV)

¹ 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? ² 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. ³ 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.

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. ⁵ 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. 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 the written code.

⁷ What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” ⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. ⁹ Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. ¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Fact:** To dive into the purpose and applicability of the Law to Christians.
- **Biblical Principle:** To understand that we are dead to the law and alive to God.
- **Daily Application:** To state a way to guard against a wrong view of the Old Testament law that you have heard expressed.

INTRODUCTION

The Ten Commandments

Beginning in the 1950s, a fraternal organization began donating made monuments of the Ten Commandments to state and local governments. This project gained traction when endorsed by film director Cecil B. DeMille as publicity for his movie *The Ten Commandments*. The number of these impressive granite slabs is not known but estimated to be over 150.

One of these was donated in 1959 to a city where it stands on the street corner outside of the downtown police station. A lengthy court battle to remove this monument ensued, citing violation of the separation of church and state. That was resolved in 2005: the monument could stay. But overgrown shrubbery partially blocked sight of it, and few passersby even noticed its presence.

Does this reflect the attitude of Christians to the Law of Moses, of which the Ten Commandments form the core? Is that body of law merely a relic from a long-ago past? Does freedom from that law mean we can ignore it?

LESSON CONTEXT

Paul addresses the above questions in Romans 7, a deep dive into the purpose and applicability of the Old Testament law to Christians. Tension between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds is a context of the book of Romans—something that is no longer an issue in the church today. Even so, the question of the place of the Law of Moses as regulations for human behavior is still debated. Therefore,

while understanding Paul's ongoing argument in Romans can be challenging, diligent study of this book is essential for the practice of biblical Christianity. The book of Romans is the fullest expression of Paul's teaching—what he calls "my gospel" (Romans 2:16; 16:25). Paul refers to his teaching this way as he draws frequently on his Jewish heritage. By one count, the book of Romans features more than 50 direct quotes from the Old Testament.

In Romans 5-7, Paul identifies three great tyrants of humankind: *sin*, *death*, and *the law*. Each of these has had a role in oppressing men and women and robbing them of the possibility of a reconciled relationship with the Lord. Each of these three has had "dominion" (Romans 6:9, 14; 7:1), the language of tyranny. Death has reigned in terror since the sin of Adam (5:14). Sin has reigned in the lives of men and women (6:12), leading to the consequences of judgment. Law (whether Mosaic or secular) exists as the authority to define and punish wrong behavior (6:15–23). In Romans 7, Paul returned to a discussion of the rightful place of the law in God's plan.

Bondage of The Law: Romans 7:1-6

For Paul to *speak to those who know the law* probably indicates the intended audience to have been those Christians who were of Jewish background. His presentation at this point is characteristic of the intricate argumentation of a learned rabbi of his day. It is a style that was both appealing and persuasive to Jewish readers. But Paul was certainly aware that Christians of Gentile background would be listening, too, and that some of them were well acquainted with the Jewish law.

Paul begins with a basic legal principle, one that is not confined to the Law of Moses: laws don't apply to dead people. Both divine (Mosaic law) and civil law maintain a hold on mankind as long as a person lives. In that sense, death nullifies any authority a law might have over a person.

1. What legal principle did the Apostle Paul introduce in Romans 7:1?

To illustrate this, Paul uses the customs of marriage. We should be careful how we apply this, for he is not teaching about marriage here. Rather, he is teaching about the applicability of law regarding death; in so doing, he uses marriage as an example.

Paul's point is that in a marriage the wife is bound by the law to her husband. This recognizes a reality of both Roman and Jewish society of the day. Both Jewish and Roman law required that a woman remain with her husband until his death. A man might divorce a wife, but among the old-covenant Jews there was no such thing as divorce initiated by a wife (compare Deuteronomy 24:1–4; contrast 1 Corinthians 7:11–13).

We should take care to not be distracted at this point by pondering how the modern legal system is superior in this regard. Paul is not defending the divorce law of his day. Rather, he's using that law as an example to make a point: marriage is a lifelong commitment, but the commitment would terminate if the husband were to die (compare 1 Corinthians 7:39).

2. How did Paul use marriage customs to illustrate that laws do not apply after death? (Romans 7:2)

Paul introduces into his example a hypothetical situation (compare and contrast Matthew 19:9; Luke 16:18). The bond of the woman's initial marriage had not been broken by death of the first husband. Therefore she would rightly *be called an adulteress*—someone who had violated the seventh commandment (Exodus 20:14; compare Leviticus 20:10).

But *if her husband* died, the situation is different. She is free from lawful requirements toward her deceased husband. She is legally able to marry another man without being an adulteress. But let's not miss Paul's main point: it's not merely that death frees the woman from marital obligations to her first husband, but also that she is permitted to remarry without breaking the law. This is because the situation with her previous husband no longer applies after his death. It is death that has broken the marriage relationship and set her free.

