

## Free to Win or Lose

by Ray C. Stedman

This is an election year, and we are hearing plenty about it. On television and radio and in newspapers we are confronted with the question, “What is wrong with this country?” Both of the major candidates are telling us what they think is wrong; and if you listen to them, you hear that the problem is always the other party. But, in our hearts, we know that both parties are wrong, because the problem really isn’t in our politics – it’s in us. In those immortal words of Pogo, “We have met the enemy, and he is us.”

The book of Romans agrees with this, for the Scriptures are always telling us that the problem with man is man himself. Until we deal successfully with that problem, there is little hope in any political change. All we do is rearrange the pattern of the problem when we elect another party’s candidate; we really haven’t changed the problem itself.

Romans tells us that God’s solution to the problem of man is to begin a whole new race. He doesn’t start with halfway measures; he doesn’t patch up the old; he doesn’t try to improve what’s there until it gets good enough to live with. He cuts us right off at the root and begins a new race. But the wonder and the glory of it is that he starts the new race within the shell of the old. Outwardly, we remain unchanged. Our bodies are still subject to decrepitude and decay and death. Yet, within, a new man has begun if we have exercised faith in Jesus Christ. God’s solution is to end the curse of Adam and to release within us the power of a new life, the life of Jesus himself.

Paul brilliantly describes this solution in these opening chapters of Romans, especially in Chapter 5, where there is a tremendous picture of what happens when we put our faith in our Lord and what he has done. We enter into an identification with his death and his resurrection, and the death of

Jesus cuts us off from the old Adam that we all began life with. The resurrection of Jesus, Paul says, introduces us to a whole new power – the life of Jesus available to us.

In Chapter 6, the apostle pauses to deal with a problem that this creates. Basically, it is the question, “Can we still sin as believers?” As you remember, his answer is, “Yes,” and “No.”

- No, we cannot go on in the same lifestyle which we had before we came to Christ. There must be a change. The radical transformation within us is going to result in some change in our attitude and outlook and value system, and, therefore, it will result in a change of lifestyle. Anyone who remains basically unchanged is fooling himself about being a Christian, because he is not a Christian unless there has been this inner change. But,
- Yes, we can still sin as believers. This is what Paul tells us in Chapter 6. We can sin if we choose to. But if we choose to sin, we cannot escape the enslavement that sin will bring, and it carries us further than we want to go. It will involve us deeper than we would like; it will spread darkness and corruption throughout our lives; it will lead us to do things of which we will be terribly ashamed. Though we can choose to sin, we will not escape the effects of sin in our experience.

That brings us to Chapter 7 where the apostle deals with still another question before he goes on to develop more fully this wonderful, glorious gospel. The question in Chapter 7 is this: “Does the Law help us, as believers, to handle the problem of sin in our lives?” Again, the answer is both, “Yes,” and “No.”

- Yes, the Law does help us – but only up to a point. It will help us to define the problem. But
- No, the Law is no help at all when it comes to delivering us. It can't help us – in fact, it will only make things worse.

Paul deals with the last part of this question first.

In Verses 1-6 he shows the necessity of being freed from the Law in order to handle the problem of sin in the life of the believer. We can't handle our problem with the Law hanging over our shoulder; we must be freed from that.

I think you can see already that this is a very pertinent problem in our day. Every Christian believer rejoices in what he reads in the Scriptures about our identification with Christ and about these tremendous terms – being freed from sin, dead to sin, and alive unto God, alive to righteousness, wholeness, power. Yet our experience tells us that we do not often achieve this. We are aware that we all have a problem with sin in our lives. We still like it, and we still do it. We experience what Paul says we will experience (enslavement, death, darkness, unhappiness, and shame) as a result of our sin.

This is true in all Christendom today. Churches everywhere are filled with Christians who are struggling with this. What's wrong? Basically, it is the same problem that Paul describes in Romans 7:

- We still haven't learned how to handle the Law.
- We still want regulations and detailed instructions to follow so we can be freed from our problems.
- Yet, when we try, even with the best of intentions, it still doesn't work.

That is what Paul is dealing with in this chapter.

