

## **Romans (31): Married to Christ**

### **Introduction:**

Today we will examine in more detail and with better clarity the believer's relationship with Jesus Christ. Paul described this relationship as analogous to a second marriage after the death of a former spouse. Believers had formerly been bound to the law, but through their union with Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection, they died to the law so that they would become joined with Christ so they could bring forth fruit unto God. Let us read **Romans 7:1-6**.

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? <sup>2</sup>For 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. <sup>3</sup>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.

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>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. <sup>6</sup>But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

The apostle had declared earlier that the believer is no longer ruled by the sin to which he had formerly been subject. The reason was that the believer was no longer "under law" but rather was now in Christ "under grace." Romans 6:14 reads, "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." In accordance with Paul's common writing style, he stated the truth rather abruptly, making the statement in verse 14, but then returning later in the passage to provide further explanation. Romans 7:1ff is the explanation of why the Christian is no longer "under" God's law but is now "under" God's grace. Paul had held off his explanation to this point, because he first addressed the possible objection that this truth would result in believers having a license to sin (Cf. 6:15-23). But now with 7:1, he picks up the subject from 6:14.

**Verse 1** reads, "*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?*" Paul stated what he regarded as an obvious principle, "do you not know... that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives?" When someone dies, the law no longer controls or rules over him. When someone dies, the principles and prescriptions of the Mosaic Law no longer controls him, no longer does it have authority over him.

Here Paul is reasoning with an illustration that *all* of his readers would have understood. Even though it may seem that Paul might have been narrowing his illustration only to some of his audience, when he wrote, "for I am speaking to those who know the law", he was assuming that they all knew "the law."<sup>1</sup> Even the Gentile believers in the church of Rome may have been earlier Gentiles who had been sympathetic with the Jews' religion, even to the degree of being called "God fearers."

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<sup>1</sup> As Moo argues. Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1996), p. 411. Schreiner is in agreement. Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 347.

In addition, a substantial portion of the Gentiles in the church may have been Gentile converts or God-fearers from the synagogue and have been well-schooled in Mosaic teaching (Dunn 1988a: 359; Stuhlmacher 1994: 103).<sup>2</sup>

Some have argued that Paul was referring to “law” generically, that is, law as a general principle, or even to Roman law.<sup>3</sup> But this is not correct. Paul was referring to the law of Moses.

Paul then provides his illustration of marriage, widowhood, and remarriage. **Verse 2** reads, ***“For 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.”*** Paul was speaking of marriage according to the law of Moses. He shows marriage to be a life-long commitment and bond between the husband and wife. God regards marriage between husband and wife to be “until death do they part.”

Now it is important to understand that Paul was not setting forth a doctrine of marriage in this passage. In other words, it was not his purpose to explain reasons for possible divorce and remarriage. That may be found in our Lord’s own teaching elsewhere (e.g. Matt. 5:22; 19:1ff). The reason we state this is that some cite Romans 7:1ff and argue that divorce is never an option in God’s sight but that death alone dissolves the marriage. But that would be a misuse of this passage. It would have been contrary to Paul’s purpose to bring forth this illustration if he were to include causes or reasons for divorce. His point was to show that just as death dissolves a marriage which then allows the surviving spouse to remarry, so Christians were free to be joined to Christ because of the dissolution of their former relationship with the law through their union with Jesus in His death and resurrection.

Paul continues in **verse 3**: ***“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 marries another while her first husband is still living, then she is guilty of adultery and may be labeled or described as an “adulteress.” This is the general law of God stated regarding God’s will respecting the permanency of marriage.

Just as an aside, we certainly take note that our society has evolved a great deal in the last generation respecting its views on marriage. But God’s standards remain in place. God regards a marriage relationship as sinful if it was entered by one of the spouses had been previously married but the first spouse is still living; God regards that second marriage as an adulterous relationship. And on the Day of Judgment God will judge people according to His laws for the marriage relationship. “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous” (Heb. 13:4). The exception to this, of course, is if the first marriage was dissolved and the divorce occurred due to the infidelity of the former spouse. Then the divorced man or woman is free to marry another with the blessing of God. Now there are many marriages in today’s culture that may be described as having violated God’s law respecting their marriage. There are many Christian families that have this background to their marriage. To be a Christian and in this kind of marriage does not mean that he or she is consigned to a life of forfeiting God’s blessing on that marriage. But Christians should be honest with themselves before God and one another. They should acknowledge error before one another, not trying to justify themselves or change God’s standard to justify their relationship. And having acknowledged their error, they should confess their sin before God and then resolve as God enables them to acknowledge God’s good and perfect will in these matters before others. Even our past failures may be used of God for a fruitful witness before others, if we are humble before the Lord, seek His will, humble ourselves before Him, and then resolve to take the stand, “Let God be true.”

But again, Paul’s purpose here was not to set forth a biblical view of marriage and divorce. He is only stating the principle of marriage that is fitting for an illustration about the believer’s relationship to

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<sup>2</sup> Schreiner, p. 347.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid..

the law of God. Paul states the legal principle that if and when the wife's husband dies, then she is free to marry another man. Death had brought the end to her relationship with her first husband. She is no adulteress in her second marriage.

We then read of Paul's application of his illustration in **verse 4**: ***“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.”*** If you look closely, you will see a twist in Paul's reasoning. To follow his illustration precisely, what would follow is that the law died in Christ enabling you to be bound to Christ. But Paul does not say that. And it is reasonable that he did not say that, for there is no place in the Scriptures that speaks of God's law “dying” or ceasing to have abiding authority in that respect. No, Paul declares that you, the believer, died with respect to the law through your union with Jesus in His death. This union with Jesus Christ in His death severed what was your former relationship with the law.

But not only were believers in union with Jesus Christ in His death, but they were also in Him in His resurrection. This enabled us to belong to Jesus Christ rather than to be bound to God's law. “Union with Christ in his death must never be severed from union with him in his resurrection.”<sup>4</sup> And it is our union with Jesus Christ in His life that enables us to “bear fruit for God.” “Fruit” is a reference to true righteousness characterizing our lives.

Paul then described what our former life was like when we were under the law. ***“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”*** (7:5).

Here Paul uses the term, “flesh”, to describe the life of believers before conversion when they were controlled by sin. Now the Jews had always believed that the law helped prevent them from sinning. But Paul turned it about and declared that our sinful passions were actually “aroused by the law”, resulting in sinful actions resulting in death.

The shocking statement in Romans 5:7 is that these desires for sin were aroused by the law. The typical Jewish view was that the law helped prevent people from sinning. Paul contends that it aids and abets sin, that sin is provoked and stimulated by means of the law. Jewish history supports Paul's contention, for under the law Israel ended up in exile because of its sins.<sup>5</sup>

The law of God reveals God's standards, but when it is applied as the rule of life for the unbeliever, it will aggravate his sinfulness. Later in Romans 8 Paul will write, “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. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7f).

Now, when we say that here in verse 5 the word “flesh” is a term that denotes the life of the believers before conversion when he was controlled by sin, the word “flesh” does not always carry the connotation of being sinful. Ultimately the context determines the exact definition of any word. There are some places where the word “flesh” simply means this present life without respect to sin. Perhaps the clearest example would be John 1:14 with reference to the Son of God, the Word of God: “And the Word became *flesh* and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” It is obvious in this context the word “flesh” has nothing to do with the presence of sin.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately a word's context determines the nuance of its meaning in that context.

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<sup>4</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 243.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 350.

