



## Free from the Law

### Lesson 9 | Romans 7:1-25

How do we fix our broken world? Many people see the mess things are in and think that the answer is more education. If we just teach people what is best, then they would make the right choices instead of the wrong ones. But sadly, that will never ultimately work. People may know what is right and wrong, but people will not choose right simply because they know it is right. As Paul would put it, having the law (in the sense of God's instructions about how to live) isn't enough because there is a deeper problem – we are the problem. No law, no matter how good or holy or perfect, no law will make up for the fact that sinful people are going to sin despite any such law. Our problem isn't ignorance. Our problem is rebellion.

***Why do you think that simply knowing what is best isn't enough to keep people from sinning?***

***Can you think of specific examples of people who knew what they were doing was wrong but still chose to make the wrong choice?***

Throughout Romans Paul has made statements about the law that might confuse some of his Jewish audience. For example, he has said that believers are not under the law, but rather are under grace (Romans 6:14). He has said that the law came to increase transgression (Romans 5:20) and that the law brings God's wrath (Romans 4:15). In fact, God declares us righteous apart from the law, yet in doing so establishes the law (Romans 3:31). How in the world do all these pieces fit together? And how is any of this supposed to make sense if you've grown up your whole life being told: "This is God's instructions for how to live. Follow these laws because this is God's best!" In this chapter Paul fleshes out his understanding of how the law of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ work together.

## Christians Have Been Freed from Law (7:1-6)

Paul begins by teaching that as believers we are free from the law. This doesn't mean we get to do whatever we feel like doing or that no one can tell us what to do. Rather, it means that now we are free to live fruitful lives for God. As we look at this section, Paul lays out a principle and illustrates it (7:1-3), then applies that principle (7:4-5) and sets before us a goal we should be striving for in light of this principle (7:6).

### **The Principle: Death frees you from the law (1-3)**

Paul begins with the simple observation that dead people no longer need to fulfill their legal requirements. If you make a deal with someone and they die, your commitment to them has ended. The specific illustration that Paul uses is marriage. If you marry someone and they die, you are no longer bound to

them and are free to marry someone else. The key phrases that Paul uses here is “loosed from the law” (Romans 7:2) and “free from the law” (Romans 7:3). Dying means all the legal obligations you may have had are ended.

### **The Application: You are dead to the law so that you can belong to Christ (4-5)**

This general principle is now applied specifically to the person in Christ and the law of God. Building on his earlier analogy that we died with Christ, Paul argues that if we died with Christ our death was not just to sin, but to the law as well. Sin no longer has power over us, and neither does the law. This doesn’t mean that obedience to God doesn’t matter (cf Romans 1:5; 16:26), but rather that it is not through self-empowered following of God’s laws that we will find salvation and acceptance with God.

***Why might we as believers be uncomfortable with Paul saying that we are dead to the law?***

***What do you think Paul’s response would be to such objections?***

### **The Goal: Serving in the Spirit (6)**

But why have we been set free from the law? Paul makes it clear that the goal is not doing whatever we want. Rather, we have been set free from the law so that we can *better* follow God, not so that we can simply follow our own sinful desires. If you hear that you are free from the law and your first thought is, “Great, I can do what I want!” you don’t really understand what Paul is saying here. If you think to yourself, “Wow, so I don’t have to keep trying to obey all those commands in my own strength? In the power of the Spirit I can now truly live a life that is fruitful to God?” then you understand what Paul is getting at here. He makes clear in these sections that the goal of being freed from the law is bearing fruit to God (7:4) and serving in the newness of the Spirit (7:6).

***How do you think it is that being free from the law enables us to better obey God?***

***How does this thinking compare with the typical thinking of Christianity?***

***Why the difference of perspectives?***

## **The Law Shows Us Our Sin (7:7-13)**

We have been freed from the law! What wonderful news. But wait, the law came from God. So, did God make a mistake in giving us the law? If we are free from the law, does that mean the law is bad? And if we are free from the law, then what was the purpose of the law in the first place? In this section Paul answers these questions by explaining why God would even give us a law we need to be freed from.

### **The law is good.**

You can imagine a Jewish person hearing everything Paul is saying and responding with something like, “So, are you saying the law is bad?” Paul responds in the most emphatic way possible: “God forbid!” Sadly, many Christians also misunderstand this. They start reading through Leviticus or Deuteronomy and start feeling a little bit suspicious, as if they are on enemy ground. But Paul says that the law is holy and righteous and good (Romans 7:12).

***Why is it that some people have a hard time not thinking that God’s laws are bad?***

Paul will make clear that the problem is not the law, the problem is me. If I could follow God's law perfectly, it would lead to life just as God promised it would (7:10; cf Deuteronomy 30:19). But we can't follow the law because in our flesh we are dominated by sin and so instead we find ourselves facing death. If followed, God's law bring life, but when rejected it brings death.

***What does it mean that God's law brings life? In what ways have you seen this to be true?***

#### **The law clarifies sin.**

So if the law is good, but people who hear the law simply disobey it, then what purpose does it serve? Why would God give us these instructions if He knew that we would sin when we hear the law? The purpose of the law, Paul teaches, is that we might "know sin" (7:7). In other words, the law clearly shows us that what we are doing is sin because it is a direct violation of God's Word. It is one thing to be generally aware that I'm not a good person, but it's different when God gets specific. Once He starts giving specific commands, we begin to realize how far short of His standard we have fallen.

***Why does it matter knowing that I've broken specific commands rather than just knowing generally I'm not living as well as I should?***

#### **The law enables sin.**

Paul says some interesting things in this section when he claims that without the law sin is dead, but when the law came it revived sin which then killed Paul (7:8-9). What does all this mean? He goes on to explain that this happens when specific commands prohibit specific activities. Once we realize God has given a specific command, something inside us comes alive and wants to do the very opposite. For Paul, it was covetousness. The law said "thou shalt not covet," but Paul realized that once he *knew* he wasn't supposed to desire things with an unhealthy craving, he couldn't stop. God's law was the fixed standard that showed him, not only that he had sinned, but that he was a sinner who was bent toward sinning.

If you think about it you've probably seen this principle at work more than you realize. This is why kids say bad words for no other reason than they are not supposed to. This is why making a rule against something often results in more people doing the forbidden behavior. This is why we all feel a pull to do what are told not to do it. In our broken sinfulness ("the flesh" as Paul would call it), the law awakens something within us that demands we do what we want, not what we're told. We were sinners before there were laws, but once the law came our sinfulness became a whole lot clearer to us.

***Why do we desire to do something simply because it is forbidden?***

### **The Law Shows Us Our Sinfulness (7:14-25)**

So the law is a good thing and it leads to life. But trying to live by the law quickly shows us that we are broken – we seem unable to choose obedience to the law! Yet the law not only made it clearer to us that we have sinned because we are sinners, it also points out how desperate our sinful condition really is. In these verses we have an unusually transparent reflection on the part of the apostle Paul. He opens up

about his battle with sin, and these words have become well-known and well-loved because they reflect so clearly the agony of many believers trying to live right and discouraged by sin.<sup>1</sup>

### **We face an internal battle to do what is right (14-20).**

As Paul begins this section, he first observes that while the law is spiritual, people are carnal. Many people have the desire to do what is right, at least on some level, but they find themselves unable to do it. God's laws, by themselves, have no power to make us holy. And that's a problem, because the human condition is one that's in a pretty bleak place. We are "sold under sin" and unable to stop doing the things we hate doing.

#### ***Why is it that God's laws are unable to help us do what is right?***

These verses can get a little convoluted, but what they are describing is something all Christians can relate to. We know what it's like to want to do what is right, and then to do the wrong thing. We know what it's like to desire to be holy, yet to keep falling short. We find ourselves unable to do the good things we want to do, whether that be faithfulness to God or spiritual growth in some area, and instead find ourselves constantly falling short in the same old habits, whether they be anger, laziness, lust, or any other number of sins.

Change is really, really hard. Those who don't know Christ don't really know what this battle is like, because they just follow their flesh. But once saved, the old man dies but the flesh remains. Part of us is gone, but part of us sticks around. And so there is a battle to do right raging inside the heart of every born again Christian, a battle that will stick with us until we have glorified bodies.

#### ***How can knowing there is a battle be an encouragement to a believer?***

#### ***What have you found to be particularly helpful in this battle?***

### **We face an internal nature to do what is wrong (21-23).**

But Paul draws a conclusion from this battle. Whenever I want to do right, sin is close at hand. Something in me is twisted and broken, something that keeps me a slave to sin. This inclination is called "a law," a binding principle that always seems to hold true. The law of gravity means things go down. The law of sin means that I find myself over and over again turning to sin. I delight in what God wants. I really do want to do right, but whenever I try to do right I keep doing the wrong thing instead.

#### ***Why do you think that simply wanting to do the right thing isn't enough?***

### **Jesus can deliver us from ourselves (24-25).**

This chapter leads up naturally to verse 24, where Paul in frustration cries out and asks who will deliver him from this broken body that finds itself bent to sinning. But after this tragic cry, we immediately find the hope – Jesus. Through the work of Jesus and the Spirit, we can have victory over sin. If we walk in the flesh, we will live as slaves to sin. But if we walk by the Spirit, we will have victory over sin. While we are

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<sup>1</sup> Theologians debate whether Paul is here talking about himself in the present, or whether the "I" is a rhetorical device describing either (1) the hypothetical person trying to live by the law or (2) Paul's past struggles with sin before conversion (which would be someone trying to live by the law). In other words, is this inner battle the description of someone who is saved or of an unbeliever? Since Paul uses present tense verbs, it is best to take this as Paul's current experience, at least when he tries to live rightly without the Spirit (as he will discuss in chapter 8).

ending our lesson with the last verse of chapter seven, it is important to remember that this chapter break didn't exist when Paul wrote the letter. Paul's discussion flows into chapter eight where he gives his solution to the problem of indwelling sin— we must live by the Spirit! Through our death with Christ and resurrection we can now walk in Spirit-empowered obedience and live rightly before God. We will look at this exciting development next week as we look at life in the Spirit.

***How can the Spirit set us free from the power of sin?***

***If the Spirit can set us free from sin, why do we still struggle with sin?***