

## ***The Letter vs. the Spirit***

### ***Romans 7:1-6***

Someone has quipped that what you read in the Old Testament will either put you to sleep or will keep you awake at night. Some passages in the OT are endlessly fascinating and even shocking; they describe violence and immorality and injustice and intrigue. The first time you read through the OT, you will be shocked at some of the things that God tells His people to do. If you take it seriously, some parts of the Old Testament will keep you up at night.

But other parts of the OT are likely to put you to sleep. For me, most of what is written in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy fall into that category, especially the passages that describe what God demanded of the Jewish people in the old covenant. There were regulations about food - what they could eat, how it had to be prepared, etc. There were regulations about what they could wear - different types of fabrics, for example. You will find long, detailed descriptions of various sacrifices at various times of the year.

When we read all these regulations, we think, "How could they even keep all of these things straight? How do they remember what to do when? How could the Law possibly have been meaningful to anybody in their relationship with God?!?" As I've thought about it over the years, I've developed an analogy that might be helpful.

Imagine that you've never seen a basketball game. You show up for the Big 12 tournament this week and find it all bewildering. And so your friend explains it all to you.

- He explains about the jump ball that begins the game.
- He explains about different fouls: blocking fouls, charging fouls, technical fouls.
- He explains about free throws. After some fouls you shoot them and after others you don't (depending on whether the person was shooting, how many the team has that half, etc.). Depending on the circumstances, you might shoot one shot, two shots, or even three shots. There's a certain protocol about where different players can stand on either side of the lane during a free throw. During free throws for technical fouls, none of the other players can stand at the lane.
- He explains rules about dribbling, shot clocks, timeouts, lane violations, etc.

At the end of his explanation, you're thinking, "How can they even keep all of these rules straight? How do they remember what to do when? How could a game that complicated possibly be enjoyable to anybody?" The answer, of course, is that if you grow up in a household that loved basketball and if you spend a few thousand hours watching basketball (or better yet, playing basketball), it's all very intuitive. You know the rules and the flow of the game without even thinking. It makes sense and you love it.

Jews in the first century grew up in households that loved and kept the Law. Since they spent thousands of hours hearing and practicing the Law, it all made sense to them. It provided structure for their walk with God and gave them tangible ways of expressing their devotion to God. Understandably, when Paul taught that the Law was obsolete, they found it very disturbing. They felt like he was insulting God Himself (who had given the Law) and that he was encouraging lawlessness and disobedience.

Paul repeatedly addresses these charges in the book of Romans (and Galatians). Today we'll consider Romans 7:1-6 in which Paul explains that when God made the old covenant (the Law) obsolete, He replaced it with something far superior. He really didn't leave His people without a path and a plan.

***The Principle: Death severs the lordship of the Law. (Romans 7:1)***

In verse 1 Paul lays out a general principle that he will illustrate (vv. 2-3) and then apply to believers (vv. 4-6). Paul elaborates on his statement in chapter 6 that followers of Christ are no longer "under the law."

1 Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives?

We know from other passages in Romans that the church in Rome was primarily Gentile (non-Jewish; see 1:5-7, 13-15). Nevertheless, he was confident that he was speaking to people who "know the law" - who were conversant with what it taught. Specifically, Paul was confident that they understood the principle that "the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives."

Paul is making a very obvious point: when a Jewish person dies, the Law is no longer his/her master. The term "has jurisdiction" is the same term Paul used in chapter 6 (verse 14) when he wrote that "sin shall no longer **be master** over you." Here he is making the obvious point that when you die you are free from the lordship of the Law; death severs a person from the demands of the Law.

***An Illustration (Marriage) (Romans 7:2-3)***

Paul illustrates this principle by discussing marriage law. What Paul wrote in verses 2 and 3 would have been readily accepted by his readers.

2 For the married 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. 3 So then, 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.

In most marriage vows, a husband and wife commit themselves to each other until they are "parted by death." When/if a woman's husband died, she would (obviously) be released from any obligation to him and would be free to marry someone else. If, however, she has relations with "another man" while her husband is still alive, that's altogether different. That's the definition of adultery: a married person having sexual relations with someone besides his/her spouse.

