

All Roads Lead Here: Released
By Jason Huff
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Psalm 102:18-22; Luke 4:16-21; Romans 7:1-6

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is Romans 7:1-6. May God add His blessing to the reading of His holy Word. “Do you not know, brothers - for I am speaking to men who know the law - that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.”

Catha and I still laugh about something that happened many years ago when I was working for a cell phone company. I took 80 calls a day from customers trying to pay their bills and get their phones working. It was intense, and a lot of what we said was carefully scripted to try and control our conversations. It got pounded in our heads day after day, week after week.

I didn't realize how much until one day when Catha and I sat down to dinner after a busy day at work. Catha asked me to pray, and I said, “Sure, hon.” I bowed my head, closed my eyes, and said, “Thank you for calling Cingular Wireless. This is Jason. May I please have your account or mobile number?” We laughed, but that's how deeply ingrained it was. Once that job ended, when my call center closed, I never had to use that line ever again. It no longer had to be a part of my vocabulary. I had been freed from my Cingular Wireless script.

Paul uses a similar illustration today. Paul has been talking about sin and the law for a while now, and he keeps coming at it so we thoroughly understand our relationship to them both. We've learned that when we are baptized into the Christian faith, we are baptized into Jesus' death. We die to ourselves and live for Him. Today's passage tells us why this is so important.

Paul explains through marriage how we were once bound to God's law. When a couple is married, in the eyes of God's law they are married for life – “until death do us part.” Marriage is meant to be a binding vow. Adultery happens if we break that vow to leave the marriage for someone else. We have broken the vow we agreed to.

But here's the thing: marriage is not forever. Some people really hate hearing that, and some people don't seem to mind so much. Now it doesn't mean that for those of us who are happily married, we won't know or love our spouses in eternity. But it does mean that the relationship will be different. Marriage ends at death. Jesus was clear with the Sadducees in Luke 20 that people would neither marry nor be given in marriage in the Kingdom of Heaven.

So when one spouse dies, what happens to the living spouse? The law has no effect because one party has died. Both parties are free from the regulation of the law. The living spouse is free to remarry, and there's nothing wrong with that. It's perfectly fine. Almost nowhere in the world do you find a law against a widow or widower remarrying.

That's Paul's analogy. Before we believe in Jesus, we are bound to the law and the sin that naturally sprang up from it. We were married to it and judged by it. As soon as humanity knew what God wanted, we were immediately tempted to break it, and we did it. We bore fruit for death. And the only way for us to be released from the law was for us to die to it. That happens through faith in Jesus. Jesus paved the way for us so that we would not be married to the law God gave to Israel, but that we could follow Him, in a metaphorical sense, to be married to Him instead. Paul says we can now follow in the new way, according to God's spirit, and not according to the old way of the written code.

Now we are going to diverge from the text just a little bit for a little discussion about the Old Testament law and what it's good for. Because if we misunderstand Paul, it would be really easy just to cut out the Old Testament from our Bibles and throw them in the trash. They'd be a lot easier to haul around, and we wouldn't feel guilty about not reading 75% of God's Word. But that's not what Paul intends. We need to understand why the Law exists and what purpose it has.

There are four reasons God gave us the law in the Old Testament and why it's still important for the Christian. *The first reason God gave us the Law was to lead us to Christ.* In Galatians 3, Paul calls the law a "guardian" that watched over us until Christ. The Law wasn't meant to save us but to point us to our need for a Savior. In Roman families, a guardian was a personal attendant who took care of the children until they were out of the home. In the same way, when Christ comes and we believe in Him, we no longer need our guardian and can move on to full spiritual maturity. The Law leads us to Christ and hands us over to Him.

Martin Luther understood this really well. Martin Luther was a monk around 1500 AD. Early in his life, Luther saw Jesus as "the hangman and jailer of his soul." He lived in constant depression and fear. And it's because he took the Law of God very seriously. Other monks went to confession once a day to say they'd had an extra bit of bread or stayed up past bedtime reading Scripture. There's not a lot of trouble to get into when you're in a cloister. But Luther constantly went to confession, agonizing over his sins. He saw in God's law how far he was from meeting God's demand of perfection. He knew he couldn't ever be good enough to be saved by his merit.

