

Released from the Law

📖 Romans 7:1-6

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📅 February 22, 2015

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Q: What do you mean by saying that we now have freedom? Paul says we are either a slave to the sin nature or a slave to God. Do you mean we have the freedom to choose which one we serve?

A: In part Paul is just filling out the analogy by saying we are slaves to God. But the principle is true that we are slaves to the one we present ourselves to. I hold that we are both a slave to God and the Lord's freedman. As far as non-resurrected humans are concerned we as regenerate people have the most freedom possible. The understanding of how man, slavery and freedom relate is clear when we understand man in the four states in which he finds himself; as created, as fallen, as regenerate and as resurrected. You cannot speak of man in blanket terms as if he is the same in all four states. You must talk about man relative to the state under consideration. First, as created we would say that Adam was created very good and that part of his goodness was a holy disposition to please God and yet at the same time he could choose contrary to his holy disposition. We say then that Adam was *free not to sin*, with the emphasis on freedom because it leaves a crack in the door for him to choose to sin. It is something of an enigma that he did choose sin since he had only a holy disposition, but it is a necessary conclusion to draw from the Genesis narrative. Second, as fallen we would say that every natural descendant of Adam has a sin nature or disposition and cannot choose contrary to his sinful disposition but is slave to it. We say that as fallen we are *free to sin*. That is our only area of freedom. We are not free not to sin. Our entire being is tainted by sin. This leaves us wondering how we can freely come to faith, which is the opposite of sin, and therefore enjoy salvation. This area is and always has been under great dispute and we are not investigating that very involved question here. It is sufficient in this discussion to simply say that man as a fallen creature is *free to sin*. But in all reality that is slavery because sin is slavery. Third, as regenerate we would say that man has a sinful nature or disposition and a new nature or disposition. This means that we still are *free to sin* but we also are *free not to sin*. When we exercise our freedom to sin, however, we are really slaves, slaves to our sinful nature, which is not freedom. When we exercise our freedom not to sin, we are slaves to God, but this slavery is freedom. Why is this kind of slavery true freedom? Because it is living as we were originally designed to live. It is living consistent with who we fundamentally are. Man can only enjoy true freedom as he lives as he was designed to live. This freedom is only available to regenerate people and only enjoyed when they exercise their

freedom not to sin, as slaves to God. Then only are we truly enjoying freedom. Fourth, as resurrected we would say that man has only a new nature or disposition. This means that we will be *not free to sin*. We will have no free choice to sin; only the free choice to righteousness. This is ultimate freedom, not a choice to sin but freedom to live as we were designed to live.

This is what is hardly ever understood in the freedom discussion. Most people think that freedom of choice is just the freedom to do what they want, whether good or bad. This kind of freedom is an illusion among fallen people who are only free to sin so that in reality they are slaves to the sin nature. Only Adam as originally created and regenerate people are free not to sin. But Adam did sin and we as regenerate still have the freedom to sin that enslaves. This is why we long for the resurrection, because only then we will be *not free to sin*. This is what I mean by true freedom; the freedom to live as we were designed to live, as holy and in the presence of a Holy God.

We are studying Romans 6 and the regenerate state as contrasted to the fallen state. How we are now versus how we were then. How we should live now versus how we lived then. Then there was only one path open to us, freedom to sin, freedom to obey our sinful nature. That freedom is still available to us now as regenerate people but it is the path of slavery, it is an experience of death. Sin always deals out the wages of death. But now we also have available to us the freedom not to sin, which is the freedom to do righteousness and it is a path of freedom, an experience of life. God's grace always gives the free gift of eternal life. I'm talking here of Romans 6:23 as a general principle that can apply to unregenerate or regenerate. It's purely a general statement; the wages of sin is death, the free gift of God is eternal life. Who is Paul applying the statement to in the prior verses? Regenerate people. When regenerate people sin what are the wages of that sin? Death. What does he mean then by death? He's just speaking generally of the separation from fellowship with God that results in discontentedness, mental frustration, inner turmoil and chaos in life. He's not talking about eternal death, he's talking about temporal death, the same kind of death an unregenerate person experiences whenever he sins. The wages of sin is always death. Of course, when the unregenerate person dies and is resurrected then he will face eternal death. But we as regenerate people can experience temporal death whenever we sin. On the flipside, when a regenerate person presents himself to God what is the free gift? Eternal life. What does he mean then by eternal life? Not duration of life. The quality of life we enjoy is eternal in nature but ultimately what is in view here is an enjoyment of a high quality of life that comes by walking in fellowship with God; things such as joy, a relaxed mental attitude, contentment, stability, etc... All those wonderful things are free gifts of God, grace gifts that we enjoy now as we present ourselves to Him and walk in fellowship. And yes, when we die, a fuller enjoyment of that life that will continue forever. But now we can enjoy it too as we live as we were designed to live.

