

Dead to the law

Do you not know, brothers — for I am speaking to men who know the law — that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? ²For 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 of marriage. ³So then, if she marries 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, even though she marries another man. ⁴So, 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. ⁵For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶But 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. (Romans 7.1 – 6)

Introduction

These verses that we read start a new section, which runs through to the end of chapter 7, in which the apostle Paul explains the relationship that the Christian has with the law of God. In them the apostle brings out another wonderful implication of the Gospel, the Good News, about Jesus Christ, which is this: that those who are believers have “died to the law”. They are no longer “married” to it, but instead they are “married” to Christ. They have now been set free to serve God in a new way, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The key verse of the passage is verse 4, which reads, “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.”

These verses contain wonderful truth, which when we properly understand will have a huge impact upon our lives for good: that we who are believers are set free from the condemnation of the law. We have died to it. It has no jurisdiction over us. We are also set free from seeking to attain our own righteousness by means of works of the law. We are further set free from the slavery to sin which the law tends to make worse when we are not born again. We are now empowered to live a new life of heart obedience to God, which fulfils the law.

These verses are often misunderstood. They are often mistakenly taken to mean that God does not require us any longer to obey his law. We need to look at them carefully to understand properly what the apostle is saying.

The way I propose to deal with this passage is by asking four questions of it, and seeking to answer them. These questions are this:

1. What is the “law” that the apostle is speaking about here?
2. In what sense have we died to the law?
3. How have we died to the law?
4. For what purpose have we died to the law?

The first two I will deal with today. The second two I will seek to deal with on a future occasion.

1. What is the “law” that Paul is speaking about here?

The first question we need to ask is, what is the “law” that is being spoken about here?

In answer to this question, we need to realise that the word “law” can be used speak things in the writings of the apostle Paul. You have to look at the context to see what sense he means. Sometimes he uses the word in the sense of a principle. Sometimes he uses the word to speak about the Old Testament as a whole. Sometimes he uses it to speak just about the ceremonial laws, to do with sacrifices and things like circumcision.

Usually, however, when he uses the word “law” he is referring to the moral laws that God gave in the Old Testament, and particularly the Ten Commandments. I think we can safely say that by the word “law” the apostle here is referring to Ten Commandments, because in verse 2 he refers to one of the Ten Commandments, the commandment not to commit adultery. Later in the chapter, in verse 7, he refers to the Tenth Commandment, “You shall not to covet”. So I think we can be pretty definite that when the apostle uses the word “law” here he is talking about what sometimes people call the “moral law”, the moral laws of God, which apply to all men, and which all men know about in their

consciences, and which were explicitly revealed in the Old Testament in the Ten Commandments.

2. In what sense have we “died to the law”?

The second question is this: in what sense or senses have we “died to the law”?

Some have said that by saying that we have “died to the law” the apostle is saying that the law is no longer relevant to us who are Christians, and that our relationship with God does not involve law in any way. They say that the Ten Commandments, and any other laws we might have had to live by, have been done away with. They say that as Christians we do not need to study the Ten Commandments, nor seek to live by them. The term that is often used to describe this position is “antinomianism”, which come from two Greek words, “anti”, which means “against”, and “nomos” which means “law”. What is antinomianism? It is the position that the Ten Commandments are not binding upon the consciences of believers. The antinomian says that the believer is not under an obligation to keep the Ten Commandments. We need to understand that the term “antinomian” covers a very wide range of views and behaviour. Some antinomians in practice live very godly lives, virtually indistinguishable from those who believe that the Ten Commandments continue to be binding upon the consciences of all men. They are sometimes called “theoretical antinomians”. Although they believe in theory that their consciences are not bound to keep the Ten Commandments, they live lives that are virtually indistinguishable from those who do believe that the Ten Commandments continue to be binding upon the conscience. Other antinomians live very godless lives, making the grace of God an excuse for all sorts of sins. They are sometimes known as “practical antinomians”.

Does this passage teach antinomianism? No. If you look carefully at the passage and its context, you realise that the apostle is not saying that God does not require us to obey his law any more.

Look at the illustration he gives in verses 1 to 3. He says, in these verses,

Do you not know, brothers — for I am speaking to men who know the law — that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? ²For 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 of marriage. ³So then, if she marries

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, even though she marries another man.

Paul is drawing an illustration from everyday life. The seventh commandment of the Ten Commandments says “You shall not commit adultery”. When a woman marries a man she becomes “bound” to him as long as he is alive. So if a woman marries another man while her husband is alive, she commits adultery. But if her husband dies, she is released from the marriage covenant with her husband, and is free to marry another man.

Now, the apostle then applies this illustration to our relationship with the law. But the way he does so is very interesting. You might expect him to say, following the illustration through, something like this, “So also, the law has died, and now you have you are married to a new husband, Christ. Whereas God used to want you to obey the law, he now wants you to obey Christ instead.” But he does not say that. He does not say that the law has died at all. He says that WE have died. His words are, in verse 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.” We have died to the law, but the law has not died. Our “marriage” to the law has ended, not through the law dying or being annulled or done away with, but through our own death, in union with Christ. Here we see that the apostle is stating again the great truth that he has stated repeatedly in chapters 5 and 6 of this letter: we have been united with Christ in his death and in his resurrection.

So the law has not died. We have, through our union with Christ. What God commands people to do, whether or not they are Christians, has not changed. He still commands all people, whether Christian or not, to obey his holy law. But our relationship with that law has fundamentally changed, because we have died to it, through our union with Christ.

This interpretation is confirmed by the references to the law that there are later in this chapter, in which time and again the apostle goes out of his way to say that the law is good and right.

Look forward with me and look at some of the positive things that the apostle says about the law later in this chapter:

Verse 7: “What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law.”

Verse 12: "So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good."

Verse 14: "We know that the law is spiritual."

Verse 16: "And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good."

Verse 22: "For in my inner being I delight in God's law."

If the law is something that was in any way defective, or has been done away with for the believer, the apostle could never have written these positive things about it. No, the law is good and right, and stands as something that God requires us to obey.

Furthermore, if you look forward to chapter 8 and verses 3 and 4, you will see that the apostle says that "what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, *in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us*, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit."

God condemned our sin in Christ, so that the righteous requirements of the law might be "fully met" or "fulfilled" in us. We were saved so that we might fulfil the righteous requirements of the law.

Go forward further to chapter 13 and verses 8 to 10, and there we read,

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbour as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

God wants the law – the Ten Commandments – to be fulfilled by us, and the law is fulfilled by living life of love by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So, when the apostle says that we have "died to the law" he is most definitely not saying that God does not require us to obey the law any more. So then, what does he mean when he says that we have "died to the law"?

From this passage, and from the rest of this letter, there are three main senses in which we have died to the law.

1) We have died to the condemnation of the law

Before we came to Christ, we were condemned by the law. The law testified against us that we are sinners. And the sentence of the law is condemnation and death. But Jesus bore the condemnation that we deserve when he died upon the Cross. The just sentence that the law demands because of our sin has been borne by Christ upon the Cross. Moreover, for those of us who are true believers, we have been joined to Christ in his death. The old man, who was condemned by the law, is dead. We cannot be condemned any more, because we have died. As the apostle says in verse 1 of this passage, “the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives.” In human law, a man who is dead cannot be put on trial for his offence. Once he has died he is outside of the jurisdiction of the law of the land. So we are outside of the jurisdiction of the law of God. It cannot condemn us.

The apostle speaks about this also in chapter 8 and verse 1: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Also in chapter 8 and verses 31 to 34:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died — more than that, who was raised to life — is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.

Here is the tremendous truth for you if you are born again, and are depending upon Christ for salvation: You have died to the condemnation of the law. The law cannot condemn you. It cannot touch you. Nothing is going to change your status of non-condemnation before God. Even if you were to commit some heinous offence, you would still not be condemned. You are totally free from the condemnation of the law. You can sing with confidence the hymn of Augustus Toplady, “A debtor to mercy alone”. This says, “The terrors of law and of God with me can have nothing to do. My saviour’s obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view.”

2) We have died to the law as a way of achieving righteousness

In chapter 10 and verse 5 the apostle says these words: “Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: “The man

who does these things will live by them." ", quoting from Leviticus 18.5. This is the way of salvation based upon works. Trying to get to heaven through your works is utterly miserable, because, however hard you try, you can never make yourself good enough.

But, through our union with Christ, and through the salvation that we have received in Christ, we who are born again have died to the law as a way of achieving righteousness. God has given to us righteousness that is not our own, a righteousness is from God, given to us as a gift, that is received by faith. We do not have to try in any way to earn our salvation or to buy God's love. These things are given to us freely in Christ.

This is a tremendous relief for the believer. We all of us have a natural tendency to want to "prove" ourselves, and to show ourselves to be good people. We do not need to worry at all about making ourselves appear to be good. God has declared us to be righteous, for ever. His opinion of us is all that matters.

3) We have died to the slavery to sin that the law brings about

The third way in which we have died to the law is that we have died to the slavery to sin that the law brings about. This is something which the apostle speaks about in verses 5 and 6.

For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, 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.

Before we were born again, the law had the effect of actually increasing sin in us. This is because our natures are so perverse that learning what we ought to do has the effect of making us want to do that wrong thing all the more.

But for us who are born again, we have died to the law as something that enslaves us. God has instead written his law upon our hearts. We now want to do obey his law, where previously we hated his law and wanted to disobey it more the more we knew it.

Conclusion

These verses are tremendous good news for Christians. We have died to the law! Not in the sense that we are no longer required by God to keep the law. We should not be worried about keeping the law, because the law is good and holy and righteous. If we live lives that conform to God's law this is pleasing to God, and also good for us, because he made us and knows what is best for us. No, we have not died to the law in the sense that we are no longer required to keep it, but in the sense that we are no longer condemned by the law. We have also died to the in the sense that we no longer need to try to achieve our own righteousness by works of the law. God has given us a righteousness that is not our own. On top of this we have died to the law in the sense that we are set free from slavery to sin that the law makes worse.

What should our response be to these things? If you are a Christian who is born again, your response should be to be profoundly grateful to God for what has happened to you in Christ. Rejoice in his love, and obey his laws, not because you are afraid of condemnation but because you realise how good God has been to you.

What should be your response if you are not yet a Christian? This passage shows the utter bankruptcy of trying to achieve your own salvation by religious laws. The vast majority of people in the world are seeking to gain a place in heaven by their efforts to live a good life. This passage shows the utter futility of that attempt. This way only leads to condemnation, misery and slavery to sin. But thanks be to God, there is another way, through Christ. When you come to Christ your sins are all taken away. You are not condemned. You are given a righteousness that is not your own. You are set free from slavery to sin. You are enabled to obey God from the heart. Come to Christ. He will save you from the guilt of sin and also the power of sin.

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