It was through reading Romans that Luther finally realized that Jesus had set him free from the law through His death on the cross. He didn't have to live in constant fear. He could live in joy because he was under the mercy and grace shown to us at Calvary. The law was Martin's teacher, his tutor, his guardian, showing him his desperate need for the redemption and forgiveness of Jesus. That was a good thing. But once that job was accomplished, Martin was free to live knowing he was forgiven. The law had fulfilled its purpose.

Maybe you've tried to read the Old Testament. Genesis is pretty easy; there're a lot of action and interesting stories, and that's also true of the first half of Exodus. But then the rest of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy contain God's law. And there are a lot of them – the Jewish rabbis said there were 613. It's really hard reading. Some of the laws don't make a lot of sense to us. And there's just so many of them! And most of us aren't like Martin Luther. We don't take them that seriously because we can't wrap our heads around them. And if we did, we'd be like, “How can I remember all of these? And how can I keep them all without breaking one?”

That's the question God intends for us to ask. The very nature of the law shows that we cannot keep it all. We must have someone to free us from its burdens because they are far too large. Have you ever had to carry something really large a long way, maybe a couch or a amp? After a while, you think, wow, I thought I could carry this but I really can't? That's the law. We can't hold its weight. The law exists, in part, for us to recognize that and turn to Jesus and say, “Can you carry this for me, please? Because I can't.”

Now that's one purpose of the law, but it's not the only purpose. The second reason God gave us the law is *to give us insight into His character*. You can tell the character of a nation by the laws it has. In a few ancient societies, they had no laws against adultery, but theft was a capital crime – you could be executed for stealing a loaf of bread. Emissions laws tell us that part of the character of that region is an attempt to reduce pollution. What laws your country has on important matters like abortion and marriage and crime says something about who you are.

We could spend all day talking about the aspects of God's character we see in His law, but we'll mention just a few. God cares about order. God isn't an anarchist saying “do whatever you want.” He gave His people a structured way to deal with life. God is just. He wants to see justice done in our affairs because it reflects His own justice. God is loving – the law constantly tells the people to show mercy to the poor, the orphan, the widow, and the non-Israelites, the least, last, and lost in society. God is active in our lives and that's reflected in how God's law is pro-active; it isn't just a list of things to avoid but things to do to help your neighbor. And God is sovereign over every part of life. In pagan culture, you prayed to the rain god to water your crops; you went to the fertility goddess to ask for children; you begged the war god for victory over your enemies. But God, the true God, gave us instructions on every aspect of life, asking us to turn to Him for all our needs.

The more you study the law, the more you fall in love with God who cares about every aspect of our lives. You even begin to realize that the law is there for our own good, that God desires the very best for us. I promise you that if you really study the Old Testament law, even though we're not bound to it, we'll see God's character shining there just as much as God's character shines in Jesus in the New Testament.

So what's another good reason for the law of God? *God gave us the law to restrain us from our worst impulses*. You've probably heard that locks are meant to keep honest people honest. If a criminal really wants to break into your car or your house, a lock isn't going to stop them. They'll break a window, use a crowbar, whatever, they'll make it happen. But locks keep the rest of us from casually wandering into the house across the street to see what they have and maybe deciding that we'd really like a couple things they have.

God's law doesn't keep us from doing evil, but it keeps us from carrying out the worst of our desires. It reminds us there are consequences to evil, and those consequences reel us in. Why don't I speed as fast as I could? To avoid a fine. Why don't I cheat on my taxes? Because I could wind up in trouble with the IRS. All of us avoid certain things not because we have a moral qualm against them but because the consequences are too high. In a bad moment, when we are desperate or angry or depressed, there are things that we wouldn't normally do that in that one moment we would, and the law holds us back. It makes us think twice. That's a good thing.

Here's the last reason for the law, and one that very much matters for the faithful Christian today: *God's law helps us know what pleases God*. Have you ever asked someone what they'd like for Christmas and they say, "Oh, I'll love whatever you get me, it doesn't matter," and then Christmas comes and you've gone crazy trying to figure out the perfect gift because you don't know and you give it to them and they're like, "Oh, that's nice...but I really wanted this other thing"? That makes me mad!

