

FREEDOM FROM THE LAW

Alternative solution

When Police Chief Martin Brody in the movie “Jaws” gets a terrifying look at a great white shark that has swum into his jurisdiction, he turns to the captain of the boat he is on and concludes, “We’re gonna need a bigger boat.”¹ The problem, to say the least, is greater than he had thought. A different solution—a bigger boat, and then some—was needed.

So it is with sin. The malevolence of sin calls for a more radical approach to life than is often proposed, even by believers in the gospel. The failure of the usual approach, which involves adherence to rules, illustrates not only the immensity of the problem but the necessity of an alternative solution, one that works at the level of the heart.

In the new Exodus that Paul is leading us through, we arrive, in Romans 7, at Mount Sinai. In Romans 6 we were liberated not from Egypt, like the Israelites of old, but from sin. Baptism into Christ replaced the crossing of the Red Sea. When the Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, God gave them the law. Paul in Romans 7 tells the story of Israel’s reception of the law and of its experience under the law. He’s offering further comment on his bewildering statement in Romans 5:20, “The Law came in [to Israel] so that the transgression would increase.” In Romans 8 he will continue with the new story, which features not the law but the Holy Spirit.

After a transitional and introductory section (verses 1-6), Paul in Romans 7 keys off two questions, one in verse 7 and the other in verse 13, just as he did in Romans 6 with verses 1 and 15.

Romans 7:

¹Or 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? ²For 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. ³So 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.

⁴Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. ⁵For 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. ⁶But 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.

⁷What 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; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, “YOU SHALL NOT COVET.” ⁸But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. ⁹I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the

commandment came, sin became alive and I died;¹⁰ and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;¹¹ for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.¹² So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

¹³Therefore 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, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful.

¹⁴For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.¹⁵ For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate.¹⁶ But if I do the very thing I do not want to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that the Law is good.¹⁷ So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not.¹⁹ For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want.²⁰ But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

²¹I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good.²² For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man,²³ but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members.²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

Liberated from the law

Paul said in Romans 6:14 that to be under the Jewish law involves being a servant of sin. Now, in verse 1, he speaks of the Jewish law in the same way that he spoke of sin. In Romans 6, Paul demonstrated that Christ defeated the lordship of sin. Now we see that the law, too, in conjunction with sin, has exercised lordship.²

Paul uses an illustration from marriage to demonstrate that Christ has also defeated the lordship of the law. Believers have not only died to sin because of their union with the death of Christ, they have also died to the law. They have been freed from the lordship of both sin and the law.

For the Jews, the sinful passions worked through the law to produce fruit for death—namely, shameful behavior—just as sin produced such fruit in everyone (Romans 6:21). Once again, Paul shows that the law didn't enable the Jews to rise above sinful humanity. On the contrary, it showed them to be in solidarity with sinful humanity. Believers, however, have been separated from the law and united with Christ, and they therefore bear fruit for God—namely, behavior characterized by his holiness—just as their separation from sin allowed for the bearing of such fruit (Romans 6:22).

Just as in Romans 6, in Romans 7:6 we serve God, not sin, because of our union with Christ in his death and resurrection. In Romans 6:4, Paul said that we “walk in newness of life.” Such language in Paul implies the work of the Holy Spirit, as is evident in Romans 7:6, where he says that we “serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness

of the letter.” In the new covenant, the Holy Spirit replaces the law and creates new kinds of servants who constitute a new kind of people who obey God from the heart.

Paul has dropped hints concerning the nature of this new way of life, indicating that it concerns the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts (Romans 2:29, 6:5). But we have to wait until Romans 8 for a more fully developed description of what it means to walk in newness of the Spirit. For now, in Romans 7, his topic is the law, which cannot sustain the Jews, or any people for that matter, as servants of God.

Sin invades the law

In verses 7-25, Paul explains his contention in verse 5 that the law aroused sinful passions in Israel and produced fruit for death.

