

Paul must explain what he means by saying that Christians are not under law but under grace and this he does in these verses.

“Living in the Spirit”

Romans 7:1-6

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In 6:14 Paul had said to his Christian hearers, “you are not under law but under grace.” In the remaining verses of the chapter he had dispelled a possible misunderstanding of that statement, viz. that if believers were not under law they were free to disobey the commandments of the law. In the opening verses of chapter 7 he returns to his statement of 6:14 to explain and amplify it. What does it mean that believers are no longer under the law? Generally these verses repeat and expand upon the themes of the previous two paragraphs.

Text Comment

v.6 This is another of Paul’s characteristic anticipations. He mentions life in the Spirit here but does not develop the thought until chapter 8. We will see that the first 4 verses of chapter 8 summarize the thought of this paragraph.

It is important in an argument as ordered and as compressed as Paul’s in Romans to keep a view of the forest while looking at the individual trees. In Romans 6 Paul anticipated an objection to his doctrine of justification by faith, the doctrine expounded in chapters 3-5. It was an objection he knew very well people had already raised, as he says in 3:8. If you break the connection between our obedience and our right standing before God, you do away with any motive for righteous living. You undercut morality. Paul replied to that objection by saying that there are other reasons for holy living than the attempt to earn one’s way to heaven and that Christ, in his death, had not only freed his people from sin’s condemnation, he had liberated them from sin’s power and raised them to a new kind of life. Christians live righteously as the inevitable result of Christ’s having saved them *for this purpose!*

Along the way of this argument, however, he had also said that “the law was added so that the trespass might increase” (5:20) and that believers “are not under law but under grace” (6:14). Remarks like those, apparently dismissive of the law and of its importance, were bound to raise the hackles of Jews and even of Jewish Christians. They loved and revered God’s law and Paul seemed to be slighting it. So he must explain himself again. He must clear his doctrine of another likely objection: viz. that it belittles the holy law of God and makes the revelation of that law, surely one of the greatest events in redemptive history, a bad thing rather than the good thing God’s people had always understood it to be.

It is to the answering of that objection and the explaining of himself in regard to the law of God that Paul writes what is our chapter 7. That becomes particularly clear in v. 7, the first verse of the next paragraph, where he asks another of his rhetorical questions, questions that tell us quite precisely what objectors to Paul’s doctrine were actually saying. “Paul is saying that the law is sin!” Paul will respond directly to that accusation in the verses that follow, but before he gets

there, he needs to expand on his statement that the believer is not under law but under grace. This he does in vv. 1-6.

And he begins by explaining what he means by a person “dying to the law.” He uses an illustration taken from the law. A woman is bound to her husband so long as he lives. It is a general statement, of course. The law of God provided for divorce under certain circumstances, but Paul isn’t interested in that. He is making a general point. A married woman cannot lawfully marry another man. But a widow can. A woman whose husband has died is free to marry again. The law does not forbid a marriage in her case because she has been set free from her first marriage by the death of her husband. The first marriage has no continuing claim on her.

Well, says Paul, think of your relationship to the law in that same way. You were bound to it. But you died when Jesus died for you. And by your death you were released from your obligation to the law and set free for another relationship and another way of life in which the law is not your master, domineering over you. I say domineering advisedly because obviously Paul thinks it is liberation from a cruel bondage to be freed from the law in the sense in which he is speaking. As he says in v. 5, when we were under the law we were controlled by our sinful nature and sinful passions and were living a life that could only end badly. We were living a life that must have taken us to eternal death.

And, so Paul concludes, “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, [literally, the old way of the letter.]”

But, now, we have this great question and controversy to resolve. In what way were we once under the law and in what respect are we no longer under the law? And how does life in the Holy Spirit – for that is surely what Paul means by “way of the Spirit,” as the expansion of his remarks here later in chapter 8 makes unmistakably clear – how does life in the Spirit differ from life under the law?

As you are aware, a great many answers have been given to those questions. Some, for example, have argued that since Paul must be talking about the Law of Moses, he must be contrasting the OT and the NT. He is talking about the different spiritual situations that prevailed before and after the incarnation of the Son of God, his death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, and the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. *He must be talking about two ages or two epochs in the history of salvation: the age of the law that ended with the appearance of the Messiah and the age of the Spirit that began at Pentecost.* Many Christians have so understood Paul and drawn from that interpretation a wide range of conclusions. For example, some have taught that Christians no longer are to have anything to do with the Ten Commandments; that the life of the Spirit is no longer under the law precisely in this: that it is a life in which goodness comes up from within without reference to any commandment from God; it is natural, not directed; it is willing, not ordered or commanded.

But it is certain that Paul is not contrasting two ages or epochs with their corresponding spiritual situation. *First*, Paul has already and will again assert the continuing authority of the Law of God in the life of God’s people and, indeed, over the life of the unbelieving. He has already been

careful to say, in 3:31, that far from nullifying the law of God by his doctrine of justification by faith, in fact he upholds the law. Later in this same chapter he will say that the law is holy, righteous, and good. In a statement recapitulating the argument of this paragraph of chapter 7, in the opening verses of chapter 8, Paul will again say that being set free from sin is for the purpose of renewing men precisely so that they can meet the righteous requirements of the law. Later, in the ethical section of the letter, Paul will talk about Christians fulfilling the law and will enumerate some of the commandments of the law that they must keep.

And this is everywhere Paul's perspective. He obviously believes we are obliged to keep the commandments of God. He cites a number of them in his letters as obligations for us to keep. He can say such things as "circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts." [1 Cor. 7:19]

But, more than this, what is obvious in Paul's exposition of chapters 6-8 is that the before and after he is talking about is not of epochs in the history of mankind but of stages in the experience of individual human beings. The people to whom Paul was writing were under the law long after Pentecost and were placed under grace only when they became Christians. As he begins verse 4, "So, my brothers..." In Paul, the before and after is not Moses and Christ, but unbelief and faith, or, as he will put it in chapter 8, first the life of the flesh and then the life of the Spirit. The before and after Paul is talking about, first under law, then under grace, is experienced in our day as it was in Paul's. There are a goodly number of you who once were under law, but are now, God be praised, under grace.

Finally, Paul makes it clear that our bondage to the law was the result of our sin and sinfulness, not the law itself. The law becomes in 8:2, the law of sin and death, and then the point is made explicitly in 8:3: the problem was our weakness because of our flesh or sinful nature. What made the law a cruel master for us was our sin, not the law itself, and that is why the problem, the bondage of men to the law, continues and shall continue to the end of time. The appearance of Jesus Christ did not take sin out of the world and doesn't take it out of the life of his people *until they believe in him*. So, again, the contrast is not of two epochs, but of two stages of human life.

But if that is not Paul's meaning, if he is not contrasting the ancient epoch with the epoch introduced by Christ and his apostles, if the before and after that Paul is talking about is that of two spiritual situations in human life, two situations experienced as surely before the incarnation – for example, in the lives of Abraham and David, whom Paul has already used as illustrations of the salvation he is explaining – as they are experienced by men and women today, what does Paul mean by being "under law?"

I. Well, first, he obviously means "under the condemnation of the law."

We know that because in Romans 8:1, which everyone understands to be a recapitulation of what has already been said in the letter to this point, Paul describes being set free from the law by saying that "there is, therefore, now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." That is the main thing: we are no longer condemned by the law. We are set free from the law by being set free from its condemnation. Paul's exposition here in Romans 6 and 7, in other words, is another way of saying what he says in Galatians 3:10:

“For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law.’”

And what is the remedy for that curse? Paul goes on: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us...so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit,” a statement quite like the one that concludes this paragraph.

We must take care that we never, ever underestimate the wonder of this liberation, the first fruit of the sacrifice of our Savior on our behalf. We were, as sinners, condemned to judgment by the law because we were law-breakers. But by bearing our punishment in our place, the curse was removed and we were freed from the threat of that terrible judgment. What that means is that someone who is united to Christ by faith, someone who, therefore, died in the death Jesus died and rose in the resurrection of his body, cannot come under condemnation. No matter how viciously he or she might sin, no matter what commandment he or she might break, there is no condemnation. Your punishment has already been suffered by another, by no one less than the Son of God; it cannot be imposed on you. You can easily understand how people would misunderstand *that* and take offense at a statement like *that*. If I can’t sin my way out of salvation, so long as I am a believer in Christ, then “Katie bar the door;” all hell is about to break loose.

But, no matter possible misunderstandings, this is true and must be true. The penalty of our sins has already been borne. No sin can bring us under the condemnation of the law. David’s adultery and murder did not place him again under the condemnation of the law. Peter’s betrayal of the Lord at the worst possible moment did not nullify his liberation from the curse of the law. And the sins of Christians ever since have not done so.

You are aware, perhaps, that for a long time now there have been said to be three reasons for church discipline. Calvin settled upon three and we have been repeating his list ever since and do so in our own Presbyterian Church in America’s *Book of Church Order*. The three reasons are: 1) the honor of God, 2) the recovery of the offender, and 3) the warning of the saints. The last two are reasons that are mentioned in the Bible itself on a number of occasions. The censures of church discipline, excommunication especially, are designed to force a rebellious or drifting church member to face the consequences of his or her unwillingness to live as a Christian should. And they are designed to remind the rest of the church that people cannot continue to represent themselves as Christians or think of themselves as part of the people of God if they are unwilling to live the Christian life. That is clear and the Bible says as much a number of times.

But the other reason, Calvin’s first reason is not so obvious. Are we to cast sinful people out of the church for the honor of God’s name? Is his reputation sullied when professing Christians disobey his commandments? Well, there is surely a sense in which the reputation of the Lord and his gospel are in the hands of his people. The Lord Jesus said that if Christians lived in unity with one another that would be a demonstration to the unbelieving world that the Father had sent the Son into the world. And Paul urges his readers to adorn, to make beautiful the gospel and the teaching of the Bible by the lives they lived. That is true. But the Bible never says that we should practice church discipline to preserve the honor of the Lord’s name. And when we begin to think

that having sinners in the church is a stain on the Lord's name, we are very likely to begin moving in a direction that will swell the pride of some and crush the spirits of others. If we come to think that having sinners in the church is a stain on the Lord's name we are likely to embrace a very judgmental and harsh approach to one another in the church. It has led to that in the past. The Bible never says that we must cast sinners out of the church to preserve the honor of the Lord's name.

The Lord knew what he was doing when he pronounced his people in Christ beyond condemnation. He knew they would continue to sin and sometimes sin greatly. But he has never been ashamed to be associated with sinners – not during the days of his ministry and not during this long age while he sits at the right hand awaiting the day of his return. That too is part of the honor of his name. It is his glory as our Savior to have annihilated the condemnation of the law for his very sinful people.

I was working on my evening sermon earlier this week, a sermon on prayer; part of this series I am doing on the disciplines of the godly life. And in preparation for that series I read again part of Martin Luther's *A Simple Way to Pray for a Good Friend: How One Should Pray; for Peter the Master Barber*.

Apparently while cutting the famous Reformer's hair, his barber, Peter Beskendorf, had asked him, "Dr. Luther, how do you pray?" For his pains he got back a 40 page pamphlet that was then published in the Spring of 1535 and is still read avidly today by people who want to develop a better approach to their daily prayer. Well, I give you that introduction, so that you can better appreciate the fact that Luther's barber, Peter Beskendorf, got drunk one day and in a rage killed his son-in-law. He was guilty of the crime of manslaughter. He didn't deny it; no one disputed the facts. It took Luther's intervention to prevent Beskendorf's execution; instead he was exiled from Wittenberg. But Luther never stopped believing that there was no condemnation for Peter, his barber, who remained a Christian and a forgiven man, no matter the terrible thing that he had done.

We see what a mighty thing our liberation from the law is when we contemplate such a result. That there is no condemnation for a murderer – a man who *as a Christian* killed another human being, even a member of his family, his own daughter's husband – because he is in Christ Jesus and because he died to the law when Christ died for him.

That is the first thing that Paul means by saying that we are no longer under the law or that we have been released from the law. We are no longer condemned by the law or subject to the punishment it threatens to all who break its commandments, which all of us do all of the time. Christ has delivered us by enduring the law's punishments himself, in our place. In Toplady's famous lines:

The terrors of law and of God
 With me can have nothing to do;
 My Savior's obedience and blood
 Hide all my transgressions from view.

- II. *But there is a second sense in which Paul says that we are no longer under the law. We are no longer shut up to the way of the law. We are no longer reduced to attempting to be righteous with a method that is bound to fail.*

When Paul says that we are no longer under law he also means that we have been delivered from the law's way of producing righteousness. Do this, do that; keep this commandment; keep that. That is the way the folk of Paul's day, Gentiles and even more so Jews, thought about righteousness and the way most people think about being good today. People who are good are the people who do good. If you want to be a righteous person, you must behave righteously. Keep God's commandments. In the immortal words of Spike Lee, "Do the right thing."

But Paul has already said that is the counsel of despair. For the law is incapable of addressing the problem of our fallen natures, irretrievably bent toward sin and selfishness. It demands obedience but does not help us to obey. More than this, the law actually increases our unrighteousness and provokes our sin. Not only is forbidden fruit the sweetest, but rebels in the nature of the case thrive on rebellion. This statement in v. 5, that sinful passions *are aroused by the law* explains a great deal about man's life in the world. Why does he relish doing things that are so self-destructive? Because those are the very things that God forbids and he will not obey God. He will destroy himself before he will submit to God. Because the law brings God's will to his mind it provokes man's rebellion. Tell a young person what he cannot and must not do and it makes him intensely interested in that behavior. How often have we seen children and teenagers disobey for no other reason than that they do not want to obey. It is disobedience for disobedience's sake. They do not want to do what they are told. Well, adults mask their motives better, but it is the same with them.

The law was never meant to save anybody. It was never given to make a sinful man righteous in God's sight. That was not its purpose. And so when it is put to that purpose it is employed in a way for which it is not suited. No wonder it doesn't work. No wonder it makes matters worse. Hollywood wants you to believe that bad people become good people all the time by changing their behavior. But even in Hollywood movies there is some recognition of how unlikely that is, how unlikely that a bad person becomes truly good. In the movies, when such a transformation occurs usually some ghosts have appeared to terrify the person into changing his ways; or some terrible crisis occurs that brings the person to the end of himself or herself. But that is the movies. In real life a few good deeds cannot change a heart; behavior cannot make a person truly good.

In his summary in 8:3 Paul makes this point again. The law was powerless because of our sinfulness. The law points men in the direction they do not want to go; in the direction they have no intention of going. That is why living by the law inevitably corrupts a person. The Jews, for example, thought the law was a bulwark against sin. But, Paul says, actually the reverse is true. The law sets you on a course of inevitable hypocrisy. You can't and won't obey its commandments so you must pretend that you do. Obedience must be redefined in very superficial terms. The entire rabbinical system was such a pretense – a way of pretending to obey when one was not obeying at all – and that is why Jesus is found in the Gospels condemning the rabbi's concept of obedience and righteousness at every turn. Trying to be righteous by the law

turns people into self-satisfied hypocrites. It did in Paul's own case. He will tell that part of his story in the next paragraph.

But when, through faith in Christ, the mastery of the law is broken, we find ourselves in another condition. We not only want to obey the law but we have the power to do so. The Holy Spirit has taken up his residence in us and has given us a new nature. He then summons that new nature into expression as we live our lives day by day. As Paul will put it again in his summary in the opening verses of chapter 8, we no longer live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. In Galatians 5 he speaks of Christians living by the Spirit and being led by the Spirit of God and the result or fruit of that – notice he also speaks of “fruit” here in vv. 4 and 5 – is a life of love and joy and peace and kindness and so on. In other words, the ministry of the Holy Spirit makes possible what the law never could. The Spirit can change our lives; the law never could. The change must come from above and from the inside out. So the Holy Spirit!

Notice the “but now” with which v. 6 begins. This is an entirely new and different situation. The old situation has been replaced by a new one. Now we serve God not in the old way of the law – the way of self-effort, of hypocrisy, and foolish pride; the way of the letter or the law by itself, but in the new way of the Spirit. Now we serve out of a new nature, with the help of the Holy Spirit, and with the power of sin having been broken by Jesus Christ on our behalf.

This is true of every Christian, no matter how he or she became a Christian or at what point in his or her life. We live in a new realm with new powers. We live with the hand of God upon us. The Holy Spirit, the third person of the triune God, is at work within us. We are new people. At its very best the old life of mankind, the unrenewed life, the life under the law, I say, at its very best, it was a dying life; a life that could only have ended in darkness, punishment, and death.

This new life is open to the future, to eternal sunshine, to the joy of the Lord, and to the love of God and all the saints. *That* is what Christ has accomplished for us. *That* is what he has done for us. He has given us an utterly new life. We think differently, we long for different things, our affections, our hatreds and our loves have been utterly turned on their heads.

And to what end? Paul tells us: that we might serve the Lord in the new way of the Holy Spirit. Remember, as he said in the second half of chapter six, we are still servants, slaves indeed; but slaves of a master who cares for us more than life itself and who wants nothing else for his servants but that they find the true fulfillment of human life lived as it ought to be lived.

Make me a captive, Lord,
 And then I shall be free.
 Force me to render up my sword,
 And I shall conqueror be.
 I sink in life's alarms
 When by myself I stand;
 Imprison me within Thine arms,
 And strong shall be my hand.
 [George Matheson (1842-1906)]