

119

MINISTRIES

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Dead to the Law? (Romans 7:1-6)

Is God’s law in the Old Testament still relevant to Christians? Well, that depends on who you ask. For instance, if you ask Jesus—or Yeshua, as he was called in the first century—then the answer would be yes. Yeshua prohibited his followers from *even thinking* that he came to abolish God’s law:

Matthew 5:17

[Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.](#)

Yeshua goes on to explain that nothing from the law would pass away until heaven and earth pass away and all is accomplished (Matthew 5:18). Furthermore, he admonishes his followers to do and teach even the least of the commandments of the law (Matthew 5:19).

So, according to Yeshua, we should be keeping God’s law. But not everyone agrees. In the second century AD, there was a teacher by the name of Marcion. Marcion taught that the Old Testament was the product of demons, and that Christians should have nothing to do with it. Marcion was widely rejected as a heretic, but sadly, his ghost continues to haunt the modern Christian church.

For instance, in his book *Irresistible*, Pastor Andy Stanley echoes Marcion when he writes the following:

Jesus followers are dead to the law. The law, along with the covenant arrangement that served as the context for the law, has no say in the life of a believer. None ... According to Paul, Jesus followers are dead to the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments have no authority over you. None. To be clear: Thou shalt not obey the Ten Commandments.

—Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 136

So, according to Pastor Stanley, Christians should not obey God’s law—not even the Ten Commandments!—because we are dead to the law. Pastor Stanley cites the apostle Paul in Romans 7:1-

6 in support of this idea. In this passage, Paul does say that believers “[have died to the law](#)” and are “[released from the law](#).” But what do these statements actually mean? Does the apostle Paul disagree with Yeshua about the law’s relevance for Christians? Does Paul think that God’s law has no say in the life of a believer?

Before we look at Romans 7:1-6 in more detail, it is worth noting some other things that Paul says about the law. For instance, in this same chapter, Paul calls the law “[holy, righteous, and good](#)” (Romans 7:12). He calls the law “[spiritual](#)” (Romans 7:12) and says he delights in it (Romans 7:22). Elsewhere in Romans, Paul says that our faith in Messiah establishes the law (Romans 3:31). Paul says that our flesh refuses to submit to God’s law (Romans 8:7), but the Holy Spirit empowers believers to keep the law’s righteous requirements (Romans 8:2-4).

Based on these statements, it appears that Paul and Yeshua are in complete agreement. The law is a good thing, and believers should be keeping it. So, then, how should we understand Romans 7:1-6? Let’s start by reading the passage:

Romans 7:1-3

[Or do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.](#)

Paul says that the law—the Torah—is binding on a person only as long as he is alive. So, if a believer dies, then he will no longer be bound to the law. Paul goes on to give an example in order to demonstrate this principle. He says that a woman is bound to her husband for as long as the husband is alive. That is, while she is married to her husband, she cannot marry someone else. If she did marry someone else while she was still married to her husband, she would be committing adultery. However, if her husband dies, she is released from her covenant with him, and therefore, free to marry another man.

How does this principle help us understand the believer’s relationship to the law? Well, let’s continue:

Romans 7:4

[Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.](#)

So, through his union with Christ, the believer has “[died to the law](#)” (cf. Romans 6:5-6). Just as the woman is no longer bound to her deceased husband, the believer is no longer “bound” to the law in some way. The believer has been “[released from the law](#)” (Romans 7:6) and is now free to belong to Christ.

As we’ve seen, Pastor Stanley interprets this verse to mean that the law no longer has any say in how believers should live. But is that really what Paul is saying here? How do we reconcile this passage with Paul’s other statements that clearly affirm the law’s ongoing relevance to believers?

We think it is unlikely that Paul is blatantly contradicting himself. He isn’t encouraging believers to obey the law in one part of Romans and discouraging them from obeying in another part. So, then, how

can we resolve this apparent contradiction? The answer is that Paul seems to have a narrower focus when he speaks of the law here. That is, Paul seems to be speaking of a particular *function* of the law that believers have “died” to and are “released” from (See J. Brian Tucker, *Reading Romans After Supersessionism: The Continuation of Jewish Covenantal Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 109).

To explain, in Romans, Paul sometimes uses the term “law” when speaking of particular functions of the law (Romans 7:22-23, 25; 8:2). A good example of this can be found in Romans 8:2:

Romans 8:2

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua] from the law of sin and death.

Here, Paul seems to be saying that the law has a dual function. In the realm of the “Spirit,” the law functions as a tool to fulfill righteousness (Romans 8:4), which leads to life. In the realm of the flesh (Romans 7:7-20), which is inclined toward sin, the law functions to condemn the sinner to death. In other words, the law itself is a good thing (Romans 7:12), but it is a tool that can be used to bring about either life or death (cf. Deuteronomy 30:19). Those who are led by the Spirit obey the law, so for them the law brings life and blessing. Those who are led by their “flesh” disobey the law (Romans 8:7), so for them the law brings death and condemnation.

So, in Romans 7:4, it seems that Paul is referring to the law’s power to condemn sinners. This is the specific function of the law that Paul says we have “died to.” Let’s unpack this a bit more and see if helps us to resolve this apparent contradiction regarding Paul’s view of the law in Romans.

In Paul’s theology, all have sinned and have fallen short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23). Sin, according to Paul, is defined as breaking God’s law (Romans 7:7). The law reveals our sin so that “**no human being will be justified in his sight**” (Romans 3:20). The punishment for sin is death (Romans 6:23; 7:5). When we sin—when we break God’s law—we are legally condemned to death.

Before we put our faith in Christ, and “died” through his death, we were held captive by sin and rightfully condemned (Romans 6:6, 16, 20-23). We could not belong to Christ nor bear fruit for God while under the law’s condemnation. Why? Because, according to Paul, we were slaves to sin. Consider these parallel passages in Romans:

Romans 6:1-2

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?

Romans 6:6-7

We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin.

Romans 6:11

So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus [Messiah Yeshua].

Romans 6:20-22

For when you were **slaves of sin**, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is **death**. But now that you have been **set free from sin** and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.

Again, these parallel passages indicate that the “law” to which Paul refers in Romans 7:4 is closely associated with sin and its consequence—death. Paul’s point in Romans 6 is that we cannot serve two masters, just as his point in Romans 7 is that a woman cannot be married to two husbands at the same time. We cannot serve both Christ and sin. We need to be released from our previous master—sin—in order to serve our new master—Christ. As Paul writes:

Romans 6:16-18

Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

How were we released from our previous master and enabled to serve God? We “**died to sin**” through Christ. Because we have “died,” we are no longer held captive by sin and under the law’s condemnation. Therefore, we are no longer prevented from belonging to Christ and bearing fruit for God. As Christian scholar John Stott remarks:

[W]hat does it mean that we *died to the law*? The expression reminds us of the similar statement that we “died to sin” (6:2). Indeed, they appear to mean the same thing. For if to die to sin means to bear its penalty, which is death, it is the law which prescribes this penalty. Therefore to die to sin and to die to the law are identical. Both signify that through participation in the death of Christ the law’s curse or condemnation on sin has been taken away.

—John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 194

It seems that a more accurate interpretation of Romans 7:4 is that believers have died, not to the law itself, but rather to sin and death. That is, just as the law of marriage does not apply to a widow, the law’s *condemnation of sinners* does not apply to those who have “died” with Christ. In Paul’s example, the law of marriage represents the *condemning function* of the law.

This interpretation is much more consistent with Paul’s other statements about the law in Romans. Paul is not saying that we have died to the law, as in the law is no longer relevant to us for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16). No, Paul is saying that the penalty for our sin no longer applies to us because we have already died with Messiah. We are no longer enslaved to sin. Therefore, we are now free to belong to Messiah and bear good fruit for God.

Let’s continue:

Romans 7:5

For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

Here, Paul is referring to when we were “living in the flesh”—that is, before we put our faith in

Messiah. While we were unbelievers living in the flesh, we were slaves to sin (Romans 6:6). But our slavery to sin ended when we died with Messiah. Now we live as “[those who have been brought from death to life](#)” (Romans 6:13). Instead of being slaves of sin, we have become slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:17-18).

What does Paul mean when he says that our sinful passions were “[aroused by the law](#)” when we were living in the flesh? In Romans 8:7, Paul says that the mind controlled by the flesh is hostile to God and refuses to submit to his law (Romans 8:7). Here, paradoxically, the law exacerbates our flesh’s desire to disobey God’s law. As Douglas Moo writes:

As Paul explains more fully in [Romans] 7:7-11, the law, in setting forth God’s standard, arouses sins by stimulating human beings’ innate rebelliousness against God.

—Douglass Moo, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 420

When we were slaves to sin, our flesh rebelled against the law. Therefore, the law could only condemn us. Christian scholar Kline Snodgrass has some interesting insights here:

The law can be either the law of sin and death or the law of the Spirit of life (Rom. 8.2). Therefore, Paul’s view of the law was positive, but the law was like a tool. It did not contain power within itself (Rom. 8.3); rather, it could be taken over and used by sin or it could have its rightful use in the sphere of Christ, the Spirit, and faith. In the sphere of sin the law is a sub-tyrant, is negative, and causes death, but in its intended sphere it is the expression of the will of God and is for life (Rom. 8.7; 7:10) ... [Paul] will not grant that there is anything negative about the law itself. Instead, sin works through the flesh and uses the law to cause death.

