

Romans 7:1-6 (ESV)

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?

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

I want to tell you a story. The names won't have to be changed to protect the innocent, because I won't use any names. If I did, the names of dozens of people could be used.

This story is a composite of so many lives that I have crossed paths with over the years. If you see yourself in this story, know that you're not alone. There's a little bit of all of us in this chronicle.

It is a love story with a protagonist and an antagonist. But the villain and the hero are hard to distinguish. There's a bit of both in all of us.

The story begins on the wedding day. The bride and the groom exchange vows and become man and wife. As they walk arm in arm down the aisle at the conclusion of the ceremony, the smiles are broad and the assembled congregation applauds.

What a delightful moment. The bride is radiant in her beauty and the groom is vigorous and handsome. The photographer captures the moment which will be on the cover of their wedding album which would be pulled off the shelves on every anniversary.

But pictures can be deceiving. What appeared to be the ideal couple on their way to happily ever after, is just a snapshot of a moment in time.

Real life is a continuous motion of events and situations that can't be captured in a photograph. The rented tux is returned, and the wedding dress is stored away in a closet.

Everyday living is done in work clothes. We walk down many aisles without witnesses or applause. Life after the wedding day goes on and settles into a routine.

And so it was for this husband and this wife. They got on with the task of living. There was no let down after the honeymoon. They both knew that the bliss of the moment would make way to the grind of everyday life.

But it surprised the wife how quickly that transition took place. She had always dreamed of what it would be like to establish her own home and build her own nest.

She looked forward to pleasing her husband and working together to make their humble abode their home.

But within the first week of their married lives, she began to sense the disapproval of her husband. It's as if she fell just a tad bit short in everything she tried to do.

The dinner wasn't prepared just right. The house wasn't managed as good as it could have been. The checkbook balance didn't always add up.

Nothing major, but those minor things add up after a while. The wife began to feel an emotional distance between herself and her husband.

It wasn't hostility, but a noticeable detachment between the two. They would do all the perfunctory things a married couple would do, but they often seemed cold and mechanical.

When the wife brought this up to her husband he was rather dispassionate about the whole thing. He said, "If each of us did what we were supposed to do, then our marriage would work out just fine." End of discussion.

So that's what the wife set out to do. Meet his needs and perform her duties. If she would just try harder, surely the spark could return in their relationship.

Instead, the opposite happened. It's not that the husband was totally unresponsive. He appreciated his wife's efforts, but it was never enough.

Three really good days would be followed by a string of mediocre or sometimes really bad days. The good days were pleasant but brief. The bad days were long and grueling.

The late night extended conversations turned into quarrels and fights that left them both physically and emotionally exhausted. At such times it was a relief to go a day or two without speaking to one another.

But eventually they would come to terms or at least call a truce. Yet every time that happened, the two were a bit more guarded with each other.

The new normal between the husband and wife was an aloof coolness that was draining on them both.

For those who knew this couple, there was no noticeable difference. No marriage is without fault. Outwardly they still had what seemed like the perfect marriage.

So it was with some shame and embarrassment that the wife confessed to a friend that she was very unhappily married.

She said that she felt empty and that her heart was cold. She had built up defensive walls that protected her from pain but also left her without any of the vibrant joy that once pulsed out of her very being.

It's not that her husband was a bad man; just the opposite. He was a good man. He always did the right thing.

In fact whenever they got into an argument, it was the wife who would always be the one who ended up feeling that she was the problem. It was always her fault.

Her friend listened, sympathized, held her hand, and told her that she'd pray for her. There was really nothing more that she could do.

Life goes on. Patterns continued. Habits deepened. Adjustments are made. But the distance between the husband and the wife extended and became wider.

Divorce was not an option. Both the husband and the wife knew that marriage was a commitment until death do them part. That at least brought them stability.

Their lives were not awful by any stretch of the imagination. Both the husband and the wife performed their duties. The husband was responsible, reliable, and predictable. Oh, was he predictable.

The wife never felt like she could measure up. She always felt inadequate. She could never meet his expectations.

The husband always said that he loved her, but it seemed formal and prescribed. He came across more as a taskmaster rather than a soulmate.

If she would do her part, then she'd get the approval that she craved for. But those time were increasingly rare.

But then the unthinkable happened. Suddenly, without warning, the husband died. He left for work one morning, never to return home again.

Stunned and dazed by this sudden loss, this widow had to somehow make sense of her new lot in life. After the funeral and the initial adjustments, she pulled her wedding album off the shelf.

The picture of them walking down the aisle brought back many memories, some good and some bad. She realized that she really did love her husband, but something had smothered the life out of that love.

She had tried to be a good wife. She wanted to please her husband. Most of all, she wanted his love and approval. But it never seemed to work the way she had dreamed it would.

She truly missed her husband, but there was also a sense of relief. Day after day of not meeting expectations take their toll. It was like a cloud that constantly hung over her head.

The taskmaster was gone, but that left a huge void in her life. She grieved not only the loss of her husband, but the loss of love. To be honest, that love had been gone for some time.

The years passed and this woman carried on with the duties of life. From time to time she would think of what it would be like to remarry, but she knew that the days of her youthful beauty were long gone. Who would be interested in her?