Now, let's see what he has to say in Verses 1-3:

**Do you not know, brothers – for I am speaking to men who know the law – that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. {Rom 7:1-3 NIV}**

This is a simple illustration taken right out of life. This situation occurred again and again in Paul's day, and it occurs again and again in our day. It is an illustration intended to clarify this whole problem of our relationship to the Law. And yet, I don't think there is any passage in Romans that has become the source of more confusion than these opening verses – not because the illustration is confusing, but because the commentators are. They twist the illustration. There is a unique phenomenon here that only those acquainted with theological journals and commentaries of our day would see. For some strange reason, this illustration, which is simple and clear, is often twisted by many commentators who insist on applying this as though the first husband is the Law.

In the illustration the woman clearly is a picture of the believer – you and me.

This woman had a husband, her first husband. According to the commentators, that first husband was the Law of Moses. But when you start with that understanding of this illustration, you are bound to end up with hopeless confusion. In fact, many of the commentators go astray even before this. They fail to note to whom this whole passage is addressed, although Paul carefully underlines it for us. Notice the first verse again: "Do you not know, brothers – for I am speaking to men who know the law –" In other words, if you are going to understand this paragraph, you must know something about the Law – you must know its functions, its purpose, and its effects. If you don't know or understand the Law, you are going to end up confused with this paragraph. As Paul says, "I realize that the ones to whom I am writing here are men who understand the Law."

Now, before we plunge into this, my question is: Do you understand the Law? Just as I thought – not one of you here is a lawyer. As Paul points out here, we have to understand the Law. Let's stop a moment and see just how much we understand about the Law:

1. First, do you know that the Law Paul mentions here is a reference to a standard of conduct, or behavior, which is expected of men. There are other uses of the word *law*. Sometimes it is used in reference to a principle that governs our lives, such as the law of gravity. But here Paul is talking about a standard of conduct that we are expected to live up to.

The most obvious and perfect expression of that standard of behavior is the Ten Commandments. Everyone has heard of the Ten Commandments – right? The Ten Commandments tell us: “You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourselves a graven image... You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain... Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Honor your father and mother... You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet...” (Exodus 20:3-17). That is a standard of conduct, isn't it? That, of course, is the Law that Paul talks about here – the Law that was given to Israel.

But Paul already has made clear in Chapter 2 that, in a wider sense, the Law is present among men everywhere. Have you ever listened to people talking about their experiences and relationships with other people? Listen for a while, and you will hear a phrase like this: “I don't think that is fair.” What do these people mean? What is it that determines whether a thing is fair or not? It is obviously some unspoken standard of conduct or behavior that both the speaker and the listener have in mind which is universally understood without speaking.

Some might put it this way: “I think this is the right thing to do.” There, again, is an unspoken standard of behavior. Somebody says, “I'm going to get even!” How do you know when you are *even*? There is an unspoken standard in mind. So, as Paul points out in Chapter 2, the Law really is everywhere; it is

embedded in the hearts of men. There is an undescribed, unspoken standard of conduct to which we all refer. Every man everywhere thinks in these terms, no matter what his background may be. Now, that is the Law. It is the unspoken agreement that we all understand and which we must measure up to. Do you know that this is what Paul calls ‘the Law’?”

2. Let's see what more you know about the Law. Did you know that the purpose of the Law is to condemn failure? The Law never pats you on the back when you do right. It takes for granted that you ought to do right anyway, and it never says thank you for doing right. But if you do wrong, the Law condemns you. In one way or another, it points out and punishes wrongdoing. It does this in the laws of our land, in traffic laws, and even in our so-called “moral” laws. Evil and wrongdoing always take their toll. Therefore, the nature of law is that it condemns failure. Did you know that?
3. Now, do you know that the effect of the Law is to discourage people? If law condemns – and no one likes to feel put down and condemned – then the effect of the Law, invariably, is to discourage, to produce a sense of defeat, and, ultimately, a sense of despair. That is what the Law does. That is why, in our land and in all the nations of the earth, law is producing a sense of despair. That is a major problem that people wrestle with today.

No one likes to feel despairing, and so we react in various ways. Do you know that there are certain invariable signs that you can detect in people who are still under the Law? Paul is writing this to those believers in Christ who were still under the Law. In their minds, at least, they thought they had to live under the Law, and there are certain signs of people who live like that.

