

Prayer

Lord God Almighty, we ask You to bring true love and calm realism to Your people, the Church, in the midst of a world full of violence, racial tension and religious strife. Then, may we face our worldly responsibilities with the confidence that comes from knowing that the whole world is ultimately in Your control. We believe You will lead us through the present troubled times and guide us towards Your future; thank You, Lord: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

In the middle of your normal working day, stop what you are doing, and wait on the Lord in silence

On-going prayers

- **Pray for you local hospital.** *Pray for the porters and other workers essential to the running of your local hospital*
- *Pray for teenagers and for people to love and befriend them*
- *Give thanks for the answers to your prayers, and pray again those prayers that remain unanswered*

Meditation

Aspire to the greatest achievements,
For the Lord Your God has given you power
Beyond your understanding.

Reach out to the highest goals,
For the Lord your God has specific tasks for you
That only you can do.

Believe that the impossible can be done,
For the faith to grow the Kingdom of God
Is yours to use, not loose.

Take hold of your covenant heritage now,
For Your God has portioned out His blessings
They are there for you, right now!

Bible passage - Romans 7:1-6

¹ Friends, do you not know (for I am speaking to those who know the law) that the law is binding on someone only for as long as they live? ² In this way, a married woman is legally bound to her husband while he lives; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. ³ She will therefore be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But she is free from that law if her husband dies, and she is not an adulteress if she marries another man.

⁴ In the same way, my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to someone else, that is, to Him who has been raised from the dead so that we may live fruitfully for God. ⁵ When we were living naturally, our sinful passions were stirred up by the law, and were at work in every part of our bodies to bear the fruit of death. ⁶ But now we are dead to that which held us captive, we are released from the law, and we give our service under the new life of the Spirit, and not under the old letter of the law.

Bible Study

Review

In this interesting section of Romans, Paul explains what it means to leave the past behind and accept Christian faith. In order to explain this to the Jews of his day, he uses the illustration of marriage. He says that just as a marriage contract ceases when one partner dies, so the old covenant between Israel and God has ceased with the death of Jesus. Because of this, no Jew can be unfaithful by deciding to accept a new relationship with God through the risen Christ (7:3).

Now although it is relatively easy to spot this point within the text, it is also obvious that the passage says more. In the second half from verse 4 onwards, Paul begins by using the same illustration of marriage, but goes on to talk about 'dying and rising' in verse 4, and this is the language of baptism! He also introduces new ideas that flesh out what he means by the new life in Christ, such as being fruitful for God (7:4), and living as God's servants (7:6).

So it seems that Paul had more on his mind when he wrote this than the need of converted Jews to justify abandoning the old covenant of Judaism. He was also aware that when Gentiles accepted Christian faith, they needed to understand the difference between their past lives and the life of faith. So the first three verses containing the illustration of marriage are spoken primarily to Jews, but as the passage continues, Paul speaks more broadly to all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Moreover, his point about separation from the past by the death of Christ clearly meant one thing for Jews, but something else for Gentiles, who needed to draw a line under the past and move on with Christ.

Paul's use of the illustration of marriage is interesting. Since setting out the Gospel (3:21-26), Paul has used a number of important examples to help illustrate the Gospel. These include the sin of Adam (5:12-21), the rite of baptism (6:1-14), the meaning of slavery (6:15-23) and now marriage. We can imagine that Paul used all these illustrations in the course of his regular preaching, as the circumstances he faced so demanded. Here in a dictated letter, however, he decided to use all these illustrations to help people understand what it means to respond to the Gospel and live the new life by faith.

With all this in mind, the illustration of marriage assures all Christians that by being bound to Christ, they are not dishonouring what God may have done in their lives in the past. For the Jew, the old covenant is annulled (7:1-3), and the Gentiles, who are described by Paul in verse 5 as '*living naturally*' (or as some translations say, '*living according to the flesh*'), are released from the bondage of sin and its consequences. Both are therefore united in Christ to live the '*new life of the Spirit*' (7:6). Strangely, although Christians today often speak of the 'new life of the Spirit', I have not heard many preachers expound this important text.

There are many interesting features of this passage, and we will look at them later as the study goes 'deeper', but we can hardly read it and fail to notice a number of significant phrases. For example, Paul speaks in verse 4 of being united in the '*body of Christ*', and in the very next verse, he describes by way of contrast, the broken nature of the different '*parts of our bodies*', which '*bear the fruit of death*! Surely, these phrases must connect with what Paul writes elsewhere about the '*body of Christ*' in 1 Corinthians 12, and also his famous description of the '*works of the flesh*' and the '*fruit of the spirit*', as found in Galatians.

