

There's been a lot of talk recently about the 10 Commandments, specifically their public display in schools, in courtrooms, in government buildings. Several years ago – probably a decade or more – I was asked to attend the Montague County Commissioners Court to lend support for a motion to post the 10 Commandments in the county courthouse. I figured that I could support that request, given that the Decalogue holds a prominent place in the history and foundation of our country and our legal system. But the reasoning I heard from a local pastor was different. He claimed that this action would bring tremendous spiritual changes throughout our county. According to this pastor, years ago, when the people of our county loved God and obeyed His word, everything was lush and green and fertile and prosperous. Due to apparent moral collapse and a reluctance to honor God,

rain had stopped, lakes had dried up, and the land had failed to produce. He even referenced the Old Testament, comparing how God has dealt with Montague County to how He dealt with the nation of Israel, disciplining them for their disobedience and failure to revere Him properly. His reasoning was that if we could once again exalt God by posting the 10 Commandments on courthouse property, He would bless us with rain and prosperity. The remedy for our rebellion against God was to turn to the 10 Commandments to provoke in us obedience and righteousness so that God would bless our land.

Now, regardless of where you stand on the public display of the 10 Commandments – I, for one, don't necessarily think it's a bad idea to post the 10 Commandments in the courthouse due primarily to its role in our history and the

establishment of our laws – the pastor’s argument leaves us with some questions. First of all, when exactly did all the people of Montague County (or even a sizeable fraction of the people of Montague County) love and obey God? Can you give me a date on that? Second, even if you could give me a date, where in the NT does it indicate that, for Christians, obedience leads to material blessing, prosperity, and favorable circumstances? I mean, Jesus obeyed perfectly, sinlessly, and He was crucified. Stephen, James, Peter, and Paul were all martyred for their faithfulness to the gospel. Believers throughout the world and across the centuries have suffered for their obedience.

But there was one other question that I don’t even know if anyone else even considered. This pastor’s statement was

based on an assumption, an intuitive idea that might naturally appear to be true, that the remedy for sin and unrighteousness and rebellion and unfaithfulness is to return to God's law, to the 10 Commandments. The solution to disobedience is a list of rules inscribed on stone tablets telling us how to live. But is that right? Is that what the Bible teaches? Is that what the NT teaches?

In Romans 7, Paul says, "No." As obvious as it might APPEAR, God's law, while it reflects God's righteousness and demands righteousness from us, while it defines and condemns sin for us, actually provokes sin in us. Instead of stimulating obedience, it actually arouses disobedience. And so Paul takes these six verses we're going to look at this morning to show that we are no longer under the demands and power of the law, having died to it, but that,

being freed from it, we are now able to bear true spiritual fruit for God having been united to Christ in His resurrection. So I want to invite you to take your Bible, turn with me to Romans 7, and follow along as I read the first 6 verses [READ ROMANS 7:1-6].

First, a little background in what Paul has said about the law so far in the book of Romans. In chapter 2 he argued that even those who have the law and know the law break the law. In chapter 3 he says that the law brings a knowledge of sin and renders all men accountable to God, leaving them with no excuse. He also says in chapter 3 that God reveals his righteousness apart from works of the law. In chapter 4 he shows how God did that very thing for Abraham, that He justified Abraham by faith, not by keeping the law, and that all who would be considered

Abraham's descendants becoming that, not by keeping the law, but by believing in the promises of God like Abraham did. In chapter 5, he writes that the law magnifies the offensiveness of sin by defining and condemning it. And in chapter 6, he concludes that we (Christians, believers) are not under the law, but under grace. So everybody breaks the law, the law exposes us as sinners before God, the law is unable to justify us before God, it magnifies our sin, and believers are not under the law. That's sort of a summary of what Paul has written so far about God's law.

So beginning in chapter 7, Paul is going to help us understand exactly what it means that we are not under the law. What, if any, is our relationship to these rules that God established? Well he starts with three assumptions.

First, he assumes that what he's about to explain is

something his readers have heard before. It's something they know already. It's not new information. That's how he can say, "Do you not know?" The answer to that rhetorical questions is, "Yes, you DO know." So he assumes they understand these things already. Second, he assumes that the people reading this, the people he's addressing, are believers. He's writing to those who have heard and believed the gospel, have been freed from the penalty and power of sin, and have been brought from death to life. These are things that apply to them, to us, to those who have placed their faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. And third, he assumes that they are familiar with the Mosaic law, the law that God gave to Moses and the people of Israel at Mt. Sinai, encapsulated in the 10 Commandments, but including all the other civic and ceremonial laws as well. All the laws to govern their lives

and their society and their worship. Paul assumes they know and understand these things, even though most of them were from a Gentile background and probably didn't grow up keeping the law. They still are familiar with it.