- A. One of the first signs is that they are always proud of their record. You say, “Wait a minute! I thought you said that the Law's effect was to make you discouraged and defeated. Someone who is proud of his record is not discouraged or defeated.” Well, that is a diversion. The Law is making them discouraged and they

don't like it. In certain areas of their lives they see defeat, and so they attempt to get people's attention off this area of failure and onto areas where they feel they have succeeded. That is why they are always pointing out the areas of their success and boasting about how well they are doing. They want to keep us from looking at that other area where they are failing. The Law produces failure. Therefore, one of the first marks of a person who is living under the Law is that he is always pointing out how well he is doing. Isn't that strange? Did you know that? I speak to those who know the Law, and you ought to know this.

B. Another mark of people who are living under the Law is that they are always critical of others. This is another diversionary tactic. Why are people critical of others? Well, if you succeed in getting your friends' eyes fastened on other people, they won't look at you. And you feel justified because the faults you point out in other people aren't the same faults you feel guilty of. You know, God plays some amazing tricks with us. He so blinds our eyes, or allows Satan to do so, that invariably the things we criticize others for are the very things that we ourselves are guilty of. And we don't know it! You see, the Law is producing this sense of failure and defeat, and we are constantly adjusting to it and compensating for it by criticizing others.

C. Another mark of those under the Law is that they are always reluctant to admit any error or fault in their own lives. It is hard to get them to admit it. I have just finished reading *Born Again*, Chuck Colson's book about his terrible experiences during Watergate. I was interested in his characterization of former President Richard Nixon. This was one of Nixon's problems – he could never admit he was wrong in anything. In fact, Colson said that even when Nixon obviously had a cold – nose running, face red, sneezing, all the symptoms of a cold – he would never admit it. That is the mentality of those who are under the

Law. They feel very heavily the standard of conduct they are expected to have, so they pretend they are living up to it, even though they don't. They hate to admit defeat because that means they must change.

D. Another symptom of those under the Law is that they invariably are subject to times of inner boredom and depression, and oftentimes experience outward symptoms of depression and discouragement and defeat. They go through times of utter, sheer boredom. That is the sign of someone under the Law. The Law is doing its work condemning, and that sense of condemnation produces depression of spirit. Did you know this? You see, you can't understand this passage unless you know what the Law does. That is why I keep asking "Do you know it?" If you know this, you can see that this is a major problem in the church today. This is what has gone wrong with so much of the church in America today.

Now, therefore, we must understand Paul's application of this illustration. Let's get it now in Verses 4-6:

**So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by our sinful nature [i.e., the flesh], the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. {Rom 7:4-6 NIV}**

Here is the way out, the way to be free from the Law! But I doubt if you understood it. Let's work through this passage so we can see it.

Let's go back to the illustration: The woman is you and me.

She has two husbands, one following the other.

Now, the point of this little story is not that the woman has two husbands. Although that is important, it is not the major point. What Paul is getting at here is what the death of the first husband does to the woman's relationship to the Law – not what it does directly to the woman herself, but what it does to her tie to the Law.

Notice that Verse 2 tells us the place of the Law in this story?

**For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage** [or, the law of her husband]. {Rom 7:2 NIV}

Do you notice three factors here?

- First, there is the Law;
- Second, there is a woman; and
- Third, there is the husband.

None of those are the same thing, are they? Therefore, the husband cannot be the Law. Many commentators say this woman (us) is married to the Law, and they have missed the point of this illustration. It is not that. It is the Law that binds the woman and her husband together. The Law is outside, saying "You two must stay together because you are married." The Law is not the husband, that is clear.

If the first husband dies, Paul says, the woman is released from the Law. Not only is she released from her husband, but she also is released from the Law. If her husband dies, the Law can say nothing to her as to where she can go, and what she can do, and who she can be with. She is released from the Law. The death of the husband makes the woman dead to Law.

Now, who is this first husband? According to the context, it is very clear. We have been looking at it all along. The first husband is Adam, this old life into which we were born. We were linked to it, married to it, and couldn't get away from it. Like a woman married to an old, cruel, mean husband, there is not much she can do about it. While she is married she is tied to that husband.

In Verse 3, Paul says:

**So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from the law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man.** {Rom 7:3 NIV}

Now, that is plain, isn't it? The woman cannot have two husbands at once. She cannot have a second husband while she is married to the first. She is stuck with #1, and she has to share his lifestyle. As we have already seen, that lifestyle is one of bondage and corruption and shame and death. That is why we who were born into Adam have to share the lifestyle of fallen Adam. It fits perfectly, doesn't it?