The drawing of such parallels between sin and the law naturally leads to the question of verse 7: “Is the law sin?” Some Jews would have recoiled at Paul’s apparently negative portrayal of the law up to this point. Finally, Paul sets about vindicating the law. To do so, he tells the story of Israel’s relationship to the law. As a Jew who identifies with Israel and at one time lived under the law, Paul uses the first-person pronoun “I” to represent Israel. When Paul speaks of himself in Romans 7, he’s speaking, in a rhetorical way, of Israel.³ Romans 7:7-12 concerns Israel’s reception of the law. Romans 7:13-25 concerns Israel’s experience under the law.

In Romans 7:7-12, Paul, echoing Romans 5:12-21, demonstrates that Israel, the new humanity, recapitulated the sin of Adam. Adam, transgressing God’s commandment, partook of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Israel also transgressed God’s commandment and worshiped the golden calf.

Israel came to know sin, or experience it in a powerful way, “through the law.” To illustrate his point, Paul uses one of the 10 commandments: “You shall not covet.” Sin, like an invading king, took over the law and used it to provoke coveting, not to mention, presumably, all manner of transgression. The forbidden nature of the fruit served to make it more attractive. Before the law, sin was present, causing death everywhere, as Paul noted in Romans 5:13. But in Israel, before the advent of the law, sin was dead. It was dormant, content with Israel in bondage to Egypt.

Israel came to life as the people of God when he liberated it, just as Adam came to life when God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. The Exodus marked the birth of Israel as God’s new humanity. So Paul can say, “I [Israel] was once alive apart from the law.”

After the Exodus, sin looked for an opportunity to enslave Israel. It found that opportunity in the law, which “came” to Israel on Mount Sinai.⁴ The law held out the promise of life. If Israel obeyed it from the heart, the nation would be sustained as God’s people (Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Sin became alive when Adam sinned. At Mount Sinai, it came alive again. Sin deceived Israel into transgressing the law, just as the serpent deceived Eve and Adam.

The consequence for both Adam and Israel was death. For both Adam and Israel, death meant exile from the presence of God. Adam was exiled from Eden, and Israel, eventually, was exiled from the Promised Land (Genesis 3:24, Deuteronomy 30:15-20). Israel repeated the idolatry that began on Mount Sinai throughout its history until God finally sent it into exile. The time between Israel’s initial idolatry and its exile is parallel to the time between Adam’s sin and his eventual death.⁵

The point that Paul makes through the Exodus story is that there's nothing wrong with the Jewish law, contrary to the impression that a reader might have received from reading Romans 1-6. On the contrary, the law, which comes from God and reflects his character, is "holy and righteous and good." The law is good, but its function, to magnify sin in Israel so that it could be defeated, has been fulfilled and its time has passed.

Sin takes over the law

If the law cannot be identified with sin, can the law be held responsible for death, which results from sin's use of the law? Paul's answer, once again, is an emphatic no. The result—death—simply shows how wicked sin actually is. If sin is able to use something that is inherently good—the law—to achieve such devastating results, then it is exceedingly wicked. And if it is exceedingly wicked, it must be confronted in a radical way that goes to the heart of the matter.

Paul's point in verses 13-16 is to provide evidence for his contention that the law is good. The law is "spiritual," having been inspired, along with the rest of the scriptures, by the Holy Spirit. But the law was unable to find a willing partner, because Israel was not spiritual but fleshly and therefore unable to respond to the law. It had been "sold into bondage to sin." After being released from captivity to Egypt, Israel as a whole became captive to sin and opposed to the will of God.⁶

Israel as a whole, at least at times, wanted to practice the law but was unable to do so. It found itself doing not what it wanted but what it hated. Although mystified by its failure, Israel knew that the law was good.

The problem in verses 13-16 is not with the law but with Israel, which is unable to respond to the law. But in verses 17-20, Paul spotlights sin, which is responsible for Israel's fleshly condition. Sin, the invading tyrant, took up residence in Israel. Paul declared four times in verses 12-17 that the law is good, but in verse 18, when speaking of sin's domination of Israel, he says that "nothing good" dwells in Israel.⁷ Sin, not the law, found a home in Israel.

The Israelite "I," in bondage to sin, needs transformation. For God's people to be responsive to him, something else needs to dwell among them, as a people, and in them, as individuals. The law needs to be written on hearts (Jeremiah 31:33). Paul, who has already hinted at such a solution as early as Romans 2:15, is once again setting us up for Romans 8, where he will tell us that the Holy Spirit, not sin and not even the law, dwells in believers (Romans 8:9).

