



# THE ROLE OF THE RULE BOOK

*SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY*

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Romans 7:1-13

15th Message

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I wonder what were you were thinking when you heard the law of Moses being read earlier in the service. Many people have an uncomfortable relationship with this great law. They wonder if they are held accountable under it. In chapter 6 of Romans, the apostle Paul twice writes that Christians are “not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14, 15). Does that mean that we may disregard the law? Does the law help us to control sin in our lives? If we put a copy of the Ten Commandments on the refrigerator, will it help us live according to those rules?

The statement that Christians are “not under law” must have come as a shock to Paul’s readers, especially Jewish believers in Rome. What on earth did he mean by that? For centuries they had been laboring to live up to the Mosaic law. It was one of their most treasured possessions, the thing that separated them from every other nation. God had revealed his will to them, how they were to live and worship, how they were to die, even. The law was the centerpiece of their social structure. To talk down about the law or to speak about being delivered from it as a privilege, would seem blasphemous to Jewish ears.

But Paul knew that he was writing to a people who had misused the law. The Jews felt that it was the means to make their way to God. They thought that God wanted a law-abiding people who would keep his rules impeccably and thereby earn his pleasure. But that was never the case. The law was not intended to justify man, to bring him into God’s presence. The law doesn’t work that way. It didn’t work for Israel then and it won’t work for us now. In chapter 6, Paul said that when we died and were buried and then raised with Christ, we put an end to this old life of trying to keep the law as a way of pleasing God. It is over, finished with. There is a new way, which the apostle will now begin to set out.

The outline of our passage is quite simple. The interpretation is difficult, but not the outline. Commentators disagree as to how to interpret this text, and I am not going to try to explain every nuance of it. There are too many difficult concepts here that I don’t think we will fully understand until we meet Paul face to face. But the structure of the passage is very simple. Paul sets out a principle in verse 1; he illustrates the principle in verses 2-3; applies it in verses 4-6; and uses a personal example from his own life to show how it worked out for him as an individual, in verses 7-13.

First, Paul establishes the principle:

**Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? (Rom. 7:1, NASB)**

Paul is writing to Jews who had come to Christ and well understood the law. The gentiles knew it as well, because they had been taught it in church. They didn’t have a New Testament, they had only the Hebrew Scriptures, so they understood it well. Paul uses the law in different ways here. At times he refers to it as a principle (“I see a law at work in my members,” i.e., “I see a principle at work in my members”). He will also use it to refer to the entire Old Testament. At times he will refer to the first five books of the OT (the Pentateuch); at other times he refers to the Ten Commandments, as I believe he is doing here, because he quotes from them.

Now Paul says that the law, any law for that matter, has jurisdiction over a person only for as long as he is alive. That is the principle. Regardless of how big a scoundrel a person has been, once he dies the law can’t touch him. Dead people are not served with subpoenas. Their relationship to the law has ended. That is the easily understood principle.

The illustration that follows, that of marriage, comes out of domestic life. Verse 2:

**For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then if, while her husband is living, she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress, though she is joined to another man. (Rom. 7:2,3)**

That is easily understood as well. Even though her marriage might not be sublimely happy, a married woman is bound to her husband by law. She cannot be joined to another; that would be adultery. But if her husband dies, she is set free from the law so she can marry someone else. The law bound her, but his death frees her. That is an illustration of the principle that Paul just established in verse 1. <sup>1</sup>

Now he applies the principle, and here is where we encounter interpretive problems, because his application does not logically follow his illustration. I am not going to go through all of the illogic, but a careful reading of what follows will show that the principle doesn’t quite follow. Verse 4:

**Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God. For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.** (Rom. 7:4-6)

This is somewhat confusing. In the marriage metaphor of verses 2-3, the husband dies and the wife remarries, but here in Paul's application, it is the wife (who was formerly married to the law) who does both the dying and the remarrying.

We could spend a lot of time trying to figure out who died, but the point is that a death took place, which rendered free the person who died. In the husband-wife relationship it is the death of one which renders the other free to marry again. In the Christian life it is our own death (in Christ) which sets us free to marry again. Jesus Christ (his body) died on the cross. Through our union with Christ (which Paul explained in chapter 6) we have shared in his death, and so we have died through his body. The point of Paul's illustration is that death has secured our release from the law. We are no longer under its jurisdiction. We are now free to be joined to Christ in order to bear fruit for God.

Paul says we no longer regard the law as heretofore, when we saw it as the means to gaining God's acceptance. All that is in the past now. We have seen that the law cannot change one's character. Some of you made resolutions a few months ago. Have you kept them flawlessly? Hardly. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. It doesn't matter what law you place yourself under, the Ten Commandments or your own commandments, before long you will break your own rules and God's rules. The problem is not with the law but with the material that the law has to work with. The problem is with us, not with the law. The law is a perfectly good instrument. It came down through Moses. It was mediated through angels. God didn't risk any mistranslating by Moses; he wrote it himself on stone. There is no question that the law is a perfect expression of the character of God. It is good and holy and just, as Paul will say later.

