

“It’s a Wonderful Life!” (Romans 7:1–6)

Many years ago a very tragic boating accident resulted in the loss of two lives. A family enjoying a day at the lake made a sudden turn in their boat and the daughter fell overboard. Quickly turning the boat around, the father jumped into the water to save his daughter. The father could swim, but for some unexplained reason he immediately drowned, leaving the little girl thrashing about in the water. No one on board knew how to operate the boat, and it continued to drift away as the girl struggled.

Nearby a man was fishing in a small rowboat. Seeing the accident he began to row to the scene to help in any way he could. Paralyzed from the waist down, the man’s ability to help was limited. Approaching the struggling girl, he held out an oar for her to grasp, but he could do no more because of his condition. Unable to hold on to the oar, the girl slipped beneath the surface of the water while the man watched helplessly.¹

Humankind is just like the drowning girl. We are overcome by sin and unable to save ourselves. The Old Testament Law, and any other system of rules, is very much like the paralyzed man attempting to rescue the girl. His intention is sincere and commendable, but he lacks the power to save her. Likewise, the Law cannot save the sinner. Neither can the Law release the Christian from his or her bondage to sin. As a matter of fact, it is the Law, which somehow sustains our bondage to sin. The solution to the problem of sin, therefore, is to be released from the Law and thus, from sin.² Paul describes this release in Romans 7:1–6. He does so by explaining two great truths: (1) We have been released from the Law, and (2) we have been joined to Christ. Verse 1 serves as a principle for all that Paul will say. He then illustrates his principle in 7:2–3, and finally concludes with an application in 7:4–6.³ The main point of this passage is that we can try to live by rules, or we can live by a relationship. We could put it this way: *Focus on the Ruler not the rules.*⁴ Paul’s first great truth is . . .

1. We have been released from the Law (7:1–3). The reason that we’re free is because we have died to the Law. In every church there are believers who are prone to abuse grace and others who are more likely to advocate legalism.⁵ In chapter 6 Paul deals with grace abusers; in chapter 7 he deals with legalists. At various times in our lives, we are guilty of both. Therefore, Paul’s words are immensely practical for us. Paul begins with a foundational principle in 7:1: **“Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law),⁶ that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives?”** The question, “Or do you not know?” refers back to 6:3, which is the only other place this phrase is used in the New Testament.⁷ Here, Paul asks, “Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death?” Paul assumes that his biblically astute Jewish and Gentile⁸ readers (“brethren”⁹) understand that they are no longer under the Law because they have died with Christ. This is especially evident in the word translated “jurisdiction” (*kurieuo*), which is a form of the word “lord” or “master.”¹⁰ Paul is saying that the Law only has mastery over us while we are alive. But since we have died with Christ to the Law, we are free indeed! As Paul says in 6:14b: we are “not under law but under grace.”¹¹ We are freed from the Law by our death in Christ. One relationship is terminated, so that another may begin.¹² The Law of Moses, or any other law, only applies to us while we are alive. Dead people are released from the Law.

Imagine someone commits a crime and the legal authorities want him for prosecution and possible imprisonment, but then the police discover that the person has died. At that point they drop all concern about trying the criminal with any charges. The police no longer bother with him because the law only has authority over him while he is alive.¹³ Again, Paul’s principle is: The Law only has authority over a person while he is alive.

In 7:2–3 Paul now illustrates the principle that we have been released from the Law. **“For the married¹⁴ 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. So then,¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ Just for your information, this illustration does not really help us in the controversial issue of divorce and remarriage.¹⁷ The only point that Paul is making is: Marriage is for life. Any other commitment is not Christian marriage. Too many people—including some Christians—go into marriage thinking that if it does not work out, they can always get a divorce. That “back door” mentality often leads to the break-up of the marriage. The only way to stay married is for both parties to believe that “divorce is not an option.” So if you’ve been using “the D-word: (i.e., divorce), stop it! The only D-word you should be using is death, as in “til’ death do us part.”

