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As Paul explains justification by grace through faith through the book of Romans, he also explains the role of the law and how it all fits together. Understanding the relationship of law and grace can be difficult in that human nature tends to gravitate toward the extremes. So some will gravitate toward the attitude that grace gives us a license to sin. Paul answered that group in Romans 6.

In Romans 7, he answers the second group – those that would gravitate toward legalism – the belief that we become holy and sanctified by obeying God’s laws. In Romans 6, Paul tells us how to stop doing bad things. In Romans 7, in effect he tells us what doing good things does not do for us. We were not justified by keeping the law, and we cannot be sanctified by the law either.

The beginning of the chapter continues to answer the question, “Shall we continue to sin since we are under grace and not under the law?” Now he uses the illustration of a married couple to show that the believer has a new relationship to the law because of his union with Christ. The illustration is simple, yet profound.

When a man and woman marry, the union is to be for life but it is broken by death. As long as they both live, they are under the law of marriage. If one is unfaithful, they commit adultery. But if one dies, the other is free to remarry because they are no longer under the law of marriage.

When we were unsaved (“*in the flesh*”, v. 5), we were condemned under the authority of God’s law because we could not perfectly keep the law. But when we trusted in Christ to pay the penalty for our sin, we died to the law. The law did not die, we did.

But in Christ, we also rose from the dead and now are “married” (united) to Christ to live a new life. God’s law still rules over men, but we have died to the law and it no longer has dominion over us. However, being dead to the law does not mean we live lawless lives. It does mean that the motivation of our lives does not come from the law; it comes by God’s grace through our union with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The legitimate conclusion is that the law cannot exercise authority over a dead person. Keep also in mind that death means deliverance. The Christian life is not one of independence and rebellion. We were delivered from the law that we might serve the Lord. This answers the false accusation that we are licensed to sin.

So then, objectors might raise yet another question: “What good is the law?” As is explained in verse 7, the law reveals sin. It acts as a mirror that exposes flaws, both outward and inward. As sin is revealed in our lives, it exposes our need for a Savior.

The rich young ruler (*Mark 10:17-27*) is a good example of the law revealing sin and showing a person his need for a Savior to deliver him. The young man was very moral outwardly, but in his heart he coveted things. Christ knew this and exposed his sin. Unfortunately instead of admitting his sin and repenting, he rejected Christ and went his own way.

The law also arouses sin. The sinful human nature leads people toward rebellion whenever a law is given. The human heart sees laws as meant to be broken. The enticement of sin goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden.

The law cannot give life. It does not offer salvation. It can only show the sinner that he is guilty and condemned. That condemnation and the results of sin (death) should help us to understand how bad sin really is. Many people do not realize the true terrible nature of sin, and human nature is to downplay it. The fact that the Son of God paid for our sin with His very life should open our eyes to the true wickedness of sin.

Paul explains that the law itself is not sinful, in fact it is holy, just and good. The law reveals sin, arouses sin, and then uses sin to destroy us. The problem is not with the law, the problem is our sinful nature.

Paul has explained what the law does, and beginning in verse 14 he explains what the law cannot do. The law is spiritual – it deals with the inner, spiritual part of man. Our outer actions are affected as they relate to our heart and will. The law’s nature is spiritual, but human nature is carnal. So the old, fleshly human nature resists the law. In a sense, ‘the old nature knows no law, and the new nature needs no law’. The law cannot transform the old, human nature – it can only reveal its sinfulness.

The law cannot enable us to do good. Three times in this section (v. 14, 18, 20) we are reminded that sin (the old, sin nature) dwells in us. But, the Holy Spirit also dwells in the believer, and later in Romans 8 Paul will emphasize how He (the Holy Spirit) enables us to live in victory over sin – something the law cannot help us do.

This section reminds us that our problems lie within ourselves. We cannot do the good we want to do, and we do the evil that we do not want to do. In ourselves, without the power of the Holy Spirit, we cannot obey God’s law, and even when we do, that evil human nature is still present within us. Our own righteousness is as filthy rags (*Isaiah 64:6*).

We have an old nature that wants to keep us in bondage. Just willpower cannot overcome it on our own. Continued failure brings more misery, and the law cannot set us free. But there is deliverance: “Who will deliver me? (I thank God... there is Someone)... Jesus Christ my Lord!”

Romans 7

Freed from the Law

⁷Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law only has authority over anyone for as long as he lives?

²For a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. ³So then if she were to marry another man while her husband was still alive, she would be an adulteress. But, if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she may marry another man and not be an adulteress.

⁴Likewise, my brethren, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.

⁵For while we were still living in the flesh, our sinful lusts, which were aroused by the law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

⁶But now we have been 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 Law and Sin

⁷What then shall we say? That the law is sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known what sin was except through the law. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

⁸But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetous desire. For apart from the law sin lies dead.

⁹I was once alive without the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. ¹⁰The very commandment that promised life proved to bring death to me.

¹¹For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment it put me to death. ¹²So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Law Cannot Save from Sin

¹³Therefore did that which is good bring death to me? Certainly not! It was sin that produced death, through what is good, in order that sin might be recognized as sin, and that through the commandment sin might be seen as exceedingly sinful.

¹⁴For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold into bondage to sin. ¹⁵For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want to do, but I do the very thing I hate.

¹⁶Now if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷For now, it is no longer I who am doing it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me (that is, in my flesh). I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

¹⁹For the good that I want to do, I do not do; but the evil I do not want not to do, that I do. ²⁰Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.

²¹So I find it to be a law, that when I want to do right, evil is also present within me. ²²For in my inner being I delight in God's law. ²³But I see another law in the members of my body, warring against the law of my mind, and making me captive to the law of sin that is in my members.

²⁴O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on one hand with my mind I am serving the law of God, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

Memory Verse for the Week

*Galatians 2:21 – I do not set aside the grace of God,
for if righteousness comes through the law,
then Christ died in vain.*