

ROMANS

Part 14: “The Law in Light of the Gospel”

Romans 7:1–6

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Sunday, May 1, 2022 (Easter Season)

Scripture Reading

“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” (Rom 7:1–6).

Introduction

What comes to mind when you hear the word “theology”?

For some, theology is a scary word that means something akin to spiritual calculus. In other words, they think theology is only something that the smartest people can do. For others, theology is a pretentious word that is nothing more than spiritual speculation that is irrelevant to the average person living their everyday life.

But here’s the truth—everybody has a theology. The question is whether or not your theology is good theology.

Simply defined, **Theology** is what we believe to be true about God.

Theology matters because your thoughts about God are the most important thoughts you have.

So, let me give you an example of some bad theology maybe you have heard in your life. There are some people who think that the God of the Old Testament as a grumpy, angry God who is all about wrath and judgment. In contrast, those same people envision the God of the New Testament is super chill, easy-going, loving, and peaceful. But this is a deeply mistaken way of understanding God; it is a bad and unbiblical theology.

But this bad theology isn't new. In fact, in the early centuries of the church, there was an early false teacher and heretic named Marcion [show **1Marcion**], who believed the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament were entirely different Gods. Marcion believed that creation was the work of a malicious God, that the law of Moses was evil, and that Jesus had come to liberate us from the material world through a secret knowledge that would give us an entirely spiritual salvation. This is, of course, a dangerous false doctrine.

The reason I bring all of this up is that is really important for Christians to understand how the Old Testament and the New Testament work together. We need to understand how the Old and New Testaments are not opposed to one another. Instead, they work together to reveal the God who made us, redeemed us, and will one day restore all that is broken.

But it is not always easy to understand how the Old Testament fits into the life of the Christian. This is especially true of the Old Testament law, meaning the 613 commands that the people of Israel were to live by.

How should Christians understand the law? What role should the law have in the Christian life? How should we view **"The Law in Light of the Gospel"**? That is what Romans chapter 7 is all about.

The law of God is not a bad thing. After all, it is the law of God. However, there are ways that we can interpret or understand the law that are detrimental and damaging to the Christian life.

If we understand it wrongly, the law is an impossible burden that we cannot bear. If we understand it rightly, the law is a guide that points us toward our need for Christ and reveals to us a vision of who God has called us to be in Christ.

So in these first six verses of chapter 7, Paul will show us how to understand the law rightly. He will teach us that: **1.) We must understand the law in terms of the New Covenant, not the Old Covenant, 2.) We must understand the law as those who are in Christ, not those who are in the flesh, and 3.) We must serve the Spirit of the law, not the letter of the law.**

Each of those statements has a lot to unpack, so let's get to work.

Exposition

1.) We must understand the law in terms of the New Covenant, not the Old Covenant.

Paul begins Romans 7 by talking to his "brothers [and sisters]" "who know the law." In other words, he is addressing the questions and concerns of the members of the Roman church who are ethnically Jewish.

For the Jewish people, the Torah—the law of Moses—was central to their identity as a people. The law was given to the people of Israel just after God had delivered them from slavery.

When God gave his people the law, he made a covenant with them. A covenant is essentially a sacred and binding promise. And in biblical studies, the covenant that is associated with the giving of the law is typically called "the Mosaic Covenant" or "The Covenant of Moses," named after Moses, who led the people of God out of slavery from Egypt [show [2The Law of Moses](#)]. The big idea of the Mosaic Covenant was that God was to be Israel's God, and Israel was called to be God's people. God promised Israel that if they obeyed the commandments in his law, they would be blessed by God. If they disobeyed the law—if they broke this covenant—God would bring judgment upon them.

And throughout the history of Israel, recorded on the pages of the Old Testament, we see that the people of Israel were unable to keep the law. They broke the covenant. And, for them, the law became something that revealed humanity's radical inability to achieve righteousness through our own moral performance.

Nevertheless, for a Jewish person, the law was binding because God's covenant was unbreakable.

This is where Paul comes in with a brilliant argument. He compares the covenant of Moses to the covenant of marriage. Look at the first few verses of our passage: *"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"* (Rom 7:1–3).

The illustration is of a married woman. Her marriage is a type of covenant, and covenants are by definition binding and enduring. That's why we say, "Until death do us part" in our wedding vows. So, the illustration goes, if she were to leave her husband and live with another man, she would be violating her covenant of marriage. However, if her husband were to die, she would no longer be bound by the covenant. Instead, she would be released to marry another man should she choose to do so. A covenant is only truly broken by death.

Paul is telling the Jewish Christian you no longer need to feel bound to perform up to the impossible standard of the law. Why? Because Jesus Christ was born under the law. He lived a perfectly righteous life and fulfilled the law. And he truly died on the cross and took upon himself the curse of the law. And if you have been united with Christ, when Christ died, you died too.

Paul says in verse 4, *“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”* (Rom 7:4).

The Covenant of Moses is now the Old Covenant. Jesus has inaugurated a New Covenant; a better covenant. And in this New Covenant, we are not made righteous through our works of performance according to the law; rather we are justified by faith in Christ.

2.) We must understand the law as those who are in Christ, not those who are in the flesh.

Back in Romans 5, Paul talked about how all of humanity was plunged under the dominion of sin when Adam and Eve rebelled against God at the dawn of creation. Outside of Christ, we are in Adam, meaning we are complicit in Adam's sin and the judgment it merits. To describe this same condition, sometimes Paul uses the phrase "in the flesh."

