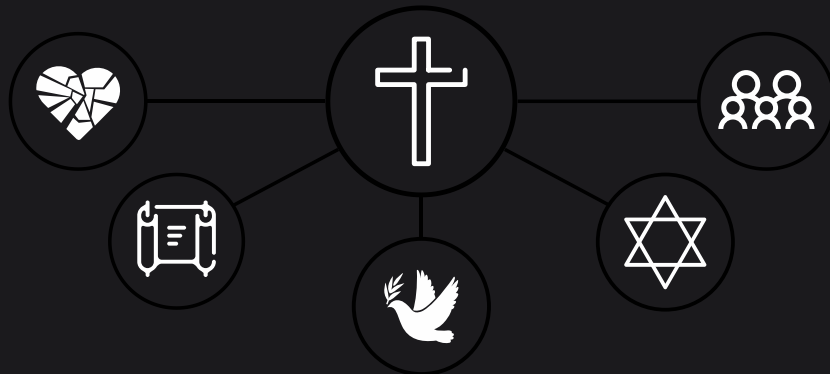




ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



Title: Romans and the Future Gospel

Text: Romans 7:1-6

Date: February 19, 2023

Main Idea: Having died with Christ, we are freed from the law, given new life in him to bear fruit.

Personal Study Guide

READ ROMANS 7:1-6

Highlight – What stands out?

To understand the passage better, it's helpful to read it in another translation. Dr. Smith preaches from the ESV, so it is good to always read from the translation. But read from another translation, like the Christian Standard Bible to help bring insight to this text.

1. Who is Paul speaking to in these verses? (Hint: It is in verse 1). Remember who the audience of this letter is, how does this help explain who he is speaking to?
2. Paul uses a relationship to prove his point in verses 1-3. What is that relationship and what does he tell us about that relationship?
3. In verses 4-6 he then connects to something else he has been talking about in Romans. What is that?
4. Some other themes and ideas that Paul has referenced in previous chapters come up in these verses. Write down as many as you can identify.

Explain – What does this mean?

1. Look back at Romans 6. Fill in the blanks based on what is happening in Romans 6.
 - We are _____ to sin. But _____ with Christ. (Rom. 6:1-6)

- We once were _____ to _____. (Rom. 6:7-23)
 - Now we are _____ to _____.
2. Now look at Romans 7:1-6. What word does Paul use to begin Romans 7 with? What does that mean for how to interpret these verses?
 3. Summarize Romans 7:1-3. How is it connected to what came before it?
 4. Summarize Romans 7:4-6.
 5. Think back to who Paul is addressing in verse 1. He's addressing the Jews, who held the Law in high esteem. But what could the law not do? Look up Jeremiah 31:31-34. How is Jeremiah's prophecy fulfilled in these words from Paul?
 6. Contrast the life lived under the Law with life lived under Christ? How does the marriage metaphor illuminate that point? (Hint: What happens when a wife's husband dies and she remarries? Can she be married to both?)

Apply – How does this change me?

Let's think about how this can be a comfort to them and to us.

1. Do you think Paul is saying that the Law was unimportant? (Look up Romans 6:11-15 to help you answer this). If not, what is he saying about the Law then? (To supplement: Look up 2 Corinthians 3:6. How does the Law kill? What does it do to those who try to follow it to perfection?)
2. Look back at Romans 7:4-6. What is this “new way of the Spirit” Paul is talking about? Look up John 14:15-26, John 15:1-5, Galatians 5:13-25 to help explain your answer. How is this different than what Old Testament believers experienced? How is this better?
3. Think back to the analogy of marriage Paul uses in Romans 7:1-3. Up to this point, he has used death and life, slavery, marriage, and kingdom language (reigning) to talk about our transformation from our old life to our new life. What does this say about your own salvation story? How do each of these images point to the radical and powerful nature of salvation?

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. In what ways are you trying to obey the Law perfectly, but falling short? Spend some time writing those down or confessing them to God. Ask him to give you an awareness of how the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life gives you everything you need to obey his word and bear fruit.

2. Look up Galatians 2:19-20. What would your days look like if you took this to heart every single day?

3. If someone came up to you and said “it doesn’t matter what I do because God will forgive me because of Christ’s work,” how would you answer based on everything you have just studied?

Commentary: Taken from John Stott’s Commentary on Romans

Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven’t received yours.

10. God’s law and Christian discipleship

7:1–25

Romans 7 is well known to most Christian people because of the debate it has provoked about holiness. Who is the ‘wretched man’ or ‘miserable creature’ (NEB) of verse 24, who gives us a graphic account of his inner moral turmoil (15ff.), cries out for deliverance, and then immediately appears to thank God for it (25)? Is this person regenerate or unregenerate? And if the former, is he or she normal or abnormal, mature, immature or backsliding? The different schools of holiness teaching are obliged to come to terms with this chapter.

But it is never wise to bring to a passage of Scripture our own ready-made agenda, insisting that it answers our questions and addresses our concerns. For that is to dictate to Scripture instead of listening to it. We have to lay aside our presuppositions, so that we can conscientiously think ourselves back into the historical and cultural setting of the text. Then we shall be in a better position to let the author say what he does say and not force him to say what we want him to say. It is of course legitimate to seek secondary applications to

contemporary questions, but only after the primary task of 'grammatico-historical exegesis' has been diligently done.

If we come to Romans 7 in such a mood of meekness and receptivity, it becomes evident at once that Paul's preoccupation is more historical than personal. He is not answering questions put to him in a Christian holiness convention, but rather struggling with the place of the law in God's purpose. For the 'law' or the 'commandment' or the 'written code' is mentioned in every one of the chapter's first fourteen verses, and some thirty-five times in the whole passage which runs from 7:1 to 8:4. What is the place of the law in Christian discipleship, now that Christ has come and inaugurated the new era?

Before coming to Romans 7, however, we need to ask what Paul has written thus far about God's purpose in giving the law. Paul's reply is couched in almost entirely uncomplimentary terms. To be sure, in theory the person 'who does these things will live by them'. But in practice no human being has ever succeeded in obeying the law. Therefore it can never be the way of salvation.² Instead, the law reveals sin (3:20), condemns the sinner (3:19), defines sin as transgression (4:15; 5:13; cf. Gal. 3:19), 'brings wrath' (4:15), and was even 'added so that the trespass might increase' (5:20). In consequence, God's righteousness has been revealed in the gospel altogether 'apart from law' (1:17; 3:21a), although the law helped to bear witness to it (1:2; 3:21b). And sinners are justified by God, not through obeying the law but through faith in Christ (3:27). Such faith upholds the law (3:31) by assigning to it its proper function. Abraham himself illustrated this principle, since the way he received God's promise was 'not through law ... but through the righteousness that comes by faith' (4:13f.). This antithesis shows that the whole gospel vocabulary of promise, grace and faith is incompatible with law.

So far, then, almost all Paul's allusions to the law have been pejorative. The law reveals sin, not salvation; it brings wrath, not grace. And these negative references culminate in what to Jewish ears must have appeared his shocking epigram that Christian believers are 'not under law, but under grace' (6:14f.). It is the springboard into Romans 7, which begins with similar statements that we have 'died to the law' (4) and so have been 'released from the law' (6). How dare the apostle be so dismissive of God's law? One has only to read Psalms 19 and 119 to sense the enormous pleasure which godly Jews derived from the law. It was to them 'more precious than gold, than much pure gold' and 'sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb'. How then could the apostle denigrate it as promoting sin rather than righteousness, and death rather than life? How could he proclaim freedom from it? What did he mean that we are 'no longer under law'? Was he declaring it to be abrogated? His words must have sounded like a clarion call to antinomianism.

