

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ROMANS
Living Under Grace (Romans 5-8)
v. Grace Trumps Law
Romans 7:1-6

Paul has argued in Romans chapter six that as Christians we have died to sin. He now adds in 7:4 "you also died to the law". If the law in Psalm 19:7 ff is described as "... perfect refreshing the soul... [and] The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous," why then are we called to die to something which is inherently good, true and righteous. Paul would argue that the problem is not the law per se, rather sin which is provoked by the law and seeks to control us. Left to ourselves we end up serving sin as master of our lives. Bob Dylan protest folk singer of the sixties and recent Nobel Laureate for literature reminds us.

'You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls.
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes
Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody,
It may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.'

Paul similarly asks the loaded question in verses 1-3. He uses the analogy of marriage to illustrate the point that the Mosaic is no longer the means of salvation. When someone dies, in this case the husband, the wife is free to remarry, the law of Moses notwithstanding. Likewise, the believer; having died with Christ, the law no longer has mastery over us. We are united to another by faith. Paul may well have been referring to a rabbinic maxim, 'If a person is dead, he is free from the Torah and the fulfilling of the commandments'. Christ has set us free not only from the condemnation of sin, but also from the claims of the law with regard to salvation. For an unregenerate person, someone who is not saved, the law simply condemns, having set a standard which no one can attain through self-reliance.

So, at the outset Paul poses the rhetorical question "Do you not know brothers and sisters", the third within two chapters, "... that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives?" Through union with Christ, his death and resurrection attributed to us, we have died to the law. Paul is not speaking about law in general or Roman law in particular. Clearly, he is speaking about the Mosaic law of the old covenant. He is not teaching about marriage and divorce per se, rather using a principle and analogy to illustrate that we are under a new law, the law of Christ. Nor is the passage speaking about the Christian life. It is speaking about the law, the law of Moses.

Our Reformed tradition, the Westminster Confession of faith and John Calvin the great reformer, speak of three aspects of the law; the civil law applicable to Israel as a theocracy under the direct rule of God through prophets, priests and kings. Then there was the ceremonial law, the intricate sacrificial system dealing with the sins of the people. The civil law is abrogated and the ceremonial law is fulfilled in Christ. However, the moral law enunciated in the Ten Commandments is still applicable, no longer as a means of salvation, but rather as a means of grace, governing our behaviour as believers. Contemporary commentators argue that Jewish belief did not distinguish between the civil, ceremonial and moral law. The law was the law as Paul understood it prior to his

conversion. He used it to persecute Christ followers. However, his Damascus encounter with the risen Christ saw his theological world turned upside down in terms of law and grace.

So, what does Paul tell us about the implications of the law with regard to our belief and behaviour? The believer is no longer a slave to sin and the law. Verses four to six enunciate the principle which he established in verses one to three. Having sat at the feet of Gamaliel the leading rabbi of his day, Paul was familiar with the minutiae of the law. However, he learned the reality of sin and its hold over humanity by sitting at the foot of the cross. Keeping the law does not set one free. Only the person of Christ liberates us. A dead letter devoid of a living personal relationship leads to spiritual disaster and damnation. We need to see our lives through the lens of a new relationship. A robust view of holiness is not a matter of legalistic nit-picking. We can step boldly into the space created for us to be a witness to Christ.

Paul as a devout rabbi concerned about the letter of the law was set free from the claims of the old covenant. All that the law did for the Israelites was that they were incapable of keeping it and ended up in exile. The law did not save. It pointed to the need of a Saviour. And that is what we have, a Saviour who gives us a new nature, setting us free from the clawing claims of the law. A higher law, the law of Christ is operative in our lives. Thank God for "But now..." of verse six. We are under new management as it were; given a new nature, the nature of Christ, no longer dictated by sin, no longer straight-jacketed by the Mosaic law, no longer subject to legalism. "Free at last" is the legacy of the believer, free to follow Christ as he daily fills us with his Spirit.

Alan Cameron
Trinity, Lynnwood
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