We see that usage in verse 5, *“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”* (Rom 7:5).

Before we were living in Christ, we were living in the flesh. And our flesh does not respond well to God's law.

God's law is spoken from God's authority. God's law makes moral claims upon our lives. God's law commands us. In fact, one of the essential summaries of God's law is found in the famous Ten Commandments.

The law of God helps us. The law of God instructs. The law of God illuminates what is true and good. But Paul shows us that the law of God does something else. The law of God provokes us to rebel. The law of God arouses our sinful passions.

Augustine of Hippo, one of the greatest thinkers of the church, once told a story of his childhood in his famous book *The Confessions*. He talks about how he and some of his friends saw a neighbor's pear tree. They knew that they shouldn't steal fruit or eat from this tree. But they did it anyway. And not only did they take some of the fruit—they took all of it [show [3Augustin and the Pear Tree](#)].

Augustine confesses that he desired to do this act, even though he was not hungry. In fact, he and his friends never even ate all of the fruit. They left most of it to rot on the ground. What drew him to this act was not desire for the fruit but rather the sinfulness of sin. He wanted to sin *because* he knew it was wrong.

This is how the flesh thinks. This is what the flesh does.

Because the flesh is under the dominion of sin, it is inherently rebellious and drawn to cross authority. Sin delights in transgressing the law.

And you may still be tempted by the flesh. You may sometimes even act according to the flesh. But if you believe Jesus, you are no longer in the flesh because you are in Christ.

Jesus Christ is the Word of God who became flesh and dwelt among us. By his incarnation, he united himself with humanity so that, by faith, we might be united to him.

So for every Christian, you have been united with Christ. You have been baptized into Christ. You have been liberated in Christ. And as verse 4 told us, You belong to Christ; you are part of his body; and you are called to bear fruit for good works (Rom 7:4; cf. Eph 2:8).

3.) We must serve the Spirit of the law, not the letter of the law.

The final verse of this passage reads, *"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"* (Rom 7:6).

A literal translation of the Greek word translated as "written code" is "old letter" (παλαιότητα γράμματος). Paul is contrasting the letter of the law with the Spirit of the law, which is something he also does in 2 Corinthians 3, in which he writes, *"...our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life"* (2 Cor 3:5b-6).

Have you ever heard the phrase they got the letter of the law, but they missed the Spirit of the law? That language actually starts with the Apostle Paul. It means that it is possible to technically do what the law commands but miss what the law intends.

There's an old Calvin and Hobbes comic strip in which the little boy Calvin is filthy after playing outside. His mom tells him to go get in the bathtub. So he goes and gets in the bathtub, but he does not take off his clothes, and he does not turn on the water. He just sits, covered in dirt, in the bathtub [show [4Calvin and the Letter of the Law](#)]. And as he sits there, he states, *"I obey the letter of the law, if not the spirit."*

So too, it is possible to do all the right outward religious behaviors but have a cold heart toward God. It is possible to know all the right biblical truths yet have no love for your neighbors. Such a mentality does not lead to true righteousness. It leads to legalism, judgmentalism, hatred, and self-righteousness.

Paul knew this all too well. Paul knew what it was like to live according to the law. Once, he was a Pharisee. He was so zealous for the law that he sought out Christians to have them arrested and executed (cf. Phil 3:2-11). Although he knew the word "Thou shalt not murder," he cheered mobs on as they murdered believers. He was a religious fanatic who knew every word of Moses, yet His heart was veiled from the truth. He knew the law, yet He was blind to the one to whom all the law and the prophets were pointing.

But then everything changed.

While on the road to Damascus, Paul was blinded by a bright light and heard the voice of God. He encountered the risen Christ, he was set free, he was utterly transformed by the Spirit of God, and he gave the rest of his life testifying to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 9:1–18).

This is why he writes later on in 2 Corinthians, *“But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit”* (2 Cor 3:14–18).

Conclusion

The gospel is not meant to inspire us to be better people. The gospel transforms us into *new* people.

So how do we view the law in light of the gospel? We understand that the law can be a wonderful guide, but it can never be a Savior.

The law is meant to expose our need; to reveal our radical inability; to teach us that we cannot merit righteousness through our good works. But the law is also meant to point us to the one who alone is righteous and true. The law testifies to the Lamb, who was slain to take away the sins of the world. The law was meant to reveal a true and better High Priest who intercedes for us. It was meant to awaken our hopes for the King of all kings, who has been given all authority and who will reign eternally.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may no longer place our trust in our own performance. May we instead place our trust in Christ. With unveiled eyes, may we behold the beauty and wonder of Christ. And may we see obedience to his commands, not as a duty or obligation, but as a response of loving worship for the one who first loved us.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1. Read Romans 7:1–6 out loud. Who is Paul addressing in verse 1? Why is this important as we consider Paul's discussion of the law in chapter 7?*
- 2. Why does Paul use the illustration of marriage in verses 1 through four of this text? What are we supposed to learn from this analogy?*
- 3. How does one who is "in the flesh" respond to the law of God? How should this be different for those who are in Christ?*
- 4. Compare Romans 7:6 with 2 Corinthians 3. How might the chapter of 2 Corinthians illuminate our understanding of Romans 7:6?*