Moreover, Paul's teaching is by no means of purely antiquarian interest today. For the advocates of the so-called 'new morality', which was first proclaimed in the 1960s but is still popular today, appear to be twentieth-century antinomians. They maintain that the category of 'law' has been

abolished for Christians and that the only absolute left is the commandment of love. There are also contemporary holiness teachers who declare similarly that the law has no place in the Christian life. In support of their position they quote both 'Christ is the end of the law' (10:4) and 'you are not under law' (6:14f.), as if these statements meant that the moral law has been annulled. What Paul writes in Romans has direct relevance to this debate.

Whenever we come across a negative statement, however, we cannot interpret it until we discern with what it is being contrasted. For example, if you were to say to me, 'You're not a man' without adding any positive counterpart, you could be insulting me (meaning 'but you're a baby or a pig or a demon'), or you could be flattering me (meaning 'but you're an angel'). Similarly, on my return from a recent visit to the United States, I remarked to a friend, 'I haven't had a bath for a month.' Before he had time to express disgust at my lack of personal hygiene, however, I added, 'But I've had a shower every day.'

What, then, did Paul intend when he described Christians as being 'not under law'? He used this expression in two different letters and contexts, and so in two different senses. He also clarified the meaning of each by the contrasting phrases he added. In Romans 6:14f. he wrote that 'you are not under law, but under grace'. Here the antithesis between law and grace indicates that he is referring to the way of *justification*, which is not by our obedience to the law, but by God's sheer mercy alone. In Galatians 5:18, however, he wrote that 'if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law'. Here the antithesis between law and Spirit indicates that he is referring to the way of *sanctification*, which is not by our struggling to keep the law, but by the power of the indwelling Spirit. So for justification we are not under law but under grace; for sanctification we are not under law but led by the Spirit.

It is in these two senses that we have been 'freed' or 'released' from the law. But this does not mean that we have been divorced from it altogether, in the sense that it has no more claims on us of any kind, or that we have no more obligations to it. On the contrary, the moral law remains a revelation of God's will which he still expects his people to 'fulfil' by living lives of righteousness and love (8:4; 13:8, 10). This is what the Reformers called 'the third use of the law'.

We are now ready to summarize three possible attitudes to the law, the first two of which Paul rejects, and the third of which he commends. We might call them 'legalism', 'antinomianism' and 'law-fulfilling freedom'. *Legalists* are 'under the law' and in bondage to it. They imagine that their relationship to God depends on their obedience to the law, and they are seeking to be both justified and sanctified by it. But they are crushed by the law's inability to save them. *Antinomians* (or libertines) go to the opposite extreme. Blaming the law for their problems, they reject it altogether, and claim to be rid of all obligation to its demands. They have turned liberty into licence. *Law-fulfilling free people* preserve the balance. They rejoice both in their freedom from the law for justification and sanctification, and in their freedom to fulfil it. They delight in

the law as the revelation of God's will (7:22), but recognize that the power to fulfil it is not in the law but in the Spirit. Thus legalists fear the law and are in bondage to it. Antinomians hate the law and repudiate it. Law-abiding free people love the law and fulfil it.

Directly or indirectly Paul alludes to these three types in Romans 7. He does not portray or address them directly one by one, but their shadowy forms are discernible throughout. In verses 1–6 he asserts that the law no longer has 'authority' over us. By dying to it with Christ we have been released from it, and we now belong to Christ instead. This is his message for legalists. In verses 7–13 he defends the law against the unjust criticism that it causes both sin and death. He attributes these instead to our fallen nature. The law itself is good (12–13). This is his message to antinomians. In verses 7:14–25 Paul describes the inner conflict of those who are still living under the regime of the law. If left to ourselves in our fallenness we cannot keep God's law, even though we delight in it. Nor can the law rescue us. But God has done what the law could not do, by giving us his Spirit (8:3–4). This is the experience of those who find their freedom in fulfilling the law.

These three paragraphs of Romans 7 may appropriately be entitled 'Release from the Law' (1–6), in order to serve God in the Spirit, 'A Defence of the Law' (7–13), against the calumny that it causes sin and death, and 'The Weakness of the Law' (14–25), because it can neither justify nor sanctify sinners.

1. Release from the law: a marriage metaphor (1–6)

Paul begins this paragraph by addressing his readers affectionately as *brothers* and by asking them for the third time: *Do you not know?* Having questioned their understanding both of the meaning of baptism (6:3) and of the implication of slavery (6:16), he now asks if they know the limited jurisdiction of the law. There can be no doubt that the dominant theme of the paragraph concerns 'release from the law', since he uses this expression three times (2, 3, 6), and refers to the law in every verse. He assumes that they do know, since he adds in parenthesis that he is *speaking to men who know the law*, the Jewish law certainly and the Roman law probably as well.

a. The legal principle (1)

Paul lays down the principle which he assumes his readers know: *the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives* (1). Or better, 'the law is binding on a person only during his life' (RSV). The word for 'is binding on' or 'has authority over' is *kyrieuō*, which is rendered 'lord it over' in Mark 10:42, RSV. It expresses the imperious authority of law over those who are subject to it. But this authority is limited to our lifetime. The one thing which invalidates it is death. Death brings release from all contractual obligations involving the dead person. If death supervenes, relationships established and protected by law are

ipso facto terminated. So law is for life; death annuls it. Paul states this as a legal axiom, universally accepted and unchallengeable.

b. The domestic illustration (2–3)

As an example of this general principle Paul chooses marriage, and in applying it extends it. Death changes not only the obligations of the dead person (it is obvious that these are cancelled), but also the obligations of those survivors who had a contract with the dead person. *For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive* (or ‘until death parts them’), *but if her husband dies, she is released* (‘discharged’, RSV, NEB) from her marriage vows, indeed *from the law of marriage* itself (2), literally ‘from the law of her husband’ (AV), that is, from the law relating to him and her contract with him. The contrast is clear: the law binds her, but his death frees her. Moreover, her release is complete. The strong verb used (*katargeō*) can mean to ‘annul’ or ‘destroy’. ‘The apostle is saying that the woman’s status as a wife has been abolished, completely done away. She is no longer a wife.’

So then, Paul now draws a conclusion, *if she* (sc. a married woman) *marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress* (she ‘incurs the stigma of adultery’, JBP). *But if her husband dies, and she remarries, she is not an adulteress* (3), because she has been *released from that law* which had previously bound her. What has made the difference? How is it that one remarriage would make her an adulteress, while the other would not? The answer lies of course in her husband’s death. The second marriage is morally legitimate because death has terminated the first. Only death can secure freedom from the marriage law and therefore the right to remarry. These references to death, freedom from law and remarriage already hint at the application which Paul is about to make.

c. The theological application (4)

Paul turns from human laws to the law of God. It too claims lordship over us while we live. Indeed, although without explicitly saying so, the apostle implies that we were previously married to the law and so under its authority. But as death terminates a marriage contract and permits remarriage, so we *also died to the law through the body of Christ*, so that we might remarry or *belong to another* (4a).

Two questions confront us about this death which we are said to have died. First, how did it happen? It took place *through the body of Christ*. It is impossible to believe that there is any allusion here to the church as Christ’s body. No, it was his physical body which died on the cross. But through our personal union with Christ we have shared in his death (as the apostle has argued in Romans 6), and we may therefore be said to have died ‘through’ his body. Secondly, what does it mean that we *died to the law*? The expression

reminds us of the similar statement that we 'died to sin' (6:2). Indeed, they appear to mean the same thing. For if to die to sin means to bear its penalty, which is death, it is the law which prescribes this penalty. Therefore to die to sin and to die to the law are identical. Both signify that through participation in the death of Christ the law's curse or condemnation on sin has been taken away. 'The death to sin ... is necessarily also a death to the law's condemnation.'⁶

There are, in fact, many parallels between Romans 6 (freedom from sin) and Romans 7 (freedom from the law). As we died to sin (6:2), so we died to the law (7:4). As we died to sin by union with Christ's death (6:3), so we died to the law through the body of Christ (7:4). As we have been justified and freed from sin (6:7, 18), so we have been released from the law (7:6). As we have also shared in Christ's resurrection (6:4–5), so we belong to him who was raised from the dead (7:4). As we now live in newness of life (6:4), so we now serve in newness of Spirit (7:6). As the fruit we reap leads to holiness (6:22), so we bear fruit to God (7:4).

The purposes of our dying with Christ to the law are now spelled out. The immediate purpose is that we *might belong to another*, namely, *to him who was raised from the dead* (4b). Every reader notices that with this statement Paul's metaphor has undergone a shift. In the marriage metaphor the husband dies and the wife remarries; in the reality it is the wife (formerly married to the law) who does both the dying and the remarrying. Some commentators appear to enjoy poking fun at Paul for his supposed literary ineptitude. Nobody is more scathing than C. H. Dodd: 'The illustration ... is confused from the outset ... Paul ... lacks the gift for sustained illustration of ideas through concrete images ... It is probably a defect of imagination. We cannot help contrasting his laboured and blundering allegories with the masterly parables of Jesus ... Paul flounders among the images he has tried to evoke ... We are relieved when he tires of his unmanageable puppets, and talks about real things.' But this kind of sarcasm is unfair, as is also the comparison with Jesus. We must allow Paul to be himself and do what he is intending to do. He is not writing a parable. But neither is he developing an allegory in which every detail of the picture corresponds exactly to something in the reality. His purpose is admirably served by the essence of his illustration, which is that death has secured our release from the law and our remarriage to Christ.

If the immediate purpose of our dying with Christ to the law is that we may now belong to Christ, the ultimate purpose is *that we might bear fruit to God* (4c). Some commentators believe that Paul is continuing his marriage metaphor, and that 'fruit' refers to the children of the marriage. 'It can hardly be doubted [sc. because of the context]', writes C. K. Barrett, 'that he [Paul] has in mind the birth of children.' By it Paul 'unmistakably' completes his metaphor, says Godet, and he accuses those who reject it as being guilty of 'prudery'.⁹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones goes further and elaborates the parallel. He refers to Ephesians 5:25ff. and to the union of the church with Christ, which he portrays as mysterious, submissive, permanent, privileged and intimate. He goes on: ' "Fruit" means children, the fruit of the marriage, the offspring ... that

are to be born.¹¹ What is meant? It is 'the fruit of holiness', the fruit of the Spirit. He concludes that the law was impotent to do this. 'But we are now married to One who has the strength and the virility and the potency to produce children even out of us', that is to say, a life which is lived 'to God's glory and to God's praise'.¹³

Other commentators have been very dismissive of this construction. James Denney and Charles Cranfield have both used the epithet 'grotesque' in relation to it, and James Dunn declares that it is 'neither necessary nor appropriate'.¹⁵ Although I do not personally feel quite so negative, I do want to register some criticisms. First, it pushes Paul's metaphor into an allegory, which his explicit development of it does not encourage. Secondly, it gives a forced interpretation of 'fruit' (*karpos*) when the word is not used in this sense in the New Testament (in spite of God's original command to be 'fruitful'), when other words for 'children' could have been used, and when already in the context 'fruit' has been used for 'outcome' or 'benefit' (6:21f.). Thirdly, it depicts the individual Christian as married to Christ, whereas it is the church which is Christ's bride, as Israel was Yahweh's.

At all events, whether 'fruit' means 'children' or not, all are agreed that the result of being released from the law and joined to Christ is holy living, not antinomian licence. For becoming a Christian involves a radical change of allegiance. At the end of chapter 6 our two slaveries were contrasted. At the beginning of chapter 7 it is our two marriages, death dissolving the first and so permitting the second. Both metaphors speak of our new freedom to serve, which is the topic to which Paul now comes.

d. The fundamental antithesis (5–6)

In the further contrast which Paul now paints between our old and our new lives (*when we were ... But now*, reminiscent of 6:20, 22), he is particularly careful to point out the place of the law in each. In our old life, *when we were controlled by the sinful nature* (literally, 'when we were in the flesh'), our *sinful passions aroused by the law* (provoked to rebellion, as Paul will elaborate in verses 8–12) *were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death* (5). *But now, by dying to what once bound us*, that is, the law, *we have been released from the law so that* in consequence, far from being free to sin, we are free to serve (as slaves). And our slavery to Christ is *in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code* (6). Or literally and more briefly, it is 'in newness of Spirit and not in oldness of letter'.

The distinction Paul has in mind in this neat aphorism is neither between the so-called 'letter' and 'spirit' of the law, nor between the literal and the allegorical interpretations of Scripture, but between the old covenant which was one of 'letter' (*gramma*), an external code written on stone tablets, and the new covenant which is one of 'Spirit' (*pneuma*), for the new age is essentially the age of the Spirit, in which the Holy Spirit writes God's law in our hearts.

We are now in a position to sum up the contrast contained in verses 5–6. It is an antithesis between the two ages, the two covenants or the two dispensations, and so, since we have been personally transferred from the old to the new, between our pre- and post-conversion lives. In our old life we were dominated by that terrible quartet—flesh, law, sin and death (5). But in our new life, having been released from the law, we are slaves of God through the power of the Spirit (6). The contrasts are striking. We were ‘in the flesh’, but are now ‘in the Spirit’. We were aroused by the law, but are now released from it. We bore fruit for death (5), but now bear fruit for God (4). And what has caused this release from the old life and this introduction to the new? Answer: it is that radical double event called death and resurrection. We *died to the law* through the death of Christ (4a); now we belong to Christ, having been *raised from the dead* with him (4b).

So we return to the question whether the law is still binding on Christians, and whether we are expected still to obey it. Yes and no! Yes, in the sense that Christian freedom is freedom to serve, not freedom to sin. We are still slaves (6), slaves of God and of righteousness (6:18, 22). But also no, because the motives and means of our service have completely changed. Why do we serve? Not because the law is our master and we have to, but because Christ is our husband and we want to. Not because obedience leads to salvation, but because salvation leads to obedience. And how do we serve? *We serve in the new way of the Spirit* (6). For the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the distinguishing characteristic of the new age, and so of the new life in Christ.

For our justification, then, we are ‘not under law, but under grace’ (6:14f.), and for our sanctification we serve ‘not in oldness of letter but in newness of Spirit’ (6, literally). We are still slaves, but the master we serve is Christ, not the law, and the power by which we serve is the Spirit, not the letter. The Christian life is serving the risen Christ in the power of the Spirit.

Having reached this point, Paul could have gone straight to Romans 8, which elaborates the meaning of life in the Spirit. But he knew that his insistence on liberation from the law would have been so provocative to his Jewish readers that he must take time to anticipate and answer their objections. This he does in verses 7–25, which are really a parenthesis between Romans 7:6 and 8:1. He does not mention the Holy Spirit again throughout the rest of chapter 7.¹

¹ John R. W. Stott, [*The Message of Romans: God’s Good News for the World*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 189–197.

Additional Resources:

Article: [What's Really Going on in Romans 7 by Will Timmins \(The Gospel Coalition\)](#)

Sermon: [Freed from the Law by R.C. Sproul](#)

Podcast: [Knowing Faith: The Internal Struggle with Tom Schreiner](#)

Article: [Dying to the Law Through Christ \(Ligonier\)](#)