Now, if this woman, while she is married to her first husband, tries to live with another – for this lifestyle is sickening to her – she will be called an adulteress. Who calls her that? The Law does. The Law says, "You are a hypocrite." That, you see, is the spiritual counterpart of the physical term "adulteress." The Law condemns her, it points out her failure, it calls her an adulteress. It is only when the first husband dies that she is free from that condemnation of the Law and thus can marry again. When she does, the Law is absolutely silent; it has nothing to say to her at all.

Now look at Verse 4:

**So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God.** {Rom 7:4 NIV}

What a fantastic verse! Here is the great, marvelous declaration of the gospel of our Lord Jesus. Notice how Paul draws the parallel: 'so ... you also.' We fit right into this. The key word here is "you died to the law through the body of Christ," and the body of Christ refers to the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross. He died in a body. He came to take a body, that he might die.

Paul is referring to what the Scriptures say in many places – that on the cross the Lord Jesus was made sin for us. He took our place, as sinful humanity, on the cross. I don't know how, but he did. In other words: He became that first husband. Do you see that? It is very important. On the cross, he became that first husband, that Adamic nature to

which we were married. And when he became that, he died. And when he died, we were freed from the Law.

The Law has nothing to say to us anymore. We are free to be married to another. Who is this? It is Christ risen. Our first husband is Christ crucified; our second husband is Christ risen from the dead.

- We now share his name,
- We share his power,
- We share his experiences,
- We share his position,
  - his glory,
  - his hope,
  - his dreams –
- All that he is, we now share!

We are married to Christ, risen from the dead. The Law, therefore, has nothing to say to us. Isn't that clear?

Verses 5 and 6:

**For when we were controlled by our sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. {Rom 7:5-6 NIV}**

You see, while we were married to sin, the old Adamic principle, we often tried to act as though we were married to someone else, didn't we? We tried to act righteous and loving and kind. Many of us did. We really tried to behave ourselves, but we found we couldn't. The Law refused to go along with us. The Law judged us. It said. "You are really not that way, you are just acting like that. You are pretending." The Law called us hypocrites, and it was right. That is what we were. We were religious hypocrites, many of us, attempting to give the impression that we were OK, and right, and loving, and moral, and kind, and good, when we weren't at all. Inside, all our attitudes were selfish and self-centered and loveless; but we were pretending. And the Law saw through it and named us what we were: hypocrites.

But, according to this, we died to the Law through the death of our first husband. When Jesus was crucified, that first husband died. And now we are free from the condemnation of the Law. We are married to another, Christ risen from the dead. So now, when we seek to be righteous and to do righteous things and to be loving and kind, we are no longer hypocrites. This is the point Paul wants to make. We are doing what we really are. We are tied to Jesus. His life is ours and we are acting according to our true nature.

We are married to a new husband. And because we share his life and power, we are not only able to be what he is, but we are also free from any condemnation or failure in our struggle along the way. We don't always act right, but the Law doesn't condemn us. The Law's purpose was to condemn, and we can't be condemned anymore because we are not hypocrites. We are doing what we were designed to do. We have a new identity. No longer bound to our failures, we can admit them and forget them. We don't have to have them clinging to us; we no longer have to believe that God is unhappy with us because we don't always live exactly right. He has made provision for this. It is not a fraud when we go back to God again and again and accept from his hand his forgiveness.

Therefore, it is not law that straightens us out, it is love. We no longer need the Law to straighten us out, but we have love to do so. We are free to fail and still be loved. And we are also free to win in the new power given to us.

The question Paul asks is, "Is the Law worthless, then, and contemptible?"

His answer, of course, is, "No!"

Some Christians talk that way about the Law, but Paul never does. There is a place for it, and it is valuable in a certain way, but it can do nothing to deliver us from evil. Only our relationship to love can do that.

Father, our hearts are singing,

Free from the law,  
O happy condition,  
Jesus hath bled,  
and there is remission;  
Cursed by the law  
and bruised by the fall,  
Grace hath redeemed us  
once for all.

**Prayer:**

We thank you for this Father, and we pray that we may understand more and more fully that we are not under condemnation. Even though we struggle and don't always catch on to these truths very quickly, and don't always act on the principles revealed

to us, nevertheless, you don't reject us, you don't cast us aside. You are not angry with us, but you lovingly forgive us, and help us, and restore us, and lead us on. That is what will make us free more and more. Thank you for it, Father, in Jesus' name, Amen.