

A New Marriage: Romans 7:1-6

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We're moving on to a new chapter this morning in our study through this great letter of Romans. I want to tell you my plan for the next few weeks. Two weeks from today is Easter Sunday, and so I've been thinking about my preaching plans for our Good Friday service and Easter. And what I've decided to do is preach on the beginning of Romans 7 this morning and next Sunday, and then on Good Friday and Easter skip to the end of Romans 8, to focus on those glorious verses about Christ's death and resurrection and the great hope that holds out to us who believe—that absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of Christ.

It says, "*Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?*" (Romans 8:34–35, ESV) It's those verses and the ones surrounding them that I want to meditate on for Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. And then after that we'll return to chapter 7 and pick it up where we left off.

So this morning we're at the beginning of chapter 7. Last Sunday we finished chapter 6. I loved going through chapter 6. That chapter is so encouraging to me, and has personally been very motivating to me in the fight of faith. In chapter 6 Paul used the imagery of death and resurrection, and he spoke of baptism as symbolizing our death and resurrection with Christ. He then spoke in terms of slavery: our past slavery to sin, and now our slavery to God, which is freedom from sin.

In the middle of chapter 6 Paul mentioned one other set of categories: under law and under grace. "*For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!*" (Romans 6:14–15, ESV)

Now, in chapter 7, Paul comes back to elaborate on this. And as we begin this new chapter, we find yet another analogy—a marriage analogy. And we'll look at that in just a moment. First, recognize the development of Paul's argument. Remember the question that he was responding to in chapter 6. The question is in

verse 1 and verse 15. “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” “Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?” Many religious folks think that if you’re not under law, then you’re going to sin more. If you don’t have rules bearing down on your life, then all hell is going to break loose in your life and you’re going to sin all the more. And that’s why the Gospel message of salvation by faith alone apart from works of the law is so threatening to religious folks.

If we’re saved by trusting and not by obeying, then who’s going to obey? Everything will be lost. Everyone will be out of control. That’s the legalistic mindset, and it’s what produces the kind of objections Paul is responding to. In Romans 7:1-6 Paul is still responding to those questions, and the answer is shocking. He’s saying that being under the law doesn’t make you better, but worse. In fact, being under law arouses sin. It keeps individuals in bondage to sin. And the only way for there to be real obedience in your life is for you to die to the law. That’s the radical message of this passage concerning the law.

In the sermon I preached 3 weeks ago on “under law vs. under grace,” I read the passages where Paul uses that terminology of “under law.” And one of the things we can see in those passages is that he’s referring to the Mosaic law, the law given by Moses on Mt. Sinai in the Old Testament. Believers, living in this age following Christ’s death and resurrection, are not under that old system of the Mosaic law. That law was intended to point people to Christ. Christ has now fulfilled that law. And it would be foolish and dangerous for any of us to live as though our relationship with God is based on our obedience to the law. We cannot be justified by the law. We cannot be sanctified by the law. In living out the Christian life, we don’t look to the law for help. We don’t look to external rules to change us. We need something different. We need something that goes to the heart of our issues. And that’s the beauty of the new covenant, that we serve in the new way of the Spirit. We are not under law, but under grace. Paul mentioned this briefly in chapter 6. Now he’s going to spend more time in chapter 7 explaining the law.

The outline of the passage is simple. Paul gives his basic principle in verse 1, that “the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives.” Then he develops this marriage analogy in verses 2-3 to illustrate that principle. And then in verses 4-6 he applies the principle to believers.

I’m going to begin with the marriage illustration in verses 2-3, and then we’ll look at the two amazing truths in verses 4-6:

first, that we have died to the law, and secondly, that we are united to Christ.

The Marriage Illustration

“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.” (Romans 7:2–3, ESV)

Now, this is not the main point of the passage. Paul describes this situation for the purpose of illustrating something about the law and about Christ. But we can’t read over this too quickly, without noticing how stunning this statement is, especially to the ears of our culture.

I debated how much to say about this, since it’s not the point of the passage. But I do want to briefly mention, what I believe to be, some implications from what Paul says here about marriage. About 3 years ago, when I was in the middle of preaching through the Gospel of Mark, I did a short sermon series on marriage. And part of that sermon series was dealing with the difficult issue of divorce and remarriage, which is what Jesus teaches about at the beginning of Mark 10. Jesus says there something very similar to what Paul says here in Romans 7. Jesus said, *“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her, and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”* (Mark 10:10–12, ESV)

If you were here for that sermon series on marriage, you may remember my discussion of the different viewpoints on whether there are any exceptions to that or not. Of course, the world believes that you can divorce and remarry for any reason. Those who believe the Bible know that the world’s thinking is wrong and harmful. But there is disagreement among Christians as to what, if anything, constitutes a legitimate ground for divorce and remarriage. The majority position among evangelicals is that, in the case of adultery or abandonment, the spouse who has been sinned against in that way is permitted to divorce that person, and also permitted to remarry.