We said then that the expression eternal life is more complex than most Christians imagine. When we look at the expression eternal life, life is a noun and eternal is an adjective modifying the noun. So life is the core concept; eternal is modifying that concept. Life is a quality of existence that can vary. Eternal modifies it giving it an

everlasting sense. Putting this together *eternal life is something that all believers possess forever but their enjoyment of it can vary until they get into eternity*. That's why you've got to look at it in its various contexts and not assign a fixed meaning to it. Take for example Matthew 25:46. Here, at the conclusion of the sheep-goats judgment it says that the sheep shall go "into eternal life." Well if they are sheep don't they already have eternal life? Of course they do. What then are they going into? They're going into a fuller enjoyment of eternal life. There are dimensions of eternal life that we have not yet experienced even though we already possess it. Take another example, Galatians 6:8. Here Paul is talking about the importance of sharing material goods with the bible teacher who shares with you spiritual goods. In verse 7 the principle is what one sows he will also reap. The application is verse 8, "For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." Now, I thought we already had eternal life? What does it mean then that I can sow to the Spirit and reap eternal life in the future? It means that I can have a fuller enjoyment of eternal life in the resurrection by way of rewards. You see, eternal life is not just something you possess by virtue of believing. It is something you possess of course, John 6:47 is very clear, "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life." That's something every believer possesses. However, it's not only something you possess, it's also something a believer may or may not enjoy. But to enjoy one's eternal life he has to make this daily presentation of himself and his members to God to be used by Him for righteousness. When we do we enjoy a fresh experience of our eternal life, an experience of joy, peace, tranquility, contentedness, etc...despite the surrounding circumstances. It's that enjoyment that Paul is talking about in Romans 6:22-23.

Now we come to Romans 7:1-6 and we asked last time, what comes before? What's the antecedent? It's clear that Paul has the law in mind and he's illustrating that the regenerate man is not under the Law as the governing principle in sanctification. He hasn't spoken of this since 6:14 where he abruptly stated, "for you are not under law but under grace." It's that verse that states the truth that the believer has been released from the Law and 7:1-6 is picking up that theme from 6:14 and developing it. Renald Showers says, "Scholars who deal with the antecedent of Romans 7 are convinced that Romans 6:14 is that antecedent." Therefore it is critical to understand 6:14 before developing 7:1-6. In 6:14 Paul abruptly states our release from the Law. He says, "For the sin nature shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace." Paul's use of the word "under" with both "law" and "grace" shows that he is referring to "law" and "grace" as governing principles of sanctification. His reference to the sin nature not being master indicates that if we put ourselves under "law" as a governing principle it will only stir up the sin nature to rebel. This truth will be repeated again and again. He first stated it as early as 5:20 where he said, "The Law came in so that the transgression would increase." The giving of the Mosaic Law did not decrease sin but increased sin. This is because external law only stirs up the sin nature to rebel. He is alluding the same truth in 6:14 and he will state it explicitly in 7:5, "For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death." It becomes a working principle for Paul that if the believer puts himself under law as a governing

principle for sanctification he will not only fail but will fail miserably. Law as a governing principle is not sufficient to produce sanctification. That is why Paul said in 6:14 that we are “under grace” as a governing principle for sanctification. Grace is able to do what the Law could never do. And that grace incorporates the Spirit as the means of victory. It is in 7:1-6 that Paul makes crystal clear that we are not under law but under grace.

