

Lesson 16: The New Way of the Spirit

Romans 7:1-6

Introductory Question for the Long Answer, part 2 (Answers the Objection in 6:15)

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?

Illustration of Marriage

(1) Two simple points about marriage

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.

(2) Comparison to law and grace

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.

The New Way of the Spirit

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. 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.

NASB

What is New about the New Covenant?

What's new about the new covenant? Let's make a list.

First, its not salvation by grace alone through faith alone. Paul was clear about that in chapter 4, using Abraham as his precedent. The biblical answer to the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?", is 100% grace, whether we are talking about Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses or David. The first question of covenant is always the same for God, always by grace through faith.

What is new about the New Covenant comes in answering the second question of covenant, "How then shall we live?" The answer to that changes from covenant to covenant. There is some consistency between covenants because of God's unchanging moral character. But there are also major differences. Here are four significant differences between the Old Covenant under Moses and the New Covenant under Jesus.

First, the Old Covenant used ritual symbols of sacrifice to look ahead to the one true atoning sacrifice. The New Covenant looks back to the cross as the one true atoning sacrifice. In the New we do not look forward to an event that must happen. We look back to an event that has happened. We look back to the cross.

Second, the Old Covenant people of God had their locus or center in the geo-political nation of Israel. The people of God were defined by their geography with Jerusalem as the center of the nation and the temple as the center of Jerusalem. They were also defined politically as a nation with a king. To be connected to God meant being connected to and looking to the nation of Israel and the temple as the center of worship and teaching. The New Covenant people of God no longer find their center in a geographic or political nation, but in Jesus Christ himself. Our center is spiritual, not institutional. The church is the people of God, and the church is found in all nations where ever true believers gather.

Third, the laws of the Mosaic covenant included not only moral law, but also civil and ceremonial law that was specific to the people of Israel who were defined geographically and politically. So, with a new spiritual definition of who are the people of God, we need a new set of covenant stipulations. The New Covenant people of God are not given civil law because we are not a political entity. We can speak into politics. But we do not have our own set of civil laws in the New Covenant. We also have

very little in the way of ceremonial law, not much other than baptism and the Lord's supper. We are no longer defined by a central temple institution. The moral law, however, stays much the same because it comes out of the nature of who God is. It would be the same no matter the covenant. The change of the cross and the change in our definition as people who believe in Jesus, requires a new set of stipulations or commands in the New Covenant.

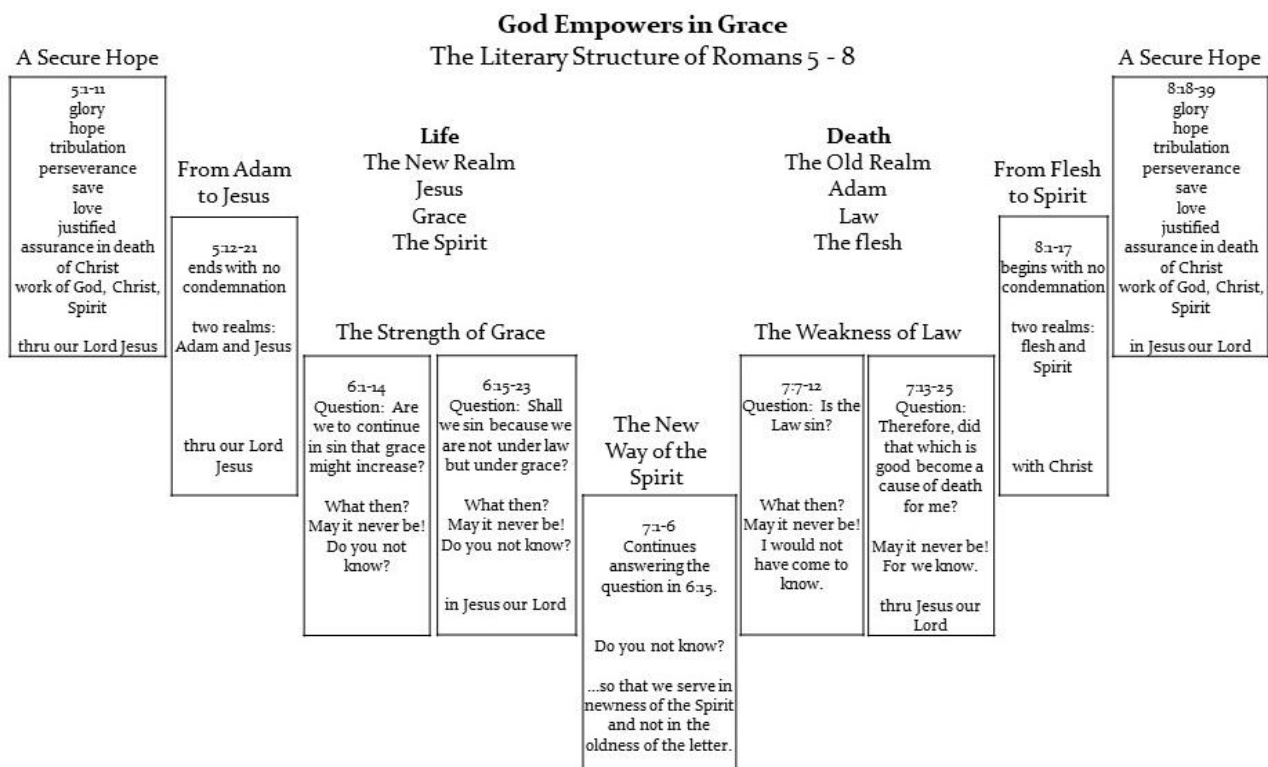
Fourth, and extremely important, the Old Covenant people of God were given an external written code and called to live up to it. The New Covenant people of God are indwelt with the Holy Spirit and called to live through him.

Recap: what is new about the new? These four things: the cross, the people, the stipulations and the Spirit.

The New Way of the Spirit

Here in Romans 7:1-6 we have come to the central point of Paul's teaching on life under the New Covenant of grace. This is the center of chapters 5-8. We have come to a key idea in this central section at the end of verse 6, "having died to the law by which we were bound, we serve in the newness of the Spirit and not the oldness of the letter." We have come to the new way of the Spirit.

This is not our first encounter with this idea in Romans. Paul alluded to the need for a spiritual work in the heart of believers back in 2:29 when he said that the true Jew "is one inwardly; and



circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter." Since that verse, Paul has chosen not to speak in terms of the Holy Spirit. In chapters 1-4, I believe Paul wanted to establish our justification before he began to talk about how we should live. And he wanted to do that with a focus on Jesus Christ. The gospel for Paul does not begin with an emotional or miraculous or empowering work of the Holy Spirit. As important as the work of the Holy Spirit is, the gospel begins with the death of Christ on the cross as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Paul keeps the two questions of covenant separate. I was taught the same thing when I was first taught how to share the gospel. I was taught following the order we see Paul using; to first share the gospel of Jesus focusing on our justification by grace through faith; and then, after a person had placed their faith in Christ or I realized they were already a Christian, only then would I share how to live in the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is what Paul has done in Romans. The first question is answered by Paul exclusively in terms of Christ's atoning work on the cross. And even in his answer to the second question of covenant Paul mostly holds off on references to the Holy Spirit until chapter 8. He chooses first to establish the strength of grace in terms of our relationship with Jesus. But now, here in 7:6, Paul refers to this new union we have with Jesus as the "newness of the Spirit" contrasting it to "oldness of the letter." Grace initiates a new way of life best described as union with Jesus Christ or living in the newness of the Spirit. It is the same spiritual concept, Christ in us, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We just get this one mention of the Holy Spirit here in 7:6. It is a key idea to grace, to what is new about the new covenant. Paul is going to develop the idea of life in the Spirit in chapter 8. But before we get to that, he has more to say about law, grace and sin.

Paul's argument that grace does not lead to sin insists that grace does more than forgive sin. Grace initiates a new reality in the heart. Grace changes the person who believes. There is a strength in grace to free the believer from sin and to bring about a fruitful life. Paul's concern is both to help us understand life under grace and to also help us better understand life under law.

As the central point of Romans 5-8, Romans 7:1-6, serves as a bridge from Paul's treatment of grace in chapter 6 to his treatment of law in chapter 7.

Let's read the passage: Romans 7:1-6.

[Read Romans 7:1-6.]

7:1 Introductory Question for the Long Answer, part 2 (Answers the Objection in 6:15)

6:15a Invitation and Objection: *What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?*

6:15b Short answer: *May it never be!*

6:16-23 Long answer, part 1: *Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves...*

7:1-6 Long answer, part 2: *Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law)...*

This passage does not follow Paul's rhetorical pattern that includes an invitation, objection, short answer and long answer. But when we look at the first verse, we see something familiar. "Do you not know..." and then Paul goes on to develop a point around an illustration of marriage. This is the way he started his long answer in 6:3 "Do you not know..." and then he illustrated his answer with baptism. Then the next long answer in 6:14, "Do you not know..." and he illustrated by slavery. This passage fits in with the long answer part of Paul's pattern.

So then, what question is he answering? What is the objection? The most reasonable answer is that he still answering the objection put forth in 6:15. We had an invitation, "What then?", followed by an objection, "Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace?" Paul gave his short answer, "By no means!" And then he started his long answer, "Do you not know..." That was long answer part 1. What we have in 7:1-6 is long answer part 2 to that objection, "Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace." First, he develops an answer using the illustration of slavery. Now he is adding to the answer using the illustration of marriage.

The passage is not only a second part of a two-part answer. It also concludes the argument for grace and prepares to move us in to the discussion about law. So, its finishing up chapter 6 and moving us into chapter 7. When you think about chapter 6, neither of the two passages address issues of law. Both address issues of grace, righteousness and sin. In chapter 6, Paul is considering life under grace. For believers, does grace promote sin or promote righteousness? He did raise the idea of being under law in the objection that was in 6:15, "Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace." But he did not mention the law.

Once we get into chapter 7, Paul is no longer explaining grace, righteousness and sin. He turns to explaining law, righteousness and sin. Paul argues the power of the gospel, not only by showing the strength of grace, but also by showing the weakness of law. We get a bit of both in 7:1-6 because we are transitioning from the discussion of grace to the discussion of law.

Let's walk through the passage.

7:2-3 Two simple points about marriage

Paul's dominating illustration here is marriage. He starts out telling his listeners that he knows that they know how law works. Verse 1, you know "that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives." It is not clear if Paul is talking about Mosaic law or the civil Roman law. And it does not seem to matter. A living person is under the rule of law whether in covenant with God or in relationship to civil society, unless he dies. And then the law ceases to have jurisdiction. So far, it is just a simple point. When you die the law no longer has jurisdiction.

Then in verse 2 and 3 Paul builds on this simple idea using the case of marriage. When I teach this passage of Romans, it is not unusual for someone to ask me about divorce and remarriage. At that point I ask everyone to take a pause. This is an illustration about marriage being used to make a biblical point that is not about marriage at all. We would have to be very careful interpreting this illustration to help us consider issues like divorce or re-marriage. Recently, I saw this passage quoted in a document making a case that remarriage is not allowed if the other spouse is still alive. That is one argument, but I believe it is poor biblical interpretation to try to make that argument from an illustration being used by Paul. For example, considering divorce, Mosaic law allowed for divorce. Jesus taught in Matthew 19:4-9 (also see Matthew 5:32) that the certificate of divorce in the Old Covenant was not the ideal will of God but a civil concession made to curb sin among the Israelites. Jesus went back to Genesis 2 to make his argument that God's ideal will is that what God brings together let no man separate. But then Jesus did make an exception for adultery, saying that adultery was a valid ground for divorce. So, we could interpret Jesus' teaching that divorce is not the ideal, but adultery may be grounds for it. But if I just take Paul's words here, the illustration does not allow for divorce at all. It is only death. The problem is not that Paul disagrees with Jesus. The problem is that Paul is using marriage as an illustration by which he makes a point he assumes to be obvious to his readers. That is why you use illustrations. Most people can readily connect with what you are saying. The illustration is not to complicate. The illustration is to help simplify something else that is complicated. Paul does not mention divorce and Paul does not mention remarriage. The illustration does not express Paul's thought on either topic. If we want to know Paul's thoughts on marriage we need to go somewhere like 1 Corinthians 7. But not here. We might glean something useful here, but only very carefully and tentatively. This is not teaching us about marriage any more than chapter 6 was trying to teach us about the institution of slavery. This is making a point about the readers' common understanding of marriage to teach us about law, grace and sin.

So, we should be asking, "What is the simple point of the illustration?" Let's look at Romans 7:2-3.

Romans 7:2-3, "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. 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."

Two simple points, really. First, when two people are married by law and one dies, the other is freed from the covenant of marriage. Second, if two are married by law and the wife joins herself to another, presumably sexually, she is an adulteress. But to emphasize again the first point, if her husband has died, she is not an adulteress.

7:4 Comparison to law and grace

Using this simple summary of marriage law, Paul makes his spiritual point in verse 4. This is what he was getting at originally.

Verse 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."

You died through Christ, so that you might be joined to Christ.

I do not think that Paul is just speaking just to Jews here when he talks about the law. Jews were clearly under law, under the law of Moses. So, Paul's comments on law through chapter 7 have specific relevance and application to Jews under Old Covenant law. The Jew is still Paul's best case for someone trying to live by law because the Mosaic law is law revealed by God. But Paul's use of law continues to also carry with it the more general application of the moral law that proceeds out of the character of God. Paul argued in chapters 2 and 3 that those who are not under the specially revealed law of Moses are still held accountable to a general principle of moral law. We could argue that all human beings are under the general covenants made with Adam and Noah, while the Jews came under the special covenants made with Abraham and Moses.

All human beings, then, are under moral obligation to God. We are under covenant, or we could say that we are under law. The marriage illustration helps Paul make his point. The only way out from being under the law is to die to the law. Law must be fulfilled, or the penalty of law must be paid. We have failed to fulfill the law, so the second option applies. We must pay the penalty of death. Through faith in Jesus we are united with him in his death. His death applies for us. We have died. Died to the law. We are no longer under law.

We are now free to enter into a new kind of relationship with God. Not only are we joined to Christ in his death, but also in his life. We have a new kind of spiritual, emotional intimacy with God through our spiritual union with Jesus.

Remember that Paul is still responding here to the objection in 6:15, "Shall we sin because we are not under law, but under grace?" The marriage analogy affirms the description made by the objection. It is true to say that we are not under law, but under grace. And this is not unjust. This is not adultery.

The faithful Jew may remember the harsh words in Ezekiel 23 or Jeremiah 3 that describe the idolatry of Israel and Judah in terms of spiritual adultery. Speaking of Judah, after the fall of Israel, Jeremiah says, "Her treacherous sister Judah did not fear, but she went out and was a harlot also...she polluted the land and committed adultery with stones and trees (Jeremiah 3:8-9)." The stones and trees are the spiritual places and idols set up in the land to a host of gods and goddesses. Turning from the law of Moses, breaking the command to "have no gods before me" and to "fashion no idols", entering into the worship of other gods was recognized as a form of spiritual adultery. You could image Paul taking this view towards the new Christian movement when he was still called Saul, a Pharisee of Pharisees. Not understanding that Jesus fulfills the law, the younger Paul burned with zeal against fellow Jews who would leave the law of Moses to follow Christ. They were spiritual adulterers. How dare they take themselves out from under law. They had no right to do so. They were in covenant with God. They left, and they committed adultery.

Paul's illustration of marriage defends against that charge in the case of those who follow Christ. To charge Christians with unlawfully or unrighteously abandoning the law of Moses is an unfounded charge because Christians are not in that category. Through faith in Christ, Christians have legally died to the covenant of law - the penalty has been paid, the law is satisfied - and have been freed to enter into union with Christ under the new covenant of grace.

And notice the end of verse 4. God's point in releasing his followers from law and joining them to himself in Jesus is that "we might bear fruit for God." It is the same as 6:4. We were buried with Christ in death, "so we too might walk in newness of life." Fruit for God, newness of life, it is the same idea. The goal of grace is a new kind of fruitful life for those who trust God. Grace is counterintuitive to the religious person in his or her natural human state. The way you get people to bear fruit for God is by defining moral behavior through a set of rules and requiring the faithful to live by those rules upon threat of shame, exclusion, expulsion or damnation. The external law guides the faithful to righteous living.

Paul says, “No. You’ve got it wrong on two fronts. First, you misunderstand the strength of grace to produce righteous living. But it’s not just that. You also misunderstand the weakness of the law. The law really is not as good at producing righteous living as you think it is.”

My daughters have listed what they want in a husband. Ability to throw a frisbee is at the top of the list; spiritual maturity, sense of humor, hard working. Can you imagine being married to the perfect man? If you make your list, what would it be like to be married to the perfect man? The perfect man knows you truly and deeply. He knows your secret thoughts. He knows what you do, say and think every moment of the day. He never makes mistakes, but he is aware of every mistake you make. And he lets you know it. You make an insensitive remark. He points it out. You use your time selfishly. He comments with his eyes. You are harsh with your child. He observes that you do the same kind of thing you just rebuked your child for doing. And then points out your inconsistency in discipline. And then gives you three rules to follow to be better next time. Each time you fail to do what you should or succeed at doing what you shouldn’t, you are reminded by his tone, his eyes, his silence that you are not the perfect woman. You do not live up. You are not acceptable. You are not worthy. Though he will permit you to keep trying.

Would you like to be married to that perfect man?

That man is the moral law. He evaluates you dispassionately, accurately, severely. Either you live up, or you do not. Your acceptability depends on your performance. There is always a phantom wife floating out there, the potential perfect you who you never succeed at emulating. Your perfect husband’s presence reminds you every day that you never live up, are never acceptable, never worthy, never truly loveable. That is what it is like to be married to the perfect man. That is what it is like to sincerely pursue life under a perfect moral law. You never live up.

But in Christ you have died to the law, so that you might be joined to another. The other is also a perfect man. But he accepts you by grace, not by performance. He finds you valuable, loveable, likeable, enjoyable. He died to make the legal payment, so that you could enter into a free union with him. He sees your failings, your every thought and word and action. And he desires for you to grow and mature. But not to earn his love. You have that. He understands, he cares. He gives himself. He enters into a deep spiritual and emotional union with you to help you become who he knows you can be. He has a lovely vision of you. And he is sure of it. What does Paul say in Ephesians 5:25, “Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for her; that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water and the word that he might present to himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless.”

When he looks at you, his eyes do not frown, his forehead does not wrinkle, his mouth does not purse. When he looks at you his eyes twinkle and shine from the joy in his heart. When he looks at you. When he looks at you, he sees purity, no spot or wrinkle. He sees loveliness. He sees the glory of his bride. He knows the journey still may be long and painful. He is not naïve. He is wise. He sees what lies ahead, and he trusts implicitly in his commitment to you and in his strength to follow through. In him you are loved, you are secure. He is prepared to give a lifetime to bring you home. And in him you find power and desire to enter the process of becoming all you are created to be.

How about that perfect man? How would you like to be married to him?

You have been released from the law, so that you might be joined to another, to Christ Jesus himself, the perfect man.

The New Way of the Spirit

Paul has contended through chapter 6 that there is a strength of grace that comes from a new union with God through Jesus Christ. Paul is getting ready in the rest of chapter 7 to prove his second contention that the law is weak. We get a summary of both the strength of grace and the weakness of law in verses 5 and 6.

[Read Romans 7:5-6]

“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. 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.”

Paul describes our state under law as being in the flesh. The flesh is not necessarily a sinful state, at least not in the case of Jesus. In 1:3 Paul describes Jesus as “born of a descendant of David according to the flesh.” It just means human. Adam and Eve also existed in a state of human flesh that was without sin. But since their fall, the principle of sin described by Paul in chapter 5 has afflicted every person. We are not only of human flesh, we are of fallen, sinful human flesh. Our natural human state includes a darkening of the mind and the desires. We are born into this. And while we are in the flesh, Paul tells us that the sinful passions are aroused by the law. Those passions at work in the members of our body, our mind, our eyes, our tongue, our hands, our feet, bear fruit for death. This is the slavery to sin described in chapter 6. What Paul adds here is the idea that the law actually arouses those sinful passions. Rather than curbing sin, the law becomes a catalyst, stirring up sin. Paul will follow up on that idea in the passage to come.

To end the section Paul turns back again to the power of grace. We have been released from the law, “so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.”

The newness of the Spirit speaks to the reality of our union with Jesus under the covenant of grace. Through Moses God handed down a written code and challenged us to live according to that code. Through the covenant of grace, God calls us into union with Jesus Christ to live through him. This is the New Way of the Spirit. This is what is so new about the new covenant. He has written his word in our hearts by the presence of the Spirit. He has invited us into a new kind of intimacy, a new kind of joy, a new source of power. We do not bear fruit for God working out of our flesh. That is the struggle of human religion, straining to work against our fallen desires and broken thoughts to produce for God an honorable life. We can’t do it. We need God, not only to address the guilt of sin, that’s critical, but to also address the power of sin in human flesh. God addresses both of these needs in the covenant of grace in a way that was only symbolized or foreshadowed in the covenant of law. Now through the death and life of Jesus Christ, we have forgiveness of our guilt and we have new power through our new union with him.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as interesting or important or strange or confusing in Romans 7:1-6? What are some questions that the text raises for you?
2. The beginning section of this lesson lists four new things about the New Covenant in comparison to the Old Covenant. Review the list. Do you agree with the list? Does any item stand out to you as particularly interesting or important or helpful?
3. Paul uses the illustration of marriage to demonstrate two important truths. (1) Christians leave the covenant of law in a way that is morally upright. (2) Having left the covenant of law, Christians are able to enter into a new covenant which includes spiritual union with Jesus Christ.
In this lesson the analogy of marriage is extended to consider what it would be like to be in marriage to the perfect man who is “Law” and what it is like to be married to the perfect man who is Christ. How does this illustration help you think about life under law versus life under grace?
4. Paul says that the law arouses or brings out the sinful passions of the flesh. How do you understand what Paul is saying? How does the law interact with human nature to bring out sin? In what way is this true to your experience?