

WE NOW BELONG TO JESUS

Romans 7:1-13

Key Verse: 7:4

"So, my brothers, 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 to God."

In Romans 6, we learned that we must count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. We are no longer slaves to sin. Our identity has been changed. Jesus is our Lord now. He is our Master. We obey him from our hearts. We still have sinful desires in us. Our relationship with sin is not quite over. But we don't have to be the helpless victims of sin. We can overcome sin with God's help. To do so, we must offer ourselves to God as instrument of righteousness.

In Romans 7, Paul teaches us about our relationship with the law. God gave his people the law through Moses after the exodus from their slavery in Egypt. It was to train them to be holy people of God. The law became the central part of their spiritual life, guiding them to worship God and live according to God's instructions. The problem was that they put the law above their relationship with God to the point that they became slaves to the law. Then Jesus came to change everything. Jesus set us free from sin and death through his cross and resurrection. And our relationship with the law was changed for good. Let us think about what this means to us.

I. RELEASED FROM THE LAW TO BEAR FRUIT FOR GOD (1-6)

Look at verse 1. Earlier Paul said we Christians are no longer under the law but under grace (6:15). In verse 1, he explains further our new relationship to the law of God. *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?* To the Jews, the law was a way of life. The law was the glue that held them together through their many ups and downs in history. So we can understand why they had a difficulty in thinking outside the box called the law, even after they became Christians. In a way they were married to the law. Some Jerusalem church leaders even tried to teach the Gentile believers that unless they observed the law of Moses, they could not be saved (Ac 15:1). It was a serious false teaching. Paul declares here that the law no longer has authority over Christians. The law has jurisdiction over a person only as long as he lives. When he dies, the law has no jurisdiction over him. There was a horrific accident in Korea this year. A ferry carrying hundreds of passengers, most of them high school students on a school trip, sank in the frigid waters along with 300 victims. The Korean justice officials were hoping to capture and prosecute the cult leader who was ultimately responsible for the sinking. To their dismay, the man was found dead before they could capture him. They could not prosecute him. They had no jurisdiction over the dead man.

Paul illustrates this point in verses 2-3 using marriage as analogy. *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. Some modern women may not like what Paul says here. They may protest, saying, “I am not bound to my husband whether he is dead or alive.” Actually Paul’s teaching here is not about marriage *per se* (even though he said the same about marriage in 1 Corinthians (1Co 7:39)). Instead, he is stating the fact that the law has no legal jurisdiction over a woman whose husband dies. She is released from the law that binds her to him. She is free to remarry another man without being accused of committing adultery.

What is Paul’s conclusion from the illustration? Let us read verse 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.* In Romans 6, Paul declared that we died to sin through Jesus’ cross and resurrection. Now he declares that we died to the law through Jesus’ death and resurrection. Again, this means that our identity has been changed in Jesus Christ. We are transformed into new creation. We now belong to Jesus. By the grace of God, our status has been changed from the condemned violators of the law to children of God. Before our union with Christ, we were like Jean Valjean who was constantly chased by Police Inspector Javert in Victor Hugo’s novel *Les Misérables*. Then Jesus came to pay for the price of our sins with his blood and set us from sin and death. We have been set free, not only from sin and death but also from the law!

Why did God set us free from the law? It wasn’t because he wanted us to be lawless people. Verse 4 says that he did so in order that we might bear fruit for God. Paul explains this further in verses 5-6. *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.* Paul first says something very interesting about the law. Before God changed us into his children, the law aroused the sinful passions in us so that we bore fruit for death. What does this mean? I think we understand this well. If you put a jar of candies on the kitchen nook and tell your children not to touch it, what do you think will happen? As soon as you tell them about the rule, a mischievous passion will be aroused in them. And it is not just the children. It is in our human nature to desire to do what is forbidden. St. Paul had a personal experience with this which he testifies in this passage. He says that he would not have known what coveting was until the law said, “You shall not covet.” Then sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the law, produced in him every kind of coveting (8). The harder he tried to keep the law, the more covetous desires arose in his heart. He threw his hands up and said, “I cannot do this. I cannot keep the law 100%, 24/7!” 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 the written code.* He again used his favorite two words, “But now.” Things are different now because of Jesus. In his grace we died to the law that once bound us. We have been released from the law so that we can serve God, not in the old way of observing the law as the Pharisees had done, but in the new way of living in the Spirit.