<sup>6</sup> Passages that use the word “flesh” to connote the unconverted life governed by sin include Rom. 7:18, 25; 8:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13; 13:14; Gal. 3:3; 4:23, 29; 5:13, 16, 17, 19, 24; 6:8, 12, 13; Eph. 2:3, 14; Phil. 3:3, 4; Col. 2:11, 13, 18, 23. Passages that use the word “flesh” to connote life without respect to sin include 2 Cor. 4:11; 12:7; Gal. 4:13, 14; Eph. 5:29; Phil. 1:22, 24; Col. 1:24.

Paul mentioned “fruit” in this verse. Here fruit is that which is produced in the flesh due to sinful passions stirred up by the law. Here “fruit” is either acts of sin or a description of the outcome of a sinful life. The fruit of the unbeliever are acts of sins. Life with the law of God as one’s rule apart from Jesus Christ, stirs up sin within the sinner and results in sinful actions.

But in contrast to our former life while “under law” we read of our new life in Christ in **verse 6**. ***“But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.”***

We were “released” from the law through our union with Jesus Christ in His death. The law of God had condemned us. The law of God had enslaved us to itself. Just as Paul had described sin as a master that had owned us and controlled us as slaves, so Paul in the same way shows how the law of God in those former days had bound us as a master keeps his slaves in chains. We had been bound by obligation to obey God’s law to obey it with the consequences of failure being God’s judgment and condemnation. We were the servants of God’s law, held captive by it. The law to the unconverted sinner is a master that holds him under its power in bondage.

But true believers died through our death in Jesus Christ, thereby releasing us from the law’s mastery over us. But we were released for a purpose. It was so that ***“so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.”*** Here Paul describes “the new way of the Spirit.” He uses the term Spirit, a clear reference to the Holy Spirit. Apart from the opening greeting of this epistle (1:4), this is the first time in this epistle to the Romans in which the Holy Spirit is mentioned.<sup>7</sup> Here we see Paul’s style of writing once again in which he introduces a subject, here the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer, but he does not explain or develop the theme until later, which we will read in Romans 8. The Holy Spirit is only mentioned in this single verse in all of Romans 7, but the Spirit is referenced specifically 21 times in Romans 8. There we will learn the nature of life in the Spirit that Paul here introduced to his readers.

Paul contrasts “the new way of the Spirit” and the “old way of the written code.” The Christian is to live according to the Spirit, not according to law. “‘Newness of the Spirit’ is a reference to the Holy Spirit and the newness is that which the Holy Spirit effects.”<sup>8</sup> What this means is that the Christian is to look to Jesus Christ who gives the gift of the Holy Spirit to His people.

Now, it is my opinion that He baptized His church on one occasion, that being the Day of Pentecost—“there is one baptism”—and when King Jesus saves one of His people he brings that one into the experience of the baptism of the Spirit that He had poured out on Pentecost. But the enthroned Lord Jesus continues to give the Holy Spirit to His people in various degrees of manifestation, in times of need, when His people need God’s strength, wisdom, and protection to live according to His will. In short, “the new way of the Spirit” is the Christian who is living with the enablement that the Holy Spirit gives His people as He is given to them by their enthroned King, Jesus Christ.

“The old way of the written code” speaks of our lives before we were converted to Jesus Christ. The written code was specifically the law of Moses.<sup>9</sup> We were under God’s law as a covenant of works. This means that we were under obligation to keep God’s law with the consequences of our failure being our condemnation. And we each and all failed to various degrees. To the degree we failed to keep God’s law, we aggravated our just condemnation before God. With God’s law as the standard with which God demanded that we live in righteousness, our failure resulted in our aggravated condemnation. But now due to our union with Jesus Christ in His resurrection, we may enjoy the new spiritual life that was given us by the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that had raised Jesus from the dead.

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<sup>7</sup> In Paul’s opening words of this epistle he made reference to “the spirit of holiness” (1:4). This is probably a reference to the Holy Spirit, however, it was in his opening greeting; a clear reference to the Holy Spirit is not found in the content of his message until 7:6.

<sup>8</sup> Murray, p. 246.

<sup>9</sup> “‘The oldness of the letter’ refers to the law, and the law is called the letter because it was written.” Ibid.

Now let us consider several implications and clarifications of what the Holy Spirit has set before us in this passage. We need to understand clearly what it means for us to no longer be under the law but under Christ.

First, consider this truth: *The Christian remains under the law as the rule of life as led by and empowered by and applied by Jesus Christ.* Our union with Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection delivered us from the law of God as a covenant of works, but it continues as our rule of life under the covenant of grace by which we relate to God. Not all believe this. They argue that we are delivered from the law in all of its aspects and administration. But the abiding role of the law as the rule of life for the believer can be proved from Scripture quite easily. Paul, the same one who wrote that the believer is no longer under the law but under grace, wrote these words:

<sup>14</sup>But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it <sup>15</sup>and how from childhood you have been acquainted with *the sacred writings*, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. <sup>16</sup>All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable *for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness*, <sup>17</sup>that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work. (2Ti 3:1 ESV)

Paul referred to the law in Romans 7:6 as the “written code.” Here He refers to God’s law as “the sacred writings.” Now most of the New Testament had not yet been written when Paul penned these words to Timothy. And none of the written New Testament books were widely disseminated among the churches. Paul was writing of the Old Testament Scriptures, the law of God, if you will, that Timothy had been taught from childhood. He exhorted Timothy to use God’s written law, the Holy Scriptures as the rule for His life.

And yet, the Scriptures declare that the believer is no longer “under law”, but “under grace.” What then does this mean? In what way is the Christian to see himself delivered from the law as his master and is now servant to Jesus Christ, and in what way is the believer “(not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ” as Paul had once described himself (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19-22)?

There is a good book that was written long ago that presents the matter quite well. It was written by an English puritan pastor of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He had pastored three different churches in London before he took the post as Master of Christ’s College and then later Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University. His name was **Samuel Bolton**. The book that he wrote was entitled, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*. He set out to show in what way the Christian has been set free. He answers in great detail six broad questions, which include:

- (1) Does our being made free by Christ free us from the law?
- (2) Does our being made free by Christ deliver us from all punishments or chastisements for sin?
- (3) Is it consistent with Christian freedom to be under obligation to perform duties because God has commanded them?
- (4) May Christ’s freemen come into bondage again through sin?
- (5) Is it consistent with Christian freedom to perform duties out of respect for the recompense of reward?
- (6) Does the freedom of a Christian free him from all obedience to men?

For example, in Bolton’s treatise he included “Five Reasons Why the Law cannot condemn the Believer.” Here is this section:

All this the apostle puts plainly: “Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died” (Rom. 8:34). He sets the death of Christ against all the charges that can be brought. It is evident that the court of the law cannot condemn the believer:

(1) Because that court is itself condemned; its curses, judgments, and sentences are made invalid. As men that are condemned have a tongue to accuse, but no power to condemn. It cannot fasten condemnation on the believer.

(2) Because he is not under it as a court. He is not under the law as a covenant of life and death. As he is in Christ, he is under the covenant of grace.

(3) Because he is not subject to its condemnation. He is under its guidance, but not under its curses, under its precepts (though not on the legal condition of 'Do this and live'), but under its penalties.

(4) Because Christ, in his place and stead, was condemned by it that he might be freed: 'Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us' (Gal. 3:13). It may condemn sin in us, but cannot condemn us in sin.

(5) Because he has appealed from it. We see this in the case of the publican, who was arrested, dragged into the court of justice, sentenced and condemned. But this has no force because he makes his appeal, 'God be merciful to me a sinner' (Luke 18:13). He flies to Christ, and, says the text, 'He went down to his house justified'. So the court of the law (provided that your appeal is just) cannot condemn, because you have appealed to the court of mercy.<sup>10</sup>

The role of the law in the believer's life is an aspect of biblical theology that is not commonly understood or applied. However, the major point is this, when we were in our sins, the law of God aggravated our sinful condition and aggravated our guilt before God. But now that we are in union with Jesus Christ and He is our Lord and Savior, the law can no longer condemn us. God has rather rendered us as ones who may now be instructed by His law while free from its condemnation.

