

Romans 7:1-13
Notes by Dr. Jerry Nelson

See also: "The Law of God in the Life of the Christian from *Exodus* 19-20 (www.soundliving.org).

In the first 2 ½ chapters of Romans Paul describes the definite need every person on earth has to become a Christian.

From half-way through the first chapter through the first half of the 3rd chapter Paul demonstrates how everyone on earth is sinful, condemned by God and helpless to do anything about it.

Mid-way through the 3rd chapter Paul begins to describe how we can become Christians - It is only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Because of who Christ is and what he has done on the cross, it is possible for the righteousness of God to be credited to us through faith in Jesus.

In chapter 4 Paul uses the illustration of the Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, to prove that it has always been true that righteousness is credited by faith not earned by being good enough.

Then, at chapter 5 Paul begins to describe the great benefits of being a Christian.

The first result he mentions is that we are no longer enemies of God's but now we have peace with God - we have become part of his family - God's friends.

Those thoughts end with 5:11 "Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Reading through Romans carefully it would seem likely that the subject of chapter 8 would come next.

That subject is how we live this new life in Christ.

Romans 8 begins with 8:1-2 "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, ² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death."

Paul then goes on to describe life controlled by the Spirit in contrast to life controlled by sin.

But there are 2 ½ chapters between the first part of chapter 5 and chapter 8.

In these chapters Paul digresses with some very important clarifications.

We have already looked at the first two in the last half of chapter 5 and then in chapter 6.

In the latter part of chapter 5 Paul describes how it is possible for the righteousness of Jesus, to be credited to us.

You might recall that he does it by using the analogy of our relationship with Adam.

Just as we were “in Adam” when he sinned so that his sin is credited to us, so also we who trust in Christ were “in Christ” when he died and rose again so that his righteousness is credited to us.

In chapter 6 Paul deals head on with an erroneous assumption.

In chapters 1-5, Paul has so emphasized the fact that we are not saved by what we do, by our good efforts, that it was possible for people to assume that it therefore doesn't matter how we live – after all we are saved by grace not by works.

In two different ways Paul demonstrates how that kind of thinking is absolutely false.

Now in chapter 7 Paul will clarify another issue, the one with which we deal today.

In the first 6 chapters of Romans Paul has said several things that could have been understood as disparaging the law.

3:20 “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law...”

3:31 “Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith?”

6:14 “you are not under law, but under grace.”

Now here in the first part of chapter 7 Paul uses some of that same language:

7:4 “you also died to the law...”

7:6 “we have been released from the law...”

In the minds of those familiar with the Old Testament, that would have raised an important question of the purpose of the law in Christianity.

If we are saved by grace, what then is our relationship to the Law of God?

For a commentary on 7:1-13 see the notes beginning on page 8 or 9 below.

With the coming of Christ our relationship to the law changed, but not in the way some people think.

There is a popular misconception that before Christ came people were saved on the basis of keeping the law and that because so few were able to keep the law, Jesus came and changed the basis of salvation to grace.

The Scofield Reference Bible was for many years a purveyor of this error.

In his comment on John 1:17 for example Scofield wrote that under the Mosaic covenant, “legal obedience (is) the condition of salvation.” (F.B. Meyer suggests the same in Studies in Exodus 220)

But Paul has already clearly shown, particularly in chapter 4 of Romans, that salvation has never been by law-keeping, not by Abraham nor by any other OT believer.

Still others would suggest that we are no longer responsible to obey the law of God.

They object to even reciting the 10 Commandments in our corporate and personal worship.

To be fair to them it is likely that they fear a return to legalism; they fear leaving the impression that we can earn God’s favor by keeping the law.

And so they suggest that we no longer need to keep the law of God because we are now under grace.

And they cite such phrases as “we are not under law,” “we have died to the law,” and “we have been released from the law” to make their case.

But in this very same context Paul says such things as:

7:12 “So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

7:14 “We know that the law is spiritual

7:16 “I agree that the law is good.

7:22 “For in my inner being I delight in God’s law;

7:25 “I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law,

And he adds in 1 Corinthians 7:19 “Keeping God’s commands is what counts.

So we cannot take Paul to mean that we are to jettison the law.

So how has a believer’s relationship to the law change now that Christ has come?

To use Paul’s words, how have we “died to the law” or how have we been “released from the law?”

Under the Old Covenant, the law had both a controlling authority and a condemning authority.

As to that controlling authority, the Old Covenant believer was expected to obey the laws of God as set forth in the Old Testament. Now we have already seen that he was not to think that by keeping those laws he was saved.

No, he was saved by grace through faith – “Abraham believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness.”

But as a saved man, one to whom God’s righteousness was credited, he still lived under the laws controlling authority and steep penalties attached to disobedience.

It is also true that the law had a condemning authority.

Failure to keep the entire law perfectly meant spiritual death.

