

Romans 7:1-6 - Released from the law

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[0 : 00] Our reading this morning is from Romans chapter 7 verses 1 to 6. Romans chapter 7 verses 1 to 6.

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?

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.

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.

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.

[1 : 07] For when we are 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. But 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.

Great. Thank you, Pesh. Let's pray together as we come to God's word. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we pray now and ask for your help and your blessing.

We're so very conscious of the weakness of the means that you've given us, but also of your great power by your spirit to work through them for your glory and for our good.

Please, Lord, we've come from busy weeks, we've got things on our hearts and our minds, and we pray that you might quieten us to listen to what you say to us in your word.

In Jesus' name. Amen. It's a universally accepted truth that church is boring.

[2 : 14] We know that, don't we? On all measures of that scale of entertaining, church is not entertaining.

I am very grateful for all of our musicians, and I know that we are quite, like, geographically close to the West End, but this is not a musical, is it?

We probably wouldn't be able to sell a recording of our singing, especially if the microphone was anywhere near me. We're not entertaining. And then you're sitting now and listening to someone speak, and he is not very entertaining either.

Hardly Winston Churchill or William Shakespeare. I've got a conference speaker. I've written no books. Only a very few people download our sermons or watch the YouTube videos.

Church, by any measure, is not entertaining. And neither is it a social phenomenon. So, you know, we're sat together in a cozy-ish room because Louise has turned the thermostat up and say, it's going to get warmer and warmer and warmer in here.

[3 : 23] But despite that, we're all very different to one another, aren't we? There are very few people in the room who are exactly the same age as me. Very few people who are from the same background. There are not many people with bald heads and beards.

There are not many people who are born in Loughborough. Not many people who like motorbikes or tow caravans, right? This is not a club where we're all the same. It's not a school where everyone is in the same age and stage.

We stay around and have a cup of tea and coffee together, maybe even a few biscuits. But this is hardly Starbucks. And it is certainly not Gale's. They are not worried that there is a building down the road that is giving coffee away for free.

They're not threatened by that at all. No, church is an undisputed fact. Church is boring, which is why 95% of people in the UK have zero desire to be here.

And it's why some of the 5% who do come fall asleep when they're here as well. Church is very, very average. Church, even cool churches, and there are churches that are kind of cool, and when they record their music and the pastor does speak at conferences and write books, still they are below average compared to the other entertaining things that you might do in life, right?

[4 : 39] I can only imagine if they don't know that, they've never been to watch a football match, right? But here is the remarkable thing, that despite the fact church is dull and boring, still people come.

I've been to church all my life, and not a single week have I turned up and been the only person there. And it's not just that.

People want to be here, right? People don't just stumble into the building. You might have done this morning, and you might think, oh my goodness, what am I doing here? But most people have not just stumbled into the building. Instead, they have put the gathering of the church in their calendar as one of the big things that they're going to do this week.

I mustn't miss that. They are here willingly. And people are listening. People are singing. And they're not forced to do either of those things either. They are choosing to do that.

Perhaps even more remarkable than that is that church costs us about, I don't know, about £150 per church member per month to run.

[5 : 45] See, someone's already calling a friend, right? Church costs us about £150 per member per month to run. And that kind of pays for a few staff. It keeps the lights on. It keeps the roof basically watertight.

And we give to missions like London City Mission and Grace Baptist Missions. But that money doesn't come to us from the government. It doesn't grow on a tree in the car park. No, that money is given to us by church members who are not told to give.

There's not a fee. Instead, they just give willingly. And even extraordinary amounts. You are sat in this building. I am stood here in this building because a long time ago, well, a short while ago, I suppose 10 or so years ago, maybe a few more, one church member gave half a million pounds to this church so we could buy the freehold so we could still meet here.

But perhaps maybe the most amazing thing is that people in this room, members of this church, don't consider themselves just friends who happen to be in a seat next to each other for an hour and a half once a week.

Rather, they consider one another brothers and sisters. You'll notice that if you're a visitor this morning, people will refer to each other in that category. Brother, sister.

[7 : 00] They pray together. They show up for one another when they're in need. They get to know each other's struggles and joys. They walk alongside each other. They invite one another into their homes. That extraordinary depth of commitment in church has not gone unnoticed.

At Christmas time, a load of church leaders and ministers were invited to Downing Street. And the community's minister, Mr. Reid, said this. And I read it in the paper. I wasn't there. So often it's the church that is there at the important moments in our lives, holding communities together, supporting the most vulnerable, reaching out to the most lonely.

All of you are champions for your community. All of you represent the very, very best in Britain.

Now, if I can ask you a question just for a moment before you fall asleep, right?

Can I ask you to explain that to me? Explain that to me. Why something so ordinary commands such devotion?

Explain why, if you're a Christian this morning, for all of the weaknesses and the failings, still there is a part of you that is excited to be here this morning. You know, part of you can't wait to hear what Romans 7 says.

[8 : 10] Not because you're interested in me, but because you're interested in this, the text. Why? Why is that? You know, why is it that if I stood here and told jokes, even if they were really funny jokes, you'd leave, you'd never come back.

But if we look together at this ancient text, even if it makes you work hard this morning and you're having to think hard, still you'll stay, you'll engage and you'll listen. Why? Why? Well, Romans chapter 7, verse 1 to 6 says, Church is like that.

Christians are like that. You are like that if you're a believer this morning, not because there's a rule that says you must be like that, but because there's a new spirit in you that wants to be like that.

In other words, Romans 7 is telling us that the Christian life is not explainable in worldly terms. You cannot explain the church as entertainment or a social club or the best coffee in town.

There is something else going on in this room. God is at work by his spirit in our hearts, binding us to him and to one another. So that we're not governed by rules that tell us what we must do, but we're governed by the spirit who now plants new desires, new goals, new hopes, new loves in our hearts.

[9 : 23] So we want to be here. Now, in a way, there's nothing new in Romans 7, 1 to 6 that hasn't really been covered in Romans chapter 6. But Paul's style involves lots of repetition.

And so here we go again. This is the link between being saved through the work of Jesus Christ and living for Christ, considering what teaches and motivates and governs and shapes our Christian life.

You know, what will keep us from sin and error and from fruitless lives? And the repeated answer is, remember, it's not a law. It's not a list of rules that will keep you.

Look at verse 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 a person lives.

Now the work begins, right? Paul is talking about the moral law, the idea that we all know what is good and what is bad. That might be because you've grown up in a Christian home and you've been taught the Ten Commandments.

[10 : 25] Maybe you learned them. Or you might have had a very liberal upbringing with very little moral instruction, but still even you know there are moral lines that you will not cross. And so Paul says, listen, we all know the law.

But the problem is, and we all experience this, that knowing the law doesn't actually help us keep the law, does it? Knowing what is right and wrong doesn't actually help us to do what is right and not what is wrong.

In fact, often it works the opposite way. So you read in the law, honor your father and mother. It turns out to be quite a lot more difficult than you first anticipated, doesn't it?

And so the law, instead of enabling you to do what is right, catalogues your failure. Don't covet.

That proved impossible as well. Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.

Rest, worship your God and your maker. That too was beyond us. And so the law, sort of like a bad master, binds us to failure and perpetually condemns. It holds up perfection and exposes our imperfections.

[11 : 28] You know, do this and you will live. Oh, you can't do this. Therefore, you cannot live, says the law. And we all know how that feels, don't we?

We call that guilt or shame and we all experience it. But, says Paul, something has changed for the Christian. They have been liberated from that law.

How have they been liberated from that law? Well, not by keeping it because that was beyond us.

Rather, they've been liberated from that law by dying, it says. Dying to it and so being released from its grasp.

And Paul has an illustration of this and his illustration is marriage. Take a look at verse 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. So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress.

[12 : 23] But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man. Paul is using an illustration of contracts that end in death.

If your husband dies, the marriage contract dies with him and you are free. Free to marry again should you choose. But if you try to do that before they die, then that's bad.

It's immoral. It's adultery. And more than just that, it's a breach of contract. Because being married to someone still alive, you are not free to go and marry someone else.

That freedom only comes when your husband passes away. So it is with the Christian. The Christian, verse 4, is someone who has died to the law through the body of Christ.

That means the Christian is united to Jesus by faith in such a way that they died with him to the tyranny of the law. That the list of debts has been shredded.

[13 : 20] Not because morality no longer matters, but because the consequences of our disobedience have been satisfied in Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. We died to the law.

By faith, we are united to him. And the requirements of the law have been met in us too. And so now the law of condemnation has no hold on us because we're dead to it. The sentence has already been passed.

It cannot be passed again. Maybe this is a good opportunity for me to explain what a Christian is this morning. Maybe you're here this morning and you know that you're not a Christian and you're wanting to find out more.

Or maybe you're just still not quite sure where you stand with the Lord. Well, listen, this is it. Being a Christian is not about keeping rules. It's not about that. It's not about keeping rules.

It's rather about dying to the rules. By being united to Jesus by faith in him so that we die and rise with him. It's strange language, I understand. But verses 5 and 6 try and explain it to us.

[14:19] Let me work through those and see whether it becomes clearer. Verse 5 talks about what life is like before you become a Christian. Before faith in Christ. And he calls it living in the realm of the flesh.

It says this. 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 to death. In other words, sinful passions, this desire to disobey God is aroused by the list of things which are required of us to obey God.

And the flesh listens to the rules and goes, I'm going to run the other way. You know, we hear, oh, don't covet. Don't lie. Don't disobey your parents.

And those become the things that we want to do. And the fruit of that is death, says Paul.

Condemnation. But becoming a Christian changes all that. Verse 6 explains it to us.

But 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.

[15:23] Here it is then. Becoming a Christian is being united by faith to Jesus so that in his death we die. Die to the condemnation of the law.

And so we're made alive in a new way, a way by the spirit, so that we have new desires, new hopes, new loves. We're new people. Let me try and illustrate what's going on here.

Think about the difference. And this is a controversial illustration, but just bear with me for a moment, okay? Think about the difference between cats and dogs, right? Cats, you know, don't you?

They live for themselves. If you have a cat, it is completely disinterested in you. They are living for themselves. They do what they please. They might obey you to the extent to which they get what they want back from you, like food or attention.

But don't you imagine for a moment that you can tell a cat what to do. They do exactly what they want to do. They are ruled by their desires. And if you like, the longer your list of expectations of your cat, the longer your list of disappointments in your cat will be, because they will perpetually let you down.

[16:31] But dogs, right? Dogs love you. Yeah? They're not interested in themselves. They will do anything to please you. They're grateful that you walk them, that you feed them, that you fuss them.

They love learning new commands because they just love that joy that comes to you when they, you know, spin around when you ask them to. Now, and I can't believe I'm illustrating it like this, but really becoming a Christian is like being transformed from being a cat to being a dog, right?

Please forgive me, right? That God in Christ, through your union with Christ by faith, is killing your old cat-like nature at the cross and by the spirit making you new.

So there's a whole new way of living. Not the old way of the written code, but the new way of the spirit. Now you want to please God. Now you want to be with his people.

Now you want to hear his word. Now you want to sing his praises. Not for reasons that are immediately obvious. Not for reasons that can be explained as a merely kind of cultural phenomenon or entertainment alone.

[17:38] But because you're a new person in your heart. Listen, let me put it this way this morning. If you're bored this morning, it could be worse than you thought it was.

It could be you think that you're bored and sleepy because you think I am boring and making you sleepy. Which might be true. But it could be that if you have no desire in your heart to hear his word, it's because you're a cat and not a dog.

It's because you need a new life by the spirit where you long to hear God's words. To be with his people. To sing his praises. But if you are hungry for his word.

If you're delighting in what he's done for you. If you find whelming up in you. This love for these people around you. Even though they're very different to you. Even though they look different. Sound different.

Have different experiences. Come from different places. But you love them. Know that God has done that in you. That's not you doing that yourself. He has made you a new person. And this is the point here.

[18 : 38] Right? You don't look after dogs in the same way you look after cats. Right? They need different kinds of things. Different kind of food and different kinds of attention.

Because they're different animals. That's Romans 7.1-6. Christian living is new life by the spirit. It's the only explanation of why we are here this morning.

It's because God has done something in our hearts. Which has given us a completely new desire. Which cannot be explained to the world. Because it's God's work in us. And that new life is kept and grown.

And fed and flourished. Not in the old way. But in a new way. It's kept by faith and not works. That's the big idea. Let me just finish with two applications for us.

First one is this. Don't live your new life in the old way. I think this is perhaps Paul's big concern.

Over and above what came before in chapter 6. He starts this section with the words.

[19 : 36] Do you not know? Which I think means by implication. This is I am writing to you something that you should already know. But you probably need to think about it some more. You need to be reminded of this.

And why is that? Well it's because I think it's the easiest thing in the world for Christians. Especially if this morning you're a keen well-meaning Christian. It is the easiest thing in the world to impose law upon yourselves.

Or even upon others. To make you or others behave in a way you think they should. And then you assume that your Christian growth is your ability to keep those rules you set for yourself.

Even though the whole of the Christian life is about faith in Jesus. And not about keeping rules.

Now you perhaps don't need me to tell you how often churches do this.

Churches set up discipleship programs for young Christians. That are focused mostly on setting rules for them. And then holding them account to the keeping of those rules. Youth talks.

[20 : 36] Which are basically thinly veiled appeals to young people to behave themselves. Please behave yourself. Or the Roman Catholic Church loves to make its members feel guilty all the time.

And Paul says no don't do that. Now don't do that not because we should have no moral restraints. Rather because the rule-based system. The system of works. The law as he calls it.

Is a bad master from whom you've been liberated. Now there's a really simple test to know if we're going wrong here. But it's perhaps not what you would expect. The test is not simply to abandon all rules.

And it's certainly not to abandon all moral expectations. Some people assume that don't they? But that's wrong. God's moral expectations still matter. Adultery is still adultery if you're a Christian liberated from the law.

If failure to keep the Sabbath. To tell the truth. To honour your parents. All of those still matter to me. To you if you're a Christian. Reading your Bible and attending church each week is a good thing to do.

[21 : 34] And setting a commitment to do that will be a blessing to you. The test is not no check to see whether you've got any rules in your life. And if you have you've gone wrong. No. This is the test. How do you deal with failure?

Does it ruin you? Do you see where you've broken God's moral command? And does it crush you? Do you hide what you're really like? For fear of being exposed?

Do you feel like your Christian life is lived pretending that you're better than you really are? Are you proud of your success as if it means like you're winning God's favour?

If any of those things are true of you, then you are running on the law, not by the Spirit. Martin Lloyd-Jones, who was a preacher in central London last century, said this in his commentary on this passage.

He says, I'm about to make a statement which is almost certainly going to be misunderstood. What a great way to introduce what you're going to say. I'm about to make a statement which is almost certainly to be misunderstood. I put it like this.

[22 : 37] It does not matter how deeply, how violently you may sin as a believer. You should never come again under condemnation. If you do, it's because you've not understood your relationship to the law and you have put yourself back under the law again.

And this is where we go wrong so often as Christians. If you're a Christian this morning and you have in your heart a sense that God is just disappointed in you, that you've let him down with your disobedience, that your ongoing battle with sin might end in failure, that you're probably the worst Christian in this room, that it doesn't matter how hard you try or what you do, you'll always be a failure as a Christian.

All of that is wrong because you're out of that system of condemnation. That's not how we think anymore. You died to it and you've been made to live for Christ.

So your sin, past, present and future is dealt with at the cross. You are forgiven. You will be holy and not by your effort in your strength, but in Christ. Now, before you all complain that this illustration of cats and dogs has gone too far, I'm going to push it a little bit harder.

And I have owned both cats and dogs and you will know where my preferences lie, right? But you know, don't you, that cats are very complex and very fussy to look after.

[23 : 58] Now, if you put the wrong food down for your cat, it will not eat it. Our cat, if you didn't allow it to drink from a running tap, would refuse to drink water. It's insane, isn't it?

A dog, all you just need is a cheap bowl of kibble once a day and a walk. Job's done. They'll drink from puddles. Now, in a sense, that's true of a born-again Christian.

A born-again Christian does not need a complex set of rules. That's how religious people care for themselves, isn't it? That's how self-reliant people care for themselves. And it becomes very complicated. I must pray this many times a day.

I must wear these clothes, not those clothes. I must eat this food and not that food. I must wash my hands in this way and not that way. I must go to this gym and not that one. But what does the born-again Christian need?

Well, they know God's moral law. They read it, don't they? And they love it. They love obeying God. And they realise that the fuel for the Christian life is not obedience to rules, but repentance and faith.

[25 : 00] And so they see their sin as it's exposed to them, as they're exposed to God's moral law. And they go, Lord, I've seen it. I know what I'm like.

I'm deeply, deeply sorry. Thank you that in the Lord Jesus Christ, you've done all that's needed to be done to forgive me. You knew this before I knew this.

Have mercy. I believe in Jesus. Sorry. Yes. Receive again the assurance of the gospel. I can't tell you how important this is for you.

You are not saved by your great moral effort. And you will not be made holy by your own personal efforts. Repentance and faith is what you need.

That's not to say you need to put no effort into the Christian life. That's not what I'm saying. But it is your efforts empowered by this new life of the Spirit lived out in you.

[25 : 58] This is why our church services take the shape that they take, right? Our whole gathering is shaped around the gospel because this is what we need as the fuel for Christian living, right?

You don't, as you come here, you don't need a great emotional experience. What you need is the gospel of Jesus Christ. You come in. You hear of his greatness and his majesty and his glory. You see that he is the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one to whom all people will one day bow. Now, and you realize again, oh, I'm unworthy to be in your presence, Lord.

