

**“Law and Gospel”**  
**Romans 7:1-6**  
**February 7, 2010**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

One of the important questions in our topic of the gospel-centered life concerns the role of the law of God in the changes needed in our life. Very few people doubt the need for change in their lives. At our small group this past Wednesday night, I asked the question of where each person felt the need to change in his or her life. There was no shortage of participation in answer to that. We wanted to control our tongues and not feel the need to control other people. We wanted more intimacy with God, and less anxiety in our lives. It was a long list, and it could have been much longer if we had had more time.

Most any group of Christians you might get together will have universal agreement on the need for change. But they will not agree on the method of change. Their disagreements will often center on the place of the law of God in our change. The crux of the difference is the question of whether change occurs from the inside out or from the outside in. Those who give a large place to the law say that change is primarily an outside-in matter. It is as we conform ourselves to the right patterns of behavior that change occurs in our lives. “Live the right way and the heart will follow” summarizes this outside-in approach. If this approach is not correct, which I believe is exactly what Paul teaches here, then how is it that we do change? This brings us into a very old theological discussion on law and gospel, a relationship Paul discusses in Romans 6-7, and particularly in our passage at the beginning of Romans 7. It is clear that this chapter is all about the place of the law in our lives. Using various words for God’s law, it is mentioned in every one of the first 14 verses, and a total of 35 times in this chapter and the first four verses of the next. Let’s consider, then, the role of the law in our Christian growth.

**I. The Inadequacy of the Law**

Paul states several times that those who have believed in Jesus are no longer under the jurisdiction of the law. Back in chapter six he said, **“For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace”** (v. 14). In verse 1 of our text he says that the law is no longer binding upon us. In verse 4 he says that we have died to the law, and in verse 6 that we have been released from the law. It is not until verse 5 that he explains why it is important to our growth in Christlikeness to be released from the jurisdiction of the law. **“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.”**

The law doesn't make us better, but worse. He says that it arouses our sinful passions.

Let's look at this a little more carefully, that we might understand Paul's meaning. We need to start with what he means by the term "the flesh" in verse 5. It is clear that he uses this term to refer to our sinful human nature prior to our conversion. We sin because it is in our nature to do so, just as it is in the nature of a snake to strike when it feels threatened and unable to escape. It is our nature to be hostile to God, to want him out of our lives. Ultimately, this nature desires self-rule instead of the rule of God. We want to do what we want to do rather than submit ourselves to God's rule. What happens to this sin nature at conversion? It is not eradicated from our lives, but still present. It is like a dragon within our hearts. It is our flesh, our sin nature, that contains these sinful passions that are aroused by the law. But the law of God is not a sufficient weapon to defeat the dragon of our sin nature. On the contrary, to wield the weapon of the law against the dragon is like walking up to a sleeping dragon and poking it in the eye with a stick. The stick can't defeat him, but it can make him mad. Paul goes on in the rest of this chapter to illustrate from his own life what happens when he tries to fight his sinful nature with the law. In a word, it makes things worse, not better.

Perhaps another analogy will help. If you are thrown into a river with a swift current, when do you notice how swift the current is? Only when you attempt to swim against it. If you allow yourself to be carried along by it, it will seem as still waters to you. The sin nature is always present, but we only sense its power as an enemy when we attempt to counter it. The law brings us to the place of turning to swim against the current, but it cannot supply us with sufficient power to make the swim. Chris Lundgaard, in his helpful book, *The Enemy Within*, asks a good question. "Which is easier: to sit with a bucket of butter-soaked popcorn and watch Tom Cruise on the big screen for two hours, or kneel and pray for five minutes?" (p. 46).

One of the objections Paul anticipates is that someone might conclude that he is saying that the law is a bad thing. Many of his critics misunderstood him to be saying precisely that. But he makes it clear in this passage that he is saying no such thing. **"So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good"** (v. 12). The law is not bad, just inadequate to bring about change in our lives. It can make demands of us, and in the case of God's law, the demands are good and right. But it cannot give us desire to do the right thing, and it is desire that is needed if we are really to change.

Let's apply this before moving on. We need more than knowing the right steps to take in life. Don't you find it to be the case that when you encounter some big problem in your life, you want someone to give you the right steps? If you are having trouble with your children, you want to find a counselor who can say, "If you will do these three things, then all your problems will be

solved.” But Paul is saying to us that having the right steps is not enough. There are no steps more perfect than the law of God, but even this law is insufficient. Change is an inside-out process, not vice-versa. The right steps cannot bring change because that is an outside-in process. The human heart is like memory foam, which returns to its original form when outside pressure is removed. You can make yourself kneel in prayer for five minutes, but until the heart changes to become a praying heart, no lasting change has taken place. The law can apply the outside pressure and temporarily change our form, but as soon as we stop focusing on that area, it quickly returns to its former shape.

## II. The Power of the Gospel for Change – Death to the Law

What the law is unable to do, the gospel can accomplish. Paul comes to that conclusion by the end of chapter seven. **“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”** (v. 24-25). Back at the beginning of the chapter, he lists the two things that the gospel brings to us to empower the needed changes to our heart. First, it makes us dead to the law. Paul uses the illustration of marriage to help us understand this. Paul asks us to imagine two married women who both engage in the same behavior—they married a man other than their first husband. One of the women is guilty of adultery in doing so, while the other woman is not. The behavior is identical in both cases, but only one woman is guilty. The reason is that the first husband of the innocent woman has died, thus releasing her from the law that bound her to that man. Paul’s point is that the same thing has happened to us regarding the law of God, leaving us in a position in which the law no longer has jurisdiction over us.

The theological basis for Paul’s conclusion about our death to the law is our union with Christ. He began his teaching on union with Christ back in chapter five, and summarizes it in 6:5. **“For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”** Those who have trusted in Jesus have been joined into union with Christ, and that union means that we are so closely joined to him that the things happening to Jesus have in some sense happened to us as well. Marriage is the most common biblical illustration of this. When two people marry, they come to share in everything. When Wendy and I got married, she had a much nicer car than mine, and her car became mine. She also had a loan on that car, and her debt also became mine. I had some savings, and that money became hers. In our union with Christ, his death to sin has become ours and his resurrection to life has also become ours. There is a sense in which we have already died and been raised again with Christ. Paul applies our union with Christ to the law in 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.”** Because of Jesus’ death, and because

of our union with him in his death, we have died to the jurisdiction of the law over us.

Paul's point is that we are just as free now as if the law did not exist. The word Paul often uses to describe this new condition is the word "freedom." He uses that word over in chapter 8. **"For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death"** (8:2). He uses it most frequently in the book of Galatians. **"For freedom Christ has set us free"** (5:1). **"For you were called to freedom, brothers"** (5:13). Imagine that you are a student facing a day at school for which you are completely unprepared. You have two major exams and a paper that is due. You haven't even begun to work on the paper, and you have been lost in the subjects of those classes where you are facing exams. You don't sleep well the night before this day. But then as you wake up and look out the window, you see nothing but white snow covering the ground to a depth of about a foot. Excitedly, you turn on the television and hear that glorious news that all schools are cancelled. Our freedom from the law should feel just like a snow day.

Why is this freedom an important part of change in our lives? Because our inability to keep God's law will inevitably do one of two things to us. It will always lead either to despair or to pride. If we are honest and recognize our inability to keep the law, it will lead to a debilitating guilt. I arrived home one day this week and was looking through the mail that had come that day. As I did so, Wendy anxiously pointed out to me a thick envelope that had come from the IRS. I knew immediately that it was the forms we use for paying our quarterly taxes, but she feared it was something more threatening. We cannot thrive if we live under a cloud of guilt and fear from God's law. Others deceive themselves into thinking they have met the requirements of the law, and this produces in them pride.

### **III. The Power of the Gospel for Change – Belonging to Christ**

So the power to change comes first by recognizing that we have been freed from the tyrannical jurisdiction of a law that we cannot keep. But how is it that this does not just lead to a life of a different and even more tyrannical slavery, the enslavement of doing what we want. Because something else has happened as a result of our union with Christ. We have died to the law that we might **"belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead"** (v. 4). The result of belonging to Jesus is that we **"bear fruit for God."** Since we belong to Jesus, he is the one who provides us with all we need. What we need is the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and Paul says that it is precisely this gift that Jesus, the husband to whom we belong, has given to us. And it is the Spirit of God who changes our hearts to bear fruit. When Paul mentions bearing fruit, I think the chief fruit he has in mind is the first one listed in the fruit of the

Spirit, the fruit of love. And love is the summary of the law, meaning that if this fruit is ours, we will be keeping the law.

For reasons we don't have time to look into, the language of verse 6 is covenantal language describing the new covenant in Jesus' blood. Let me just mention one aspect of this new covenant, spoken of by the prophet Jeremiah. He promises a new covenant from God, by which he says, **"I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts"** (Jeremiah 31:33). This is the promise of inside-out change. When it is written on our hearts, the law is transformed from a demand to a desire. This is the change we need. It comes as a gift by the Holy Spirit, given to us by the one to whom we belong. I think this is expressed so well in the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism, which I have printed in your bulletins. In answer to the question, "What is thy only comfort in life and in death?" the following answer is given:

That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who with his precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and redeemed me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must work together for my salvation. Wherefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me heartily willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Let's close by considering a few implications of this. First, we should not be satisfied with external changes in our lives, but should seek a change of heart to begin loving God and others. It is possible to have a heart full of hate and anger, while on the outside we exhibit a demeanor that is all kindness and patience. When the Spirit of God comes, the change begins on the inside.

Second, we are least spiritual when we feel most in control, and most spiritual when we feel out of control but dependent on Jesus. This is an extension of the truth that it is the Spirit of God who changes us, not law. And we experience a fullness of God's Spirit as we learn dependence on Jesus. It is often the case that we want to know the steps to fix our problems just so we can feel in control of our lives. But our central need, and the way God changes us, is not when we feel most in control, but when we are most dependent. It is a good thing to say, "I don't know what to do, but I need you, Jesus, and I need the Holy Spirit in my life."

Third, worship is the most important thing we do to help us change, because it is in worship that we affirm that we belong to Jesus and come before him to serve him. If you want to change from the inside-out, learn to worship.