

Romans 7:1-13

Proper 8A + July 5, 2017

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho

Pastor Tim Pauls

A Perfect Couple

The Word of the Lord from Romans 7:1: "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?" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

The Law is binding on a person only as long as he lives. That seems obvious enough. Once you've died, you don't have to worry about traffic laws, tax returns, paying debts or appearing in court. Criminals are no longer prosecuted once they're dead, because they're beyond the reach of the law. Death makes a difference.

There are some times in life when it's the death of somebody else that sets you free from the Law. Paul uses one example to kick off our epistle lesson, that of a married woman. In her wedding vows, she's pledged to remain faithful and married to her husband so long as they both shall live, until death parts them. She is bound to that commitment by the Law of God – and, in Paul's time, the law of the land. So if she leaves her husband and lives with another man, she violates the Law and she's guilty of adultery. But if her husband dies, then she's not married according to the Law anymore. She's freed from her vows that the Law held her to, and free to marry another man. She has a new life because of the death of another.

By the way, this isn't to say that this hypothetical woman's first husband was a bad guy that she was trying to get away from; nor that she regretted her first marriage and was looking for an escape. This text isn't one for discussing marriage and divorce: we have others in Scripture for that. Rather, Paul is simply giving an illustration that the death of one can set another free from the Law.

Once past that example, he makes his point: you've been freed from the Law by death – not yours, but the death of Christ. He says, "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. 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. 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."

What does this mean? If we want to use the imagery of Paul's example, at one time you were "married" to the Law; that is, you lived under its direction and you sought your life and meaning from it. This isn't all bad: the one who abides with the Law generally leads a Law-abiding life. But there are a couple of big problems with the Law as your partner. For one thing, the Law of God always accuses. It's always telling you what you should be doing and aren't, as well as what you shouldn't be doing and are. It's always pointing out your sins, both the bad you commit and the good you omit. This has an effect on you, perhaps worse than you imagine. When the Law shows you your sin, it does more than just point out your imperfections: it actually makes you sin more. It provokes your sinful nature to try to prove you're the boss by breaking the Law. The Law says, "Thou shalt not," so you want to say, "Watch me." The Law says, "You can't have that," and you respond, "I'll show you!" The Law says, "You really ought to be doing that," and you say, "Nobody's going to tell me what to do." The Law says, "That's going to hurt,"

and you say, "Hold my beer." You and the Law are not a particularly harmonious couple, because the Law is always working hard and provoking you. It brings out the worst in you.

For that, Paul uses the example of the ninth and tenth commandments, summed up as "You shall not covet." He says, "For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness." That's how the Law and the sinful nature interact. I can remember visiting a home with one of my boys when he was two years old; and because the coffee table had some fragile knick-knacks on it, I told him, "Don't touch the coffee table." Touching the coffee table was probably the farthest thing from his mind until I laid down the law. But because I said, "Don't," he just had to reach out, with one finger, and touch the coffee table to defy me.

The same sinful nature is in you. Sin isn't just stupid things you do: sin is rebellion against God's Law. You want what the Law says you can't have – that's what lust and covetousness are all about. You want to scream at the person you're angry at, especially since you know that the Bible commands you to love your neighbor. You want to take what doesn't belong to you, because you know that stealing is wrong; and if you still can't have it, you're going to be angry at those who have more simply because the Bible would have you be content. You hear God forbid idolatry, saying "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me;" which only makes sense since He's the only true God; but you still want to worship anything but Him.

In other words, married to the Law and subjected to its demands, you're always going to find yourself saying, "Nobody's going to tell me what to do! I'm in charge and I'll do what I want."

Frankly, you and the Law are not an attractive couple because the Law is always nagging you. That's annoying enough to your old sinful nature, but we haven't hit the two most troubling aspects of this relationship yet for sinners.

Here's one: the Law is always right. When the Law accuses you and shows you your sin, it's never mistaken. When it nags, it's always right. Paul writes, "What then shall we say? That the Law is sin? By no means!" He also adds, "The Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." God's Law is holy and resolute. It doesn't change. It's right. You're wrong. It's tough enough on you as a sinner that the Law is always accusing you – but it really galls your pride that the Law is always, always right.

Here's the other thing: when you're bound to the Law, your partner is killing you. The Law says, "I can make you live forever! All you have to do is do everything I say, and eternal life is yours! If you don't do everything I say, then you're going to die." Or, to shorten that up, the Law says to sinners like you, "You're going to die." It's not the Law that brings death, though: it's sin. Blaming the Law for your sin is like blaming the speed limit sign for your ticket. The Law just tells you that you're wrong, but you're the one who has committed the wrongdoing, and the wages of sin is death.

Now, remember how Paul began this reading? "The Law is binding on a person only as long as he lives." Being bound to the Law is killing you, so you've got to be released from it if you're going to live. But the only way to be released from the Law is to die, which means you're not going to live anyway. Either way, no matter how you work it, the wages of sin is death.

Unless, of course, the death of somebody else can set you free.

Back to the Good News we heard before: the death of somebody else has set you free: "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."

You've died to the Law. You died to the Law through the body of Christ. In other words, He died for you. He bore all of your sins to the cross – every last thing that the Law could accuse you of. He died for them all: and because He forgives you for all of your sins, the Law looks at you and says, "I don't see anything left to condemn you with." But Christ hasn't just died for you: He is also risen for you. That's why Paul says, "you also died to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another." You're no longer bound to the Law. Who do you belong to? Paul says you belong to, "Him who has been raised from the dead." You're not partnered to the Law anymore: you're joined to Christ. You're part of His Church, His bride; and He's the Bridegroom who has laid down His life to make you His own, and then taken up His life again.

You've died to the Law and you belong to Christ. This is huge. It's not like Christ died to take away your sins *but* you still also belong to the Law. If that were the case, then the cross would just be a reset and the Gospel would be, "Jesus has taken away your sin. So now, if you just keep the Law perfectly from here on out, then you'll be saved." That would be no gospel at all. Instead, the proclamation of the cross is that Christ has fulfilled the Law and died your death for sin. In your Baptism, He joined you to His death and resurrection. He's joined you to Himself, so that you might have life: not because you keep the Law perfectly, but because He's kept it for you. All of it. Even the Law that the wages of sin is death.

You've died to the Law, says Paul; but does this mean that you live a lawless life? Does this mean that you go ahead and do whatever you want to do? That now you get to show that you're the boss? No. You're joined to Christ, and He is your Lord and King. You're no longer bound to the Law, but you obey it because it's Christ's Law; and by following it, you bear fruit to God. By obeying the Law, you do the good works God has created you to do. You cannot be a faithful follower of Christ and willfully sin anymore than a woman can be a faithful wife and willfully commit adultery. Such unfaithfulness says to Jesus, "I don't want to be joined to you – I'd rather be a slave to sin." That puts you under the Law – and condemned – once again.

That is not for you. You've died to the Law, because Christ died for you and He's joined you to His death. You live – not as a slave to the Law, but as a member of the Church, the bride of Christ. By His death, you are released from the Law. By His resurrection, you have life with Him forevermore. By His work of redemption, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen