



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Released from the Law

Romans 7:1-6

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The theme of St. Paul's letter to the Romans is that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God. Let me unpack that, since we need constantly to be reminded of what this means. The Gospel is the good news and, specifically it's the good news that this Jesus who was crucified and raised from the dead is the world's true Lord. People worship all sorts of other things from money to sex to the state to their own selves, but in his death and resurrection, Jesus has been declared by God to be the Messiah—to be the true King, who demands the allegiance of the entire world. And this good news reveals God's righteousness. That means that it reveals his faithfulness to keep his covenants, to keep his promises, which, themselves, were always aimed at restoring his Creation—including human beings—back to the good that he created it in the first place.

We need this reminder as we now head into Romans 7. This is one of the most difficult parts of the book and Christians from Augustine to Luther have wrestled with it. And one of the reasons we've struggled with it so much is that we sometimes forget what Romans is about. People read, in particular, Paul writing in verses 14 and 15, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate," and they see their own struggles with sin and think that Paul's focus here is on us and on how to live the Christian life. But that's to forget that the centre of Romans isn't "us", but God himself and his righteousness. What Paul's doing is telling the story of redemption—a story that goes back far beyond us and far beyond Jesus. As we've seen, Paul uses the great events

of the Exodus to shape the story. In Chapters 5 and 6 he's brought us through the Red Sea and now in Chapter 7, he leads us with Israel to Mt. Sinai in the wilderness. If we keep what Paul's doing in mind, it's easier to see that the subject of Chapter 7 isn't "us", it's not Christians struggling with sin—although there's an element of that here—but that the "main character" here is the law, the *torah* that was given through Moses.

Paul's mentioned the law several times over the last few chapters and he's said something that would have seemed pretty strange to people with a Jewish background. What would have troubled them the most was his statement in 5:20 that "the law came in to increase the trespass". You see, Israel saw the law as the thing that set her apart as God's people, that made her better than the nations, and Paul writes that, actually, what the law really did was show that Israel had the same problem as everyone else born in the sinful and rebellious family of Adam. There were Jews, like Paul, who were, as he says in Philippians, blameless before the law. That doesn't mean they never sinned. It means that they lived uprightly and, when they did sin, they availed themselves of the law's sacrificial system to make it right. Paul's point is that people like him should have seen the way that the law reveals the brokenness of even the most upright of people—even they still had to make sacrifices for sin. But for the people in Israel who were less than upright—for the people who worshipped pagan gods alongside the Lord, for the people who oppressed the poor, the widow, and the orphan, for the people who refused to love their neighbours, for the people committed to violence as a means of bringing God's kingdom—the law shone a bright light on their sin. Pagans sinned, but they did so in the dark. Israel sinned, but she did so under the bright spotlight of God's law. But, Paul wrote, this was God's purpose. It's not that the law was a bad thing. No, it was a good thing, precisely because it allowed sin

to be concentrated and heaped up in one place, in Israel, so that God could send his Messiah to deal with it once and for all. This is the story we need to remember. It's the story Paul is telling through Romans.

But, again, at this point some of the people in the Roman church were scratching their heads. Jews saw the law as something that set them apart from Adam's sinful family, but Paul's been saying that the law and the people under it are, actually, part of Adam's sin-enslaved family. So Paul gives them a helpful illustration to make his point. Look at 7:1-3.

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.

In Chapter 6 Paul stressed that in Jesus the Messiah, we have died to sin and been raised to the life of God. Look back at 6:6, where he writes, "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." Then in verse 14 he wrote that "sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under the law but under grace." This is what Paul is illustrating here.

Paul gives us a picture of a married couple. It helps to remember that people looked at marital obligations a little differently in Paul's day than we do today. Whether that's for better or worse is a topic for another time. But it helps to remember that one of the chief duties of a wife was to bear children for her husband. The law said she was bound to the man to whom she was married. If she went

off and had children with some other man, the law said that she was an adulteress. But, if her husband were to die, she would no longer be bound to him. At that point, there would be nothing wrong with her marrying another.

Again, what Paul is illustrating what he wrote back in Chapter 6 about being bound to sin and then being freed and bound to Christ.

Specifically here, he's now writing about Israel. She was bound by the law. Now, she saw the law as something that bound her to God and made her his special people. And as much as that's true after a fashion—it's part of the paradox of the law—Paul's point here is that the law actually bound Israel to Adam. Again, that wasn't a bad thing. That's what the law was *supposed* to do. It allowed sin to be heaped up all in one place so that God could deal with it in Jesus. But for anyone who *continues* to think that the law is *the way*—or even *a way*—to be God's people, Paul stresses that the truth is really just the opposite.

So Paul's point is that the law cemented a person to Adam. The law didn't do it *per se*. Birth did that. But the law showed those who were under it that they were sinners. Paul now goes on to explain what the illustration means for the Christians in Rome. Look at 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.

"You have died with Jesus the Messiah in baptism," Paul has been saying, "And You have been raised to the life of God." Part of the problem people have had in understanding Romans 7 is that they've forgotten Chapter 6 and then gone on to struggle to understand just who is that Paul is

saying died. But Paul is clear in the way he's been building up to this. He's said it seven times in the last chapter. In 6:2 he wrote, "we died to sin". In 6:3, we "were baptised into Christ's death," and in 6:4, "we were buried with him into his death". In 6:5 Paul writes, "we were planted with him in the likeness of his death," and in 6:6, "our old man was 'co-crucified'." In 6:8 he wrote plainly, "we died with Christ" and in 6:11, because of that, he writes: "reckon yourselves dead to sin". I doesn't get much clearer than that. Those who are in Christ have died to sin. Then remember how Paul, back in 5:20, made the link between the law and sin. If we pay attention to what Paul's said before, it should be plain as day. When he says "you died to the law" at the beginning of 7:4, what he means is that the "you" is the first husband and that the "you" in the second half of verse 4 is the wife. "You" in the first half of the verse is the old person, born of and in solidarity with Adam and enslaved to sin. "You" in the second half of the verse is the new person, "re-married", this time to Jesus the Messiah, set free to serve God.

Paul says something very similar in Galatians 2:19-20. He writes there, "Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God," and then he explains it by saying, "I have been crucified with Christ." Through Jesus, we've died to the law, we've died to sin, so that we can belong to someone else—to God.

To some people it may seem that Paul's putting an awful lot of stress on something unimportant. You and I, being Gentiles, were never under the law. But Paul's not beating a dead horse. He was dealing specifically with Jewish people—and presumably with some Gentiles who had a connection with Judaism—and they were used to seeing the law as the means by which they identified with God or belong to him. And Paul's

saying that, in fact, no, that's not the case. *Faith* is what identifies us with God—and *faith* has always been what identifies God's people. He stressed this back in Chapter 3 in talking about Abraham. Abraham's faith was in God's promise, which has since been fulfilled in Jesus. We might think, "Well, that's all well and good, but I'm not Jewish and I've never thought of the law as a means of identifying myself with God. What's this got to do with me." Brothers and Sisters, it's got everything to do with us and with our proclamation of the good news.

The fact is that there are still people who think that the law is how we identify ourselves as God's people. This continues to be at the core of Judaism in the present day and at the centre of the Church's outreach to Jews must be this message that faith in Jesus through baptism is the means to identify with God's people, not the law. The same goes for people involved in a wide variety of cults like Adventism and with many involved in the Messianic or Hebrew Roots movement. The law is not the answer. Jesus is. But this extends out, more importantly for most of us, to anyone who's got the idea that our works will bring us into fellowship with God. This was the concern of men like Martin Luther and John Calvin in the Reformation. The popular idea that far too many people have about Christianity is that we work at becoming holy until we become somehow acceptable to God—that we must somehow die to sin ourselves. But Paul stresses just the opposite. God's people are God's people because they have died to the law, they have died to sin "through the body of Christ". Jesus is the one who has done the work. Jesus is the one who has done the dying. We find union with him—his death to sin becomes our death to sin—not because of anything we've done, but because we have believed, because we have put our faith in him, because we have trusted in his death to sin and his

rising to life. Paul stresses baptism as the means here, not because baptism is some kind of work on our part, but because it is through the baptismal waters that God makes his promise and we take hold of them. Again, the analogy with the Exodus is important. The Egyptians were ready to kill or capture the Israelites, but God parted the sea and gave the Israelites a promise of life and freedom on the other side. I expect most of the people were scared to pass through the parted sea, but they did and they found life on the other side. In a sort of twisted sense, you might say that walking through the parted waters was a “work” on their part, but the point is that it was God who made the promise and God who made the way—just so for us as we take hold of Jesus in faith. He has done the work and he has made the promise. *Faith* is our part.

The other vitally important thing that Paul stresses here is the completeness of this work. Not only has Jesus done it once and for all, but the work is also done for all those who are in him. Paul doesn’t say, “You *will* die to sin” or “You are in the process of dying sin”. He’s very clear: Those who are in Jesus the Messiah benefit fully from his work and are really and truly dead to sin. That doesn’t mean that sin isn’t still a serious problem. The Israelites were most definitely no longer slaves after they passed through the Red Sea, but they still frequently fell back into the mindset of slavery. Periodically their faith in the faithfulness of God faltered and they grumbled against him or even fell back into idolatry. But this is Paul’s point: It’s done. Our status is no longer “slaves to sin”, but “in Christ”. When we find ourselves struggling with sin or with faith what we need to do is reckon, consider, do the math and remember that we are dead to sin and alive to God and then live out that reality. If that sounds impossible or if it just sounds like screwing up our moral courage, Paul will highlight in a couple of verses why that isn’t the case. Being in

Christ, we have something that Israel never had and that makes all the different. We’ll come to that in a bit.

Some Christians have read Chapter 7—particularly Paul’s talk about knowing the right thing to do, but struggling to do it—and they’ve taken him as saying that Christian is some sort of hybrid creature with one foot still in sin and one foot in Jesus, with one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom of God. This is where Martin Luther came to his famous conclusion that the Christian is *similis et peccator*—at the same time both just and sinner. And while he’s correct to a point in recognizing that no Christian will ever achieve perfect holiness this side of eternity, Paul doesn’t leave room for this idea. Luther would have the Christians married to Adam and Jesus at the same time and Paul’s clear that can’t happen. Sin is real and serious; there’s more to come for us of the life of God; but Paul is unambiguous that what Jesus has done for us is done and for real, that our status has been changed, that we’re not dual citizens of two different kingdoms, and that we are well and truly dead to sin and our old solidarity with Adam. Paul’s answer to the struggles we face with sin is assurance: “It’s done,” he says, “think through the facts of the cross and the empty tomb and start living out the implications of it sure in the knowledge that you’ve been swept up in to the story and are now part of it.”

And that leads us very naturally into verses 5 and 6 where Paul explains the implications. Here’s what he writes:

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.

Paul talks about when we were in the flesh. “Flesh” is often misunderstood to be referring to our being physical beings—as if our physical bodies are somehow bad. This usually goes along with the other error that salvation is about being freed from our “flesh” to enjoy an eternity as spiritual beings in heaven. This is not the way Jews saw the world. It’s not the way Paul saw the world. It’s the way Greek philosophers saw the world and their ideas, unfortunately, wound up having a powerful influence on the church several hundred years later. Like other Jews, Paul understood the physical creation—including our bodies—to be created by God and therefore good. For Paul, “flesh” refers to our corruptibility and rebelliousness. It’s another way to talk about being “in Adam”. Now, when we were in that state, he says, our sinful passions—and for Jews this was compounded by the law—caused us to bear fruit for death.

Think back to the beginning of Romans. Paul stressed that we were created for life. God even created us with the capacity to create life and then he sent us out to be fruitful and to multiply—to spread his rule and his kingdom throughout the earth. This is part of what it means to be truly human. But we, instead, embraced death. Not just that, but having submitted ourselves to sin, sin forced us—the way Paul puts it—to slave away for death itself. But now, he writes, we have been freed from our former master to live the life of the Spirit. Specifically, he contrasts the Spirit with the letter, meaning the law.

What Paul’s doing here is introducing the language of the new covenant. It’s interesting that while he uses this language of bearing fruit, he also mixes it up with the illustration of marriage, which involves bearing children. It’s pregnant—pun intended!—with the idea of new creation. We were slaves to death, but having become the bride of Christ,

we're ready to bear life. But, more important, is this idea of new covenant. Adam was created for a purpose and he gave it up. Through Jesus, whom Paul puts forward as a sort of second Adam, a new covenant has been established. All those who are in Christ are set back on track to be the restored humanity. We've been given back our vocation to serve the living God.

And here's where we see why it's so important for Paul to show us the whole story—why you can't just start the story in the Gospels with Jesus. You've got to understand not only where the story started with Adam and where it went wrong—also with Adam—but we've got to see the struggle of the people of God to try to live the life of God and fail. The Old Testament is depressing on its own. Throughout we see the good and loving creator, but we see him working with these people whom he calls and frees, but who turn out to be utter failures. After everything God does for Israel, the Old Testament ends—whether you read it the Jewish way and end with Chronicles or the Christian way and end with Malachi—it ends with the people of God in exile, living out the consequences of their failure. And yet, there's a promise. The prophets pointed to the problem: the law was written on tablets of stone and, the people's hearts, being hard and stony too—well, the combination would never work. The law gave a holy standard, but the hearts of the people were never fully committed to it. And so the prophets pointed to a new covenant—a covenant of the Spirit, a covenant in which the Spirit of God would be poured out on his people to do a work of transformation in their hearts—to remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh, to take that external law and write it deep in their hearts.

That's what Paul is talking about here, finally. The written code could never create a new people for God, but the

Spirit can and the Spirit has. This is the reason why Paul has written Romans 7. Before we can fully understand what the Spirit is working to do in us, we need to understand just what it was that the law could not do—as Paul will put in in 8:3. Paul lays out the law here, but then in Chapter 8 he'll give us one of his most profound expositions of the work of the Spirit. But here he points to the Spirit as the one who makes all the difference. When Paul says to reckon ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ, he's not telling us to go out and do better in our own strength. What he's telling us is to live the new life the Spirit has given—a life in which our old hearts, hardened against God, have been softened by the Spirit, made new, and turned towards God.

This is where I want to end this morning, but it highlights another important point. Paul's stress here is on the fact that all of this has been accomplished, and all of this is true of everyone who is in Christ. Just as it's an error to think of Christians in this life as hybrids of Adam and Jesus, living with one foot in the old life and one in the new or forever dragging around the old man, it is an even far more serious error to teach that there are different classes of Christians, some with the Holy Spirit and some without. It's true that there are some people in the Church who are just along for the ride, never fully understanding or never fully committing. Maybe they were baptised, but never understood what that baptism meant and, as a result, have never actually had faith in Jesus and never submitted to his lordship. They may try hard to be holy, but they don't bear the fruit of the Spirit, because they aren't in Christ and haven't been given the Spirit. John Wesley struggled with this issue and his solution was divide up Christian into two groups—those who have been baptised in the Holy Spirit and those who have not. The Holiness movement spread this idea far and

wide and then it became the central doctrine of Pentecostalism, which took it to extremes. Friends, if you're just along for the ride, you need to stop and think hard. You need to think about your baptism and the promises offered to you there and, if you didn't realise they were there then, you need to take hold of them now, die to sin, and come alive to God in Jesus, who will pour his Spirit into you. For everyone else, Brothers and Sisters, be assured that in your baptism, you *have* died to sin and *have* been made alive to God in Jesus. You are no longer bound to sin, but bound to God. When you are confronted by sin, when your faith seems weak, live in this assurance that you have been united to Jesus. What he has accomplished in his death and resurrection belongs to you. But have assurance to that this isn't just a legal declaration on paper. In your baptism, Jesus plunged you into the Spirit. The life of God is your life, because God now lives in you, transforming you from the inside out. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we prayed in the Collect this morning for the gifts of the Spirit, for faith, hope, and love, that we might love the things that you love and obtain your promises. Thank you for these gifts that come to us as you make us new, give us grace that we might never take the work of Jesus and the Spirit for granted, and remind us always that in Jesus, you have bound us to yourself and give us your life that we might live for you and expand your kingdom. Through him we pray. Amen.