In verses 13-16, Paul depicted Israel's struggle by focusing on Israel and shifting the problem off of the law. In verses 17-20, he mentioned the struggle but focused instead on sin, shifting the problem off of Israel. Now, in verses 21-25, he mentions the struggle again but focuses on the law. His whole argument in Romans 7:7-25, which proceeds from the questions in verses 7 and 13, concerns the law, which he wishes to exonerate.⁸

Again, in verses 21-25, Paul depicts a conflicted Israel. In its inner man, which is also called its mind, Israel joyfully agrees with the Mosaic Law. Nevertheless, sin, also characterized as evil, is close at hand to wage war against the desire of Israel to follow the law. Sin operates in the "members," or flesh, of Israel, an apparent reference to its people in their proclivity to rebel against God. Sin wins the battle and holds Israel captive. Like Cain, Israel found sin crouching at the door, but it could not master it (Genesis 4:7). Instead, sin mastered Israel.

The law was unable to solve the problem of sin. On the contrary, it identified the problem and even made it worse. Israel is conflicted, because it acknowledges the goodness of the law but is unable to practice it. It's no wonder, therefore, that Israel cries out, "Wretched man that I am!" Israel needs to be rescued, literally, from "the body of this death." The body of Israel—the people as a whole—is fleshly, in rebellion against God, subject to sin and death, just like the rest of humanity. Israel wants life—enduring relationship with God—but the law can't deliver it. Israel needs a new Exodus.

Can anyone rescue these people from their miserable state? God can. More precisely, God did. In Romans 8, Paul will explain how God has delivered Israel—or, more precisely, that part of Israel that has embraced the gospel—through "Jesus Christ our Lord." For now, in verse 25, he simply gives thanks.

Paul sums up Israel's conflict in verse 25 in a way that, once again, clears the law. The law isn't the problem. Israel isn't even the problem. Sin is the problem. And sin has won the battle. But it hasn't won the war.

The power of sin

Israel's experience with the law illustrates the depth of sin, the human problem. If sin is so sinister and so powerful that it can corrupt something as good and beautiful as God's law, then it is a foe we must not underestimate. It will attempt to take everything good and pervert it. It can destroy the best relationship with God, the best marriage, the best family, the best friendship, the best church or the best experience. C.S. Lewis illustrates the malignancy of sin in "The Screwtape Letters," in which he depicts a senior devil offering this advice to his nephew in order to thwart God, "the Enemy":

"Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures: all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which our Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which He has forbidden."⁹

Sin will also make that which God in his protective wisdom withholds from us seem necessary and irresistible. Eve hadn't considered the knowledge of the tree of good and evil, the only thing that was forbidden to her, until the serpent suggested that partaking of it would make her "like God." The story is told of a grandmother who wanted the 10 commandments taken down from school rooms because "they give our children naughty ideas."

All of us have felt the urge to misuse, and even worship, God's good gifts, such as money, power, sex and food. All of us have felt the all-but-irresistible urge to grasp for that which God withholds from us. All of us, therefore, know—or should know—that sin is a sinister and powerful foe. It can work its way into anything good and corrupt it.

The inadequacy of rules

If God's law was unable to restrain sin, we are wise to be wary of any approach to life that emphasizes rules, principles and adages. There is nothing necessarily wrong with any of these. Everything may be right with them, especially if they are grounded in a biblical morality. But rules, principles and adages, however biblical, will not by

themselves win the day. You can't just add a few rules to your life and think everything will be fine. If you do, you'll be playing into sin's hands. Sin will invade your rules and, one way or another, overpower them.

What might sin do with your rules? It could persuade you:

—To believe that your rules, not God, bring you satisfaction.

—To believe that your rules make you superior to others, who then become easy targets for your criticism.

—That everything is fine, based on outward conformance, when in reality resentment, jealousy and hatred are seething under the surface.

—To emphasize more easily kept rules that have very little to do with loving God and loving your neighbor.