—Kline Snodgrass, “Spheres of Influence: A Possible Solution to the Problem of Paul and the Law,” *JSNT* 32 (1988): 93-113

So again, according to Paul, the law itself is good. But the law can be taken over by the flesh to bring about death. With this idea in mind, it seems that Paul is saying that when we were slaves to sin, sin used the law to condemn us. Our flesh—that is, our carnal inclination to sin and rebel against God’s law (Romans 8:7)—keeps us enslaved to sin.

Later in this chapter, Paul speaks of his own struggles with sin, and how his flesh did not want to obey God’s law (Romans 7:7-20). Paul describes this struggle as a “war” between his mind’s desire to obey God and his flesh’s desire to sin (Romans 7:15, 22-23). His frustration compels him to cry out, “[Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?](#)” He immediately answers his own question: “[Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ \[Messiah Yeshua\] our Lord](#)” (Romans 7:24-25).

What did the Messiah do to deliver Paul—and us—from this body of death? Paul goes on to explain that Messiah’s work on the cross freed us from slavery to sin and death when we joined him in death. The Spirit then raised us to life and empowers us to live in obedience to the law. The Messiah freed us from the realm of the flesh, where we were in slavery to sin and condemned to death, and transferred us to the realm of the Spirit (Romans 8:1-11). Now, instead of death, we receive the law’s blessings, because we approach the law as servants of Messiah, and therefore as righteous people, not as sinners.

This brings us to the final verse in our study:

Romans 7:6

But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

What does Paul mean when he says that we are released from the law? It is unlikely that he means we have been released from having to obey God's law. Again, Paul says that those who walk according to the Spirit fulfill the law's requirements (Romans 8:2-4), while those who walk according to the flesh refuse to submit to God's law (Romans 8:7). Thus, we who "serve in the new way of the Spirit" are fulfilling the law's requirements. How, then, could we also be "released" from those same requirements? That would be a contradiction.

A better interpretation is that we have been released from *the law's condemnation* rightfully declared upon sinners. That is, because we have died with Messiah, we are released from our slavery to sin and the condemnation that sin brings upon us. The condemning function of the law no longer has any hold on us who are in Messiah.

Now that we have died to sin, we are enabled to "serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code." In context, the "old way of the written code" refers to the old life of slavery to sin. As Paul says elsewhere, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). When we were slaves to sin, the law could only condemn us. It could not cause us to live righteously. Hence, there was a need for the Messiah to release us from our slavery to sin so that we could belong to him. Having been released from our slavery to sin, and the law's condemnation, we are now free to serve in a new way. This new way of the Spirit enables us to obey God's law (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:27; cf. Romans 8:4).

Paul is not saying that the Spirit has replaced the law or that there is anything wrong with the law itself. Again, the problem is that, apart from the inner work of the Spirit, the law can only condemn us because we are slaves to sin. The law is "weakened by the flesh" (Romans 8:3). Thus, serving "in the old way of the written code" will do us no good. We need the Spirit if we truly want to fulfill the law's righteous requirements (Romans 8:4).

As Christian scholar J. Brian Tucker writes:

Scholars who claim [Romans] 7:4, 6 as evidence that Paul thinks the law of Moses has been superseded or been made superfluous *in toto* have likely overstated their case. To die and be released from the law means to be free from its condemning effects, now that righteousness is facilitated through Christ. The curse, including the difficulties of our day-to-day lived existence, is overturned through the Spirit, but not in a way in which life in the Spirit makes the law unnecessary or results in a law-free existence.

—J. Brian Tucker, *Reading Romans After Supersessionism: The Continuation of Jewish Covenantal Identity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 112-113

In conclusion, when Paul says that believers have died to and have been released from the law, he means that we have died to sin and have been released from the law's condemnation for sin. Just as the law of marriage does not apply to a widow, the law's *condemnation of sinners* does not apply to those who have had their sins forgiven. Believers have also been freed from the power of sin in their day-to-day lives. The law on its own could not cause us to live righteously. Thus, God has given us the Spirit, who empowers us to fulfill the law's righteous requirements. Far from doing away with the law, serving in

the new way of the Spirit helps us to keep the law.

So, does Romans 7:1-6 teach that the law has no say in the lives of Christians? Not at all. Yeshua and Paul are in complete agreement. The law is as relevant as ever, and we do well to study and apply it to our lives with help from the Holy Spirit.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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