I do not agree with that position. I don’t believe that adultery or abandonment are legitimate grounds for divorce or remarriage. I’m not going to take the time this morning to explain all the details. I would encourage you to go on the website and look at those sermons (a lot of you are new to the church since

then, and it would be good for you to wrestle with this issue and to know what your pastor thinks about it). Here's just a brief sketch of a theology of the permanence of marriage.

In Genesis 2:24 there's an amazing statement about the permanence of marriage. It says, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." The two become one. And to try to rip apart a union like that is disastrous. God intended for one man and one woman to be united in this intimate and permanent way. It's a lifelong union.

That's why Jesus, when He was teaching on divorce, quoted Genesis 2:24 and then said, "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mark 10:8-9). In marriage, God has joined the husband and wife together. And since God is the one who has done the joining, He is the only One who can separate that union. He does that by death. When one spouse dies, the marriage is ended. And that is God's doing. No human being has the right to end a marriage. What God has joined together, let not man separate.

We also see in the Old Testament book of Hosea that God's covenantal love for His people is such that He extends grace and goes after the wayward spouse even when there is adultery and abandonment. Gomer went after other lovers. She left Hosea, her husband. And the Lord instructed Hosea to go after her and redeem her. He bought her out of slavery and brought her home. That is the redemptive story of God and His people, and it should be the redemptive story of our marriages as well.

In the wonderful words about marriage in Ephesians 5, we see that the story in Hosea is a foreshadowing of the great Gospel reality of Christ's marriage to the church. This is what marriage is all about. The union of a husband and wife is to be a picture of Christ's union with His bride, the church. And the permanence of marriage is so important in this respect because Christ will never, ever divorce His bride. That marriage will never be severed. Even as we pursue other lovers and sin against our Savior, He pursues us and redeems us. He never divorces His bride.

When a married couple divorces, it tells a lie to the world about Christ and the church. Christ and the church will never be divorced, therefore a husband and wife should never divorce.

I know that some marriages are really rough. You may be sitting here this morning, kind of blind-sided by these things I'm saying right now. You didn't know you were going to hear a

sermon about divorce this morning. You may feel like your home is a living hell, and you might think that as bad as divorce is, it would at least be better than the turmoil and agony of what you're living in now. If you're in a situation like that, I grieve over your situation, and we, as a church, want to help you in whatever way we can. But I cannot give you any biblical justification for divorce. The counsel I want to give you, on the authority of God's Word, is to stay in your marriage, however difficult it may be. If there is physical abuse, you need to separate and find a safe place for you and your children. There may be other situations where a temporary separation is needed. Seek godly counsel in these situations. But do not divorce. You have no right to do so.

The one thing which ends a marriage is death. That's what Paul states very clearly at the end of 1 Corinthians 7, in verse 39. "A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord."

Our passage in Romans 7 says almost exactly the same thing, along with the point about adultery which Jesus had made. If the husband dies, the wife is free to remarry. But if she remarries while her husband is still living, she will be called an adulteress.

I know this is a hard teaching. It may be excruciating for some of you to hear this. I hope you know that it is not my desire to cause you pain, but to speak the truth in love. Some of you may be agonizing over past sins. Maybe you wrongfully divorced your spouse. Maybe you wrongfully got remarried. Maybe you have dishonored and disobeyed God's commands for marriage in other ways. But whatever the situation, God's grace is sufficient to cover those sins, and God's grace is sufficient to sustain you in spite of whatever wrongs have been done against you.

It's also my sincere hope and prayer that this teaching will impact the lives of young people, single people, who will one day be married. You must not enter the covenant of marriage with the mindset that if it doesn't work out, I can always get a divorce and try it again with someone else. No! Marriage is for life. That's one of the things that is so beautiful and precious about it. Therefore choose carefully, and get a lot of wise counsel, and enter into marriage with a reverence for what God designed it to be.