—To build on your doubts about God's trustworthiness so that obedience to your rules becomes a reason why you don't really need him.

—To become a perfectionist who is terrified of failure and obsessed with making correct decisions.

—That the world depends on you, not God.

—That whatever you do, it's never enough.

In other words, sin can take your rules and turn you into a Pharisee.

I noticed a disturbing tendency in myself one day when I was working out at the gym to which I belong. A list of rules is posted for people who use the weight machines. I use the machines by proceeding from one to another until I'm finished with the circuit. I am therefore particularly appreciative of the rule that prohibits people from cutting in front of those who are using the machines in order. This rule, however, is often ignored, much to my chagrin. Another rule commands users to wipe off the machines after they're finished. This rule does not capture my fancy. In days gone by, I was a gym rat. In some ways, I feel as if I grew up in a locker room. Sweat doesn't bother me. I want to finish my workout as quickly as possible. I don't want to take the time to wipe off each machine after I use it.

One day, when someone cut in front of me, I expressed my exasperation, though in a way that he probably couldn't detect. A short while later, after I had proceeded to another machine without wiping off the previous machine, the user who followed me cast a disdainful sidelong glance in my direction as he wiped off my sweat from the machine he was about to use. Until my hypocrisy was exposed, I tended to think of myself as a law-abiding gym user, morally superior to some others who didn't obey the rule that I valued.

For those who have not yet embraced the gospel of Jesus Christ, the danger of a rules-based approach to life is clear. Basic adherence to rules of decency, apart from a response of faith to the gospel of Jesus Christ, will not commend anyone to God. God is not primarily interested in adherence to rules, even his rules. He's interested in people. But he will not be interested in spending eternity with those who, through their dependence on certain rules, demonstrate that they are not interested in spending it with him. If God's law couldn't deliver an enduring relationship with him, neither will human rules, however much they reflect biblical morality. Inability to keep even one's own rules should be enough to convince everyone that there has to be another way.

For those who have embraced the gospel, the danger of a rules-based approach to life is not that they will be banished from God's presence in the judgment but that they

will not be enjoying his presence before the judgment. The danger is that they will marginalize relationship with him.

The malevolence of sin and the failure of a rules-based approach to restrain it call for a more radical solution, one that works at the level of the heart.

The radical solution

The approach that Paul calls for emphasizes the work of both Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We could have surmised as much from what he has already said in Romans 1-7, but in case we missed it, he will in Romans 8 gather together earlier references into a summary concerning the effectiveness of Christ and the Spirit. He will also expand upon earlier references, particularly concerning the work of the Spirit, which he has mostly hinted at up until now.

Lest one leave Romans 7 with little hope for victory in humanity's war with sin, it's appropriate at this point to consider both a brief summary of Romans 1-7 and a preview of Romans 8. After all, Paul himself anticipates Romans 8 when he says in verse 25, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord." Christ defeated sin on the cross. We have been united with him so that his victory has become our victory. The Spirit, then, orients us toward God, motivates us and empowers us. We "serve in the newness of the Spirit." The solution that Paul offers revolutionizes the human heart.

Assurance of our final victory over sin is found neither in the Mosaic Law nor in any "law" we might derive from whatever source, even the scriptures. Assurance is found in our connection to the death of Christ and in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

If we would want to cry out, like Israel apart from Christ, "Who will rescue me from the body of this death?" what kind of answer would we expect to get from Romans 6-8? "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord"—thanks, because Christ already has rescued us, and thanks, because the Spirit is appropriating our rescue and bringing it to completion.

You don't treat cancer with cough drops. You don't treat sin with rules, principles and adages. You treat it with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit, the presence of God.

The way of holiness

None of this is to say, of course, that there isn't such a thing as holiness, or that it isn't an urgent matter. It is to say, however, that there's a different way of going about it than is normally conceived. In the end, holiness can't be codified. It cannot be reduced to a set of rules. Yes, there are biblical standards. But it's all too possible to keep the standards and forget the Lord. It's all too possible to be right without being good. It's all too possible to be rigidly correct and spiritually bankrupt. Holiness, rooted in relationship with God, is more organic than structured.