But there was somebody out there who was mindful of this middle aged widow. He wasn't like the tall dark and handsome man that she married years ago.

In fact he was the polar opposite. He wasn't tall, dark and handsome; he had no outward traits that the world esteemed. At best he was rather plain and ordinary in appearance.

He had no money to speak of. He didn't hold any position of power or influence. There was nothing that made this man stand out from anyone else in a crowd.

Well, there was one thing. Grace. The man embodied grace. That's the first thing that this widow noticed.

It was more than just being a nice guy. It was more than kindness and being courteous. Whenever he spoke, you heard grace and truth.

Whenever you spent time with this man, you sensed that he knew and understood you better than you knew and understood yourself.

Yet that didn't scare you off. In fact it drew you closer to him. It was grace.

To be gracious is to affirm what's best in a person without condoning what's not so good.

To be gracious to live by the highest standards in such a way that it causes others to aspire to reach higher themselves.

To be gracious is to give to others not what they deserve, but what they need.

- Grace is more powerful than the Law.
- Grace motivates better than a taskmaster.
- Grace inspires greater and more noble desires than just fulfilling an obligation.

The Law provokes pride. Grace provokes humility. The Law eventually produces guilt. Grace fosters gratitude.

Being married to the Law is like being married to a taskmaster. Being joined together with grace breathes new life into a heart that was deprived of oxygen.

We move now from the analogy of marriage to the reality of the Gospel.

Why are some of you just going through the motions of the Christian life? You go to church. You sit through services. If you sing at all you just mumble through the hymns.

You may occasionally have devotions, but it's done more out of obligation than anything else.

You really don't like being associated with the Christian faith, but it's kind of expected of you.

You might remember a spiritual high that occurred years ago at an event or a rally, but that was such a long time ago. That joy and vibrancy is a distant memory.

You consider yourself a believer, but not a very enthusiastic one. There's no joy in it, only duty.

What's the problem? Among other things, you're married to the Law. You look upon the Christian faith as something that you have to do in order to be accepted by God (as if He is all that interested in you in the first place).

Deep down you know that you're just going through the motions, and if God is truly omniscient, He sees right through you.

But He doesn't seem do anything about it, so it must not matter much to God. Your heart may not be in it, but you're no worse than most the people you know.

In chapter seven of the book of Romans the Apostle Paul uses the analogy of marriage to further his point about not being under Law but under grace.

Romans 7:1-2 (ESV)

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? 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.

What's his point? What does it mean to be married to the Law? Simply this:

if being right with God means dutifully fulfilling duties and obligations, you see the Law as your spouse; your partner in life and faith.

You are justified by doing what you are supposed to do. But the problem is that it's never enough. If you pay any attention to what the Law says, you know that you always fall short.

The Law is good and right, but it is a taskmaster. You have momentary times when you think that you've done everything required, but it doesn't last long.

A few good days are followed by a string of not so good days. So in being married to the Law you find a way to keep your distance from it. Outward conformity is the best that you're going to get.

Romans 7:4 (ESV)

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.

What does it mean to bear fruit for God? In Galatians Paul spoke of the fruit of the Spirit. (Love, joy, peace, patience etc.) The Spirit is the breath of God that brings life into your actions and into your relationships.

Dying to the Law is not renouncing the commands of God. It is saying that the Law cannot make you righteous. Eventually the Law will wear you down.

Romans 7:5-6 (ESV)

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. 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.

Are you serving in the old way of the written code, or in the new way of the Spirit? It's easy to fall back into old habits. You can do the right things but for the wrong motives.

That's where the Law will wear you down. You'll do what you have to do but there won't be any joy in it. The harder you try the more energy it takes.

But the point of our passage this morning is this: through the Gospel, you are no longer married to the Law, but to Christ.

And the ironic thing is that the new life in Christ will revive your love for God's Word and His Laws. In Christ you will be energized by your desire to honor the LORD in all things.

What's the difference? Grace. The unmerited favor of God through JESUS Christ. Grace is more than just being nice and benevolent.

Grace is not getting what you deserve, but what you need. Grace doesn't lower the standards, but affirms, accepts and justifies based on the merits of another.

Grace doesn't ignore your faults, but inspires you to greater aspirations.

Grace is more powerful than the Law. Grace motivates better than a taskmaster. Grace inspires greater and more noble desires than just fulfilling an obligation.

- The Law provokes pride. Grace provokes humility.
- The Law eventually produces guilt. Grace fosters gratitude.

As a believer, you are married to Christ. It's a relationship based upon not what you've done or tried to do, but on what He has accomplished on the cross.

The fruit of the Gospel is a deeper love for God and man than you ever thought possible. It is a richer joy and a greater sense of meaning and purpose.

The fruit of the Gospel is a relationship that goes beyond the infatuation of youthful love and longer lasting than the passion of the honeymoon.

The fruit of the Gospel is based on grace which produces gratitude, which leads to joyful service.

Grace doesn't distance itself from the Commandments of God but draws closer to it than ever to see and understand what the Law is pointing to. And in the Gospel, the Law points us to Christ.

Is it Christ that you have come to worship this morning? Are you in union with Him? Is the joy of the LORD your strength? It can be, but it will always be in Christ alone.