3. What was Paul's point in his example of why a woman was permitted to remarry? (Romans 7:3)

Paul now turns the marriage analogy toward its spiritual parallel. In the previous chapter, he had presented the fact of Christians' being "dead to sin" (Romans 6:2) as concurrent with beginning a new life in Christ (6:3-4). It is not that the law itself had died, but that Christians *died to the law*. "The law that binds her to [her husband]" (7:2) still stands whether the husband lives or dies. But if he dies, it no longer applies to the surviving wife. As believers who have died to sin—and therefore the law, since the law defines what sin is (5:13; 7:7-8)—we can *belong to another*. This is a union with *him who is raised from the dead*, Jesus Christ. There is no unfaithfulness to our first "husband" (the law) due to the fact that we are no longer under its control. The result is that we begin to live in ways that *bring forth fruit unto God*. This is the new life in Christ (see also 6:6; 8:2; Galatians 2:19-20; 3:23-25; 4:31; 5:1).

4. What was the spiritual parallel to Paul's marriage analogy? (Romans 7:4)

What Do You Think?

How does dying to sin and being set free from the law help us become more fruitful for God?

Digging Deeper

Which of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 could be even more abundant in your life if you had a deeper sense of freedom in Christ?

Paul now introduces a different way of expressing the pre-Christian life: as that *of the flesh*. Paul said having been justified by faith, we are now set free from that which held us in bondage. Since we are now free, we are also expected to produce the fruit of freedom, (example above; the fruit of the Spirit), the sanctified life. Therefore, we serve God in *the new way of the Spirit*. Serving God is not simply a matter of keeping rules, obsessing over *the old way of the written code*.

In our former marriage to sin and the law we attempted to do only that which would meet the minimum standard of God. Now in our marriage to Christ, we seek to be all that we can be and to do for Him all that we can do to please Him and demonstrate our love for Him.

In other words, we no longer behave in a right manner out of fear or in the hope of being rewarded for keeping the law. Rather, we obey Christ's commandments out of love for God and for others (see John 14:15; Galatians 5:14, 1 John 5:2). This yields the fruit of the Spirit as life transcends restrictions of the law (2 Corinthians 3:6; Galatians 5:22-23).

5. How did Paul explain our deliverance from the law? (Romans 7:5-6)

What Do You Think?

When do you experience tension between obeying the Lord out of love versus out of fear?

Digging Deeper

Does fear have any role to play when following the Lord from a loving motivation? Back up your answer with scriptures.

Bondage of Sin: Romans 7:7-12

If death to sin frees us from the dominion of the law, then what is the purpose and value of the law? This is a concern often debated in the history of the church and even today. It can be framed more broadly as questioning the value and applicability of the Old Testament to the Christian and the church.

Paul's objectors were perhaps now thinking, "what good is the law if we don't need it anymore?" Paul explained that the law is a mirror that reveals the inner man and shows us how dirty we are (James 1:22-25). Note that Paul did not use murder, stealing, or adultery here in verse 7 of today's lesson, he uses coveting. Paul states that man would not have known what covetousness was if the law had not commanded, "you shall not covet." A 50 mile per hour speed sign is not sin, but teaches us the parameters of sin. This too is the function of the law.

6. What did Paul say was the purpose of the law? (Romans 7:7)

Knowing of the tenth commandment had made Paul aware of all sorts of wrong desires harbored in his heart. Coveting is characterized by many desires; it includes all sorts of greed, jealousy, and obsession. The point is that *without the law*, we would be unaware of God's desires. We would just experience the destructive effects of covetousness and inflict it on others without the thought of its being inherently wrong or sinful.

In verses 9-11 of today's lesson Paul recalls himself as a devout Pharisee, seeking to obey the Law before his conversion. (Read Phil. 3:3-11 and Gal. 1 for other autobiographical data on Paul's relationship to the Law in his unconverted days.) Since we have a sinful nature, the law is bound to arouse that nature the way a magnet draws steel. Something in human nature wants to rebel whenever a law is given. The law was intended to guard and promote life but man could not keep the law.

7. How had Paul experienced covetousness? (Romans 7:8-11)

From what Paul has just said in verses 7 through 11, we might expect a totally different conclusion. But since the law intrinsically and originally was intended to guide men and women to life, it is therefore a holy law, just, and good.

Unsaved people know that there is such a thing as sin; but they do not realize the sinfulness of sin. Many Christians do not realize the true nature of sin. We excuse our sins with words like "mistakes" or "weaknesses"; but God condemns our sins and tries to get us to see that they are "exceedingly sinful." Until we realize how wicked sin really is, we will never want to oppose it and live in victory. The problem is not with the law; the problem is with our sinful nature.

8. How is the law holy, just, and good? (Romans 7:12)

CONCLUSION

The Law Today?

First Peter 1:16, quoting Leviticus 11:44-45, says "Be holy, because I am holy." We may wonder *how* to be holy as God is holy. That is a profoundly important question, and as we wrestle with it, we must commit to growing in holiness throughout our lives.

To be holy requires a distinction from that which is unholy. God is the one who makes that distinction known in His laws. Same thing with being loving versus being unloving (see Gal. 5:14, quoting Leviticus 19:18). If there is no God, no lawgiver, then there can be no absolute laws with regard to being holy, loving, etc. But God does exist, and He has given laws for the good of humankind. The philosophies of the world deceive us into thinking that selfish living is a full, authentic life when it is actually death. The way to counteract this influence is to study the ways God intends as presented throughout our Bibles.

PRAYER

Lord God, may we never despise Your laws! May You guard us from the deception of the world which claims that sin is good and satisfying. May Your Spirit continue to form us to become more and more like Your Son, Jesus, the one without sin. We pray these things in His name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

The law is necessary to teach us what is sinful.