So there is no problem with the law. It is a wonderful gift, but it comes without batteries. No matter how willing the spirit is, the flesh is weak. You are familiar that principle. You have tried to reform yourself, to conform to some code that was set before you but you couldn't do it. The difficulty lies in what Paul calls "the flesh," our basic humanity. The flesh is what we are apart from God. The word is sometimes used in a neutral sense to refer to our bodies and souls, our material and immaterial parts. But at other times the word flesh refers to something that is morally wrong. That is what the flesh

means in this context. It is referring to man and woman without God, trying to live their lives apart from him. Our flesh will never make us spiritual, no matter how hard we try or how much we determine to do better. That is why the law doesn't work—because it has to work with our flesh. There is a better way: our death and burial with Jesus Christ ended the rule of the law in our lives. We are no longer under its tyranny, condemnation and domination.

So what is next? Believers are motivated by the Holy Spirit to lead pure lives. Freedom from the law doesn't mean we are free to live any way we like. We have already seen that at conversion, we exchanged slaveries. As John Stott puts in his book *Men Made New*: "We are indeed free from the law, but free to serve, not sin. Our new slavery, says Paul, is not in the oldness of the letter but in the newness of the Spirit."<sup>1</sup> It is the difference between the old covenant and the new. The old covenant was a letter, written upon stone tablets outside of us; the new covenant, the good news, the gospel, is Spirit, for the Holy Spirit writes God's law in our hearts. That is our new bondage. A dramatic change has taken place in the disposition of our hearts. Our motive and method have been changed. Stott continues:

We no longer serve because the law is our master and we have to, but because Christ is our husband and we want to. We no longer view obedience to the law as leading to salvation. Our salvation is what leads us to obeying the law. The law says, 'Do this and you will live'; the good news proclaims, 'You are now alive, so do this.' For the Christian, our obedience is no longer to an external code, but surrender to an indwelling Spirit. Everything has changed. We are still slaves, but the master now is Christ, not the law. The power by which we serve is the Spirit, not the flesh. The Christian life then is serving the risen Christ in the power of his indwelling Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

Next, Paul goes on to describe how this process worked out in his life. Verse 7:

**What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; (Rom. 7:7)**

That is what the law is designed to do. The purpose of the law is not to lead us to God in the sense that if we keep it, he will be pleased with us. The purpose of the law is to *reveal sin*, to tell us what is sinful.

Recently my wife got a gift one of those make-up mirrors that has a light attached to it. The mirror magnifies everything. When I looked in it I wondered why anyone would want to look at themselves through that mirror. It magnifies all the imperfections. James says the law is like that. We think we look fine until we gaze at God's perfect law. The law magnifies sin. A razor blade sees to be a fine instrument, and is extremely sharp, but under a microscope it looks like a jagged saw blade. We think we are doing well, but then the law comes along and points its finger at specifics in our lives, revealing us for what we are.

Continuing, Paul says he would not have known what sin was without the law. Verse 7b:

**for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. (Rom. 7:7b,8)**

Without the light of the Word we are unaware of sin. So many things are natural for us, we don't see them as sin. Paul says that when the law comes, sin springs to life. The law not only reveals sin, it *arouses sin*. It not only exposes sin, it stimulates it. Paul says, "sin taking opportunity" (the word is used for a military base, a springboard for military operations). The producers of the television show *Candid Camera* often capitalized on this principle. In one episode they set up cameras on a busy downtown sidewalk. They cut a 2-inch in diameter hole in an adjoining plywood construction fence, and people by the hundreds passed by and paid no attention to the fence, the hole, or the construction. Then they posted a sign on the sidewalk that said, "Whatever you do, don't look in this hole." They put another sign on the fence that said, "Don't look in this hole." Suddenly there was something behind that fence that everyone wanted to see. Soon there were people standing in line to look through the hole. There was nothing behind the fence, but the sign stimulated their interest. Next time you see a "wet paint" sign, look closely and you will see fingerprints in the paint. People just have to touch it to see if it's really wet.

Verse 9:

**And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; [i.e., when the commandment came home. Paul had it from the time he was a child, but when it finally dawned on him what the law really said, he died.] and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment [i.e., the specific tenets of the law] is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. (Rom. 7:9-13)**

Let me try to illustrate what the apostle is saying through his own life. I am indebted to my friend David Roper for this possible scenario of how Paul came to this awareness. <sup>3</sup>Paul was a pious Pharisee, a very good man. He describes himself thus in *Philippians*: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." Paul felt good

about himself. One of the problems with trying to please God by keeping the law is that it makes people proud. They become self-righteous, stuffy and uptight. And they become critical of others, because they seem to be doing better than they are. Such people are upright and uptight.