We can understand why the Pharisees could only bear bad fruit, such as hypocrisy, pride and self-righteous attitude in their lives. They were trying to attain justification by observing the law. The following is a story that Jesus told them to point out their problems: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Lk 18:10-14).

The Pharisees remained in their box of legalism, hoping to achieve justification by the law. But they only bore fruit for death. They refused to accept the truth that Jesus came to release them from the law so that they could bear fruit for God by serving in the new way of the Spirit. We have been released from the law so that we may bear fruit for God by serving in the new way of the Spirit. What does this mean? Internally, we can bear fruit of the Spirit including love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23). Externally, we can bear the fruit of good spiritual influence on people around us, and the fruit of witnessing, that is, leading people to Christ through our prayers and Bible studies with them. The fruit we can bear for God is possible only when we are united with Christ and when the Holy Spirit is working in us. The Spirit gives us the inner strength to bear good fruit for God.

II. THE LAW IS HOLY AND GOOD (7-13)

So far, Paul said that the law used to work against us by arousing the sinful passions in us to do evil things before God. But now, we have died to the law so that we may bear fruit for God. We have been released from the law to serve God in the new way of the Spirit. Then some questions arise in our minds: “Is the law evil? Is the law sin? Is the law still relevant to Christians who are under grace?” St. Paul addresses these questions in this brief digression from the main theme.

Look at verse 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.”* Paul says that the law is not sinful. In fact, the law has an important function—it tells us what sin is. Through the law we become conscious of sin (3:20). He says that the law helped him to realize that he was a sinner who needed the grace of salvation from God. Paul had been a devout Pharisee. He kept all the commandments of God from his childhood. But he stumbled on the 10th commandment. “You shall not covet.” This commandment is different from the others. Violation of this law occurs in the mind of a person. No one can see if he has a covetous desire for his neighbor’s sports car or his trophy wife. Still, coveting is a serious sin, because it is often the first step toward committing other sins.

Paul continues in verses 8-11. *But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. 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.* Before the commandment of God was registered in Paul's conscience, he thought he was a pretty good person. Apart from the law, he thought he was very much alive. But when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and he died. He felt condemned. He was guilty before God. (This is different from the statement "we died to the law" which means freedom from the law.). As a Pharisee, he knew that the law was intended to bring life. But in reality, the commandment brought death to him. It was because sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived him, and put him to death. Paul knew that he failed to keep the commandment. He realized that he was under God's judgment because of his failure to keep the law. He felt devastated. This is what he meant he said "*when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.*" He lost all hopes of attaining his justification by keeping the law. He finally realized that self-justification would not work. It was a great moment of truth for Paul, an epiphany that would lead him to Christ.

What is Paul's conclusion about the law based on his personal experience? He declares in verse 12. *So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.* The law was given by God as a blessing, not as a trap. The law is holy as it is given to us by the holy God. It is righteous because it is from God who is always right and just. The law is good because everything that comes from God is good. Paul is saying, "The law is holy, righteous and good. Don't throw it out the door." He adds in verse 13. *Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! Nevertheless, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it used what is good to bring about my death, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.* Today, people often call sin with other names such as alternative lifestyle, addiction, or psychological disturbance. They may call coveting "keeping up with the Joneses." What's so bad about that? Sin does not sound evil if you use euphemism for it. But sin is sin no matter what we call it. It still brings death to our soul. Paul says that the law helped him to see how horrible sin was. The law helped him to see how utterly sinful sin was.

Let me summarize what we learned from this passage. The key point is that we died to the law. The law has no jurisdiction over us. It cannot condemn us to death because we now belong to Christ. We have been released from the law so that we may bear fruit for God by serving him in the new way of the Spirit. We have been set free from the law. But this does not mean that the law was the problem to begin with. The problem was our sin. We died to the law; the law didn't die. In fact, the law is holy, righteous and good. Jesus said he didn't come to abolish the law. Rather, he came to fulfill it (Mt 5:17).

So what does it mean that we have been released from the law? What is our relationship to it? As far as our justification is concerned, the law does not have anything to say. We cannot be justified by observing the law. We are saved only by the

grace of God through the blood of Jesus Christ. But the law is still good. It can help us to be holy people of God. We should keep the law, not because we are justified by it, but because we have already been justified by the grace of God. We are children of God and we want to follow his ways, remembering his love and grace. That's why Jesus summed up the entire law with two commandments. He said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Mt 22:37-40). May God help us to obey the law in the new way of the Spirit by loving God with all our hearts and by loving one another in Christ!