Jesus baffles us because he approaches seemingly identical situations differently. He is connected to the Father, who sees each situation in an eternal context. That's why even the adage, "What would Jesus do?" is ultimately inadequate, unless you answer the question in each case, "He would follow the leading of the Spirit." Jesus is unpredictable. But he's holy.

Romans 6 helps us with that way of holiness, as does Romans 8. However, Romans 7, which features the law, pushes us outward to the chapters on either side of it, which feature Christ and the Spirit. Romans 7 tells us that we need a bigger boat.

Sin won a battle with Israel of old. It has won many battles through the ages. It is winning many battles on many fronts today. But for those of us who believe the gospel of Jesus Christ and possess the Holy Spirit, it will not win the war.

Scott Grant / 6-18-06

Discovery Publishing © 2006, the publications ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. To receive additional copies of this message or a tape (a complete catalog is also available) contact: Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA 94306. Phone (650) 494-0623. Fax (650) 494-1268. www.pbc.org/dp. We suggest a 50-cent donation per printed message to help with this ministry. Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (“NASB”), © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995, 1996 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

¹ *Jaws*, © 1975 by Universal Pictures.

² The verb translated “master,” spoken of concerning sin’s lordship in Romans 6:14, is the same word that is translated “has jurisdiction over,” used concerning the law’s lordship in Romans 7:1.

³ Autobiographical language was used in ancient literature for rhetorical effect. The first-person “I” stands for all of Israel in Deuteronomy 7:17. For further substantiation for the interpretation that Paul is speaking not of himself but of Israel outside of Christ, see footnotes 4, 5, 6 and 7.

⁴ Paul’s wording in verse 9 (“when the commandment came”) is similar to his wording in Romans 5:20: “The Law came in so that the transgression would increase.” In Romans 5, he’s clearly speaking of when the law came to Israel. The use of similar language gives credence to the interpretation that Paul in Romans 7 is speaking of the law coming not to himself as an individual at some time in his life but to Israel as a whole at Mount Sinai.

⁵ Verse 9 is another indicator that Paul is not talking about his own experience. How can it be said that he, as an individual Israelite, was alive apart from the law and that he died when the commandment came? Such a description is apt for Israel’s experience in the Exodus but not for an individual Israelite in the First Century.

⁶ Verse 14 demonstrates that Paul cannot be talking about his own experience as a believer in Romans 7. He has already gone to great lengths to demonstrate that believers are no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6:6-7, 7:6). He will make the same contention in Romans 8:1-8. He cannot very well be saying that he as a believer is “sold into bondage to sin.” The rhetorical shift from past tense, in verses 7-12, to the present tense, in verses 13-25, represents the change from Israel’s initial response of the law to its ongoing experience under the law. The shift in tenses may also indicate Paul’s personal connection with verses 13-25. He was not part of Israel when it received the law, but he was part of Israel when it was under the law, as he notes in Romans 11:1, “For I too am an Israelite.” Even today writers and speakers, in order to heighten immediacy, often use the present tense when speaking of the past.

⁷ When Paul says in verse 18 that “nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh,” he’s reminding his readers that he’s speaking not of himself but of unbelieving Israel as a whole. He uses the same phrase, “my flesh” (translated “my fellow countrymen”) in Romans 11:14 when speaking of unbelieving Israel. Similar uses of the word “flesh,” in application to unbelieving Israel, are found in Romans 4:1 and 9:3-5, 8. For similar usage in the Old Testament, see Genesis 37:27 and Leviticus 18:6. Similar contemporary language is employed when we speak of a family member as our “flesh and blood.”

⁸ A puzzling interpretive question in verses 21-25 is whether Paul, when using the word “law,” is always referring to the Mosaic Law or is employing word plays, referring at times to the Mosaic Law and at times to some general principle. It seems best to understand Paul as referring to the Mosaic Law throughout. The law of God is also called the “law of my mind,” the law with which my mind agrees. The “other law,” also called the “law of sin,” is the Mosaic Law taken over by sin. Just as the “I” goes two ways, wanting one thing but doing another, so does the law. It’s the law of God, but sin co-opts it.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, © MCMXC by Barbour and Co., Uhrichsville, Ohio. P. 49.