THE NEW WAY OF THE SPIRIT

Romans 7:1–25

Key Verse: 7:6

“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.”

Have you ever heard of the expression, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”? They say it’s almost impossible to change the way a person does something when they’ve been doing it a certain way for many years. So we say a person is too “set in their ways.” It just feels more comfortable to do things the old way. In today’s passage Paul is describing a fundamental change that needs to happen in our Christian life. It’s not just about changing some old idiosyncrasies or habits; it’s about having a whole new focus, a whole new spirit, an inner change and a new freedom. What does Paul mean? And why is this so important? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In chapters 5–8, the second section of Romans, Paul is explaining what living by faith in Jesus looks like in our practical lives. In chapter 5 living by faith fills us with a new peace, a new joy and a new hope. In chapter 6 living by faith sets us free from slavery to sin and enables us to offer ourselves to God as his instruments. In today’s passage living by faith sets us free from living under the law and it enables us to serve our Lord Jesus in the new way of the Spirit.

Read verse 1. Here “the law” primarily means the Law God gave his people in the Old Testament. It’s also known as “the Book of the Law” or “the Law of Moses.” Paul adds here in verse 1 that he’s “speaking to those who know the law.” It’s not lawyers; he’s writing to Christians in Rome, who were both Jews and Gentiles. Both groups of people knew God’s Law very well. Jews were familiar with it from infancy. Gentiles who came to believe in Jesus were often first drawn to the Jewish religion and went to the synagogue to learn more about God and his Laws. They were known as God-fearing Gentiles (Ac10:2,22; 13:16,26). But a group of Jewish believers were trying to insist that these new Gentile Christians also be taught to keep the Law of God in detail. In writing this letter to the Romans Paul wants to make it clear that this is not necessary at all.

In explaining it, Paul has already repeatedly been mentioning “the law”—meaning the Law of God. Among all the peoples on earth, the Jews had the great privilege of being entrusted with God’s oracles or Law (3:2). They were instructed by God’s Law to know his will and approve of what is excellent (2:18). They had in God’s Law the embodiment of knowledge and truth (2:20). They faithfully heard God’s Law read in their synagogues every Sabbath (2:13a; cf. Ac13:27). They relied on God’s Law to enable them to boast in God (2:17). But Paul said that the gospel of Jesus is “apart from” God’s Law (3:21). Many law-abiding Jews were very uncomfortable with this kind of faith. They thought Paul was trying to “overthrow the law by this faith” (3:31). They thought he was teaching people to condone sin by a cheap notion of God’s grace. Paul has just proclaimed in chapter 6 that we are not under law but under grace (6:15). Now in chapter 7 he wants to help us understand what he means by not living “under law.”

Read verse 1 again. Here Paul is referring not only to God’s Law, but also to a general principle of any human law. He says it “is binding on a person only as long as he lives.” In other words, we can’t arrest and convict a dead person, or make them obey the laws of the land anymore; it’s over. Paul uses an example. Read verse 2. The general law of marriage no longer applies when one of the couple dies. If a husband dies, his wife is no longer legally bound to him. Paul takes it further. Read verse 3. There are many interesting things here. But the point is, after a husband’s death, a wife is free to remarry and the law of marriage that bound her to her husband for life no longer applies to her. Some people are very faithful to their dead spouse and have self-imposed strict rules about staying faithful unto death. But in fact, in God’s sight widows or widowers are free to remarry if they want to. Where is Paul going with this? He’s not really teaching about adultery, marriage or remarriage. Read verse 4. Here he shifts his metaphor a bit and says not that *the law* died, but that *we* died *to* the law. In chapter 6 he said that through the death of Christ we died *to sin*; now he says that through his death we also died *to the law*. His point in using the marriage illustration is to tell us we’re free from the law and can now “belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead.” We’ll think about this more a little later.

But first, what does Paul mean that we “have died to the law” through the body of Christ? First of all, he means that when Christ died for our sins, he fulfilled all the righteous requirements of God’s Law (8:3,4). Christ’ death in his body reconciled us to God and made us holy, blameless and above reproach before him (Col1:22). So we no longer need to try to keep God’s Law in order to be right with God; though we’re nothing but sinners, Jesus’ death in his body already makes us right with God—fully justified in God’s sight. Paul also means that in Christ we died to the condemnation of God’s law (8:1; cf. Gal3:13). We no longer have to live in fear and guilt because we broke God’s Law; instead, we live with the blessed assurance that God has forgiven us of all our sin (4:6–8). Through faith in Christ we’re also free from all the ritual demands of God’s Law, such as all the food laws and observance of holy days. But Paul doesn’t mean that we’re free from the moral and ethical obligations of God’s Law. So he says in 3:31b, “We uphold the law.” Soon he says that “the righteous requirement of the law” is “fulfilled in us” (8:4). In 13:8–10 he describes how faith in Jesus enables us to actually do this, by loving each other. We didn’t die to the moral or ethical teaching of God’s Law; we died to the idea that we earn righteousness in God’s sight by “works of the law” (3:20,27–28; cf. Gal2:16).