The determining factor is whether or not her husband is still living. If he has died, she is free to be joined to another in marriage. ***The fact that a death has taken place changes everything.*** The woman is no longer bound to her first husband; she is free to be joined to another.

***The Application: Because of our death with Jesus, we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter. (Romans 7:4-6)***

In verses 4 and 5 Paul applies the illustration he's just made to the Romans. He doesn't use his illustration as an allegory - as if the woman stands for the Christian and the husband stands for the Law, etc. He applies the overarching principle that death releases/frees a person from a binding relationship.

4 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.

This statement builds upon Paul's statements in chapter 6 that the believer in Jesus has died with Christ. If you are in Christ, whatever happened to Him has happened to you: you have died with Christ, been buried with Him, and have been made alive with Him. Here in 7:4 Paul says that this experience of dying with Christ had irrevocably changed their relationship to the Law (the old covenant). "Dying to the Law" meant that the Law no longer defined how they lived out their relationship with God. This release from the Law took place through "the body of Christ," the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Just like the woman of Paul's illustration in verses 2 and 3 was free to be "joined to another" after the death of her husband, so too the Romans had been "joined to another" - to Jesus Himself. Last week's passage stressed how we are free from sin so that we can be slaves of righteousness. Today's passage stresses how we are free from the Law so that we can be devoted to Christ. As the bride of Christ, Paul says, we "bear fruit for God." (See Paul's imagery of the bride of Christ in 2 Corinthians 11:2.)

In verse 5 Paul explains once again that the Law could never produce obedience. There were certainly obedient believers under the old covenant, but their obedience wasn't produced by the Law. Paul describes their life before Christ, their life under the Law, as being "in the flesh":

5 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 chapter 8 Paul will depict all of humanity as being either "in the flesh" or "in the Spirit." Before a relationship with Christ, our only option was to be at the mercy of "the flesh." The flesh isn't synonymous with the body; the flesh is that part of us that craves sin, the part of us that wants to live independent of God. Paul writes in verse 5 that "while [they] were in the flesh," a couple of things were true of their/our sinful passions. First, sinful passions "were aroused by the Law." Because of our "innate rebelliousness against God" (so Moo, p. 420), the Law actually stimulated sin.

Second, the sinful passions "were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death." This is the progression we discussed at great length in chapter 6. When we

obey the lusts of our bodies and present the members of our bodies to sin as instruments of unrighteousness, the resultant fruit is death.

After describing life “in the flesh” in verse 5 Paul explains life in the Spirit in verse 6, a theme he will develop more fully in chapter 8.

6 But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

This is Paul’s classic contrast between life under the old covenant (the Law) and life in the new covenant (life in the Spirit). As we saw in verse 4, when they trusted in Christ, they were released from the Law - its regulations, its restrictions, its punishments, etc. Paul wasn’t saying that the Law was defective or evil. And his teaching doesn’t imply that there is no benefit in studying and understanding the Law; it still reveals the character of God and has much to teach us about holiness. And being released from the Law doesn’t mean that we’re cut loose to do whatever we want. Paul tells us that we have been released from the Law “so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”

The primary contrast here is between the Law being written and external and the Spirit being alive and internal. As new covenant believers, we aren’t **merely** trying to obey a set of teachings that are written down somewhere (on stone or paper or hard drives). We still have writings/Scriptures; our faith still has content. But now “we serve in newness of the Spirit”: the Holy Spirit within us teaches us, guides us, and empowers us to serve God. Our obedience is now fueled internally by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit indwells believers in the new covenant in a way that He didn’t in the old covenant.

In Ezekiel 36 God promised to do this very thing in the new covenant:

26 “Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.”

A covenant defines a relationship between two parties. In the new covenant God has done something new in the sense of putting His Spirit within us. In a sense, God’s statutes are no longer external and “out there”; through the Spirit’s work, God’s Word is written on our hearts. Obedience is now something internal that flows from the deepest part of our being, our hearts.

