



Catalog No. 667

Romans 7:1-12

Fourteenth Message

Brian Morgan

April 17, 1988

## LAW, LIBERTY AND LICENSE

One of the most troublesome and confusing issues we face as Christians today is our relationship to the Law. Once saved by faith in Christ through grace alone, how do we relate to God's commandments? Are we still under obligation, or do we disregard them? Is the Law still the standard for Christian ethics? Since no man has been able to keep the Law, why did God give it in the first place?

During the apostle Paul's day, this was one of the hottest Christian controversies. Paul preached a gospel of liberty as seen in Galatians 5:1: "It was for freedom that Christ set us free, therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery." Wherever Paul went, his gospel of freedom came under severe attack from two different, though related, enemies. The first was legalism and the second license. Those who were in the legalistic camp thought that Christians were still obligated to keep the Law as a means to their salvation. On the opposite side of the coin, those who taught license, the Antinomians, were against the Law. They said, "Since the Law is our trouble, we need to get rid of it. We can think for ourselves about what is right and what we are free to do."

These two enemies of freedom are still present with us today. I meet them every time I share the gospel. Whenever people are hesitant to accept Christ, they always express one of these reasons. They either think Christianity is a religion of rules, laden with do's and don't's. Or they are put off by hypocritical Christians who live as they please without any sensitivity to the ethics even pagans uphold.

In Romans 7, Paul tells us we are free from both legalism and license. This chapter is critical for a proper understanding of the gospel. We must enter into it with our whole heart because Paul wants us to walk on the clear path of liberty in Jesus Christ. We are not to be under a yoke or weighed down in bondage. Christ came to set us free.

Let us look at public enemy number one—legalism. Paul examines this enemy in the first six verses of chapter 7. He introduces the issue with a question in verse 1.

### I. Enemy #1: Legalism (7:1-6)

**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? (NASB)**

What does Paul mean by "Law?" In the Scriptures, this term has a broad meaning, sometimes referring to the entire Hebrew Scripture and sometimes to just the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. It can also refer to the ceremonial law, the religious pattern of worship which was the earthly shadow of the ministry of Christ. When Christ came, this law was done away with because the reality, the heavenly sacrifice, had arrived. The heavenly priest was functioning in his office. The Law that is spoken of in this context refers to the Old Covenant as it was clearly spelled out in the book of Deuteronomy as a means to life (Lev 18:5).

When Paul says the Law "has jurisdiction," he is using the same thought he expressed in 6:14, "you are no longer under law." This needs to be seen in light of Israel's history. When God rescued Israel out of Egypt, setting them free from 400 years of bondage, he brought the people to Mount Sinai where he gave them the Law. The essence of the Law was this: "Now that I have redeemed you from slavery, love me with all of your heart." The Law, in its original context, was to be a response to grace. Having been set free, the people were to give their hearts to God, to love him and their fellow man.

The book of Deuteronomy further applied these commandments, but the idea remained the same: love God and your fellow man out of appreciation for God having saved you. The weight of the responsibility to respond was on man, for the Law said, "If you keep these commandments, you will have life. If you do not, you will be under a curse." The book of Deuteronomy ends with a series of blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

Later in their history, Israel perverted the law into legalism. This took root in the Pharisees of whom Paul was a member. In order to keep these commandments, the Jews codified the Ten Commandments, making a series of case laws externalizing these commandments in order to fulfill them. In so doing, they missed the intent of the Law and the spiritual requirement. Thus, they added the oral law which they said had been passed down by Moses, Aaron and all the rabbis. They eventually added some 360 commandments, as if ten were not enough!

As a Christian, are you under the Law? Are you a legalist? Let me give you some characteristics of a legalist. Some of us are more successful at this than others, so I will start with the successful traits. First, a legalist is performance-oriented, and evaluates life purely on an external basis. Being a good performer, he is proud of his record. Second, because he is so good, he is unable to tolerate weaknesses in others. He may have a critical spirit. Third, he is a perfectionist and is never satisfied with his work. He feels guilty when he rests. Fourth, he is not vulnerable with others. He does not let others get close because he will not share his weaknesses or talk about heart issues.