So, having established these assumptions, he moves on to his general principle, **his proposition:** the law has authority over a person only while they are alive. The law is binding on a person only as long as they live. Now that principle is true of law in general, any law. The law only holds authority to tell you what to do and not do if you are alive. The law has no ability to hold a dead person accountable. Dead people are typically not tried in a court of law. And if they are, it's really only symbolic. Once a person dies, any laws he has broken become meaningless as far as he is concerned. That's why people sometime try

to fake their own death, to get charges to disappear. Any violation of the law, from a speeding ticket to mass murder, goes away when you die. As long as you are alive, you are held to account; once you're dead, that relationship between you and the law is broken. But in this case, it's even more true when we're talking about God's law, the Mosaic law. Because in an even deeper way, in a spiritual sense, His law rules over people. His demands reign over them, holding them accountable to the God of the universe (Romans 3), and because they are unable to keep it (Romans 2 and Romans 3) it binds them to sin and death that come as consequences of breaking the law. The law is added to sin and death as governing realities of an old age, a previous era. So the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives. That's the proposition.

He then offers **an illustration** of that principle with a picture from marriage. He gives two scenarios. First, when you have a wife and her husband, the married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is released from the law in regard to him. So a woman is bound to her husband by law. And as long as he lives, the law mandates that relationship. The only way for that relationship to be severed (from her perspective) is for him to die. And, by the way, the reason Paul focuses on the wife is that, under Jewish law, a woman could not typically initiate divorce proceedings, so truly, death is the only way for her marriage to be ended legally as it concerns her. So the law binds a wife to her husband, and she can only be released by his death. The second scenario involves another man. If the husband is alive, the wife is bound by law to her husband. So if the

woman becomes joined to another man, she becomes a lawbreaker and an adulteress. But if the husband dies, then she is set free from the law to be joined (married) to another man without being labeled an adulteress. Makes sense, right? Now there have been countless attempts to assign identities to the wife, to the first husband, to the second husband. Who and what do they represent? But trying to figure out those specifics misses the main point of the illustration, that death severs one's relationship to the law and enables a person to enter a new relationship. Death brings about a change in one's relationship to the law so that one is able to begin a new and different relationship.

So you've got the proposition, you've got the illustration, and finally Paul moves to **the application**. And this is the

difficulty in trying to apply the illustration too strictly. If you say that the woman in the illustration represents the Christian, the first husband represents the law, and the second husband represents Jesus, why, in the illustration does the first husband (the law) die, but in the application the woman (the Christian) dies? It seems inconsistent.

Well here's the reason that, in the application, the law doesn't die. Because the law can't die. The law is the perfect reflection of the unchanging holy, righteous character of God. Paul says in Romans 7:12, "...the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." Psalm 119:160 says, "The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever." Jesus said in Matthew 5:17 that He didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. So the law can't die. That can't be the death that severs our relationship to the law.

So if we are in relationship to the law, and the law can't die, what's the only other death that might end that relationship? What's the only other option? We have to die! Which is exactly what Paul has been telling us happened. Back in the first few verses of chapter 6, Paul repeatedly says we died to sin. And how did we die to sin? We were united with Christ in HIS death. Romans 6:6-7, "We know that our old self was crucified with Him in order that the body of death might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin." Death has ended our bondage to sin. But Paul is saying that same principle applies to our relationship to the law. Like the woman in the illustration, believers have, through a death, been

severed from their bondage to the law. But the death is ours. We have died, not only to sin, but to the law.

So what does that mean? What does it mean that we died to the law? What does it mean that we are no longer under the law? It means two things. First, it means that we are no longer under the condemnation of the law. The law, being the perfect reflection of God's character and will and holiness, demands perfect obedience. What's the problem? We are not and cannot be perfect, and so we inevitably fail to keep it. And when we fail, we stand condemned for our failure. That's what makes the law law instead of a suggestion or advice. It's the threat of punishment that allows these commands to function as law. In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul calls the law a ministry of death and a ministry of condemnation that kills because it

brings people under God's judgment as lawbreakers by announcing God's will without providing the ability to keep it. But for believers, Christ took our punishment for us on the cross. So the law no longer stands in condemnation over us. When we died with Christ, we died to the law's ability to condemn and punish us, especially at the end of time in the final judgment.

But it means more than that. It also means that we are no longer under the binding authority of the law as a force or power. You see, the law makes demands on us and reveals our failure to meet those demands, but provides no remedy. It's like a thermometer that shows you that you have a fever but can't fix your problem. But it's even worse than that. In v.5 Paul actually says the law stimulates or provokes or arouses sin in the person who is bound to it.

The Jews considered the law a remedy for sin – something that would keep people from sinning and turn their hearts to the Lord, kind of like that pastor in the courthouse assumed – but Paul says that sin ends up using the law as a tool to produce more sin and make the sin problem even worse than it was without the law. And to be clear, it's not the law's problem. It's ours. By setting forth God's standard, the law stimulates our natural rebelliousness toward God. It exacerbates our tendency to disobey God. It's like a fence with a hole in it. You could walk by that fence a hundred times without even noticing the hole, but the minute someone puts a sign that says, "Don't look through this hole," it provokes your desire to do something that you never even wanted to do before. Paul treats the law as a power that belongs to an old age, an old system, a previous era that we were bound to before

Christ, when we were in the flesh, controlled by sinful desires and principles and values. Then, we bore fruit for death, the wages of sin. So the governing realities of that old system were sin and death. Then he added the law. Now he adds the flesh. But now, we've been released from all those controlling principles. We are no longer under the reign of sin and death and the law and the flesh. We have died to their captivity. Their power is broken. We are delivered from the law as a system. It certainly still serves as a witness to the character of God and His holiness and His expectations of His people. But it no longer operates as our authoritative rule of life. We have died to it through the death of Christ.