If you've experienced the love of God, if you know He cares about you and believe He sent His Son to us to teach us and be with us and sacrifice Himself for us, then you can go to the Law and see the kind of things that please Him, the kind of gift we can make out of our lives to Him. We have to read all of Scripture to see what parts of the law apply to us now. For example, God took bacon off the menu for the Israelites, but He put it back on the menu after Jesus' death and resurrection. (Aren't you glad you live on this side of the resurrection?) God wanted sacrifices of animals in the Old Testament, but that's been once and for always covered by Jesus.

But the law still teaches us what pleases God. He wants a heart fully devoted to Him and an attitude of love towards every neighbor. He wants us to avoid everything that harms our relationship with Him and with one another. Over and over again, because the law shows us the character of God, it shows us how we can go about becoming like Him and what attitudes and actions from us make Him smile on us.

So if the law does all these good things – if it's a guardian to bring us to Christ, a window into the character of God, a restraint against our evil natures, and the deepest insight we have on how to please God – what's wrong with it? Why did Christ have to die to free us from it?

Here's the key: *the law of God – the old written code – highlights our finite nature and our human love of disobeying God without ever giving us the hope of mercy*. First, it highlights that we are finite, which means we are limited by time and space and bodies. A few weeks ago, I mentioned how American law tells you what not to do. When it tells you what to do, it is very specific. Like, you have to pay your taxes, but you have to pay a specific amount. When you've done that, you've kept the law. Works-based religions like Islam are clear about what you have to do. In Islam, you must pray 5 times a day. You must give a specific amount of what you have to the poor. You must recite the Islamic creed as proof of your faith.

But God's law, the ancient Jewish law, creates an overwhelming burden. Honor your father and mother? That's open-ended. How do you do that? What do you do? There's no end to fulfilling that command and you can never know you've done it right. Keep the Sabbath holy and do no work on the Sabbath. What's work? Rabbis have argued for 3400 years what work is, but the Law doesn't. Can you keep a perfect Sabbath? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. What's "all"? How can I do that? If we take the law seriously, we find we absolutely cannot keep it because we are limited creatures.

And what's more, we don't want to keep it. The law itself gives us ideas of what we could do that would displease God. As soon as I know I'm supposed to set aside a day a week for the worship of God, I start asking, how little can I do and still do what I want? I'm not supposed to covet, but I really want Joe's RV and Fred's new iPhone...and the list goes on. When we are under the law, we are bound to keep all of it. We can't, and we don't want to.

And the law has no mercy. The law says, "if you do x, y is the result." There are no mitigating circumstances, no grace, no shades of gray. You are guilty or not guilty, black or white, condemned or found innocent. You break the law, you are a lawbreaker. James 2:10 says that if you're guilty of breaking even just one law, you're guilty of breaking all of it. In Galatians 5, Paul writes that if you put yourself under the law to try to make yourself right with God by your actions, you have to keep every part of it. If you're a "good" person and sin only once against one tiny part of God's law, you are a sinner, and as our final verse last week said, "The wages of sin is death."

So let's bring this down to a practical level. What does it mean for us that we are dead to the old law as we try to live as faithful followers of Jesus every day? Very simple but very important: we serve in the new way of the Spirit. What does that mean? We live in God's love and grace, and we show that love and grace to everyone else. We live lives that are deeply informed by the law of Israel, but not bound to its every word as binding for us now. We live concerned about loving God and our neighbors. We live concerned that others have food and clothing. We live concerned about justice for the oppressed. We live concerned for the addict and the immigrant, for the homeless and the mentally ill.

We also live concerned about morality and ethics, not because some law says you can or can't do something but because we want the very best for people, and ethical issues like abortion and marriage and addiction all add up to what's best for others. We live concerned about our relationship with God first and foremost, and the rest overflows from that everyday conversation with Him. We are set free from the law so that we can get to the heart of the matter – life with God and union with His Son.

We are dead to sin and the law. We aren't bound to them, just as a spouse is no longer bound at the death of his wife or her husband. We no longer have to sin, and we no longer have to worry like Martin Luther once did about living up to the impossible standards of the law. Let us go out from this place and live as God's chosen, holy, beloved people who share His love and grace with others.