Dead to the Law

What is Paul's purpose in using this illustration? His purpose is to show that one marriage has ended, by death, and a

new marriage has been established. Paul doesn't apply the analogy precisely. In verses 2-3 it's the husband who dies, but in verse 4 it's "you" who have died to the law. We would expect that it would be the law that died, but for whatever reason Paul didn't want to state it quite that way. His point is clear enough, though. A death occurred which severed one marriage, and made way for a new marriage to a new spouse.

Let's make some observations about that old marriage.

We used to be married to the law. That's implied in verse 4, and in connection with the analogy: "you also have died to the law . . . so that you might belong to another." Under the old covenant, there was a union of the Israelites to the law of Moses. And for all of humanity, who have the law written on their hearts, there is that knowledge of God's law and connection with God's law.

At that time we were in the flesh. See this in verse 5: "while we were living in the flesh . . ." So that old life, married to the law, was a life in the flesh. That's who we were before God saved us. That was who we were left to ourselves, left to our sinful depravity. That's when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, as Ephesians 2 says, living in the passions of our *flesh*, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. The flesh is referring to our sinful, unregenerate self. When we were married to the law, that's who we were.

The law aroused our sinful passions. This is also in verse 5: our sinful passions were aroused by the law. You see, this is how the law works negatively in our lives. It's no fault of the law. As we'll see next week, the law is holy and righteous and good. But when the law meets flesh, that's bad news. The law stirs up our sin. The law incites rebellion. And that's why being married to the law does not make a person better, but worse. It can give a person more ideas of how to sin, based on the specific things that are prohibited. In a different way, it can also be a source of pride, if a person thinks he or she can obey it, or at least obey it better than the next person. Thus, it may produce some outward morality, while at the same time making the heart like stone.

This path leads to death. Death is the fruit of such a life. At the end of verse 5: "our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death." This is like 6:23, "the wages of sin is death." Likewise, to be in the flesh, captive to the law, is to be on a path that leads to eternal death.

The law held us captive. This language in verse 6 about the law holding us captive, and now we have been released from the law, reminds us of the slavery metaphor in chapter 6. We were under the control of one master, and now we've been redeemed and belong to another.

The law is the old way of the written code. At the end of verse 6 Paul makes this very important distinction between the new way of the Spirit and the old way of the written code (or, literally, the oldness of the letter). This is the distinction between the old covenant and the new covenant. The oldness of the letter is old because it has now been fulfilled in Christ and the new covenant has been inaugurated by Him. So there's no hope for us in that old system. There's no hope for justification or sanctification. To impose more and more laws on ourselves or others, which is what so many religions do, is not the path of life, but of death.

Jesus rebuked religious folks harshly. *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel across sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.”* (Matthew 23:15, ESV) This is an important part of Jesus' teaching, an important truth of Christianity, and it's something we need to make sure we understand, and that we need to make sure unbelievers understand.

This is a great message for unbelievers. I hope unbelievers are listening this morning, because Christianity is NOT about rules. That is a caricature of Christianity that is absolutely incorrect. There are many other religions that are all about rules. But Christianity is unlike those other religions in this very important way. In Christianity, you die to the law. You're no longer under the law, if you're a Christian.

So our evangelism is not about getting more people under the law, which is what the scribes and Pharisees were trying to do, and what Jesus rebuked them for. Our evangelism is about getting people to die to the law and live in freedom in Christ. And that's an awesome message to tell!

United to Christ

Now let's contrast the old marriage with the new marriage—the new marriage being our union with Christ. As believers, we have died to the law and we are now united to Christ. Notice the “when . . . now” language in verses 5-6. Verse 5 is about the past. Verse 6 is about something new that has happened.

We *were* in the flesh, captive to the law, bearing fruit for death. But *now* we are released from the law.

This is very similar to 6:20-22. There was a time when you *were* slaves to sin, but *now* you have been set free from sin. That was in terms of slavery. Now Paul's thinking in terms of the union of marriage. The old marriage is over. We now belong to another.

A Word to Men

Now, men, if this analogy is a little weird for you, if it's a little strange to think about being married to Jesus, you have to remember how analogies function. Just like I pointed out with the slavery metaphor, that not everything true of physical slavery is true of spiritual slavery. Similarly with the idea of marriage. Not everything true of human marriage is true of our union with Christ. There's nothing romantic or sexual about being joined to Christ. Rather, what Paul is getting at is the idea of union, which was in chapter 6 as well. We have been united to Christ, in His death and in His resurrection. God designed human marriage to point to that reality, but don't let the parallel weird you out.

There are many ways that the Bible describes our relationship with Christ. Another one, which you might like better, is in chapter 8 where it says that God predestined us "to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers" (8:29). In that picture, Christ is our older brother. As Christians, we are part of His family. And the Christian life is about becoming more and more like our big brother. So if you get tripped up by the marriage analogy, maybe this would be a more helpful perspective for you to focus on.

Christ's Death and Resurrection

The truth that we need to understand from this passage in Romans 7 is that our relationship with the law is over. We are dead to the law. And now we are united to Christ. And notice how this has happened. Verse 4 mentions both the death of Christ and the resurrection of Christ. You have died to the law through the body of Christ. That's an allusion to Christ's death—His body hanging on the cross. That's where He took the curse of the law upon Himself. Galatians 3:13 says that "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'*" (Galatians 3:13, ESV). That's how we have died to the law. We are not slaves to the law, we have been released from the law, the law can no longer condemn us, because Christ paid the penalty for us. He met the

requirements of the law for us, and He also went to the cross to endure the curse of the law for us.

And He didn't stay in the grave. As verse 4 goes on to say, He has been raised from the dead. So He has accomplished it all for us. He has taken us out of that old relationship which was so destructive due to our sinful flesh. And He has made us His own. And what flows out of this new relationship? We now bear fruit for God, as it says at the end of verse 4. Or as verse 6 says, we serve in the new way of the Spirit.

Letter vs. Spirit

Here's where the objections raised in chapter 6 totally miss the essence of the Christian life. Christianity is not about external rules pressing in on you to reform your ways. Rather, it's about new life, new love, arising within you that makes you want to live differently. And that's why the Gospel message of salvation by faith alone does not give people a license to sin. Instead, it gives people a will to truly fight sin at its root. And this is why being under grace instead of under law doesn't produce anarchy. It produces individuals who humbly and gladly submit to God's commands, because we know that our God wants the very best for His children.

The contrast between the Spirit and the letter in verse 6 showed up earlier in Romans in the passage at the end of chapter 2 talking about the circumcision of the heart. *“But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”* (Romans 2:29, ESV) And the one other place where Paul uses this contrast is in 2 Corinthians 3. *“Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but 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 Corinthians 3:5–6, ESV)

The law will not save you. The law will not sanctify you. The law will kill you. But if, by the Spirit, your heart is circumcised (which is a way of speaking of regeneration), then you will have life. And you will bear fruit for God. And you will serve in the new way of the Spirit.

There's a short poem which communicates this so well. It's usually attributed to John Bunyan, but it's not certain that he actually wrote it. Nonetheless, it's a great illustration of the difference between law and Gospel.

Run, John, run, the law commands
But gives us neither feet nor hands,

Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings

The law tells us what to do, but gives us no power to do it. The Gospel, on the other hand, enables us to obey, because of a change of heart.

There's no power in law. The law will condemn us and incite further sin, because of our flesh. What we need is the Gospel to change us from within.

Since this passage speaks of marriage, I'll close with this illustration. Consider a wife who feels like she must respect and submit to her husband solely out of duty. Her husband is a good man, and yet she doesn't have any real affection for him. But she knows she is supposed to follow her husband's lead. She may be able to keep that up for a time, at least outwardly. But inwardly, she may be filled with bitterness and resentment. That's the law.

Contrast that with the wife who deeply loves her husband. He has won her heart, and she delights to be near him. She does not view it as a chore to follow him, because she knows that he loves her and cares for her. When he says, "I want you to take a day away for yourself to relax and read and get a massage," she says, "I'll submit." And when he says, "I think we need to pursue this calling, even though it's going to involve sacrifice; I think we need to make this move; I think we ought to give this money away; I think we need to invest our time in this particular ministry," she says again, "I'll submit." Because she loves him and she is confident of his love for her.

Can you see the radical difference between the two relationships? One is based on law, the other on love. One is based on external duty, the other arises from the heart.

And I encourage you, friends, to do some introspection this week and consider what is the nature of the way you relate to God. If it's solely in terms of duty, it may very well be that you are not a Christian. You may know a lot of rules. You may keep a lot of rules. But that's not Christianity. Christianity is about being changed from the inside out so that you love Jesus and you want to be near Him and you want to be like Him (your older brother, your Savior, your friend). Do you know Him in that way? If not, then you're still in the flesh, captive to the law, on a path that leads to eternal death. Don't continue down that road. Turn away from

your law-keeping, look away from yourself, and put your hope in the One who kept the requirements of the law for us and bore the curse of the law for us, who was raised from the dead, ascended to heaven, and is one day returning for His bride.