

“TILL DEATH DO US PART” – ROMANS 7:1–6	57
THE LAW AND “I” (PAST) – ROMANS 7:7–13	57
THE LAW AND “I” (PRESENT) – ROMANS 7:14–25	58
POSTSCRIPT – THREE USES OF THE LAW	60
PERSONAL APPLICATION – ROMANS 8:1–17	61

• • •  
*Becoming a follower of Jesus has made  
 life harder, not easier!*  
 • • •

## THE LAW AND “I”

### “I HATE THE RULES!”

As a child, what was your reaction to “rules”? What memorable encounters did you have with rules? We have no trouble answering those questions because we met rules everywhere! They started at home. Throw your dirty clothes in the hamper. Clean your plate. Don’t talk with your mouth full. Do what I say the first time I say it. Look both ways. Come when I call you. Brush your teeth. Say your prayers.

It continued at school. Walk, don’t run, in the hallway. Be quiet in the library. Raise your hand if you want to say something. No hitting or hair-pulling. Here the complicator was that rules could change from room to room, from teacher to teacher. Even when school was out and we went off to camp, the counselors read us a list of rules as soon as we arrived. No swimming alone. No boys in the girls’ cabins. No girls in the boys’ cabins. In bed by 10:30 and lights out! Inside many a placid-looking child there lurked a fire-breathing dragon saying, “I hate the rules!”

Many of us adults still carry that opinion, but we are cautious about acting it out because we know there are consequences. The coach made us do laps. The drill sergeant shamed us in front of the whole platoon. The boss threatened to fire us. And the flashing lights in the rearview mirror made clear that lawless behavior could cost money. When it comes to rules, we adults have learned to “bend” them or, where possible, re-write them. But inside we still chafe against them.



Chapter 7 of Romans is about rules. Not just any rules but about God's rules, His Law revealed to Moses in the Ten Commandments and a host of other precepts and regulations. The word "law" is used in this chapter almost two dozen times. Since the Law comes from God, it must be good and necessary, right? But what role, exactly, does it play in the drama of salvation? That's not just an academic question. It gets highly personal. How do I interact with that Law? What does it do *to* me, or *for* me? What am I to think of God's Law, and how will I react to it? That's what we'll explore in this lesson.

### **"TILL DEATH DO US PART"**

#### *ROMANS 7:1-6*

Paul begins the chapter with a principle about the Law and our relationship to it. "The law is binding on a person only as long as he lives" (v. 1). To put it more simply: death cancels all contracts. Only a "death" could break our contract with the Law. To illustrate the principle, Paul uses the picture of marriage, which we solemnize with a vow that includes the words, "till death do us part."

Paul explains the picture. So long as a woman's husband is alive, she cannot marry another without becoming an adulteress (vv. 2-3). Now he applies it to us. The "marriage" in view is our prospective marriage to Christ. We want to "belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead" (v. 4). Before that happens, we are all trapped in a bad marriage with the Law! The legal principle says we cannot be "married" to the Law and to Christ at the same time. There must be a "death" to free us (from the Law) for this new marriage (to Christ). Paul describes all this from the woman's perspective because we Christians are, collectively, the "bride of Christ" (Eph. 5:22-32).

This is a vivid picture of the "before and after" of our Christian lives. Paul has already used the metaphor of slavery in Chapter 6, where "slaves to...lawlessness" became "slaves to righteousness" (6:19). The "before" was a journey toward death.

The "after" is a journey toward eternal life. Here the metaphor is marriage. The "before" was the time "while we were living in the flesh" (v. 5). The "after" is heralded by the words "but now" (v. 6). The "before" was a passionate cohabitation with the Law. The "after" is a "new life" — a joyful marriage with Christ.

For us, as for that married woman, there has come a change because of a death. Paul's analogy "limps" because instead of the husband dying, it is the woman herself who dies!

We are that woman, that bride, who "died ... through the body of Christ" (v. 4). Paul has made clear in 6:3-4, it is baptism that joined us to His death and buried us with Him. The incorporating effect of baptism is described in a comparable way in 1 Cor. 12:13 ("baptized into one body"). Now "we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive" (v. 6). Now we are free for the joyful union with Christ.

### **THE LAW AND "I" (PAST)**

#### *ROMANS 7:7-13*

Having given us an overview of the Law and believers in general, Paul applies it very specifically to the individual, using his own experience as a powerful example. In reading through the chapter, one notices that starting in verse 7, Paul switches to the personal pronoun ("I," "me," "my"). There are almost 50 occurrences in the next 19 verses! Michael Middendorf sees the remainder of Chapter 7 as having two parts:

- a) The Law and "I" (Past) in vv. 7-13 and
- b) The Law and "I" (Present) in vv. 14-25.

In verses 7 and 13, Paul again answers an imaginary (Jewish) opponent, who is sure to object to what he has said about the "bad marriage" with the Law. That opponent might say, "Paul, why are you saying our sinful passions were aroused by the Law? You can't be saying the Law is sinful, can you? I've always thought the Law a good thing, but

you're telling me it brings death!" Absolutely not, Paul retorts vehemently. Clearly, the Law itself is not sinful. The Law is not to be blamed for our dying. But what IS Paul saying?

In his personal past, Paul remembers the function of the Law was twofold. According to verse 7, its first function was to identify sin as sin. "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" This is not to say there was no sin before the Law was given! There was both sin and death before the Law was given to Moses (see 5:14!). But the commandments made clear what those sins were and against whom they were committed. Sin was identified clearly. A hunter guilty of trespassing might be ignorant of the fact until he sees the sign: "NO HUNTING – PRIVATE PROPERTY!"

The second function of the Law, Paul explains, is that it helps make sin "come alive" (v. 9). It may actually arouse "sinful passions" (v. 5) by forbidding them! Have you noticed how things are often more tempting once they are explicitly forbidden? Call it the "Forbidden Fruit Principle." That's what happened to Adam and Eve. How long did they work contentedly in the garden before God said, "By the way, don't eat of that tree"?

It was the script for Paul's own story. "I was once alive" (v. 9) is how he puts it. Things appeared just fine. He was living on ethical cruise control in a Pharisee's foolish paradise. He hadn't a clue about the true nature of sin and its awful consequences. He was like a man with cancer who didn't know it. But "when the commandment came" (Moffatt translates "came home to me"), Paul realized the emptiness of his life and the false security which had long shielded him. The old secure Paul died. He realized that he shared

something with Adam and Eve. "Sin...deceived me" (v. 11). Middendorf has him say it this way:

*I was alive, that is, I possessed physical life and thought I possessed spiritual life. However, I was actually living a "fleshly" existence under the lordship of the Law... I was being deceived by sin into a mistaken understanding of the purpose and function of the Law's commandment. When my full awareness of sin and its devious manipulation of the Law came home to me, I realized the actual effect of God's Law upon me as a sinful man – "I died"*  
(Romans 1–8, page 551).

Paul realized that the Law was not to blame for his "death." "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (v. 12). One ought not blame the x-ray for revealing the tumor! In the end, that x-ray propels a patient to elect surgery. In the same way, the Law's devastating diagnosis left Paul with no alternative. It propelled him into the arms of Christ, the Good Physician.

### **THE LAW AND "I" (PRESENT)**

#### *ROMANS 7:14–25*

Paul is now a follower of Jesus. He's experienced the baptismal death of his old life, administered by Ananias in Damascus (Acts 22:16). He's in a "new marriage" with Jesus Christ; he's a missionary to the Gentiles; he's inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak and write words that will become part of the scriptural witness to Jesus Christ. And yet...

Yet the Law still plays a role in his life. Becoming a follower of Jesus has made life harder, not easier! In the last portion of Chapter 7, Paul allows us to look through the window at the drama presently playing out on the stage of

his life. It is a struggle familiar to every believer in Christ, the ongoing tension between one's WILL and one's ACTIONS. "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (v. 15). We all know THAT it happens to us as it did to Paul, but WHY does it happen?

The first part of the answer, says Paul, is that he is made of "flesh" (v. 14). The word "flesh" is not always negative. It can be used simply to refer to the human body. In Gen. 2:23–24, Adam joyfully notes that Eve is "flesh of my flesh" and their subsequent marital union is summed up as becoming "one flesh." Jesus' incarnation is described in John 1:14 as "the Word became flesh." But elsewhere, "flesh" denotes the "whole fallen human nature" (Cranfield), the "workshop of sin" (Kaesemann). Jesus explains to Nicodemus that sinful people beget sinful children: "that which is born of the flesh is flesh" (John 3:6). Paul uses the word here in that negative way, noting that his flesh is the Law's adversary: "the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin" (v. 14). He says it again a few verses later: "Nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (v. 18). He distinguishes "me" from "the 'fleshly' part of me." Paul is making clear that the "I" has two aspects.

That brings us to the second part of the answer about why there is an ongoing inner struggle for the believer. In the believer, though he still walks about in his sinful flesh, there has arisen a "new man" who has "the desire to do what is right" (v. 18). This new self takes its place beside the "Old Adam." When he writes to the Corinthians, Paul says it this way: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). Like fraternal twins in the womb, these two selves are conjoined in a struggle that goes on through life. Paul's summary at the end of this chapter is "So then,

I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin" (v. 25).

Martin Luther and others after him used the Latin phrase *simul iustus et peccator* ("at the same time both saint and sinner") to characterize that turmoil we feel. That's why it can truly be said that becoming a Christian will make life harder, not easier, for us all. One preacher I knew said, "If you want peace on a windy day, just lie down. You only feel the wind when you stand up and walk against it." But, of course, when you lie down, you go nowhere at all!

It's enough to make us cry sometimes. Paul did. You can feel the frustration when he writes, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (v. 24).

The victorious Christian life, it is clear, doesn't mean we have no more temptations, no more stumblings, no more tears! And yet...

Yet we hear Paul, even in the midst of the battle, singing for joy:

*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (v. 25)*

That's where the Law, that good, holy, and very useful gift of God, drives us. Luther's "battle hymn" echoes the confident joy of Paul:

*With might of ours can naught be done,  
Soon were our loss effected;*

*But for us fights the valiant One, Whom  
God Himself elected.*

*Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is,  
Of Sabaoth Lord, And there's none  
other God;*

*He holds the field forever.*

(LSB, Hymn 656)

*The Law has its S.O.S. (shows our sins),  
which prepares us for the Gospel's S.O.S.  
(shows our Savior).*



### **POSTSCRIPT – THREE USES OF THE LAW**

Christian teachers have often said the Law has three uses. Students in many a confirmation class have memorized them as curb, mirror, and rule:

Curb – by threat of punishment, God uses the Law to control gross outbursts of sin. In highway terms, think of the warning signs, (“Watch your speed – We are!”) and the flashing lights in your rearview mirror.

Mirror – the Law shows us who we are and why we need a Savior. The Law has its S.O.S. (shows our sins), which prepares us for the Gospel's S.O.S. (shows our Savior). This use is the use most clearly described in Romans 7.

Rule – in saying, “what we are to do and not to do” the Law provides a “lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps. 119:105). The Benedictines have a Rule for their monastic order. So do we.

This “third use of the Law” has been a subject of some debate. Many argue, citing Paul himself in 1 Tim. 1:8–9, that “the law is good, if one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient.” Others respond by saying that, to the extent that we are completely faithful and obedient, no, we do not need it. But none of us is faithful all the time! To the extent we falter and fizzle in our Christian walk, the Law still provides a useful rule to show us the path ahead.

It's a debate worth having since it prompts us to read more carefully and examine our lives more prayerfully. Not everything is neatly tied with a bow!

## PERSONAL APPLICATION

## ROMANS 8:1-17

*Dear Father in Heaven, what a joy for me to call You “Father”! Today I come as Your dear child to meditate on Your Word to me here. With confidence, I remember Your promises. With a grateful heart, I lay aside my fear and remember that I belong to You. By this study time and by my life, help me give You glory. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*

For Review:

1. Describe the role of the Law in the drama of salvation.

---

2. What are two possible meanings of the word “flesh” in the Bible?

---

3. How might Romans 7 comfort the believer who says, “I feel like a failure as a Christian”?

---

Romans 8:1-4

4. The word “law” appears 4 times in these verses. To what does “law” refer in:

Verse 2a

---

Verse 2b

---

Verses 3-4

---

5. A key word in these verses is “condemnation.” In your own experience, which of the following feels like a source of condemnation for you?

\_\_\_ Spouse    \_\_\_ Children    \_\_\_ Childhood/teen memories

\_\_\_ Friend    \_\_\_ Conscience    \_\_\_ Church/Pastor

6. Who does the condemning in these verses? What is being condemned?

---

7. What preposition describes our connection with Jesus? \_\_\_\_\_

Romans 8:5-11

8. Where is the battle for control of your life fought...and won or lost? \_\_\_\_\_

9. In a few words, describe what’s going on in an unbeliever’s mind, as portrayed in vv. 5-8.

---

Do the same about a believer’s mind, as portrayed in vv. 9-11.

---

10. There's a close connection between the resurrection of Jesus and that of the believer. What connects the two in verse 11?

\_\_\_\_\_

11. What more do you learn about this from the following?

1 Cor. 6:14 \_\_\_\_\_

1 Cor. 15:20, 23 \_\_\_\_\_

2 Cor. 4:14 \_\_\_\_\_

Phil. 3:20-21 \_\_\_\_\_

1 Thess. 4:14 \_\_\_\_\_

Romans 8:12-17

12. Briefly describe how the words "debtor" and "heir" apply to you just now.

\_\_\_\_\_

13. It's common for people to say, "We're all children of God." What do they normally mean by that?

\_\_\_\_\_

In verse 15, what word describes the process by which we become God's children? \_\_\_\_\_

14. According to vv. 15-17, what things come as part of the "sonship package"?

\_\_\_\_\_

### Memory Verse Challenge for Chapter 8 (Part One)

Take time to review the verses from Romans you have memorized along the way.

What's the biggest obstacle you've faced in doing this?

What's the biggest blessing you've experienced?

Now tackle the verse from Romans 8 (Part One):

Romans 8:6 *To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.*