

Romans 7:1-6 Living for Christ in the light of God's Law and Grace

Introduction

Our perception of what is going on in a conversation or some other situation is usually pretty good most of the time, just occasionally we may misunderstand the full context of what is going on. [Take a look at this photograph that appeared in many of the newspapers from the Nelson Mandela Memorial Service on 10 December 2013 at the FNB Stadium in Soweto. What the press omitted to show are the following pictures which leave a different impression on potential viewers!] Romans 7 is an important chapter in Paul's letter to the Church in Rome that covers some aspects of what it is like to live as a disciple of Jesus Christ. He has previously explained the problem of human sinfulness and the nature of the Gospel, that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. However, the faith that saves us is accompanied in the lives of true believers by evidence of God's working in our lives. In the previous chapter he has explained that we are called to live holy lives pleasing to God. The person who has truly grasped how wonderful it is what Jesus has done for us will never entertain the thought that they can live as they please and do what they like without giving any attention to how God wants them to live as Christian women or Christian men. We may make mistakes and fail to think, speak and act as we would wish, but we have a clear consciousness of the direction in which we ought to be travelling as Christian disciples and a desire however weak to make progress each year of our lives. Unfortunately too many Bible commentators and some readers of Romans 7 miss the point of what Paul is teaching here. Unless we have come with advance presuppositions about what the passage teaches it is not difficult to see that the numerous references here to 'law', 'written code' and 'commandment' gives a very big hint that Paul is addressing different aspects of one subject, namely the place of law in God's purposes in our lives. At this point we take a step back and think Paul as a former strict Orthodox Jew has focussed on grace and the Gospel and raised serious questions about how we can be saved through endeavouring to keep what Jewish believers understood to be the Law of God and it's thousands of applications to their daily lives. Our righteousness in Christ (that is our status before God) is received through faith.

1. Paul's understanding of the place of God's moral law

Paul has explained to us that *through the law we become conscious of sin and the whole world is held accountable to God* (Romans 3:19, 20); he has informed us that the law *brings wrath* (Romans 4:15) because its breach is a *transgression* against God (Romans 4:15). Because no-one can keep the law sufficiently well to be saved, a new way of salvation that gave us a right standing before God had to be obtained *apart from law...this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe* (Romans 3:21-22). Yet does that mean that the new covenant in Christ means we are free from the **moral** law of God? No! There is an appropriate place to honour and value it and live our lives by it. The Jewish ceremonial and civil laws no longer apply. They were rendered obsolete by Christ's atoning sacrifice in our place, but we treasure God's guidance for our lives and seek to please Him in the way we conduct ourselves. Therefore we can still say with David, in the words of Psalm 19:7-11: *The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.⁸ The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.⁹ The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever. The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous.¹⁰ They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold, they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb.¹¹ By them Your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.* Therefore, we

need to look carefully at how Paul uses words like ‘law’ in the book of Romans. Words taken out of context can so easily be misunderstood. I might say accurately that after a recent trip to England, on my return via the M6 I took my hands off the steering wheel for the best part of an hour. This sounds extremely dangerous until I explain that my friend and I had stopped at a service area to eat a hot meal after four hours without a break. In context, the action described was perfectly legal and obvious when the fuller context of the information was provided! Paul has in Romans 6:14 explained that we are not under the law with respect to our justification – God’s amazing love and mercy made that possible in Jesus. A second point he believed, explained most clearly in Galatians chapter five which includes these words in 5:18: *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.* There, the apostle is saying that the way we live a God-pleasing life (sanctification) is not by keeping a list of rules which we tick off week by week, but through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit within us we are enabled to make the right choices in daily life. The end result may be the same, but our motivation is to honour God through our choices (relationship) which inspires us to do better in the future than we have done in the past. However, behind our relationship with the Lord, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is an acceptance of and commitment to obey His moral law, the Ten Commandments. This is what Paul meant when he wrote in a later section of his letter to the Church at Rome that Jesus died as our substitutionary sacrifice *in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit* (Romans 8:4). I hope you have been able to follow this clearly as it is a liberating but also a challenging point he is making. In the three distinct sections of Romans 7 the apostle will address three different attitudes to God’s moral law. The first two are views he rejects and the third the one he wishes to promote. In Romans 7:1-6 he will seek to challenge those who he viewed as legalists who saw their relationship with God, in practice, as an exercise in keeping a long list of rules. The second group of people on whom he focuses in Romans 7:7-13 viewed themselves as free from any rules now they were filled with the Spirit. Then, in Romans 7:14-25 he will come to disciples of Jesus who sought to honour and keep God’s moral law, but whose salvation was all of grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In this message we will look at Romans 7:1-6 which indicates the context in which we are **released from the law**. Paul makes four points in this section:

2. **The basic principle** (Romans 7:1)

Do you not know, brothers and sisters – for I am speaking to those who know the law – that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? (Romans 7:1). Paul is making a statement of the obvious and probably here refers to the ‘law of the land’ but it is applicable to any form of law. Once a person has left this life the law is useless; it cannot touch them nor have they any concerns for the law! All legal contracts are then affected by the departure of the person who signed up to certain obligations. So-called life insurance policies are really ‘death’ insurance policies, because although you may pay in for years you may receive nothing if you live an amazingly healthy life and earn your telegram from the Queen for reaching your hundredth birthday! The significance of them is to assist family members in the event of the untimely death of an adult member of the family. Paul has begun quite graciously to ask fellow believers to think carefully about the jurisdiction of the law in general terms, though he will come onto marriage law and the law of God later in this section. He wishes to honour their concerns to uphold the law, but address their misunderstanding of the place of God’s law in their lives. Everyone whether they realise it or not lives by certain laws of behaviour, for example. If someone is sitting on the seat you paid for on a train and declines to move, it is more than the fact that you paid for the privilege of

sitting there that you are annoyed or angry about the refusal to move to another seat. ‘You promised...’, we have all used those words at time to someone who has apparently gone back on their word about something, but it is a moral failing not something you could raise in a civil or criminal court without a great deal more evidence than a disputed claim about words. Whether they would articulate it with this kind of vocabulary or not, the vast majority of people live by some kind of moral law and find violations of it by some other people unacceptable. Yet all these standards are unenforceable on someone who has left this life.

3. The illustration of marriage (Romans 7:2-3)

² 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 that binds her to him. ³ So then, if she has sexual relations with 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 if she marries another man (Romans 7:2-3). For a number of years I was on a small group of Scottish Baptists seeking to assist one of our smaller congregations purchase their building, in fact to raise the money to purchase it for them from a variety of sources. We had thought it a fairly straightforward matter of either having or not having the money to accomplish our goal. However, the legal status of that property and the ownership of that site on which it stood was determined by a piece of historical feudal legislation that was later amended by the Scottish Parliament. We engaged a particular Christian lawyer who had a specialism in that field of law. He got rather excited about the complexity of the legal situation and sent us a long document he had produced to explain it to us. He has assisted clients in the purchasing and selling of many properties, but never under these particular circumstances. We were less thrilled noting that the potential costs might be higher than we had anticipated. The problem was duly worked through, but it took us a little while to understand what the law was saying to us on this subject! Paul, in his illustration of the law uses the example of a married couple to make the simple and obvious point that a spouse is only bound legally to the other partner ‘until death us do part’. Should they so wish at that point to remarry then in legal terms they were free to do so. The law, Paul indicates, binds us to honour agreed obligations. But death releases a person from it.

Now in Paul’s day and for many centuries beyond that a woman was owned by her husband. Do you know how long that persisted in the UK? I was astonished to think it was as late as the **Married Women’s Property Act 1870**, an Act of the Westminster Parliament of the United Kingdom that allowed women to be the legal owners of the money they earned and to inherit property! The form of the traditional marriage ceremony which is enjoyed by many couples to this day clearly reflects the handing over of responsibility for the bride from her father to her husband. The promises made are serious and wide-ranging. The couple each say to the other: I call upon these persons here present to witness that I _____ am taking you _____ to be my lawful wedded wife /husband, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to honour, until we are parted by death, and to this end I give you my word. We thank God that despite the tragedy of 40% of marriages breaking down it still leaves 60%, the majority, who succeed. I am convinced that most people getting married genuinely endeavour to keep the promises made. Over the years it has been humbling to see men and women honouring the pledge of devotion they gave a generation or two earlier.

Yet one day will come when one spouse leaves this life –where does that leave the surviving one? In legal terms, says Paul, they are in principle free to marry someone else. The law by which they were bound to one another has not changed, but the individual person’s circumstances have changed their relationship to that law. Some of these widows or widowers may choose to marry another spouse –which they are entitled to do. Now Paul was

not intending to discuss or reflect on the merits of a possible remarriage. His focus was centred on the relationship of the Christian believer with the law of God. Some of Paul's opponents were claiming or misunderstanding his teaching to the effect that because we are saved by grace we can live as we like. Paul wants to remind them that this is completely untrue. Jesus through His sacrifice fulfilled and satisfied the demands of the law so that our circumstances are now completely changed. No longer is our aim to honour God's law in order to be saved. Instead, we have been saved by Jesus and out of a heart full of love and gratitude we wish to live a life pleasing to Him in line with the moral boundaries He has given to us. No married couple would wish to demonstrate their 'love' for the other by daily engaging in activities that annoyed or upset the other partner. There would, to whatever degree, be some evidence of practical care and affection. The key words here that confirm Paul's meaning are found in Romans 7:4b: *in order that we might bear fruit for God*. It is to this point that we turn next.

4. **The Application to our daily lives** (Romans 7:4-5)

⁴ *So, my brothers and sisters, 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 for God* (Romans 7:4). In marriage it is usually assumed when the couple are young that there might be children born in the years that follow. Certainly that is the spoken or unspoken hope of many a potential grandparent! Given the later ages at which marriages take place today this is less certain than in previous generations as infertility rates are higher, with all the attendant pastoral implications. If physical fruitfulness is considered desirable in the context of marriage, spiritual fruitfulness is even more desirable and expected in the lives of disciples of Jesus Christ. Paul explains the three implications of this spiritual reality.

(a) **What we died to** *So my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ...* In earlier studies in Romans we sought to emphasise that the apostle speaks of our union with Christ that we are 'in Him'. Therefore, the event to which Paul is referring here is not anything we have done but through the sacrifice that Jesus offered in our place on the cross. It was His physical body that literally died in our place. At our baptism the benefits of this reality are credited to us as Paul has already explained in Romans 6:3: *Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? What does it mean that we also died to the law? This expression is similar to Romans 6:2: We are those who have died to sin... and it is probable that they share the same meaning. Jesus literally died, we spiritually in Him 'died to sin' by bearing its penalty which is death. The penalty was proscribed by the law that the person who sins as Ezekiel 18:4b declares: The one who sins is the one who will die. Each of us is personally responsible and accountable to God. To die to sin and to die to the law are one and the same. The law's curse or condemnation has been erased through Jesus' atoning sacrifice. Our consequent identification with our substitute and sin-bearer Jesus is clear. Paul explained it this way to the Turkish Christians in Galatia: 'For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God.²⁰ I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me* (Galatians 2:19-20). In practical and simple terms he is stressing that our old life and old ways are part of a closed chapter from the past. When we have trusted Jesus as Lord and Saviour it is a fresh start, a new beginning. Our past sins and failures are dead and buried with Him and forgiven. God has placed a metaphorical 'stop digging' sign over it! Do you need to let go of your past failures? Or your 'if only's...?' What about the shortcomings of other people the Lord Jesus has forgiven? You died to sin and the law and they did too. The past is in some senses a closed chapter we can only

influence and affect the present and the future. There is something problematic when sinful and flawed human beings continually insist on living in the present overshadowed by past mistakes. We bring them to the Lord, confess our own failings and accept that other people can do the same and draw a line under that past and move forward. Why is that both possible and necessary? It is because of the One with whom we have been united.

(b) **Who we are joined to** *that you might belong to another, to Him who was raised from the dead...* Now the picture language here by which Paul makes his spiritual point has changed. The marriage metaphor of which Paul had been speaking in which the husband dies and the wife is thereby eligible to marry another husband should she wish to do so, has now faded from view; illustrations or analogies are at best always partial. You might describe someone who is viewed as being ‘as sly as a fox’. Yet there is no hint of a suggestion that this person is covered by a fur coat, walks on all fours ...; or describe another person as ‘like a bull in a china shop’; in each of these contexts we hear what is said and can contextualise the words used to get a clear impression of how the speaker views the one they are describing. We died to living for self and doing just what we wanted to join ourselves by way of a yoke so that everywhere Jesus goes we go. What He does we do and so on. This is the radical change of direction the apostle has in mind. A young oxen learning to plough in a field is yoked with an older and stronger one who knows exactly what they are doing so that the youngster is in an ideal position to learn how to behave and accomplish the task set by the owner. **[picture to show it]** This is the essence of Christian Discipleship. ‘Follow me as I follow Christ’ is the exciting and seriously daunting call to each one of us from Paul in order that each in turn will model godly living to newer Christians in the local family of the Christian Church. Jesus used this language in His familiar words in Matthew 11:25-30: *At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.’* ²⁶ *Yes, Father, for this is what You were pleased to do.* ²⁷ *‘All things have been committed to Me by My Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him.’* ²⁸ *‘Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.’* ²⁹ *Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* ³⁰ *For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.’* Why is it a good thing to be joined to Jesus Christ? He alone knows and understands our future. He is our direct link to the Father in prayer, through the aid of the Holy Spirit. And most amazingly, He has invited us to walk with Him as He models for us a God-honouring life. Our spiritual eyes, therefore, ought to be on Him- not on other people. When Jesus was restoring Peter after his denials, the disciple could not resist asking about how John another disciple would fare. John 21:21-22 says this: *When Peter saw him, he asked, ‘Lord, what about him?’* ²² *Jesus answered, ‘If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow Me.’* Peter, your problem is that you are so focussed on other people and their circumstances that you are not allowing Me the opportunity to guide and direct your pathway as you should be going. Jesus is our model, our guide and the focus of our attention. Stop focussing on the primacy of keeping ‘the rules’ and remember that primarily it is about relationships with God and with our neighbours, Christian and non-Christian, in whatever context we may find ourselves. By putting God first in all things and then honouring other people as we would wish them to treat us, it will be no surprise how close we get to our best attempts at keeping the Ten Commandments! Or their summary in our verse for the year Luke 10:27: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, “Love your neighbour as yourself.”* Do you acknowledge that you belong to another, Jesus? If we truly grasp this then there is a lot of baggage that we need to release and allow Him to take away in order that we may be liberated to be the men and women we are called to be ‘in Him’. This then leads us onto our purpose of belonging to Christ.

(c) **What we were joined for** in order that we might bear fruit for God (Romans 7:4b). In John 15:1-8 Jesus shared these powerful words: *'I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in Me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me. ⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; **apart from Me you can do nothing.** ⁶If you do not remain in Me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in Me and My words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸**This is to My Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be My disciples.*** Lots of people claim to be Christians, but only the genuine ones show evidence of Christ-likeness in their attitudes, in their words and choices of conduct. Jesus indicates that from time to time some spiritual pruning is required in the lives of genuine believers because in some aspects of our lives we are not reflecting Jesus as we should. Is there something God is challenging you about today? God is willing to do what it takes to enable you to resemble Jesus!

5. **The purpose of having a right view of God's law** (Romans 7:5-6)

⁵ *For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶But 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.* (Romans 7:5-6). At this time in your life are there any legalistic ways to discard? Are there any ungracious attitudes that need to be put right? Are there patterns of behaviour that need to be amended? God's moral law is still binding on us, but we have been set free to serve both God and other people, with a wonderful message of God's unconditional love to the undeserving to proclaim. We are slaves to God and empowered by the Holy Spirit to model a quality of lifestyle that other people will want to walk with us in the pathway of Christian discipleship. Will each of us commit to pray this year: Lord may my walk with you be attractive enough that someone this year may ask how they too may follow Jesus also –as I do? May I resolve to let go anything in my patterns of thinking; manner of speaking or behavioural choices that would hinder the fruitful growth of Christ-likeness in me, for Jesus' sake, Amen.