

## The End of the Old Life . . .

Romans 7:1-6

May 8, 2011

Last week we looked at the distinction Paul set before us between wages and the gift of God. We saw that, outside of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the grace of God, our actions merit death. Death is the wage we all earn. Yet God's gift is eternal life, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Paul taught us this truth in the context of slavery. We are all slaves—either to sin and the lusts of the sinful nature of this world, or to righteousness. This is the board from which we dive into this week's passage.

Paul starts this section by saying, *“Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to men who know the law—that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives?”* (v.1) This means that the law is for this **life** only. It never was intended to guide our lives in the life to come. We will not need it there. After we die we either go away from God's presence and are handed over to our sin, or we go to live in God's presence where sin cannot exist, and so we will no longer be able to sin nor will we want to. The result is that the law is only active and effective in this life. Once we are dead our relationship with it is over.

This understanding—that the law's authority over us ends with our deaths—leads to another relationship that only ends with death. Since Paul is explaining how God uses the gospel to transfer us from sin to righteousness, he draws a line between being under the law's authority and being in grace. He uses marriage to illustrate it. Look with me at the second and third verses.

*“For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.”* (vv.2,3)

Once a person is married they are married. That's it. They are bound to their spouse as long as both are still alive. Paul uses the example of a married woman. She is bound by her commitment to her husband as long as he lives. If she marries someone else during that time, she is an adulteress. The same is true for the men. A man is bound to his wife as long as she is alive. If he marries someone else while his wife is still alive he is an adulterer. Thanks be to God for His grace and the availability of forgiveness for repentant hearts even in this. Still, God's intention is that marriage is lifelong.

The other side, and more important side for our purpose this morning, of this is that marriage is not **eternal**. The scriptures are very clear. When one partner experiences physical death and is no longer resident on the earth, the other partner is freed from the marital vows. When asked this question directly, Jesus said that there are no spouses—no husbands or wives—in heaven. In that way, we will be like the angels. We will not be angels, but we will be like them in that we will no longer be married or get married.

God allowed divorce as a concession to the hardness of our sinful hearts. God hates it. His plan, as outlined in the scripture, is that we commit ourselves to one person of the opposite gender, that we marry them,

that we only then have sex with them, and that we stay faithful and true to them until one of us is dead. Anything else, including changing the order of events, is sin. We are required by God's law to hold to this pattern.

But enough about the illustration. While all of this is true and needs to be said, it is not really Paul's point. Surprisingly, Paul says the same pattern of faithfulness until death functions with regard to the law. In a sense we are married to the law when we are born. We are married to sin from the moment we come into this world, and we willingly delight in it. We are bound to it. It is a bond that we cannot break, nor do we desire to break it until God starts working in our hearts.

This is why it is so important that we understand that we are crucified with Christ. It not only has to do with the fact that our sins are punished and we are freed from the guilt that they bring. It also has to do with freedom from the power and authority of the law over our lives. When we are crucified with Christ and our old selves die on the cross, then we are free from the **law**. We are new creatures, made fresh through the work of the Holy Spirit within us and we are no longer under the authority of the law but instead under God's grace. Just as a woman is freed from her husband when he dies, we are free from the law when we die. Thanks be to God that our death in Christ leads to new life in Him as well!

It is to this life that Paul turned next. *"So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God."* (v.4) Through the broken, lifeless body of Jesus

on the cross we died to the law. If we are in Christ, the law of sin and death no longer has victory over us. It no longer dominates us. We now have the victory through Christ Jesus our Lord and we have entered into the dominion of our Father in heaven.

But God did this for us for a purpose. It's not all about death. It's not even mostly about death. Our death in Christ is just the necessary passage. God did this, not primarily to free us from the law, but to purchase us for Himself. Just as we are identified with Jesus in His death on the cross, we are also identified with Him in His resurrection from the tomb. Freed from the law of sin and death we are brought into the life-giving kingdom of God. We are redeemed from the law that we might belong to Jesus, and in Jesus bear fruit for God.

God does not save us for our benefit, though we do benefit greatly from it. God **saves** us that we might bear fruit for Him—that our lives might be changed and show forth His glory in the world. The Bible talks about fruit in two different ways. Paul mentions it in passing here, but he defines it for the Galatians. After telling them about the freedom they have in Jesus, he went on to explain how they ought to live in that freedom. It is a pattern Paul often used and one we will see in Romans. Look with me at his description of the fruit we bear for God. *"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."* (Galatians 5:22,23) God saves us in order that our lives might have these qualities and thus reflect the way He created us to be. He wants to fix what is wrong in us and thus restore us to the "very good" He declared us to be when He created us.

Of course, there is another way in which we bear fruit. Trees put out fruit in order to reproduce. The idea is that one of the seeds in the fruit gets planted and a new tree grows. We, too, are to reproduce as we offer to others the grace through which God has saved us. Just as fruit trees make more fruit trees and sheep make more sheep, Christians are meant to make more Christians. Through both kinds of fruit—our changed lives and our creation of new Christians—we are to live for God. We bear fruit to Him.

Paul then draws a contrast with what we were. Our previous lives were lived for ourselves. Look at what Paul says in the next verse. *“For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death.”* (v.5) We bore the fruit of our desires and the things we sought after. We were ruled by the passions in our bodies.

The first thing we need to point out about this is that our **passions** were aroused by the law. We do not often think of the law as raising unlawful desires in us, but it is something Paul mentions frequently. The law, even as it commands us to abstain from certain behaviors and to do others, generates in us a desire to do the very things it tells us not to do. This is not lost on Paul and he deals with it in the next part of this chapter. We will look at it in depth next week. For now, it is enough to point out that it goes back to the garden of Eden. Look at what Eve thought as she looked at the forbidden fruit. *“When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it.”* (Genesis 3:6)

After the serpent pointed out the tree and reminded Eve that she was not to eat of it she took another look at it and it became even more desirable. We want that which we should not have. We find it easy to convince ourselves that God is holding out on us. We ask a rather foolish question that has caused all sorts of trouble, “What if I . . .?” This sinful desire for the forbidden, this curiosity about what should be unknown, has come down to us and been dealt with by societies in any number of ways. We see it in the tale of Pandora’s Box. We hear it in the proverb, “Curiosity killed the cat.” It is at the forefront in movies like “the Fly.” We see it in more recent discussions within modern science and philosophy about whether the ability to do something is sufficient reason to do it. Because we can doesn’t mean we should, it means we must stop to ask if we should. More options require more decisions and more wisdom. As the world has grown and wisdom has not, it has merely increased the availability, and often the impact, of sin. Once we know an action is possible, our sinful natures want to do it, even when we know we shouldn’t.

Before we are freed by the Holy Spirit through the cross of Christ, we are controlled by our sinful natures. We have no strength, or even sufficient reason, to control our sinful passions, and so they control us. We do what we want, disregarding the consequences—the fruit that our actions bear.

Paul points out that our **sinful** natures bore fruit for death. Just as God wants us to bear the fruit of changed lives, the fruit of sin is pain, sickness, broken relationships, and death. Just as Paul told the Galatians about the fruit the Spirit grows in us, he had already

reminded them about life outside of Christ. *“The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.”* (Galatians 5:19-21)

The reason Paul is writing is to remind us that our sinful natures do not have the last word. That belongs to God, who has redeemed us through the blood that Jesus shed on the cross and shares His life with us in the resurrection we celebrated just a couple of weeks ago! Once we are in Christ we are controlled by the Holy Spirit. Paul put it this way, *“But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.”* (v.6) If we are in Christ we are dead to sin. It no longer masters us. It no longer controls us. We are released from the law in order to serve the Spirit. It is no longer the written code that drives our behavior. It is now the code of God written in our hearts.

This is not permission to follow sinful desires, as we will see next week. Sin is still sin. It doesn't get baptized. We get baptized out of it. Too many in the church today say that, since we are no longer bound by the written code, but instead serve in the new way of the Spirit, then we are free to do what we want. They forget that the old nature is still alive in us, even if its power over us is dead. We still need the law to guide us as our hearts are brought into tune with it. If getting drunk or

having sex outside of marriage were sins before we came to Christ, they are still sins once we are saved. That doesn't change. What coming to Christ does is break the power of sin over us and bring the power of the Holy Spirit to start changing our attitude and thinking about our sin. But that is a conversation for the next week or two.

This week we end with the joyful reminder that if, through the body of Christ, we have died to the law that once bound us, we are now released from the law in order to serve in the new way of the Spirit. God's Spirit rules in us, guiding, teaching, reminding us of the things we have learned through the scriptures, strengthening us, and calling us to radical obedience to God's will for our lives. Thanks be to God He has done all this for us through Jesus Christ!