In light of the fact that Paul identifies two distinct ways of serving and relating to God in this passage, let’s consider a couple of questions that help us evaluate whether we’re experiencing what he’s been describing.

***Are there ways you are still serving “in the oldness of the letter”?*** This was Paul’s way of describing life under the old covenant. Paul argued that in Christ we are no

longer bound by the Law and its requirements. We don't have to bring the sacrifices it describes, follow its dietary regulations or festivals or Sabbath requirements. Years ago I met a woman who had been raised in a cult that kept the old covenant dietary laws. Even though she had come to Christ and understood that what you eat doesn't affect your standing before God, she just couldn't bring herself to eat catfish or shellfish.

I'm guessing that very few of us grew up in homes that tried to keep the Law. And so "the oldness of the letter" for us probably isn't a matter of breaking away from the old covenant. But you might have been raised in another faith that had a very distinct set of rules/regulations; most religions have a core set of behaviors. Some of those behaviors might overlap with Christianity, but some might be at odds with the Christian Scriptures.

Or perhaps you grew up in a Christian context that not only taught obedience to the Scriptures but obedience to specific applications of Scripture. Perhaps there were extra-biblical rules (written or unwritten) about things like music, entertainment, politics, how you educate your children, how you dress, etc. The Scriptures inform how we approach all of these issues; but convictions and applications can vary from person to person and family to family. But you may be laboring under such a set of rules that have been imposed on you. I'm not talking about the clear teachings of Scripture; I'm talking about obligations that have been added.

I'll give you an example from my own life. When I first came to Christ I learned a very simple grid for having a "quiet time": pray, read/study the Bible, more prayer. It was actually very life-giving for several years. Instead of staring into space trying to figure out how to meet with God, I had a clear, simple grid that structured my time with God. Nobody told me, "This the only way to meet with God. If you don't follow this structure, you're going to have a bad day. . ." But years later I felt like I **had** to follow that structure for my times with God; I didn't feel good about my day if I didn't. Uppermost in my mind wasn't fellowship with God but following a structure/grid. There was nothing wrong with that structure itself, but it had become "the letter" for me. I came to understand that God wanted me to experience Him in new ways.

The problem isn't that "the oldness of the letter" is too strict or too committed and that we need to loosen up. The problem is that "the oldness of the letter" is too external and too superficial. A relationship with God should include a substantive, internal experience; our devotion should flow from the heart. Our obedience should be a joyful sacrifice instead of joyless obligation. The issue isn't necessarily our behavior; two people can basically practice the same disciplines with one being "oldness of the letter" and the other being very life-giving.

This issue of "serving in oldness of the letter" is often quite complex, but hopefully this discussion stimulates your thinking.

***Are you serving "in the newness of the Spirit" (bearing fruit for God)?*** We'll discuss this more when we get to Romans 8, but for now I'd have you evaluate whether or not you experience "the newness of the Spirit" in your walk with God. This should show up in the way we receive Scripture; the Spirit impresses the Word on our hearts so

that we are internally motivated to obey. The Spirit gives us gifts so that we serve in specific ways; we have a sense that “I was made to encourage/show mercy/lead/teach/provide spiritual administration, to give, etc.” The Spirit leads us in our praying, showing us what to pray about and what to pray. The Spirit gives us the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control. In other words, the Christian life is not just me trying as hard as I can. It’s a matter of having an interactive relationship with God through the indwelling Holy Spirit.

Of course our experience with the Spirit isn’t infallible. What I think is the prompting of the Spirit might be my own bias based on my own limited experience; I need to be open to correction and redirection from others in the body of Christ. Nevertheless I should walk with God expecting to experience the ministry of the Holy Spirit: His empowering, His prompting, His convicting work (revealing my sin and selfishness), His guiding. We are living in days of fulfillment that people like Esther, David, Jeremiah, and Isaiah could only dream about. I would encourage us all not to settle for “the letter” but to expect to experience the very Spirit of God.