What happens to us when we die to the law? Are we just free to live for ourselves? No. Read verse 4 again. Here the expression “belong to” is important. We really want to think about what this means. In verses 1–6 Paul uses several similar words. In verse 1 he uses the word “binding.” In Greek it’s literally the word “lord” or “master,” and in 6:9,14 it’s translated as “dominion.” It means someone or something with power or authority over us. When the Law is our master, it’s never satisfied, because we never measure up to all its demands. In verse 2 Paul also uses the word “bound,” which means “tied together” or “obligated.” In contrast, in verses 2 and 6 he uses the word “released,” which in Greek means “abolished, set aside or wiped out.” It’s a strong verb that’s translated elsewhere in Romans as “nullify,” “overthrow” or “brought to nothing” (3:3,31; 4:14; 6:6). When we’re “released” from the Law, it’s like we got out of a nightmarish marriage that was relentlessly beating us to a pulp. Through Christ we no longer “belong to” our “marriage” to the Law. Paul also uses a word to describe the essential nature of marriage. In Greek it’s the word *ginomai*, and in verses 3–4 it’s variously translated as “lives with,” “marries” and “belongs to.” When we “belong to” Christ, in essence we “marry” him. We live with him. We become spiritually close to him. The Greek word also carries the connotation that we’re “possessed by” him; when we “belong to” him, in a spiritual sense he now owns us. And that’s a really good thing.

Paul says in verse 4 that we “belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead.” Of course he’s talking about Jesus. Many times in Romans Paul refers to Jesus as our Lord (1:4,7; 4:24; 5:1,11,21; 6:23; 7:25; 8:39; 10:9; 13:14). He explains that through his resurrection Jesus became our Lord (1:4; 4:24). Paul teaches us here that when we really believe our Lord Jesus has been raised from the dead, we “bear fruit for God.” So what does it really mean to live with the faith that Jesus is our Lord? As we saw in last week’s passage, it means to present ourselves to God, each and every day, in all that we do. In chapter 14 Paul describes it as depending on Jesus (14:4), seeking to honor him in all that we do (14:6), and, whether we live or die, to live with the conviction that, above all else, we belong to him (14:8). When we accept his grace of forgiveness, we’re happy to become obedient to him from our hearts (6:17). And as we live with Jesus as our Lord, we’re not oppressed or miserable: life is so joyful, meaningful and fruitful. It’s like the happiest marriage ever! But we shouldn’t just try to use Jesus; Jesus needs to be Lord of our personal lives, Lord of our marriages and families, and Lord of our church community. We need to make him the focus, learn how to love and serve him in all that we do, and surrender our all to him. With a believing heart and with gentleness and respect we also need to be sharing our faith that Jesus is Lord (10:9; cf. 1Pe3:15). When we live by faith with Jesus as our Lord, we bear fruit for God. We experience the healing of the inner fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal5:22,23). We also experience the outer fruit of leading others to saving faith in Jesus and to live as his disciples, which helps us know his love and joy even deeper.

Look at verse 5. Here Paul describes living apart from Jesus. It means living “in the flesh.” He’s going to say more about this in chapter 8. Here he adds that “our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members.” In verses 9–24 he explains this much more. Without Jesus as our Lord, it may seem that the Law is our lord, or that something or something else is our lord, but in fact, our sinful nature is ruling us. The fruit of this is “death” in all its misery—meaninglessness, futility, darkness, and hopelessness.

Then Paul makes a quick switch. Read verse 6. Here, “held us captive” literally means to hold us back or hinder us. This is what trying to keep God’s Law to earn our righteousness does to us. It may seem like the right thing to do, but it actually holds us back and hinders us. People still use God’s Laws in the Bible to build their own kind of religious legalism. The stricter the religious rules, the more spiritual it may seem. But because we’re all sinful by nature, any kind of religious legalism is in fact a heavy burden that’s impossible to bear (Ac15:10).

So why do we need to live with the faith that Jesus is Lord? Read verse 6 again. In Greek it literally says, “in newness of the Spirit, not oldness of the letter.” In 6:4 Paul said that by faith in our Risen Lord Jesus we “might walk in newness of life.” It’s a new way of life, depending on the Holy Spirit all the time, not on a bunch of rules. In chapter 8 Paul’s going to say much more about what this looks like in our lives. But here he’s especially describing spiritual freedom. He writes in 2 Corinthians 3:6, “…for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” And a few verses later he writes, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2Co3:17). Here in Romans 7:6 Paul uses the word “serve.” He says that through faith in Jesus as our Lord we can serve in the newness of the Spirit. The Spirit sets us free from our sinful nature and from all kinds of legalistic ideas and enables us to serve God genuinely, out of real love. It’s not a freedom we abuse, to “give opportunity to the flesh,” but a freedom we use “through love” to “serve one another” (Gal5:13). We use the freedom of the Spirit our Lord Jesus gives to lovingly “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal6:2). What a beautiful new life it is! Are we really living it?

In verses 7–13 Paul defends his high view of God’s Law, and in verses 14–25 he describes his own honest struggle with God’s Law. We need God’s Law to help us become more aware of our sin and of our helplessness to deal with our sin. As Paul explains in Galatians, we were like children and the law was like our guardian, teaching us about right and wrong and about who we really are, until we can be truly ready to receive Christ, and then we no longer need a guardian (Gal3:24,25).

So, in light of today’s passage, we should be asking ourselves, “What does my Christian life really look like? A happy marriage? Or dutiful drudgery? Am I reluctantly trying to keep religious rules, or am I joyfully serving my Lord Jesus Christ in the newness of the Spirit?” May God give us a deep conviction that we now belong to Jesus, and a new heart to live with him as my Lord. May he fill us with his Spirit and help us experience the spiritual freedom and joy of serving and bearing fruit for God.