

SOS VERSES: Psalm 34:1-20

Classic conversation stoppers. *Father of the Bride 2*, a film about midlife crisis as much as anything else— George Banks learns he’s going to be a grandfather, so he dyes his hair, starts working out, puts the house on the market... In one of my favorite scenes, George gathers his family for dinner, along with his newly married daughter, his son-in-law Brian Mackenzie, and Brian’s parents. He has a big announcement of his own, but first he tries to make dinner conversation by asking about baby names. Immediately things get tense. First name (nobody really likes their options, father-in-law suggests a name from the paternal grandfather’s line), last name (made-up names, then drop the “Banks-Mackenzie” and just go with Mackenzie). Tension escalates, everyone starts arguing, Annie whispers severely to her day to say something, and he pops out with: “Hey, guess what, I sold the house today!” All conversation stops, all attention shifts to him, questions start to fly. “The guy paid me \$15k extra to be out in 10 days.”

Paul makes a statement like that in Romans 6:

6:14 *For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.*

He anticipates the questions that will follow:

6:15 *What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?*

In other words, does the gospel leave you free to live any way you choose? Paul answers that question in 6:16-23. Then in chapter 7, he moves on to a new slate of questions, implied but not stated:

- We’re not under Law? How did that happen?
- What does that do?
- How does that work?

What we’ll see is that the answers to these questions are three steps in Paul’s argument, showing why freedom from Law doesn’t mean more sin; it actually means more righteousness.

How did it happen? (vv 1-3)

ANSWER: When Jesus died, we died to the Law:

v4a *Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ...*

How did it happen that we are “not under law” (6:14)? We “died to the law through the body of Christ.” Paul’s argument here is very similar to what he said in ch 6 about our former relationship to sin and how we were released from it. Note the parallels:

6:6 *...[we were] enslaved to sin. / 7:2 ...married woman is bound by law*

6:2 *...we who died to sin / 7:4 ... you also have died to the law*

6:7 *...one who has died has been set free from sin / 7:3b ... if her husband dies, she is free from that law*

But we’re ahead of ourselves a bit. Paul first states the general principle in verse 1 and then provides an illustration in vv 2-3.

The Principle:

v1 *Or do you not know, brothers- for I am speaking to those who know the law- that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives?*

“I am speaking to those who know the law.” Who are these people? Who is Paul’s audience here? Romans 7 is one of the most hotly debated chapters in the Bible, particularly over the question of whether Paul is speaking as a Christian or an unbeliever (specifically, an unbelieving Jew who is struggling to keep the Law) as he describes the inner turmoil in the second half of the chapter:

vv14-15 *For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.*

How can a Christian say, “I am sold under sin”? Where is the hope, the victory, the progress? We’ll deal with that next week, and I will defend my answer in much more detail. But for now let me say I believe Paul is speaking as a Christian to other Christians. He’s not speaking to a subset in the Roman church of just Jews or just seekers or just backslidden believers. This is for everyone.

When Paul says “I am speaking to those who know the law,” he is making the natural assumption that all believers have at least some basic familiarity with how the Law of Moses operated. This would have been true especially in the First Century, when their only Bible was the Old Testament—until the gospels and epistles started to circulate, every sermon would have been from the OT. You didn’t have to be a converted Jew to be familiar with the Law; you just needed to be a Christian.

Paul has been making important points about the Law all through this book, and he assumes his readers will all be able to follow along.

Furthermore, it's not like Paul makes some obscure point from the Law that only the specially informed would have known. Look at the point he makes about the Law at the end of verse 1. He says: "the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives." That's obvious to anyone, not just people who went to synagogue school. You didn't have to be raised under the Law of Moses to get that point; it's true everywhere. Paul's point is simply that, if you're dead, the Law can't bind you. Your obligation to the Law ends when your life ends.

The Illustration:

v2 *Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage.*

"Thus" is Paul's signal word that shows he's going to illustrate his point. The NIV puts it: "For example," and the point of the illustration is plain: the law of marriage is binding only until one of the parties dies. If that happens, the other is free.

Verse 3 says, "if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage" ("law concerning the husband" NAS). Literally, it's just "the law of the husband" or we might say "the husband-type laws." When woman's husband dies, there are no more husband-type laws that bind her. Why? Because she has no husband.

The word "released" is a strong word, the same term Paul uses in 6:14 when he says "our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing" ("done away with" NIV, NAS, NKJV). Her status as a wife has been "brought to nothing, done away with, abolished" with her husband's death, and the law's hold on her in this particular area is null and void. She has no more husband-type obligations. Husband-type laws have no relevance to her.

She is free in that case to remarry:

v3 *Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.*

If a woman gives herself to another man while her husband is alive, her behavior stamps her as an adulteress. According to the Law, there is only one category for her. The verb Paul uses ("will be called") is illuminating. It originally had to do with transacting public business, negotiating, or deliberating over a deal. Later, the meaning expanded a bit. Sometimes a person who worked in a certain business would literally take their name from their work—"Tanner, Baker, Carpenter." This verb could be used to describe that moment when a person's work or public reputation became their public identity:

Acts 11:26 *In Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.*

The disciples' public business, their occupation as "Christ-followers" came to be their label. That's the word Paul uses here: "she will be called an adulteress." Her behavior, her business, what she has done is so much a part of who she is, her new name is "adulteress."

But not every instance of remarriage is adultery (v3b). How is it that one remarriage would make her an adulteress, while another remarriage would not (v3b)? Death makes the difference. It ends her obligations. It even changes her identity.

How did it come to be that we are "not under Law but under grace" (6:14)? Here's how: when Jesus died, we died to the Law.

What does it do? (vv 4-5)

ANS: Death to the Law means marriage to Jesus.

v4 *Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.*

Three things that happen to us in Christ: a vicarious death, a new relationship, and a healthy harvest.

A Vicarious Death: "You also have died to the law through the body of Christ." None of the translations render this verb quite strongly enough (NAS and NKJV come closest). Literally it means "You have been put to death to the law." You didn't merely die; in the death of Christ, God put you to death, too. He makes the same point more mildly in verse 6:

v6 *But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive...*

What exactly have we died to? How did the Law hold us captive? Paul isn't talking about the role of the Law in our daily lives. He's not saying we are dead to any obligation to obey God. He's talking about the Law's former power over us.

He's talking about our former life in Adam, the old realm of existence where we lived before we met Christ. All through these chapters, Paul indicates that we live in one realm or the other: the old realm of Adam OR the new realm of Christ.

5:17 *If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.*

6:6-8 *We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷ For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸ Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.*

Paul contrasts the two realms with at least five different pairs of terms. Each realm has a different:

- Founder and King: Adam ("old man/self") vs. Christ
- Constitutional authority: Law vs. grace
- Ethical influence on their subjects: sin vs. righteousness
- Source of power: flesh vs. spirit
- Heritage: death vs. life

These are two opposing, mutually exclusive realms; and everyone lives in one realm or the other. We might say simply "saved or unsaved."

Verse 5 mentions several of these features of the former age:

v5 *For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.*

And you see the decisive contrast with verse 6:

v6 *But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.*

This is what Paul means by "died to the Law" (v4) and "released from the law" (v6). He means we are a new person altogether, free from the old realm under Adam, under law, under sin, in the flesh, facing death.

We are not a two-natured person; we are altogether new. Yes, the Christian life is a battle, because we live in an age of conflict between the two realms. We can even say that vestiges of the old realm remain

within ("it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me" 7:17,20). But when Paul says we "died to the law through the body of Christ," he means we were decisively and unchangeably transferred from the old realm to the new.

Galatians 2:19-20 *Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. ²⁰ It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.*

The law bound us when we lived in that old realm. When we were in Adam, under sin, headed for death, in the flesh, we had no hope of ever doing right or being with Christ. But once we died, all that changed:

A New Relationship. Death to old Mr. Law means marriage to a new husband:

v4 *...you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead...*

Paul didn't choose the marriage/adultery illustration randomly. He wasn't just reaching for an illustration of termination, like "The Law required you to tithe; but once you're dead, you don't have to tithe anymore. Your obligations are terminated." He wanted an illustration of transfer: marriage to one ends in death → marriage to another. Relationship to one ends, relationship to another begins. ***You can be married to Law or married to Jesus, but you cannot be unmarried.***

6:16 *Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?*

A Healthy Harvest.

v4 *... in order that we may bear fruit for God.*

The glorious thing about this transfer from Law to Christ is that it changes us. It makes us fruitful. It finally transforms us into the person we were meant to be and wanted to be. We'll never become that best version of ourselves (the Facebook you) under Law. We need a relationship to Jesus:

6:14-15 *sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. ¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!*

Why does freedom from the Law not result in lawlessness? Step One:

Because when Jesus died, we died to the Law. Step Two: Death to the Law means marriage to Jesus. Step Three... how does marriage to Jesus change us?

How does it work? (v 5)

ANS: Jesus changes us from the inside out rather than the outside in.

vv5-6 *For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. ⁶ But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.*

We saw moments ago that this phrase “living in the flesh” is a reference to our old life in Adam; it’s not a Christian catch phrase for making a sinful choice (e.g., “I got in the flesh”). Under the old regime, Sin within and Law without formed a deadly conspiracy: “sinful passion [was] aroused by the Law” and “bore fruit for death.” As soon as the Law commanded: “Do not ‘whatever’,” Sin rebelled, Flesh expressed the rebellion, and Death ensued. The more Law tightens down its hold, the harder Sin and the Flesh fight to squirm free (like holding a bar of soap).

What is the answer? The answer is to be changed from within, not constrained from without. We need a heart change. Instead of rebelling against the Law, we need a heart that is receptive, compliant, and eager to do what pleases God. This is exactly what God has done through Jesus:

8:3-4, 7-9 *For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.*

God did what the Law could not do. By sending Jesus, He condemned sin, fulfilled the Law, and granted the Spirit. Before Jesus came, our mind was hostile to God, opposed to His Law, and unable to submit. But now that we are in the Spirit instead of the flesh, He owns our heart.

Objectively, this was the promise of the New Covenant:

Ezekiel 36:26-27 *And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.*

A new heart. A new spirit. Soft flesh vs. hard stone.

Jeremiah 31:33 *But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

Subjectively, the key to living the Christian life—the key to bearing fruit for God—is to die to the law and be joined *not* to a list of rules, *but* to a Person, to the risen Christ. The pathway to change is the path of a personal, Spirit-dependent, all-satisfying relationship with Jesus.

ILLUS: *Johnny Lingo and the Eight-Cow Wife*, by Patricia McGerr, *Women's Day* (1965), *Reader's Digest* (1988)

"Do you ever think what it does to a woman when she knows that the price her husband has paid is the lowest price for which she can be bought? And then later, when all the women talk, as women do, they boast of what their husbands paid for them. One says four cows, another maybe six. How does she feel--the woman who was sold for one or two? This could not happen to my Sarita."

"Then you paid that unprecedented number of cows just to make your wife happy?"

"Happy?" He seemed to turn the word over on his tongue, as if to test its meaning. "I wanted Sarita to be happy, yes, but I wanted more than that. You say she's different from the way they remember her in Kiniwata. This is true. Many things can change a woman. Things that happen inside, things that happen outside. But the thing that matters most is what she thinks about herself. In Kiniwata, Sarita believed she was worth nothing. Now she knows that she is worth more than any other woman on the islands."

"Then you wanted..."

"I wanted to marry Sarita. I loved her and no other woman."

"But--" I was close to understanding.

"But," he finished softly, "I wanted an eight-cow wife."

The Law will not change us, make us lovely, help us do right. Christ will. Know him. Trust him. Love him. Treasure Him. And know how much He loves and treasures you.