Now we ask what law does Paul have in mind? Is it merely the general principle of an external law or set of standards or is it the specifics of the external Mosaic Law. Since in 7:7 he quotes directly out of the Ten Commandments he has in mind the specifics of the external Mosaic Law. But that’s probably because no believer would imagine that he could be sanctified by some other set of laws that come from outside the Bible. Now despite a kind of passage like this that so clearly releases the believer from the Law, many Christians today, both Jewish and Gentile, put themselves back under the Mosaic Law, yet as we’ll see they cannot be sanctified by it. They only sin more and become self-righteous. The Law can’t sanctify, it can only show sin. So my point is you should abandon trying to keep the Law in order to please God. You have been entirely released from it. That doesn’t mean it doesn’t have good principles, it doesn’t mean the Law is bad, it just means that as a rule of life it can’t produce sanctification, it can only produce more sin.

Now Romans 7:1 illustrates this critical truth by using an analogy from the marital arrangement under law. The passage is not really about marriage but understanding marriage is necessary to understanding the truth Paul is trying to communicate. He states the truth he wants to communicate in verse 1, **Or do you not know, brethren, (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives.** Paul speaks of those regenerate believers who might be ignorant, for he calls them **brethren**. There are and always have been **brethren** who are seemingly ignorant of their relationship to the Law. They therefore put themselves under the Law as the governing principle of sanctification. There are several ways groups have done this. First, some Christians divide the 613 Laws of Moses into moral, legal and ceremonial aspects. Then they claim that they are not obligated to keep the legal and ceremonial parts, only the moral parts. The others they claim were temporal and Jewish and so put to rest at the cross whereas the moral are eternal and for all men and so continue after the cross. This distortion has a number of serious textual problems. For example, James 2:10 does not allow for any division of the Law. He says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.” According to James, whether a law may be classified as moral, legal or ceremonial makes no difference, if you break just one of the 613 laws of Moses you have broken them all and are classified as a ‘lawbreaker.’ It is therefore false to think that one can take part of the Law and not all of it. Another problem is Hebrews 7:12 which says, “For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.” It is a point of fact that the priesthood was changed at the cross. At that time the Levitical priesthood came to an end and the Melchizedekian priesthood of Christ began. With that change of priesthood, of necessity a change of law also took place. This means the entire Mosaic Law was set aside as a rule of life for the believer. Another serious problem is Romans 10:4 where Paul explicitly says, “For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” So then when one believes in Christ his relationship to the law has

been terminated. Paul could not be clearer. Yet many Christians continue to illegitimately divide the law into moral, ceremonial and legal elements and then claim that the ceremonial and legal were temporal and ended at the cross whereas the moral are eternal and continue after the cross. The NT allows no such understanding. The Law is a unit and that unit came to an end at the cross. We can in no sense be under any of the Mosaic Law as a means of either justification or sanctification. Second, some Christians naively take just the Ten Commandments as their rule of life. This, of course, is ruled out by the prior arguments. But they show even more ignorance. They think if they keep the Ten Commandments they are living lives that are pleasing to God. This shows how little they know about the Ten Commandments. Take for example the fifth commandment, "You shall not commit murder." They interpret this to mean that we should not destroy innocent physical life. That's true enough as far as it goes but it does not at all go far enough. That very limited, externalized application of the law was the Pharisaic interpretation. When Jesus confronted this interpretation of the Law He denounced it as not going far enough and understating the true intent of the law all along. His view was that if you were angry at someone in your heart or yelled curses at them and didn't reconcile with them then you were a murderer because you had the spirit of murder in your heart. Murder is ultimately an anti-reconciliation heart attitude. So the brand of Christians who put themselves under the Ten Commandments are usually ignorant of what the Ten Commandments really mean and consequently haven't kept them! They are not living lives pleasing to God but are nothing more than modern Pharisees who did not please God.

So it is very important that we not be ignorant of the principle in Romans 7:1. What is that principle? **That the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives.** If you died today would you be under the **jurisdiction** of the US Constitution? No. You'd be dead. The US Constitution wouldn't have any claims on you. You'd be free from the US Constitution. Now that and that only is the principle that you have to hold on to to get through these verses. A law has jurisdiction over you only as long as you live. Once you die you are free from that jurisdiction and free to be bound to another. If you can hold on to that you won't mix the following verses up because in verses 2-3 he's going to apply that principle to marriage as an illustration and then in verses 4-6 he's going to apply that principle to you.

So in verse 2 let's look at the application of the principle to marriage as an illustration. **For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. 3So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man.** I'm not going to go into the complexities of marriage and adultery because those are sensitive topics and they will draw attention away from the Paul's point. What's Paul's point? That death ends all legal claims; it releases the one who has died so that they are free!

So in the marriage illustration Paul says, **For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living.** The point is that the woman is legally bound to her husband while he is living. She has a legal obligation

to him. It may not be a romantic view of marriage but that's because marriage is not fundamentally a romantic relationship. Fundamentally it is a covenant relationship. It binds the woman to her husband so long as he lives.

Paul then says in the middle of verse 2, **but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband.** If is a 3rd class condition, maybe her husband dies, maybe her husband does not die, but upon the condition being fulfilled that he does die, **she is released from the law concerning the husband.** Death ends all legal claims; it releases the woman so that she is no longer legally bound by the law as it relates to the husband.

In verse 3 Paul draws a logical inference. **So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress.** This case is also set in the third class, maybe while her husband is still living she is joined to another man, maybe while her husband is still living she will not be joined to another man, but upon the condition being fulfilled that she is joined to another man, **she shall be called an adulteress.** She will be **called** or "characterized" as **an adulteress** because her husband has not died and therefore she is still bound by law to her first husband. She is not free to marry another. Of necessity then the first husband must die for her to be released from the law and freed to marry another man. Otherwise she will be called **an adulteress.** The main point is still that only death ends all legal claims. Without that condition fulfilled a second marriage results in her being **called an adulteress.**

The rest of verse 3 explains, **but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another.** This alternative cause is also set in the third class, maybe her husband dies and maybe he does not, but upon the condition being fulfilled that he does die then **she is free from the law.** Death ends all claims and therefore at that point **she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another.** The point is just entirely clear and simple: death ends all legal claims; if a woman's husband dies she is released from the law and freed to be married to another without being an adulteress. But if her husband is still living and she marries another she has not been released from the law and is not free to marry another without being an adulteress. Death is what releases all legal claims and apart from it you are bound.

Now in verses 4-6, having a clear understanding of the principle, Paul explains the principle as it relates to regenerate people and the Law. Verse 4, **Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.** Clearly Paul has regenerate people in mind since he refers to them as **my brethren.** And what they must know is that they **were made to die to the Law.** Since death releases all legal claims then are we obligated **to the Law?** By no means. We have been released from the law. This death he says we have died is a once for all death because it's the aorist tense, we **were made to die through the body of Christ.** The body of Christ is looking at the crucifixion event. Paul has stated repeatedly that when we as unregenerate people believed in Christ we were co-crucified with Him. So he is saying nothing new. He is looking back to the death he spoke about in 6:2 where he says, "How shall we who died to the sin nature still live

in it." And in 6:3, "Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?" and in 6:4, "Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death..." and in 6:5, "For if we have become united with Him in the likeness of His death..." and we have because it's a 1st class condition, we would translate "since..." and in 6:5, "knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him..." that's our unregenerate self...and in 6:7, for he who has died is freed from the sin nature..." and so forth and so on Paul is saying that we have died and in these verses the first thing Paul is saying is that because of this death all legal claims of the sin nature upon us have been released such that now we are free to be bound to righteousness. In 7:4 he is saying a second release has occurred, not only did this death that we died release all legal claims of the sin nature upon us but it released all legal claims of the law upon us. The claims of the Law upon us have been buried and we are free from the Law.

Now that was necessary to set us free and that is what Paul is saying in the middle of verse 4, **so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.** You cannot be joined to Christ unless you died to the Law. It's just simply impossible; such a thing we might say is adulterous, legally bound to both Christ and the Law? Such a thing can't be. We are either legally bound to one or the other. But we were made to die to the Law so that we might be joined to another, namely to Christ **who was raised from the dead.** Not only were we made to co-die with Christ and be co-buried with Christ but we were co-raised with Christ in a spiritual sense. We haven't yet been resurrected physically but we have been spiritually. Paul is speaking about a spiritual resurrection. Spiritually we died, our old self or unregenerate person died and spiritually was buried and we were raised a new spiritual self or regenerate person. Now we are joined to another, namely, Christ. Ephesians says we are seated with Him in the heavenlies. Jesus Christ is sitting at the Father's right hand in His resurrection body right now. And we are seated in Him. This is our position from which our spiritual life proceeds. So we are on earth now and we have our experience but our experience is to emanate from our position which is in heaven in Christ. And for what purpose at the end of verse 4? **In order that we might bear fruit to God.** Note importantly that we do not produce fruit for God but we **bear fruit to God.** That is an important distinction. To *produce* fruit for God is to ourselves be the life-giving source of the fruit; to *bear* fruit to God is to be an instrument of the Spirit who is the life-giving source that produces the fruit. This is Paul's command for regenerate people in verse 13, to daily "present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments as righteousness to God." It is by being an instrument that we bear the fruit of the Spirit.

What then are the conditions of bearing fruit to God? First, at the moment of faith alone in Christ alone you are justified giving you a legal relationship with God. Simultaneously you are baptized by the Spirit such that you are co-crucified, co-buried and co-resurrected with Christ so that you are joined to Him, a new regenerate person with the Holy Spirit indwelling you. This death released you from the sinful nature and the law as the principle of sanctification growth. Second, as you reckon these things to be so and present your members as alive to God you **bear fruit to God.** There is nothing about keeping the Law that is related to **bearing fruit to God.**

Absolutely nothing. Trying to keep the Ten Commandments will not bear fruit to God. Keeping the whole Law of Moses will not bear fruit to God. You have died to that law once and for all and forevermore. It is not an operating principle for spiritual growth. Does that mean then that we are to be lawless? By no means! We have the indwelling Spirit of God and He is the inner operative agent in spiritual growth unto righteousness. So then I warn you, do not let anyone spy out your liberty that you have in Christ so as to bring you into bondage. Legalism will not help you grow spiritually. It will ruin you.

That is how you lived as an unregenerate person in 7:5, **“For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.”** If you want to put yourself under the Law it is going to stimulate the **flesh** and what you are going to bear is fruit to death, not fruit to God, fruit to death. There is no middle ground. You can't have part grace and part Law, you can't keep the Ten Commandments. You can't have them because you were made to die to the Ten Commandments. I simply cannot give any ground on that point. Unless you see the Law as totally coming to an end in the death of Christ and your death in Him then you cannot bear fruit to God.

Now what did the Law do when **we were in the flesh**? By **in the flesh** Paul means when we were unregenerate, prior to faith in Christ. What did the Law do then? It **aroused** our sinful passions, it stirred up sinful desires. He's referring to our sinful nature and he says that the sinful nature was continually at work, imperfect tense, producing fruit for death through the parts of our body. Our body was being used by the sinful nature that pressed against the Law to bear fruit for death. Death in the sense of absence of joy, frustrated mental attitude, et al. If that is what the Law did when we were in the flesh then how could it produce anything different now that we are in Christ? It can't do anything different. If you put yourself under the external Law as a governing or ruling principle of sanctification you will only sin more. You will become frustrated trying to crank out the Christian life.

It's not good, verse 6 tells us flatly, **But now we have been released from the Law.** We have been released, aorist tense, once for all at the moment of faith, we are no longer under Law as a governing principle. He then tells us how using the principle of verse 1, **having died to that by which we were bound**, we died to the sin nature so that we are no longer obligated to it and the purpose of this is then stated, **so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.** This looks back to 6:4 where he says so we too might walk in newness of life. The big picture is that we have a new way of living and this way of living is by dependence upon the Holy Spirit and not by working it up on the basis of the letter of the law. The Spirit in regeneration has written His word on tablets of human hearts whereas the letter of the law was written on external tablets of stone. He inscribes the words upon our hearts/minds so that we have a desire to please God and when we depend upon the Spirit of God He produces fruit through us such that we bear fruit to God. There is no other way to live so as to please God.

At the moment of faith we were crucified with Christ and thereby released from slavery to the sinful nature and released from the Law and joined to Christ so that we might live in dependence upon the Spirit in order to bear fruit to God.