Okay, I’m off of my soapbox. This purpose of Paul’s illustration is to help us understand our relationship to the Law, not our relationship with our spouse. Paul indicates that a wife is bound to her husband as long as he is alive. If she chooses to marry another man while her husband is alive she commits adultery (see the seventh commandment, Exod 20:14).¹⁸ However, if her husband dies, she is free to remarry. The wife is not guilty of breaking the seventh commandment because death has severed her legal relationship with her husband. A death puts the wife into an entirely different status. The Law that was restricting her is entirely irrelevant. She is free to enter into another relationship without being troubled by the Law which once bound her.¹⁹

Similarly, we died to the law *in Christ*. We are now “married” to Christ. This leaves the Christian free to pursue an entirely different kind of relationship. So I must ask you: “What is keeping you bound? Why are you staying in a legalistic relationship when Christ has set you free?” Mixing law and grace will never work. God has released you to experience and enjoy spiritual freedom. This is your emancipation declaration—your spiritual Independence Day. *Focus on the Ruler not the rules.*

[The first great truth we learned was, “We have been released from the Law.” Now in 7:4–6, he provides a direct application and a second great truth . . .]

2. We have been joined to Christ (7:4–6). When we died to the Law, we were made alive to live for Christ. In 7:4 Paul writes, **“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.”** Paul uses the word “therefore” (*hoste*)²⁰ to introduce the application of his theological argument and to conclude this section with a bang! He argues that we “were made to die to the Law *through* the body of Christ.” The passive verb translated “were made to die” (*ethanatothete*)²¹ shows that God made us to die to the Law. In Christ’s death we died! We died to the Law! The Law can never die, but we died! It is worth noting that we had to be “made to die to the Law” because our independent, performance-oriented way of life had to be broken. Prior to conversion, men and women attempt to earn their way to heaven through the Law and other works of righteousness. Yet, this verse makes it clear that “through the body of Christ” we have died to the Law. We must, therefore, place our faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ and relinquish any confidence in our flesh. This is true of our salvation *and* our sanctification. Remember, Paul is no longer discussing salvation, as he was in 3:21–4:25. In 5:1 he began a new section on sanctification. The context then makes it clear that we are no longer under Law as believers. To put it even more radically, the key to the Christian life is not obedience to God’s standards! In true spirituality, obedience to God’s standards is the byproduct and inevitable result of something that is centrally more important. God wants to release us from a life of rules, rituals, and regulations. *Focus on the Ruler not the rules.*

Paul states that we were made to die to the Law for two very specific purposes: a person and a purpose. The first purpose of our death follows the clause “so that” (*eis*). We have died to the Law so that we “might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead” (7:4b).²² Paul’s point here is that our

old husband (i.e., the Law) just made us behave worse! To bear a better fruit we had to marry a better husband (i.e., Christ).²³ Paul uses the word translated “joined” (*ginomai*) to refer back to his analogy of marriage (7:2–3). The good news of the gospel is that we are now married to another. We have been “joined” with Christ. Paul is motivating us to experience a deepening relationship with our new husband, Jesus Christ. Jesus longs to be intimate with us. Have you ever thought about that? Did you know that Jesus desperately desires a deep relationship with you? This is a mind-boggling realization. The God of the universe wants fellowship with you and me more than we could or would ever want fellowship with Him (even on our best spiritual day).

Not only have we been released from the Law to a Person but Paul also shares with us that we have been released for a specific purpose. Notice that we have died to the Law “in order that [*hina*] we might bear fruit for God” (7:4b).²⁴ Paul expects us to “bear fruit for God.”²⁵ Please notice, Paul doesn’t say “manufacture fruit” or “produce fruit”—he says “bear fruit.”²⁶ He explicitly states that we are to “bear fruit *for God*.” This means our first aim is to please Him and glorify Him. The phrase “bear fruit” (*karpophoreo*) is used elsewhere by Paul in a positive sense only in Col 1:6, 10 (cf. Rom 7:5b). In this Pauline prayer to the church at Colossae, Paul challenges his readers to a life of good works. Are you flowing in good works? Are you seeking to serve? Are you striving to love those that the Lord brings to you on a daily basis? Jesus said, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matt 5:16). When people observe your life they ought to say, “What shiny and delicious fruit! I’ve got to pluck a piece of that fruit and bite into it!”

Elsewhere the word for “fruit” (*karpos*) includes worship (Heb 13:15), giving money (Rom 15:28), and godly character (Gal 5:22–23). As we contemplate how the Bible uses the term “fruit,” may I ask you several questions? Is your love for worshipping Jesus deepening? Do you look forward to attending church and being with God’s people, or would you rather be out of town, shopping, or watching sports? Do you offer God the fruit of your lips as you worship with His people (Heb 13:15)? What about giving? Rom 15 calls giving “fruit.” Giving is one of the greatest expressions of our worship. Jesus talked more about money than anything else. He devoted twice as many verses to money than to faith and prayer combined. He even had more to say about money than heaven and hell combined. Jesus spent a whopping 15% speaking about money.²⁷ If you are a committed follower of Jesus Christ, are you growing in this area of stewardship? What about the most obvious expression of fruit bearing—the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23)? Are you looking more and more like Jesus on a daily basis? If not, why not? As we will discover in Rom 8, God has predestined you to be “conformed to the image of His Son.” How are you cultivating the fruit of the Spirit in your life? Why not choose a particular fruit from the list of nine and cultivate this character quality? God wants us to bear fruit for His glory!

In 7:5 Paul contrasts our fruitful experience as believers with our unfruitful experience as unbelievers. He commonly reminds us that who we once were is no longer who we are. Paul writes, “**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.**” In our old life, the Law was the means of arousing our sinful passions, and the members of our body were used to “bear fruit for death.” Consequently, we certainly bore fruit, but it was deadly fruit that led to a harvest of death! Well-meaning Christians often divulge how they formerly lived wicked and immoral lives, and one almost gets the impression that they feel they are missing out now. We must emphasize the death dealing consequences of our sin and avoid glorying in our past life apart from Christ.

Paul concludes this text in 7:6 by summarizing 7:1–5: “**But now we have been released from the Law,²⁸ having died to that by which we were bound,²⁹ so that we serve in newness of the Spirit³⁰ and not in oldness of the letter.**”³¹ Thank God for 7:6! It means that 7:5 is not the end of the story. When we are utterly hopeless and helpless, God has a wonderful habit of *butting in!* Paul says, “But now.”³² Through Christ we are discharged from the Law, dead to that which held us captive. Exercising faith in Jesus

Christ as Savior is not a small matter. It is a gigantic leap from sin, death, and despair to life, newness, and power. When a person believes in Jesus Christ, he or she is taken out of this realm of sin, judgment, and Law, and is given the Holy Spirit. It is an entirely new realm, a realm “in Christ” and under grace. Where sin once abounded, now grace abounds all the more (cf. 5:20). We must grasp this fact. We have died to the Law; we are in the Spirit forever.

Let us make sure that we understand why and how we have been “released from the Law.” (1) The why: We have been “released from the Law” as a result of Christ’s sinless life. Jesus “fulfilled the law” (Matt 5:17–18). He came “under the Law” (Gal 4:4). He kept the Mosaic Law in minute detail. He obeyed the Sabbath (but not additions to it). He kept its ritual, attended its festivals, and offered its sacrifices. He refused to criticize it when invited to. When He changed it (and He did) it was to move in the direction of a deeper and higher spirituality (Matt 5:21–48). Jesus fulfilled the Law perfectly! He is the epitome of all that the Law was intended by God to be. (2) The how: Since Jesus perfectly fulfilled the Law, we are released from the Law the very moment we trust in Him. It is a matter of substitution. Instead of striving and straining to keep the Law perfectly, we choose to trust in the One who did keep it perfectly.

So how do we “serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter”? Paul makes it clear that the Law has been abrogated because it is too low a level for Christian spirituality.³³ We should definitely read the Law, but when we read it, we must not say to ourselves, “How can I obey this?” Instead, we should talk to Jesus and say, “Lord, how do you want me to go beyond all this that I am reading about in the Law of Moses?” Jesus will answer and lead you through His Spirit (see 8:1–17). If we fall in love with Jesus and walk in the Spirit deliberately, we will fulfill the Law accidentally. We do not need to be “under” the letter; we can serve in the Spirit. Godliness comes indirectly by faith, by Jesus, by the Spirit. The Law cannot produce the righteousness we want; only a direct relationship with Jesus can. It is not that duty and obedience are not important. They are! It is just a matter of one’s focus and motivation.

Many years ago, I went fishing in some very rough water with my father-in-law and brother-in-law. These two men are rugged outdoorsmen—manly men! I, on the other hand, was on my first fishing trip. My only goal was to earn some chest hair or at least not embarrass myself too much. Unfortunately, the water was so choppy that I was continually on the verge of “coughing my cookies.” I’m sure I looked more like a green bean than a manly man. Being an inexperienced sailor, the only thing I knew to do was to close my eyes. Yet this resulted in me feeling even worse. It was a sickening experience. Eventually, my father-in-law approached me and asked, “Keith, are you feeling okay?” I wanted to answer him, but I was afraid of what might come out of my mouth (literally). So I just shook my head. He immediately recognized what was wrong and replied, “Don’t close your eyes; just look at the horizon.” As I began to look at the horizon and watch the setting sun, the sickness began to leave me and I was able to return to fishing.

What is your gaze fixed upon? My prayer is that it is fixed upon Jesus Christ alone. When we open our eyes to who Jesus is, we will experience true freedom and exhilaration. In the process, Jesus will also enable and empower us to live a victorious Christian life. Will you fall in love with Jesus and let Him live His life in and through you? *Focus on the Ruler not the rules.*

Scripture References

Romans 7:1–6

Jeremiah 31:31–34

Ezekiel 36:25–27

John 14:16–17

2 Corinthians 2:15–16

Galatians 3:19–25

Hebrews 7:19, 22; 8:6

Study Questions

1. When did I die to the Law (Romans 7:1–3; cf. 6:1–14)? Did I understand the ramifications of my death to the Law when I first trusted in Christ? Why or why not? How have I come to understand the role that God’s grace plays in my Christian life?
2. How have I sought to cultivate a relationship with Jesus since my release from the Law (Romans 7:4)? In what areas of my life have I been able to “bear fruit for God?” Have I truly died to the demands of the Law in order to rest in the righteousness of Christ?
3. How did the Law increase sin in my life when I was an unbeliever (Romans 7:5)? Did the Law ever enable me to please God? What did it do for me? How does the Law expose sin in my life now that I’m a believer? What purpose(s) does the Law serve for believers?
4. What are the differences between bearing fruit for God and bearing fruit to death (Romans 7:4b–5)? Where do irreligious acts fall (e.g., community service)? Into how many realms of the believer’s life should bearing fruit for God extend? In what area of my life is it the most difficult to bear fruit?
5. In what specific ways is my Christian experience “new” and fresh (Romans 7:6)? Who has observed a difference in my life since I became a Christian? How can I avoid living under the law? How can I ensure I rely upon the Holy Spirit?

Notes

¹ My friend, Bob Deffinbaugh, granted me permission to use this story, which involved the family of his college roommate. Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Relationship Between Rules and Righteousness” (Rom 7:1–6):

www.bible.org/seriespage/relationship-between-rules-and-righteousness-romans-71-6.

² Paul uses the term “law” eight times in Rom 7:1–6. The word “law” (*nomos*) or “commandment” (*entole*) appears a total of twenty–nine times in Rom 7. Additionally, the law is called “the written code” (7:6) and “that which is good” (7:13).

³ See also Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 345.

⁴ This idea was adapted and revised from Brad McCoy, “OT Law and NT Believer” (Rom 7:1–6): unpublished sermon notes, Tanglewood Bible Fellowship.

⁵ Swindoll offers a helpful definition of legalism: “An obsessive conformity to an artificial standard for the purpose of exacting oneself.” Charles R. Swindoll, *The Grace Awakening* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 73.

⁶ Lopez notes in several places (e.g. Rom 2:12, 17, 25, 27; 3:31; 4:13–14; 10:4) that the anarthrous use refers to the Mosaic Law, or Torah. René A. Lopez, *Romans Unlocked: Power to Deliver* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2005), 143. Moo states, “Paul never elsewhere uses *nomos* to refer to secular law.” Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*. New International Commentary of the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 411.

⁷ The unique Greek phrase is *he agnoeite*, not to be mistaken with *ouk oidate* (see Paul’s uses in Rom 6:16; 11:2; 1 Cor 3:16; 5:6; 6:2, 3, 9, 15, 16, 19; 9:13, 24).

⁸ Although it is tempting to interpret Rom 7:1–6 as referring to the Jewish believers in the church at Rome, Paul’s use of the term “brethren” (*adelphoi*) includes Jews and Gentiles (see Rom 1:13; 7:4; 8:12; 10:1; 11:25; 12:1; 15:14, 30; 16:17). See also Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 411–12.

⁹ This is the first time that Paul has addressed his readers as “brethren” (*adelphoi*) since Rom 1:13.

¹⁰ The verb *kurieuo* (“has jurisdiction”) in Rom 7:1 echoes the same verb in 6:9, 14 where it is used of the mastery of sin and death.

¹¹ The interconnection of Rom 6:14 and 7:1 can be established by the following: (1) the last use of *kurieuo* (“to have mastery”) preceding 7:1 is found in 6:14. The law, much like sin, “lords it over” a person; (2) the last use of *nomos* (“law”) before 7:1 is found in 6:14. Chapters 6 and 7 are in literary parallel; chapter 6 deals with the believer’s relationship to “sin” and chapter 7 with the believer’s relationship to “law.” The analogy of death freeing a slave (6:12–23) is paralleled by death freeing the marriage bond (7:1–6). See Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949), 268.

Chapter 6	Chapter 7
6:1 “sin”	7:1 “law”
6:2 “died to sin”	7:4 “died to law”
6:4 “that we might walk in newness of life”	7:6 “that we might serve in newness of spirit”
6:7 “he who has died is freed from sin”	7:6 “we have been freed from the law having died to that wherein we were held”
6:18 “having been set free from sin”	7:3 “free from the law”

Boa summarizes nicely: “In Romans 6, we die to the penalty of sin since Christ died in our place and we died with him. In Romans 7, we died to the law that is always there, continually revealing the sin we commit. By dying to the law we die to the guilt it produces. By dying to sin we die to the penalty the law dictates. The gospel delivers the believer from sin and from the law.” Kenneth Boa and William Kruidenier, *Romans*. Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2000), 219.

¹² Christopher Ash, *Teaching Romans, Volume 1* (London: Proclamation of Trust, 2009), 248.

¹³ Michael Eaton, *Romans: A Practical Exposition*, forthcoming.

¹⁴ In Jewish law only the husband could break a marriage (Deut 24:1), while in Roman law either partner could break the marriage bond. Yet Paul uses a very strange term for married (*hupandros*), which means “under a husband,” showing that he is reflecting on Jewish law. See Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 413 and Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*. The IVP NT Commentary series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 168–69. This conclusion is also supported by the phrase “released from the law of marriage,” meaning the law that bound her

under her husband's authority. See James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*. Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), 360.

¹⁵ There is a double connective here that cannot be easily preserved in English: “consequently therefore” (*ara oun*). It emphasizes the conclusion of what he has been arguing (see NET study notes). Most English versions translate this double connective as “so then” (NET, NASB, HCSB, NKJV, NIV); others render it “accordingly” (ESV, NRSV).

¹⁶ Ash, *Teaching Romans, Volume 1*, 249 writes: “There is a slight complication between the illustration (vv. 2, 3) and the reality (v. 4). In Paul's illustration the husband dies and the wife (who is still alive) remarries. In the reality which Paul is illustrating, the believer is like a wife who dies and then, as a resurrected wife, marries a resurrected husband.”

¹⁷ There is a scholarly consensus among the major commentators on this point (e.g., Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 413; Schreiner, *Romans*, 348).

¹⁸ There was provision in the OT for divorce in certain circumstances (Deut 25:1–4), but the general principle is that marriage is for life.

¹⁹ Eaton, *Romans*, forthcoming.

²⁰ The coordinating conjunction *hoste* (“therefore”) is a marker of result used to transition by drawing a conclusion from a previous point. This is Paul's first use of *hoste* in Romans (he will use it four more times—7:6, 12; 13:2; 15:19). Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 414 n. 29 notes: “Paul often uses this conjunction [*hoste*] to introduce the application of his theological argument.”

²¹ Hoehner observes this conveys the sense that “you were put to death to the law by God in connection with your crucifixion with Christ” (cf. Rom 6:4–6). Harold W. Hoehner, “Romans” in *The Bible Knowledge Word Study* (Colorado Springs: Victor, 2006), 163.

²² As Paul wrote earlier (Rom 6:1–14), we have been co-crucified, co-buried, and co-resurrected with Christ through faith (3:21–4:25). The simplest way to understand this is to realize that what happened to Jesus has happened to us. The death that we died in Christ has removed us altogether from that sphere in which the Law exercises “jurisdiction” (7:1). Therefore, because the demands of the Law have been met in the death of Christ, we are no longer under the Law, but under grace.

²³ Ash, *Teaching Romans, Volume 1*, 251.

²⁴ See Gal 2:19, “For through the Law I died to the Law, so that I might live to God.”

²⁵ Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, 275 remarks: “It is only when a man is free from the law that he can really bear fruit for God.”

²⁶ In John 15:1–11 Jesus indicates that those disciples who are healthy branches connected to the vine will bear “fruit . . . more fruit . . . much fruit.”

²⁷ Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989), 16–17.

²⁸ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 415 further elaborates on how this teaching would have impacted any Jewish readers of Romans: “Thus, in vv. 5–6, where Paul elaborates v. 4, the law is presented as not only failing to deal with sin but as actually *stimulating* sin in the person who is ‘bound’ to it. That law which Jews, not unnaturally, considered a great bulwark against sin is actually, according to Paul, an instrument that sin has used to produce more sin (vv. 5, 8) and to make the sin problem even worse than it was without the law (vv. 9–11, 13). This suggests that, as in 6:14, Paul in 7:4 is viewing the law as a ‘power’ of the ‘old age’ to which the person apart from Christ is bound.”

²⁹ The same verb translated “bound” (*katecho*) in Rom 7:6 is used in 1:18 to describe those who “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”

³⁰ The expression, “so that we serve in newness of the Spirit” is conceptually similar to Rom 6:4, where participation in Christ's death is, “so we too might walk in newness of life” (see also Schreiner, *Romans*, 353).

³¹ This is the second time that Paul draws a contrast between “the Spirit” and “the oldness of the letter” (see Rom 2:27–29).

³² Cf. Rom 3:21; 6:22; 1 Cor 15:20; Eph 2:13; Col 1:22; 3:8.

³³ Constable lists several passages which reveal that as Christians we have no obligation to keep the Law of Moses: Rom 10:4; 14:17; Mark 7:18–19; John 1:17; Acts 10:10–15; 1 Cor. 8:8; 2 Cor 3:7–11; Heb 7:12; 9:10; Gal 3:24; 4:9–11; 5:1). Thomas L. Constable, “Notes on Romans” (2010 ed.):

www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/romans.pdf, 79.