Others of us are not quite as successful at this, but we are legalists just the same. What does the unsuccessful legalist look like? This person's life is dominated by failure. Although he is performance-oriented, he does not do well. Therefore, he is more like Charlie Brown with a dark cloud of despair always hanging over his head. He is pessimistic and views God as a Scrooge, an exacting bookkeeper who always wants everything just right and is never pleased with his performance. Because of this, he feels defensive and is afraid to take risks or begin new things. He also feels threatened by the honest evaluation of others. He takes people's comments too seriously or too personally. He has difficulty loving others because he is so focused on himself and his own weaknesses.

In either case, Legalism is a disease of the heart that wreaks havoc with our freedom. To the legalists, Paul says, "Don't you know that

the Law has limits?" In verse 1, he says, "The Law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives." We died! Therefore the Law no longer has jurisdiction over us. What freedom! Did you tell the IRS that you are deceased and no longer have to pay taxes? The old covenant in which we carried the responsibility for responding to God is over. We are dead!

To help us with this, Paul gives us an analogy of marriage in verses 2-3:

**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.**

Here is the illustration of a lovely bride who wants to marry Joe. If she marries Joe, the pastor says, "Your marriage is for life! This law binds you to Joe. If he is a jerk, you are stuck! If you want to be released in order to marry Jim, the law will condemn you as an adulteress." The marriage law is revoked only upon the death of the husband. Then the woman is free from the old obligation to be married into a new relationship. If she violates this law, she is condemned.

Paul brings this analogy into the spiritual dimension of life in 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.**

We are the wife. In this analogy, the Law binds us to this husband whom Paul does not identify. Clearly the husband is sin, the flesh, for Paul says in verse 5, "Sinful passions were aroused by the Law, and the Law links you to the flesh because it commands you to respond."

From what resources could we draw while bound in this marriage? We only had the flesh. We need to clearly see that the old covenant linked us with sin for life and put the responsibility on us to respond to God. Only death could free us from our first husband and from the Law which bound us together.

In the analogy, the husband died, but in reality we do! As believers, we died not only to the first husband but also to the law which bound us. Now we are free from our old obligation to this sinful fellow to enjoy a new relationship with Christ. If we tried to do this before death, we would have been involved in hypocrisy. Many people actually are hypocrites, playing at being Christians. They try to embrace Christ without dying to the Law or to sin. We cannot join the new husband until a death has taken place.

Paul says there are wonderful results. Look at verses 5-6:

**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.**

In the old relationship under the Law, no fruit was possible. The Law kept making demands of us to be holy, to not commit adultery, to honor our parents. But in so doing, it bound us to that first husband. The sinful passions were aroused, and we died.

Now fruitful living is possible because we have been set free from that old man and the Law. Now we respond to a living God. Not only does he make requests, he empowers us from within to do what

he asks on a much higher level. This is wonderful! Fruit is made possible because of the new Spirit, not the old letter.

Let me illustrate this. I am a coach for Bobby Sox softball and have charge of eleven girls including two of my daughters. When I signed up, I was given a kit including a bag of equipment, a First Aid kit, and the 1988 Official Bobby Sox Rule Book. This book contains 62 pages with 13 rules per page. 806 rules! All these rules just to play softball! I hate rules. I was also given a video tape which turned out to be an oral recitation of the rules. At our first practice, I gathered my team and said, "There are three reason we play a sport: to have fun, to learn a new skill, and to build friendships. This is all you have to remember." With only a minimum of things I wanted them to learn, I figured we could course-correct as needed.

I did tell the girls that when they run bases they are not to overrun the bag. They are to stay on the bag to avoid being tagged out. Usually, in their excitement, they run past second base into center field! Little did I know what ramifications my rule would carry. During one of our games, we had a girl on first base, my daughter was up to bat, and I was the third base coach. My daughter hit a double—something new for our team! The girl on first ran to second and stopped. I yelled for her to come on to third, but she refused. I said, "I am your coach! Listen to me!" She replied, "You said one bag at a time! I'm staying here!" I turned to the parents watching and said, "Why should coaching be any different from home?"

What is the point? The coach has the right to overrule the external rules. I want my team to listen to their relationship with me, not to some law. The Law does not fit every context. This is what Paul is saying about our relationship with Christ. As we read his Word, it goes deep into our soul to change the way we think. As a result, we can apply wisdom in the fine details of life without the rigors of external legislation. We can read the Scriptures and discover application according to our context.

One section in the book of Proverbs has always troubled the rabbis. One proverb says, "Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes." The next one says, "Don't answer a fool according to his folly, lest you become like him." The rabbis said, "How can these two texts coexist?" One rabbi burned 100 jars of oil trying to reconcile these two verses. The point is quite simple! Only context can tell us when to answer one way or another.

Only the man of the Spirit knows when the context applies, and this cannot be legislated. This is the joy of being in a new Spirit. God's Spirit speaks from within to give us spontaneous wisdom that goes to the heart, fits the context, and is simple. This wisdom does not violate God's ethical standards. With it, we know how to weigh each issue.

One man on our church staff is gifted with a generous portion of the gift of wisdom. In our elders' and pastors' meetings, the discussion can sometimes bog down in details. At times, we do not know how or where to move. Then this man will speak. He does not speak in response to what the eye has seen or the ear has heard. Coming from the heart, his wisdom cuts through all the externals and goes to the heart of the matter. Everyone agrees with him, for his answers always seem so obvious. I have so appreciated his contribution among us.

Paul says if we want to go back under the law dangerous things can happen. In doing so, we are reuniting with our flesh. Therefore, instead of obeying the Lord, we have sinful passions aroused within us to bear fruit for death again. Anytime we express the attitude, "I

must do this in order to get life,” we are dead. Instead, God says, “Here is life. Now do this.” This is subtle but dramatically different.

In summary, legalism places too high a value on the Law. It does not recognize that the Law was meant to be temporary and was only valid while we were living. Second, legalism places too high a value on the human spirit to respond to what God asks. When Israel was given the Law, they said, “We’ll do it!” When Joshua told them to choose whom they would serve, they said, “Tell us what to do and we will do it.” Joshua knew better because he recognized the wrong spirit in them. Third, in legalism’s arrogance, it thinks it can apply God’s law to all cases in external legislation. This is the danger of legalism, beside the fact that it reunites us to that old husband who lives his life through us again.

Paul is careful lest we swing to the other extreme which is license. He addresses this issue in verses 7-12. Again he begins with a question.

## II. Enemy #2: License (7:7-12)

**What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?**

This is a good question. After all, if the Law is causing all of these problems, why not get rid of it? Let us dispense with it so that we can determine what is right in our own minds. We can think for ourselves. This is what happened during the Prohibition era. Thinking that the law banning liquor was too harsh, people ignored the law and did what they pleased.

This is the dominant characteristic of this generation. In fact, we are living in a generation in which parents say to their children, “We cannot tell you what the correct ethics are. You must make your own sexual, moral, and economic ethics.” This is creating havoc for our younger generation. Harvey Cox in his book *The Secular City* says this about today’s society:

Secular man’s values have been deconsecrated, shorn of any claim to ultimate or final significance. They are no longer the direct expression of the divine will. They have become what certain people at a particular time and place hold to be good. They have ceased to be values and have become valuations. He [modern man] must live with the realization that the rules which guide his ethical life will seem just as outmoded to his descendants as some of his ancestors’ practices now appear to him. No previous generation has had to live in the glaring light of this realization. Simple ethical certainty of the sort once available to man will never be possible again.

The Bible dedicates the book of Judges to the study of what happens to people who live on this basis. During the period of the Judges, every man did what was right in his own eyes. Man thought he did not need the law or revelation. The book ends with sodomy, revealing man’s inability to rise above sin. This is a powerful historical example for our day.

