

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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1/11/26

Sermon Title: “What’s a Free Man to Do?”

Sermon Text: Rom. 7:1-6

Rom. 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?

Rom. 7:2 For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage.

Rom. 7:3 Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

Rom. 7:4 ¶ 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.

Rom. 7:5 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.

Rom. 7:6 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.

Main Point: Christians are released from the penalties that God’s Law attaches to sin.

Outline:

1. Released from the Law’s Bondage (v. 1-3, 5)
2. Rejoicing in the Freedom of Grace (v. 4, 6a)
3. Renewed for Fruitful Obedience (v. 4b, 6b)

Introduction

When I was in seminary, I had a pen-pal. And my pen-pal was in prison. He had become a Christian while he was in prison for armed robbery, and had been in a Florida prison for 15 years. And we were pen-pals because I was grading his papers as he studied the things of God and was pursuing a theology degree. And so I would get his assignments, grade them, and then he would write me a note about what life in prison was like. And I would write back to him, encourage him, and tell him how I was praying for him. And after I graduated and started pastoring in Mississippi I got a call, and it was from my pen-pal. And he wanted me to know he was actually out of prison now!

And I had gotten so used to him being in prison that it was hard for me to get used to him now being set free. And he told me about his plans. He was going to start a business, and he was going to buy a limousine and be a driver. And he called me one day and said, “Adam, I’m free!” And sure enough he had started this business just like he told me. I asked him what it was like to be free, and he said, “It’s weird. I got so used to being told what to do all day long, where I would go, how I would spend my time, that the freedom is almost dizzying.”

He told me, “It feels amazing to finally be free!” But imagine if he still got up every day, followed the same prison routine, slept in the same miserable bed, looked at the same dreary walls, and kept the same horrible room mate. Paul today is pushing us to reflect on the freedom that we now have – the sort of freedom that he was talking about in the last chapter.

In some ways what we have here is an exposition of Paul’s earlier claim that “you are not under law but under grace” from 6:14. How did we get here into his position where we’re not under law, but under grace? And what does it mean that we’re here now? We’re free now. So how are we meant to think about the freedom that we have, and what is the right way to use the freedom that we’ve been given.

Here is where Paul is taking us: not only does the Gospel not promote sin and laziness, it actually moves us to live as beneficiaries of the new covenant. God doesn’t just want us to have our record wiped clean, but he wants us to now live in

freedom. We should not stay within the prison cells of sin and the law. But what does that mean? Especially when we consider that the law is good.

Today I want us to answer something important for ourselves:

In what sense are we free from the law, and in what sense are we now able to embrace the law? And then I want us to consider what we are meant to do with that freedom?

I want this for all of us: that we can really be free, really live free, and really rejoice in that freedom. But to do that, we need to listen to Paul.

1. Released from the Law's bondage (v. 1-3, 5)

First, Paul tells us that we've been released from the Law's bondage.

From the beginning Paul is showing us what it looks like to live under grace instead of law. And he illustrates this shift that's happened to us with this illustration from marriage. Paul says, marriage is, in a sense, an example of the sort of law that is nullified by death. It goes away. If one partner dies, the other person doesn't still go on living as if they are married.

So death with Christ severs the *condemning* power of the law. And the other side of that coin is that it severs us from the bondage of believing that just one more deed, one more sacrifice, one more offering, one more ceremony... that will give me peace with him. We've been severed from living that way, too.

We're freed from the law's condemnation. We are liberated from the treadmill of works... which are never enough, and never bring peace between us and God. But we're also liberated from the condemnation of the law when we break it as well. When we break God's law, condemnation is the result, but Paul says, "No. Not for the believer." Now this might make it sound like we're trying to get away from the law, or that there's something wrong with the law.

But we should be clear: The problem is not with the law. As verse 5 helps us to see, it is "the flesh" that is the problem when it comes into contact with the law. In one sense, what we really need isn't to be released from the *law*, what we need is to be released from the chemical combination of law + sin. It's when those two things meet that things are so destructive. But the problem's not with the law.

And over the next couple weeks, we're going to get into this struggle Paul sees in his own heart between the law and what it says, and our sinful hearts and why we resist. [Why does the flesh react so badly to the law? We're gonna get to that.] But if I can give you a bit of a preview, Paul is going to tell us: we are the problem, not the law. Because the law is steadily faithfully humming away, day-in, day-out, showing us true virtue. It's revealing the heart of our Father to us. So when we see it and react badly, it's not the law's fault, it is an "us problem." It's a sin problem, not a law problem.

We've been severed from the condemning power of the law. We have not been severed from the goodness of the law. It no longer condemns us, and we no longer expect it to give us peace with God. Paul will say in the next chapter, "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." So we're freed from the law being able to do that to us. It can't condemn us. Why?

Because just like in the marriage illustration here, we died, and that old relationship to sin has been broken in a definitive way, which changes how the law looks to our own hearts now. As Paul is going to tell us in the rest of this chapter, that doesn't mean there's no struggle with the old remnants of sin, but now, that battle in our lives happens from a position of strength and freedom instead of weakness and bondage. We are freed from the law's bondage.

2. Rejoicing in the Freedom of Grace (v. 4, 6a)

That brings us to our second point. Paul portrays the Christian as rejoicing in the freedom of grace.

So follow Paul's thinking in verse 4:

"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."

Verse 6 adds to the picture: "Now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive."

So the previous point was what we've been freed from: this old marriage to the law and its condemnation. And that severing happened through death.

Now we see what we've been freed *to*, or set free *for*.

“[You have died] so that you may belong to another.”

If we are in Christ by faith, then we belong to another. Like in marriage. We were obligated to the law until we were buried in death. Now we belong to Christ. Through faith, we are joined to Christ, the risen One, in a new covenant relationship.

Think about what this means. Here's one answer: We ought to live our lives mindful of the fact that we are not our own. This is not our life now. We belong to Christ. The Reformer Martin Bucer says that this should be a dominant thought for us: “Let this thought light a flame within us: that he regards us as worthy of occupying the role not only of servants, but also of his wife and the members of his body!”

We who trust in Christ are not coerced or motivated or driven by fear. The fuel of our lives, the engine of our lives, is not fear, it's love. And it turns out, that's necessary before we can actually serve God the way we're meant to.

We are free now!

We may sometimes think of freedom as meaning the ability to do anything that we want. That's not actually freedom, that's license. It's not the same thing.

I think that a better understanding of “freedom” is the ability to do what we should. Even the pagans knew this. If you read Aristotle, he said that happiness is not found in unrestrained choice but in living according to reason and virtue. He said that real freedom is *ordered liberty*: the flourishing of human life when aligned with its proper purpose. When we live according to our purpose, we are truly free.

Augustine, writing in his *Confessions*, describes his conversion. And he talks about it as a moment when God's grace freed his will to do what he had been resisting all his life. He could now do the good he truly desired but that he always felt powerless to perform. What this means is that freedom is not the raw power of

choice. Real freedom is a grace-enabled power to love and serve God, and live for him. That's what real freedom is. Until Christ we were in bondage. We weren't free. We may have done whatever we wanted, but we were the opposite of free.

And here's the difference: now, in Christ, we can obey and bear fruit, and that is real, true freedom. The sort of freedom that our hearts really need and yearn for.

By the way, Americans are obsessed with freedom. We talk about it all the time. But imagine if this biblical, *healthy* understanding of freedom could dominate American thinking. Imagine how different our daily lives, our politics, our conversations would be if we were obsessed with freedom as virtue instead of freedom as license.

Well we can't make our neighbors think differently, but why don't we at least start with the church. Church, let's love *real* freedom: the ability to please God and live for what is truly good. Let's rejoice in the freedom that grace brings.

3. Renewed for Fruitful Obedience (v. 4b, 6b)

Third today, Paul wants us to see ourselves in Christ as renewed for fruitful obedience.

We've already been moving here in the passage, but let me show you. At the end of verse 4, and at the end of verse 6, Paul says this:

“So that you may belong to another... in order that we may bear fruit for God...so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.”

Think about how revolutionary this is. Paul's telling us where all of this has been leading us, what it's all been for. He's telling us really what life lived in the Gospel is supposed to be like: Jesus didn't save us just to punch our ticket. He saved us so we could “serve in the new way of the Spirit.”

In the Spirit we serve God. Our life is about him. It's not our life now. We serve. We wake up each day, and ask, “How can I please God today? How can I serve God today? My life is not my own. What would God have my life mean and aim at?”

Before, we were afraid. We wondered what would happen to us if we messed up. Now, we serve without coercion; instead, we serve without fear. Now, we live and serve him from the heart, freely, joyfully, and fruitfully—not in the old letter of the law.

- The old letter of the law is the law performed from fear and coercion. That's not where we are now. We've been severed from that by death in Christ.
- The newness of the Spirit is our obedience from the heart without fear.

And there is an infinite difference between the two. Now we can bear fruit for God from the heart. What a gift! So for the Christian, we now see the moral law expressed in the ten commandments or hear them read around, and our relationship to them has changed because of the Gospel.

Before we were in Christ, we might see or read the ten commandments and think, "I can do whatever I want."

- Or maybe we'd think, "These rules just make me feel bad about myself."
- Or maybe "I have no desire to do this."
- Or we might think, "I'm going to try to do this so that I don't go to hell."

All of those things may have been how we responded to the law.

But now, the law has a different force because in Christ we have liberty: real freedom. Here is how Calvin says it:

"Christian liberty...is a spiritual thing. Its whole force consists in quieting frightened consciences before God, whether they are troubled about the lack of works or the fear of works." (*Institutes* 3.19.2)

Since I'm quoting famous Reformers, listen to this from Martin Luther:

"A Christian does not live in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor—in Christ through faith, in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God; by love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor, and yet always remains in God and in his love." (*Freedom of a Christian*, LW 31:371).

Life used to be about us. Or so we thought. But that's not the case now.

Now, as a follower of Christ I hear the commandment not to covet, and I no longer think, “I did covet just this morning even,” and then melt into hopelessness.

In Christ, I have a different reaction when I hear that commandment. In Christ, I still have sorrow for my sin, but now I set my eyes on Christ, thank God for his grace, and ask him for give me a heart of gratitude for what I have.

You see, it doesn't condemn me now, so I no longer descend into fear or insecurity when I hear it. And the law also doesn't justify me, so when I notice that I feel grateful I don't get proud or some kind of superiority complex. So what drives me is no longer fear or pride. What drives me is love. Because I love my maker and redeemer, I want to be what I love, I want to be like the one I love. And I hate nothing more than to be far from Him and what he's like. What we're talking about here is obedience without coercion. You see, in the Gospel I have a totally changed relationship to the law now.

And that is a very different posture than we once had before we came to Christ. To quote Luther again, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” (LW 31:344).

Conclusion

There is more to come in this chapter. We're just beginning with what Paul has to say. But God did not wipe your slate clean, give you a new spirit, and renew your heart simply so that you can go on living in fear. You are no longer confined by the law's verdict of guilty over you. Don't stay in that prison cell. Don't keep living like a prisoner.

You've been set free. In Christ, the question is not whether you *are* free. The question is, what will you do now that you're free? With your newfound ability to obey and please God, will you go on playing with mud pies? Or will you devote yourself to being conformed to the God who loved you, and whose Son gave himself for you?

Let's pray.