

Free From Slavery

Message 7

Enslaved by the Law

Romans 7:1-25

Introduction

Last week we noted that you will not live for Christ unless you have good reason to do so. There is a reason behind everything we do, whether conscious or not – and this includes Christian behavior. In Romans 6 Paul directly challenged those who accused him of advocating licentious living. Paul taught so emphatically that we cannot please God by our good works, some people thought we could do as we please, disregarding God's commands. In response, Paul proved two clear, strong reasons why Christians must live in obedience to Christ.

First, we are dead to sin. We were born with an inclination to sin. Sin was our natural behavior. But when you die, you sin no more. When you were baptized, you were bound to Christ and you get the credit for His life. You are credited with death and resurrection because Christ died and rose again. Now God looks at you in an entirely new light. God no longer looks at you as a sinner, but as a good person – as righteous. In fact, you have embarked on an entirely new life. Your old life is gone forever – so it would be ridiculous to live that way anymore. Sinning now is as crazy as living by yourself after you are married. You have begun a new life with Jesus, and it is foolish to return to your old life of sin.

Second, you have switched masters. You used to sin because you couldn't help yourself. You were enslaved to sin, and forced to obey its impulses. But you decided to leave that master and embrace another – God. Jesus said you can't serve two masters. You will either love one and hate the other, or vice versa. If you love God, you will hate sin, not obey it. Sinning now is treason to your rightful master. It makes no sense now to sin, because you willingly turned your back on sin when you came to Christ. Obedience to God is the only sensible way to live now.

So there you have it – two incontrovertible reasons to reject sin and obey God. But it's not so simple, is it? Because although we have iron-clad reasons to reject sin and obey God, we still sin anyway, don't we? Some sin is just a throwback to old habits. Someone cuts you off in traffic and you curse him. You don't have a foul mouth any other time, but occasionally this old habit will return. What's more disturbing is sin which clings to us – daily sin habits that we can't shake. Perhaps most of you here don't engage in theft, drunkenness, or fornication every day, but what about sins of the mind? Is anger a regular part of your life? What about greed for wealth or high grades or popularity? How about lust? Do you remember what Jesus said is the greatest commandment? To love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. Can you honestly say you do this every day? Do you joyfully go your classes, do your homework and chores, and look for ways to serve your roommate and neighbors? Like New Years resolutions which seldom last a week, we find that consistent obedience to God seems impossible to attain.

One of the great virtues of the Bible is its honesty about real life. God doesn't pretend that it's easy to follow Him, and Romans 7 is a refreshing recognition that the Christian life can be hard and perplexing. Here Paul helps us understand why this is the case, and what to do about it. But before he addresses this question, he wraps up his teaching about our status before God.

Free from the Law

In chapter 6 Paul showed that we are free from sin because we are bound to Christ in baptism.

Christ died to fulfill the penalty for sin and rose again. Bound to Christ, we also are credited with death and resurrection. Then Paul showed that we are free from sin because we are enslaved to God. Now in chapter 7 he combines those ideas, and shows that we are free from the law and married to Christ.

It's obvious, isn't it, that the law pertains to you only while you are alive. We don't try dead men for crimes, and we don't imprison corpses for breaking the law. The law has power over people, but only live people. Paul illustrates this point by reminding us that it is ordinarily illegal for a woman to leave her husband. But when he dies, she may freely marry anyone she wishes. Once the law had jurisdiction over us, but then we died. Remember? You get the credit for Jesus' death through your baptism. So the law no longer has jurisdiction over you. You are free from the law.

Does this mean that you may live as you please? May Christians now lie and steal and fornicate with impunity? Of course not! We showed last week that being free from sin did not mean that we don't ever sin again. It meant that the penalty of sin no longer applies to us – because Jesus paid it in his death. Death to the law means the same thing. It's not that the law no longer applies to us – but it's penalty can't touch us. Jesus paid the law's penalty, so we are free from the law now.

Using the same illustration, but in a different way, Paul proceeds to say we are free to remarry. While we were married to the law, we were unable to be married to Christ. But now that the law has died – or that we have been resurrected to a new life, either way – we are free to remarry. Now we are free to be united to Christ.

There is a fundamental point which underlies all that Paul is saying in chapters 6 to 8. Salvation consists of an entirely new life. The apostle John used the term “born from above” to indicate that the followers of Jesus are entirely different than they were when they began life. This is what Paul means by these terms “dead to sin”, “enslaved to God”, and “dead to the law”. Now he introduces two new terms. In verses 5 and 6 he refers to our old life as “in the flesh”, and our new life as “in the Spirit”. He will expand on these terms in the passages following, but for now let's notice the stark contrasts between the two lives.

In the old life we were enslaved to the law, and that law stirred up sinful desires. The more we heard God's commands, the more we wanted to disobey. We deeply resented being told what to do – in fact we *hated* it! So the more we heard God's commands, the more blatantly we rebelled. The source of this hateful energy was the flesh, and the result was death. In contrast, in our new life we are free from the tyranny of the law and married to Christ. The law no longer stirs up sinful desires. Instead, our love for Christ stirs up in us a love for obedience. Free from the law and married to Christ we are fruitful to God. We eagerly, willingly, naturally obey the commands of our lover. The power to obey comes from the Spirit, about whom we will say more shortly.

Does this describe you? Are you so in love with Jesus that you joyfully do all He commands and joyfully accept all He brings your way? What's more important is that Jesus is so in love with you that He will never let you go. He didn't have to marry you. You were pretty unappealing – quite ugly, in fact. Listen to God's description of His people in rebellion against Him.

*“Bring charges against your mother, bring charges;
For she is not My wife, nor am I her Husband!
Let her put away her harlotries from her sight,
And her adulteries from between her breasts;
Lest I strip her naked*

*And expose her, as in the day she was born,
And make her like a wilderness,
And set her like a dry land, And slay her with thirst.
I will not have mercy on her children,
For they are the children of harlotry.
For their mother has played the harlot;
She who conceived them has behaved shamefully.
For she said, 'I will go after my lovers,
Who give me my bread and my water,
My wool and my linen,
My oil and my drink.'
Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
Will bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfort to her.
I will give her her vineyards from there,
And the Valley of Achor as a door of hope;
She shall sing there, As in the days of her youth,
As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt.
And it shall be, in that day," Says the LORD,
"That you will call Me 'My Husband,'
And no longer call Me 'My Master,'
For I will take from her mouth the names of the Baals,
And they shall be remembered by their name no more.
In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field,
With the birds of the air, and with the creeping things of the ground.
Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth,
To make them lie down safely.
I will betroth you to Me forever;
Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice,
In lovingkindness and mercy;
I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness,
And you shall know the LORD.*

Hosea 2:2-5, 14-20

That was you and me. We lusted after the delights of sin. We despised the love of Christ who died for us. We rejected His offer of love, but He never gave up. He allured us until we were captivated by His love. And we shall indeed love Him in return. But let's press on.

Law and Sin

So far everything Paul has said about the law has been completely negative. It was shocking enough to Jewish ears to hear that the law cannot save, but Paul just said it even inflames sinful desires! That's almost the same as saying the law is sinful – for surely something that causes sin must itself be sinful. Here again Paul bursts out with a forceful denunciation of such an idea. In verses 7 to 13 he shows that the law does not cause us to sin. As we know from the Old Testament, the law is holy, perfect, and wonderful. The cause of sin is not the law, but sin. In other words, the individual infractions of God's law are simply instances, or expressions of the ruling power in our lives. Sin is more than a case of law-breaking. Sin is a condition. It's a way of life based on a condition of your heart. Sin is the name for the nature of man apart from Christ. It's the nature of unsaved man to rebel against God's law. So the law provokes acts of sin because the sin nature hates the law.

Now in verse 14 Paul makes a startling statement. He says, “we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin.” This is a puzzling statement, one that, I fear, most Christians *don't* know! The law spiritual? We thought that being spiritual meant being free from the law. I carnal? How can I be spiritual and carnal at the same time? And sold under sin? Hasn't Paul been telling us we are free from sin? Whatever is Paul doing here?

First, let's establish some terminology. The word translated “carnal” is the adjectival form of the Greek word *sarx*, meaning “flesh”. “Carnal” is derived from the Latin word for flesh. English translations are inconsistent in translating *sarx*. Sometimes they use flesh and sometimes carnal. But both of these are strange ways of speaking, so some modern translations use terms like “sinful nature”. This provides some understanding of what Paul means, but it obscures other things.

Who is this, anyway? Someone who is born again? Or an unbeliever? “sold under sin” vs. “I delight in the law of God”

Conclusion

C. David Green
Lehigh University
March 4, 2003