Paul asks, “Was the Law sin?” He says absolutely not. The Law is the best friend he ever had because of what it did for him. Look at what he says in verses 7:

**May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “You shall not covet.”**

When he said he would not have “known” sin or coveting, he is not saying he would not have known about them. He is saying that the Law made him intimately acquainted with the sin resident

within him. Thus, he learned about himself through the Law. Here is the personal testimony of a preacher revealing his own weakness.

Paul also points out the process involved. Look at verses 8-11:

**But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I 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.**

Paul was once alive apart from the Law, and sin was dead, dormant. He is really saying he was a self-righteous man who thought all was well. Everyone starts life this way.

Whenever we discipline our young children and point out their wrong, they seldom feel humility or shame for their sin. When they think they are correct, they think all is well and the problem lies with one of their sisters. My children have not experienced the Law working in them, teaching them about themselves. We all begin with the same self-righteousness.

Then the commandments arrived in Paul’s life and said, “Do this and live.” Instead of Paul coming to life, sin came to life and he died. Notice the commandment he names—“Do not covet.” This is the one commandment out of the ten that is the most internal. Being a Pharisee, Paul had taken the Law seriously. He had not committed adultery; he had kept the Sabbath and tithed; he had not stolen.

But the Law also said, “Do not covet,” which means “do not cultivate a spontaneous desire for something you do not have.” This means a man was not to desire his neighbor’s wife, donkey, servant, or field. Paul says, “When I heard this, I found coveting of every kind in my being. I struggled with the lust which dominated me.” Sin took opportunity in the commandment. In other words, sin used the commandment as a base of operations. This was the beachhead from which sin launched its campaign in his life.

If you want to destroy your yard, put up a sign that says, “Keep off the grass.” If you want people to put their grubby hands all over the walls of your home, put up a sign which reads, “Wet paint.” This will cultivate all of the spontaneous desires to violate the Law.

Then Paul comes to a conclusion about all of this in verse 10: “This commandment was given to bring life, but it proved to result in death.” This word “prove” means that Paul made a significant discovery. Through intellectual observation and reflection, he learned something about himself—he is a sinner. The language he uses comes directly out of Genesis 2,3. Adam and Eve had an ideal situation until the commandment came to not eat from one tree. Then the Devil deceived the woman, and they ate and died. Paul says, “I used to read that text with a self-righteous attitude. Adam was a wicked man!” When he read about Cain and Abel, he used to say, “That wicked Cain! How could he do such a thing?” Now he admits, “This commandment taught me about myself. Now when I read about Adam, I know that Adam is me. My heart is so wicked that in the best of environments, I would be a rebel.” Now when he reads about the wicked kings like Mannasseh, he does not have any self-righteousness. He says, “That wicked king is me.”

We are reluctant to believe this. When our children come home with hurtful speech, we say, “Who have you been with? Who taught you that word?” We are thinking, “Bad company corrupts good morals.” That is true, but in saying this we are saying that our children are exempt from personal sin. Last week we asked one of our daugh-



ters about a particular response and she said, “I taught myself.” Sin indeed comes from within. We do not need many examples before we pick up sinful behavior.

This is why Paul can say he loves the Law. Through the Law, he learned something about himself and the wickedness of his own heart which took away all his self-righteousness. A few months ago, I taught at a conference at Mount Hermon on the book of 1 Samuel. In one message, I focused on Eli’s wicked sons who were motivated to minister for two reasons: money and sex. In discussing God’s judgment, it was not difficult to find modern Hophni’s and Phineha’s for illustrations. When I finished my message, a delightful man with a gracious spirit called me aside and said, “Why did you name those modern preachers by name? When I see those men, I do not feel condemnation. I see me in them.” He was probing my spirit to see if I was self-righteous. I thought about this man after our conversation. His theology is far more advanced than mine. He would not throw one rock of judgment at these men who had fallen.

This is what Paul says happened to him. The glory of the Law took away his self-righteousness.