We may find it hard to pick our way through Paul's more complicated writing, but by keeping our eyes on the flow of the letter and making connections with what Paul says elsewhere (using the same illustrations), we can grasp his message. Here, the message is simple. Those who have faith in Christ have a radically new start with God.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Paul's examples of freedom in Christ
- The law and the Gentiles
- Living fruitfully

Going Deeper

We will now explore the core meaning of this passage and also some more about the implications I have hinted at in the introduction. Certainly, the whole illustration is far more complex than an initial read might indicate, but just like the others that go before it, it also introduces some important new ideas, such as the 'new life in the Spirit' (7:6)

Paul's examples of freedom in Christ

How is it that Paul could speak to the church at Rome as to *'those who know the law'* (7:1), a phrase that we would normally associate with Jews, when it is likely that there were few Jews there (it is likely that Jews had been expelled from Rome, see the study on Romans 1:1-7.)? Despite this, the people in Rome would have been well aware that the Gospel arose from a Jewish religious background. The only Scriptures people possessed in those days was the Old Testament, from which the people of the church at Rome would have learned about God's revelation and the prophet's explanations of the Messiah, who they knew as Jesus. They also had letters from Paul and others, and perhaps some of the early copies of the Gospels, which were gradually being accepted as the Scripture of the New Testament in their own right, although it took at least three centuries for all the churches to agree the exact content of the New Testament.

Paul therefore felt comfortable enough in using his example about marriage and divorce, talking to the people at Rome as if to those who knew the laws of Moses well (7:1). What he says relies upon his readers knowing that Moses allowed for divorce (Deut 24:1f.) and also that marriage was regarded as unbreakable because of the sacred nature of the relationship between a man and a woman, as found in the first five books of the Bible (the 'Law', or in Hebrew, the 'Torah').

In this way, Paul sets the scene for his illustration, and the law clearly means the laws of Moses. However, when Paul says *'you have died to the law'* (7:4) what can this mean to the people in Rome who had no Jewish background and were never under the law in the first place, just like most of us who read this today? At this point we must remember that throughout Romans, Paul has spoken about the law in two different ways, firstly as the Mosaic law in the Old Testament, but secondly, the natural moral laws that God has placed within His creation which affect people who do not know the revelation of Moses. Paul has already explained that these laws expose sin (1:18-25) just as much as the revealed laws of Moses expose sin for Jews, and this is crucial for Paul's Gospel argument that all are *'under the law'* (see also 3: 10-18 and verse 23) whether we like it or not. It is why I have already argued that when Paul says *'you are not under the law but under grace'* (see study on 6:12-14), he is not just making a contrast between the Mosaic law of the Old Testament and the grace of God revealed in Christ, but between all forms of legalism and the grace of Christ.

The law and the Gentiles

This also helps us make sense of verse 5, in which Paul says *'when we were living naturally, our sinful passions, which were stirred up by the law, were at work in every part of our bodies ...'* It is clear that Paul is talking here about the natural moral laws of God, explaining to the people at Rome (and to us) that law works to identify what sin is whether through the moral laws of the Universe or through the laws of Moses. Some commentators on this passage think that it is ridiculous for Paul to suggest that everyone succumbs to moral sin, and even try to suggest that Paul does not mean this. However, to say this is to miss the whole point of Paul's explanation of the Gospel. From the beginning, his point is simple; sin is endemic within humanity and any form of law exposes it. Everyone is bound by this fact of life, and Paul's whole illustration is designed to say that only death releases us from this bondage.

This is why Paul's explanation of the illustration does not equate exactly, for his focus is not on the characters (something we tend to do because of modern literature and films) but on the plot, which is death. God's solution is far more radical than we think, and Paul tells us that the death which liberates us is not that of the law, but Christ's death. He explains that as we die with Him (7:4 - which is a reference to baptism; 6:1-11), the bondage which connects us to all forms of law is broken. The glorious truth is that through our baptism we are bound to Christ in His death, and this makes us free to be bound to our God our Creator, and find liberty in Him (7:6).

And incidentally, this passage does not say that the law is dead! We may be dead to it through Christ so that it has no power over us, but the fact that the law does not die leaves Paul open to explain, later on in his letter, the proper value of all forms of law in the service of the Gospel (see 8:4 and 13:8-10). It is important to remember this, because all too often, people present the Gospel as the 'grace' option versus the 'law' option, and suggest that once the law has been rejected there is no place for it within Christian faith. It must be emphasised that there is nowhere in Paul's writings where this is said. Such an approach to the Gospel dangerously misunderstands what Paul (and Jesus) say about the law, and its proper place within the gracious redeeming work of God.