So if we've died, how can we, like the woman, be joined to another? If we were the one who died, how can we be

remarried? Well, what miraculous event has to occur for a dead person to do things only a living person can do?

They have to be brought back to life. Which, again, is what

Paul says in chapter 6 happened to us. We died with

Christ in His death and THEN we were raised with Him in

His resurrection to walk in newness of life. That's what

Paul says here in chapter 7. We were raised with Christ in

order to be joined to Him as our new husband. We have

been transferred from an old age, an old era, an old

system and realm, to a new one, from sin and law to God

and righteousness and Christ and the Spirit. We are now

under a new reign. And the one to whom we have been

joined is eternal. Romans 6:9 says that, having died once

and been raised, He will never die again. So our

relationship is permanent. We have been joined to Him

forever.

And not for nothing. We have been raised with Him and joined to Him with a purpose: to bear fruit for God. The fact that we have a new relationship with God, not under the binding authority of external commands inscribed on tablets of stone that demand obedience but don't enable it, now equips and empowers us to produce those character traits, those virtues, those thoughts, those actions, the speech, the attitudes, the obedience that God desires and requires of His children. We are now able to serve in the newness of the Spirit rather than the letter of the law. The old system, the Old Covenant was characterized by written demands outside us that simulated sin and ended in death. The New Covenant is characterized by life and fruit (results) pleasing to God. A few minutes ago I said that we were set free from the law as our authoritative rule

of life. That DOESN'T mean that we are therefore free from obedience or righteousness or holy conduct. As New Covenant believers who died with Christ and were raised with and united to Him, we simply pursue these things apart from the law. So, for example, the reason I don't murder as a Christian isn't that the law demands that I not murder and threatens me with punishment if I do. I don't murder because Jesus commands us to love our neighbor and through His indwelling Spirit, He enables us to obey Him. The reason I don't steal as a Christian isn't because the 10 Commandments demand that I not steal. I don't steal because Jesus commands that I love my neighbor and enables obedience through His Spirit. Same with adultery and coveting and bearing false witness. I don't worship idols, not because the law demands that I not worship idols, but because Jesus commands me to love

the Lord my God with all my heart, all my soul, and all my mind. And you might say, “Well, what’s the difference as long as the outcome is the same?” And I would answer that there’s a huge difference. The difference is what/who you are bound to. You are either bound to the law in an old, outdated, obsolete covenant that leads to frustration and despair and death OR you died to that law and have been transferred to a new age marked by true, Spirit-enabled, living obedience to God.

So where are you this morning in relation to the law? Do you try, through sheer force of will and your own determination, to keep the law, believing that the more you observe the commands of the law, the more acceptable you are to God? And do you find that your continual effort leaves you defeated and guilty over your repeated

inevitable failures? If you've never known anything other than that – effort, failure, guilt, resolve, over and over – you may not know Jesus. You might not have ever trusted Jesus, been forgiven of your sin, been justified by faith, been set free from sin and death and the law. The good news for you is that Jesus accomplished for you what you could not. He kept the law perfectly to earn righteousness for you, in your place, on your behalf, so that if you trust entirely in that life, in His sacrificial death on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin, and in His glorious resurrection from the dead by which He defeated the grave, you can be set free from the condemnation, demands, and power of the law. You don't have to live in that endless cycle anymore.

Or maybe your issue is different. Maybe you have been set free from the demands of the law and you know that, you celebrate that you are no longer under the authoritative power of external commands written on stone tablets, but you haven't embraced that fact that you were joined to Christ to bear fruit for God, to serve in the newness of the Spirit. You have acted as though freedom from the law means freedom from having to do anything, freedom from the determined effort to pursue holiness in the power of the Holy Spirit. If that's you, you need to repent of your passivity and acknowledge that you've been set free for a purpose. You've been set free to bear the fruit of righteousness in your actions, your speech, your thoughts, your attitudes, and your motives.

My prayer for you, for me, for us, is that we would, on the one hand, be free from the law through faith in Christ, and that we would understand, believe, and live as though we are free from the law. Not just its condemnation, but its demanding power that actually stimulates sin. That we would cease trying to make ourselves acceptable by trying to keep rules that were never designed to justify us and have no power to do so. And on the other hand, that we would commit to pursue righteousness, not by keeping the law of Moses, but by obeying the commands of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear fruit for God. That is our calling. That is our obligation. That is our joy and privilege. My brothers and sisters, 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.