Perhaps, one day Paul was meditating on the tenth commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey [those are things that really counted in those days] or anything that belongs to your neighbor." Maybe Paul found his neighbor's wife desirable. Maybe he wanted his neighbor's possessions, his new 700 MHz. computer, for instance. It was so natural to want things that it never occurred to him that it was sin. Suddenly it came home to him that to desire something that belonged to someone else was sin.

That is why the commandment, "Do not covet," is the bottom line of the Ten Commandments. This is the one that leads to all the others. It is placed there to kill you, because you can't stop wanting things. I'm sure that Paul, being the good Pharisee that he was, put his head down and determined not to covet anymore, only to discover that the law was like a spoon that stirred up the sediment of sin in his life. He couldn't stop coveting. That is why he says it killed him. The law not only reveals and arouses sin, it *condemns sin*. It doesn't mean it killed Paul literally. It killed him existentially. He died. He experienced boredom, guilt, frustration, despair, all of those death-like feelings that you and I know so well.

Paul says that is the purpose of the law: to kill you. That was the purpose of the law for Israel. It was never intended to bring salvation, but, rather, to drive them to God so that they would receive grace, forgiveness and power from him. And that is the purpose of the law today. That is how many of you came to Christ: you realized what a terrible person you were. You couldn't stop yelling at your kids. You couldn't deal with lustful thoughts or your sexual impulses. You were driven to Christ. That is the purpose of the law. The law does that for Christians as well. It points out in fine detail the areas of need in our lives so that we are driven to Christ. He is the only one who can change us. We can't change ourselves, and the law can't change us.

The law can condemn, and it does a great job of that. It can point out depravity, but it cannot save, it cannot forgive, it cannot cleanse. It can only stand there and be what it is: rigid and true and rather condemnatory, by nature of what it is. It can reprimand and rebuke, but it cannot justify. It cannot renew. It cannot revitalize. It can show us what we are doing wrong, but it cannot empower and enable us to do what is right. So in many ways it is a ruthless kind of rule book. Rule book religion is a dead-end road. It is frustrating. It is depressing. It is confining. And it is lifeless and powerless! Which of course is why many people steer away from church

and religion in general. Which is why Paul's bombshell about being released from the law is so important for us to understand.

The law was designed to lead us to the only person who can change us, Jesus Christ. And his promise is that he will—but not all at once. Some of our habits are long-standing, deep-seated things that may harass us to the end of our days. We will struggle and fail. The Christian life is not a bed of roses. It is a fight, a struggle filled with pain and heartache. But there is hope ahead. Our Lord is slowly conforming us to his image, and the job will not be complete until we stand before him. In the meantime we are totally forgiven. He is infinitely gracious. We cannot out-sin the grace that he continually offers to us.

How then should a Christian view the Ten Commandments? Are they still binding? The answer is both No and Yes; no in the sense that our acceptance before God depends on our obedience to them. Christ and his death fully met the demands of the law. It no longer has any claim on us. But the answer is Yes in the sense that we are now slaves of Christ, forgiven, cleansed, and empowered to bear fruit for God. As Christians, then, our attitude toward the law has changed. Our disposition to the rule book is radically different. We used to view it as confining, restrictive, old fashioned and burdensome, and we would stiffen and rebel against it. Paul is saying that no one who is a Christian should view Christianity that way, because all of that has changed. In Christ we have been released from that kind of drudgery, from the oppressive, restrictive nature of the law. Because of the Holy Spirit's presence and his transforming work in our lives we have a whole new attitude now toward the rule book.

As we conclude, I want to contrast a few of the changes that ought to have taken place in our lives as believers. As I describe these, I hope and pray that those of you who know Christ can identify with these changes, that you can say, "That is what happened to me." If you can't, you have some learning to do.

First, before you were in Christ, *God's word seemed to you to be restrictive and overly negative in nature*. It seemed that everything that was pleasurable in life was off limits to you. But now that you are in Christ and you have died to the law, the Holy Spirit is operating in your life. Instead of looking at the laws of God as being restrictive, now *you look at them as being protective*. You marvel at the wisdom of God who loves us so much that he wants to warn us of those areas that are harmful.

Second, before you were in Christ, *your motivation for obedience was to avoid punishment*. You thought, "I will do this because if I don't, God will bring some calamity my way. I will do a minimum to stave off his anger." *After you are in Christ your motivation for obedience is gratitude and love*. These are totally different ways of looking at the rules.

Third, before you were in Christ, *you always had the feeling that no matter how much you obeyed, it was never enough*. You were always falling short, always feeling guilty and condemned. Why keep trying? you wondered. *But, in Christ you are released from that "never enough" attitude*.

Friends, we are no longer under the tyranny of the ruthless rule book, no longer under bondage to the letter of the law. We have been released from that. The Holy Spirit has now energized us to enjoy pleasing God. Now we love to obey him and give him glory. Because of the work of Christ we are free at last.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 65.

2. Stott, 66.

3. *The Death of the Law*, a sermon by David H. Roper, Cole Community Church, January 3, 1988.