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This is the Table of Contents that reveals the subject matter of this helpful book

***The True Bounds of Christian Freedom***  
**by Samuel Bolton (1606-1654).**

Chapter 1: True Christian Freedom

The Nature of Christian Freedom  
The Quality of Christian Freedom  
The branches of Christian Freedom

1. Freedom in its Negative Aspects
  - (1) Freedom from Satan
  - (2) Freedom from sin
  - (3) Freedom from the law
    - (a) Freedom from the law as a covenant
    - (b) Freedom from the curses of the law

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<sup>10</sup> Samuel Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964, orig. 1645), pp. 32f.

- Five reasons why the law cannot condemn the believer
- True and false appeals from the court of the law
- (c) Freedom from the accusation of the law
- (d) Freedom from the rigour of the law
- (4) Freedom from obedience to men
- (5) Freedom from death
- (6) Freedom from the grave

2. Freedom in its positive aspects

Chapter 2: The Moral Law a Rule of Obedience

Query 1: Are Christians freed from the moral law as a rule of obedience?

The Scriptural uses of the word "law"

Proposition 1: The law remains a rule of walking for the people of God

The testimony of the Reformed Confessions

The testimony of the New Testament

Five proofs of the binding nature of the law

Five further arguments for obedience to the law

Application: (1) against papists, (2) Against antinomians, (3) to all believers

Chapter 3: Law and Grace

Proposition 2: The law is not incompatible with grace

Seven purposes for which the law is given

Five reasons why the law is not incompatible with grace

Objections answered:

- (1) That the law as a covenant is incompatible with grace
- (2) That the law is not the covenant of grace, nor a third covenant and must therefore be a covenant of works
- (3) That as the covenants of law and grace are opposites, the law cannot be linked with grace

Chapter 4: Chastisements for Sin

Query 2: Are Christians freed from all punishments and chastisements for sin?

Does chastisement pertain to the Old Testament only?

New Testament teaching about chastisement

Various cavils answered

Main arguments against chastisements stated and answered

Five reasons why God chastens His people

Concluding considerations

Chapter 5: Performance of Duty

Query 3: If a believer is under the moral law as rule of duty, is his liberty in Christ infringed?

Three mistakes with regard to the performance of duty

- (1) The case of such as wait for the Spirit to move them to obedience
- (2) The case of such as think they are to do nothing else but pray
- (3) The case of such as think they are to perform duty because their hearts incline them to it

Four ways in which the believer is free from duty

Nine differences between legal obedience and evangelical obedience

## Delight in duty

### Chapter 6: Partial Bondage

Query 4: Can Christ's freemen sin themselves into bondage again?

Two kinds of bondage

1. Universal bondage
2. Partial bondage
  - (1) A bondage in respect of comfort  
The five-fold peace of the man of God
  - (2) A bondage in respect of the manner of obedience

### Chapter 7: Obedience for the Sake of Reward

Query 5: May Christ's freemen perform duties for the sake of reward?

Three opinions respected this stated and examined

What is meant by rewards?

What is meant by the eyeing of rewards?

Is the eyeing of rewards an infringement of Christian liberty

1. With reference to temporal blessings
2. With reference to spiritual blessings
3. With reference to eternal rewards
  - (1) The lawfulness of it
  - (2) The necessity of it

### Chapter 8: Obedience to Men

Query 6: Are Christians freed from obedience to men?

Two kinds of subjection

Obedience to the civil magistrate

### Chapter 9: The Application to Believers and Unbelievers

The miserable bondage of the unbeliever

- (1) To sin
- (2) To satan
- (3) To the law of God

The duty of the believer

- (1) To maintain Christian liberty
- (2) Not to abuse Christian liberty

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