Living fruitfully

The question remains, why does Paul give this illustration? Some say that it is because he wants to emphasise *'being under grace'* rather than being *'under law'*, picking up on the famous verse which says this in chapter 6 (6:14). Some suggest that it is to attack those teachers of his day who taught obedience to the law. However, it is best to think of this illustration as doing what the other previous illustrations have done, which is to reveal something more about the consequences of believing in Jesus Christ. So, in the same

way that yesterday's passage about slavery ended by introduced the new subject of 'eternal life', this illustration concludes by talking about living 'fruitfully' for God (7:4), and about liberty, and the 'new life of the Spirit' (7:6) These phrases point us forward to themes that will come up later on in the letter. For example, Paul speaks in the next chapter about God's new people being the 'firstfruits of creation' (8:23), who give glory to God as the first evidence of God's re-creative activity within the world through the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the same chapter, Paul speaks of the 'freedom' of the glory of the children of God (8:21), and Paul has already spoken of the 'free gift' of the grace of God (5:15-17). Most importantly, at the height of the letter, Paul tells the body of Christian believers about the 'gifts' which express the 'life of the Spirit' within the Christian community (12:6f.).

The trouble is that we read words such as these and are familiar with them, so we do not spot that they arise and build up themes within a letter such as Romans. The fact is that after introducing the great Gospel work of God through Jesus Christ (3:21-26) and explaining it, Paul gradually introduces more and more great themes of the Christian life, using his letter to build a description of the great privileges of those who are God's new people.

Application

This passage presents us with a challenge to make sure that we read Scriptures properly, and so understand what its writers actually said, and not be content to read through a passage and presume we understand it before we have looked at it properly! The general conclusion we can draw is that the Christian has died to *'the law'* with Christ, and lives under grace; and that the law is God's to use, and is not our master. This may be a strange conclusion from an illustration about marriage, but it seems clear enough!

The challenge remains, as it did in yesterday's passage, for us to make sure that we do not let our own faith become a legalistic system which binds us. However, this passage helps us by giving us clues about the kind of life that God has for His children, and it is characterised by words such as 'freedom', 'life in the Spirit', 'service' and 'fruitful'. These are all important themes which are not, of themselves, illustrations. They are the substance of what being a Christian is all about, and are building blocks for the fellowship of believers which is the Church.

All of these things speak of living in our own world as a radically new person, and demonstrating a radically new form of living. Even if we were faithful to those things mentioned here in this passage, the Christian witness would be remarkable. True 'service of others' can be a rare thing in the world today, and God's people must always seek to love others and seek their good in the name of Christ. In addition, we are frequently told by Scripture that we must be fruitful in our discipleship, and this requirement is something against which we should be willing to judge ourselves. Neither can we escape the challenge of Paul's phrase 'new life in the Spirit', because the Holy Spirit is the one who works practical transformation in the life of the believer, and the church simply cannot from where people are uncomfortable with 'spiritual things'.

Deep down, most of us know whether our lives are radically different from that of others, because of our faith, and if they are not, then we seek to know why.

Discipleship

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. In your group, read through the passage, reading first the illustration (verses 1-3) and then the rest of the explanation in verses 4-7. Discuss how Paul uses his illustration.
2. How can Christians today use the illustration of marriage and divorce? What other New Testament Scriptures describe marriage, and how do they connect with this passage?
3. In what ways do you experience the liberty of the 'new life of the Spirit', and what does this mean?

Personal comments by author

I have sometimes found that I feel bound by what happens in the church around me even though I have submitted myself to God and have sought to love all Christians and any people God places before me. Throughout life, I have wondered whether the church is as open and reflective of the life of the Spirit as it should be, and I find it hard to ask this question because I do not want to be unfaithful to the church that 'raised me'. You may feel the same. Frankly, this passage tells me that I must trust Christ and let Him guide me. The past is in His hands, and He will lead me, but only if I walk in freedom, in faith and as a true servant

of His. I am no longer very sure about the future of the church, but I am confident that God is moving His people in new ways today, to do new things and witness to the world in new ways.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Spend some time thinking about how you can live the life of Christ in the future. Are you stuck where you are, or are you on a journey? Moreover, is this journey genuinely open to what the Lord wants of you, or have you set boundaries? Set these things before God and see what He will do for and with you.*
- *Pray for people you know who are struggling with all that it means to follow Christ and leave the past behind.*

Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us to see within each new situation, the possibility of doing good, the opportunity to excel, the prospect of some new work of Your Spirit, and the vision to see what You would do. May every day be full of Your glory, Lord Jesus Christ; AMEN