Like us, the OT believer was doomed before he started – he was born in sin as we saw in Romans 5.

Not only that but he did fail, over and over again to keep the law of God.

And the Bible says the soul that sins will die (Ezekiel 18:4).

The Law brought condemnation.

It seems apparent to me that God knew that his OT followers could not keep those laws perfectly and so he established the sacrificial

system whereby their sins, their failures to keep the law, were somehow covered for the time being.

But when Christ came and died, and we died in him, it changed everything.

First of all, the condemning authority of the law was satisfied. When Christ died the guilt of the sin of all his people of all the ages (from Adam, through Abraham, Moses, David, Matthew, Peter, Augustine, Calvin, Spurgeon, you and me and to those believers alive when Jesus comes again) was finally and fully atoned for. (Cf. Romans 3:25)

And with the guilt removed the condemnation is gone.

Paul will say it this way in Romans 8:1 “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

By the way, I think that every Old Testament believer is also now “in Christ.”

The Law’s condemning authority has finally been removed for them and for us.

And with Christ’s coming the Law’s controlling authority has also been removed.

As I said, before Christ, God-followers were obligated to keep the entire law of God, even though they couldn’t, and thus the sacrificial system.

But now we are no longer under the law’s controlling authority.

Christ fulfilled the law and we are now under Christ’s authority.

Does that mean we no longer need to obey the laws of God as given in the Old Testament?

A sermon I preached in September of 2005 addresses this issue more fully; it was titled “The Law of God in the Life of the Christian from *Exodus* 19-20 (www.soundliving.org).

But a briefer explanation comes out of a conversation I had recently with Dr. Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary.

OT
Faith in God leading to Law-keeping

NT
Faith in God (Christ) leading to obedience to the Law mediated through the Jesus.

Faith in law keeping

Faith in law keeping

Below the line demonstrates mankind's perversion of God's plan for people.

In the Old Testament period up to the time of Christ, there were people who incorrectly assumed they could earn their relationship with God by obeying the laws of God.

I think in Jesus' day the Pharisees were examples of this kind of thinking.

In and since New Testament times, there have likewise been multitudes of people who incorrectly believe they can earn God's saving favor by being good enough.

But for our purposes, it is above the line that we need to understand the difference between the Old Covenant and the New.

But first notice the similarity: Faith results in law keeping in both the OT and NT as we saw in Romans 6.

Faith results in obedience or there is no faith.

We dare not separate faith and obedience.

It is not that faith-plus-obedience saves us but it is that only a faith-that-obey saves us.

Now as to the differences, in the Old Testament time, faith in God was a faith in whatever God would eventually do to deal with their sin. They knew they were at the mercy of God and as with Abraham so others believed God and it was credited to them for righteousness. And the result of their faith in God was a desire to keep the law of God.

But it is also true that this law keeping meant an exacting obedience to all the commands with temporal penalties for disobedience and a temporary sacrificial system to deal with the guilt of their disobedience.

In and since New Testament time faith in God is faith in the now revealed means God used to deal with our sin - Christ and his atoning sacrifice.

And just as in the OT, so that faith results in obedience to Christ.

But the NT believer is not under the law's commands in the way the OT believer was.

The OT believer had no alternative to keeping all the commands, not so that they would be “saved” by keeping them but so that they would live as God desired for them.

They were obligated to keep all the laws.

But in Christ the penalties and sacrifices for breaking the laws are done away with – the law’s condemning authority is over.

And the laws themselves have now been mediated through Christ who fulfilled the law – the law’s controlling authority is over.

But what Christ and the NT writers under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, indicate are Christ’s will for us, we are to obey – in the new way of the Spirit, which will be more fully explained in chapter 8.

In Romans 7:1-6 Paul is writing about the believer’s relationship to the law – the relationship I’ve just described.

Using the example of a woman whose husband dies in verses 2-3, Paul says in verse 4, our relationship to the law has changed since Christ has died for us and we died in Christ.

In Romans 7:7-13 Paul describes the law’s relationship to us as sinners before we became believers.

To do this he speaks in the first person (“I”) but in the past tense; what was true before he became a Christian.

Romans 7:7 “I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”

Back in verse 5 he wrote, “when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies,

So again in verse 8 he writes, “But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.”

As we saw in verse 5, it is amazing to watch this principle at work in young children – if you don’t tell them something is wrong they may not do it.

But just mention that it is wrong and something in them wants desperately to do it.

But this is not just the idea of forbidden fruit being the sweetest (Cranfield, 160).

Sin takes what God intended for our freedom and good and distorts the command to make it sound limiting and bad for us.

Genesis 3 is the classic example of this – God said don't eat of the certain tree because it will bring death. Satan said you wouldn't die; God just doesn't want you to be like him.

God forbids sexual relationships outside of the covenant of marriage for myriad reasons but sin comes along and says that is too limiting; that command is frustrating your God-given right to self-expression.

Romans 7:7,13 “What shall we say, then? Is the law sin?” “Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.”

No, the law, which is good, didn't produce death in me; The Law of God is not to blame.

God has several purposes for his law; one is to show sin for what it is, utterly sinful.

The law of God reveals sin for the sinfulness that it is – a violation not just of courtesy or kindness but also and more importantly a violation of God himself.

At this point in his letter Paul switches tenses.

He used the past tense to describe his relationship to the law and sin before his conversion.

Before he was a Christian one purpose and result of the law was to show him how much he needed a Savior.

Now he switches to the present tense; no longer does he write of what had been true but now he writes of what is still true.

He is describing his relationship to the law as a Christian.

The law still does for Paul, as a Christian, what it did for him before he became a Christian - it shows him his sinfulness and his constant need for the intervention of the Savior.

For Romans 7:14-25 see “The Real Me” www.soundliving.org

Commentary on Romans 7:1-13

To prove that you are not under sin's "condemnation" or its "controlling authority" any longer Paul explains it this way:

Romans 7 "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? ² 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 of marriage. ³ So 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.

Verses 2-3 illustrate the point of verse 1 that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives.

Please note that this passage is not about marriage and remarriage and certainly not about divorce and remarriage; it is about our relationship to one aspect of the law.

Having made that point, Paul now links it to verse 4 and what he has said so well in chapters 5 and 6 that you are dead to the law's condemnation and its binding authority and are now "in Christ" so that you might live for God.

When Christ died, you who are believers, died in him. The law's condemnation of us and the law's relationship to us changed because Christ has come, ushering in a new age, and our sin has been borne by Christ.

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.

When Christ came and died and rose again, he changed the rules. He was the fulfillment of the law. If we are "in Christ" we no longer stand under the law's condemnation (see verse 5ff) and we no longer live under the law's ruling authority in the same way the OT believers did. See the discussion above on above and below the line.

⁵ 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.

Before we became Christians we were virtually controlled by our sinful natures. It is also true that the effect of the law of God was to

arouse in us a greater desire to sin – Romans 7:7-8 “For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.” While it is not our intention, one effect of telling a child “no” is to increase the child’s desire to do the forbidden thing. (See Augustine in Stott, 203)

This all yields death as Paul reminded us in Romans 6:23 “The wages of sin is death...”

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.

“what once bound us” was both the law’s condemnation and the law’s controlling authority – we have died to that in Christ – so that we are released from it to serve in the new way of the Spirit (which Paul will elucidate in chapter 8).

We are not legalists trying, on our own, to live up to the letter of the law.

But again, that doesn’t mean that the law of God doesn’t matter – oh, it matters alright but not in the way that the legalists think it does.

Verses 7-12 are autobiographical.

Paul uses the past tense to describe himself, and by inference all people, in relationship to sin and the law prior to his conversion.

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. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”

The law of God reveals sin for the sinfulness that it is – a violation not just of courtesy or kindness but also and more importantly a violation of God himself.

⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead.

As we saw in verse 5, it is amazing to watch this principle at work in young children – if you don't tell them something is wrong they may not do it. But just mention that it is wrong and something in them wants to do it.

But this is not just the idea of forbidden fruit being the sweetest (Cranfield, 160).

Sin takes what God intended for our freedom and good and distorts the command to make it sound limiting and bad for us.

Genesis 3 is the classic example of this – God said don't eat of the certain tree because it will bring death. Satan said you won't die; God just doesn't want you to be like him.

God forbids sexual relationships outside of the covenant of marriage for myriad reasons but sin comes along and says that is too limiting; that command is frustrating your God-given right to self-expression.

⁹ Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died.

¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.

Paul in the next verse doesn't make the law the culprit but says that sin is.

¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

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

¹³ Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.

Verse 13 summarizes the previous 12 verses and transitions us to the next 12 verses.

No, the law, which is good, didn't produce death in me; it is not to blame.

God has several purposes for his law, one is to show sin for what it is, utterly sinful. Now sin took advantage of the law to produce death. It took advantage in the way that verses 5 and 8 have already described.

The word “law” is used in a variety of ways in these chapters:

As a reference to the written law of God: 3:20 “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. 4:19 “It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.” 5:13 “before the law was given, sin was in the world.” 7:2 “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.

But the word “law” is also used as a reference to a power or an influence: Five times the word “law” is used but only once in reference to the law of God.

7:21-23 “So I find this **law** at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight **in** God’s **law**; ²³ but I see another **law** at work in the members of my body, waging war against the **law** of my mind and making me a prisoner of the **law** of sin at work within my members.

See it also in 8:2 “because through Christ Jesus the **law** of the Spirit of life set me free from the **law** of sin and death