I come in repentance. I'm sorry. And you hear again the great affirmations of the gospel that coming in repentance and faith like that, you are washed clean of your sin. You were assured that you're a child of God in Jesus Christ.

In union with him, you are saved and you will be made holy. And you listen to his word as a child listens to his father, longing to hear and obey.

[26 : 56] And then you come to him with your needs in prayer and you lift them up to him, asking for his help and his blessing. And you're sent out to live for his glory for the rest of the week. That's what we need.

The gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, people worry that that will make people sin some more. Oh, well, if you don't give people rules, they're going to go crazy. But that's not the case.

In fact, understanding this truth that you are not under law, but under grace and coming in confession and repentance, not fearing condemnation. That is the most powerful tool that Christian has to deal with ongoing sin.

If you're a Christian this morning, maybe you're fighting bitterness. It's perhaps true that someone has been terrible to you. And you just can't let go of it. You just can't get past the hurt.

Let me tell you, what you need is not a rule. What you need is repentance. Lord, I'm sorry I'm so bitter. I'm sorry for the anger that dwells deep in my heart. Thank you that there's ample forgiveness and grace in the Lord Jesus.

[27 : 58] I'm sorry, Lord. Please have mercy on me. Please help me. Maybe you're struggling with unwanted thoughts. Perhaps unwanted lustful thoughts and desires.

Let me tell you, what you need is not a rule. You need repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Lord, I know that deep in my heart there are desires which dishonor and displease you.

There are desires in my heart which I know deserve condemnation. Condemnation which I will not receive because Jesus has paid it all. Lord, I'm deeply sorry that I am not what I should be and not what I will be.

But thank you that there is grace sufficient in the Lord Jesus Christ, not only to forgive me for that, but also to make me holy. And it's important, isn't it, that we don't do those things on our own.

You need a community of people who will do that with you and around you and encourage you in that direction. A community of repentance and faith. Communities that come together not to be entertained but to worship and to fuel these new lives as they shape their gatherings around the gospel.

[29 : 04] Second and final application. Sorry, I'll speed up. Rejoice in unexpected fruitfulness. Just as we close, just look at verse 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.

I just want to, as we close, there's so much we could say in those verses, but I just want to zoom in on those last seven words. That we might bear fruit for God. Just think about how incredible that is, right?

Here's what is before you and me this morning. God has not saved us reluctantly. Nor has God saved us just to sort of leave us in our sin. Oh, well, I'll save them, but they're a useless Christian and I'll just leave them there and they're going to paddle around in their sin and bathe it.

No, that's not what God has saved us for. God has saved us for fruitfulness that comes not from our moral efforts under the law, but from a new life that he has given us by the Spirit. And so, look around you this morning.

This is what God is doing by his Spirit, for his glory. You are surrounded by a group of people who don't dress the same as you. They don't come together washing their hands in a particular way.

Some of them had bacon for breakfast this morning, right?

[30 : 18] They're from different backgrounds. They're not here to be entertained, but they're here for God's glory. That's what they care about. And the fuel for this community is repentance and faith drawn from the finished work of Christ.

It's amazing, isn't it? What great fruit. God is raising up communities of people like that who share their lives with one another, who gather together, who encourage each other, who share their joys and sorrows together, shining lights for his gospel in the world.

And he includes you in that by the Spirit through what he's doing. So we're here not to sit back and have a great time.

We're here to lean in. Drink deeply from the wells of his kindness and his mercy to us. Church, you know, it might be universally accepted as being boring, but that's only if you don't know what's going on.

If you know what's going on, this is the most brilliant place to be. We are watering fruitful trees, right? Trees that will bear fruit of grace and mercy to others.

[31 : 26] You know, we are growing trees here that will shed bitterness and grow kindness. Trees that will blossom with perseverance under great trial. Steadfastness in suffering.

Trees that will bring glory to God and delight in what he's done. Let's pray. And let's praise God for what he's doing amongst us. Heavenly Father, thank you that what is going on in this room cannot be explained simply in human terms.

But that you are at work by your Spirit for the sake of your glory. Thank you that by your Spirit you are enabling us to live fruitful lives to your praise and glory that we would not be able to do in our own strength.

Thank you that by your Spirit you are calling people from death to life to come and trust in you and turn from their sin. Things that they would not have been able to do in their own strength, but now find that they long to do by your Spirit.

Oh, how we pray, Lord, give us more of Jesus as we come in his name. By your Spirit, trusting in him alone. Oh, Lord, bring glory to your name we pray.

[32 : 54] Amen. Amen.