In conclusion, he describes the Law for us in verse 12:

**So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.**

The Law is holy; it is set apart to God. If something was considered holy in the Scripture, it was not to be tampered with or changed in any way. If it was perverted by any man, that man would incur the wrath of God. This is why after a significant portion of Scripture, the canon reads, “He who adds to these words or takes away, ... the curse of God be upon his head.”

Second, the commandment is righteous. It is a true reflection of the character of God. When we read that God hates idolatry, we can be assured that he still hates idolatry. He means what he says. If the Bible says we are to honor our parents by providing for them financially to give them esteem in the community, God still means this today. All of his commands are a righteous reflection of his will.

Third, the Law is good because it is beneficial to the recipient. The Law benefits us because it tells us whether we are converted or not. If we are unconverted, it makes demands upon us that we cannot fulfill and thus arouses sin in our lives. Sin comes to life and we die. That is good! The Law is the best friend we have because it tells us about ourselves. We must be killed first by sin before we can die to sin.

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to lead my friend Dave to Christ. He came to me because his wife had just left him. He said, “About five years ago, she said I had to change or she would leave.” When he asked her what he had to do, she handed him a list. He tried to become a new man seven times. Finally, he admitted, “The harder I tried, the worse I got.” I gave him the good news: “You have learned a great lesson. Now that you know you cannot be the husband she wants, you can ask Jesus into your life. He will not only forgive your sins; he will make you the kind of husband she desires. You can let him live his life through you.” We had a meeting the next day with his wife who was filled with disbelief but willing to try. She gave this Jesus a chance and fell in love with her husband anew. The marriage was healed, and they have lead many other couples to Christ. I will never forget when he left my home that first day. He said, “You have lifted a weight off of my shoulders.” He never would

have come to that conclusion without the Law telling him how sinful he was and telling him about his need for Christ.

Once we are converted, we read the Law in a different spirit. Psalm 1 says the righteous man meditates on the Law day and night, and it brings life to his soul. In Psalm 19, the psalmist rejoices in the Law:

**The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;  
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.  
The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;  
The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.  
They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;  
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.  
(Ps 19:8-10)**

Now when we read the Law with our converted heart, we do not see commandments written upon stone; we see a Person behind the Law—Jesus Christ. When we read that we are to honor our parents, we see Jesus who honored his mother and father. This same Jesus lives in us. We no longer see the commandment which says to not commit adultery or covet, we see Jesus who upheld the home and loved his fellow man. When we take him into our hearts, the Lord empowers us to do what he asks.

I once read a book entitled *Books that Make a Difference* about books that have changed people’s lives. The editor collected letters from people explaining why certain books had been significant in their lives. One of the excerpts was as follows:

The book that made the greatest difference in my life was *The Secret in the Daisy*, by Carol Grace...the difference it made was enormous. It took me from a miserable, unhappy wretch to a joyful, glad-to-be-alive human. I fell so in love with the book that I searched out and married the girl who wrote it.

Most Sincerely, Walter Matthau

This is how we can read the Scriptures. We fell in love with the person who epitomizes righteousness, and his book lead us to a marriage relationship with himself. As a result, he bears fruit in our lives today.

While legalism places too high a value on the human heart to respond to God, license places too high a value on the human heart to discern right from wrong. In our arrogance, we think we can determine our own way without God’s word. If you are in this category, Isaiah (55:6-9) says you had better repent. Man cannot think the way God thinks. God’s thoughts and moral ways are so much higher than ours, they are higher than the heavens are from the earth. Apart from the revelation of God and establishing a relationship with him, we cannot think as God thinks. We will never know how to make correct ethical decisions on our own because the chasm is too great.

Both of these enemies have something in common. The greatest danger which threatens our freedom does not come from without but from within. Both of these are rooted in one source—pride. Pride places too high a value on our ability to respond and on our ability to think. Both sides of this coin pride make a mockery of the work of Christ. Both destroy our freedom and reduce us to slavery.

May God’s grace grant us the liberty as Christians to be free from both license and legalism.

© 1988 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino