

Gracious Father, the law has authority over us only as long as we live. Thank you for uniting us to Christ's death through the waters of Holy Baptism. We are no longer under the law's authority. Instead, we are free. Help us to believe this wonderful promise. Amen.

Pastor Russell Lackey
www.reflutheran.org
Romans 7:1-6

The Law is like a nagging spouse

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? ²For 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. ³So 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. ⁴So, 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. ⁵For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶But 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.

A Strange Word

I have a confession to make. I have had a difficult time preaching the last few weeks. It would be convenient to blame my daughter Sydney and the lack of sleep that comes with having a newborn. However, she is not the reason. The real reason is that the last few passages have been difficult to preach. Two weeks ago, it was Zephaniah 3 and the coming Day of the Lord. Last Sunday, it was Romans 6, and our being slaves to Christ. How can we be slaves when we end each service with the words, “You are free in Christ”?

It should not surprise any of us that Bible can be difficult, even for a pastor. Some passages frustrate us while others terrify us. All of us have experienced a passage from Scripture that have made our hearts stop.

When you come across such a passage, it is a good practice to ask what bothers you about the passage. Sometimes it might be that the passage is just too hard to understand. Other times, it is all too easy to understand and the sinner in you does not like it. When this happens, go to a mature Christian and ask them to help you with the passage. I do that.

Just this week, I had to ask Rick Ritchie for help with our reading from Romans. Once again we come across a difficult passage. Paul tells us in 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.” It is the words “You have died to the law” that is so bothersome.

How are we to understand these words? They are a bit strange. Paul does not say you should die to the law. He does not say you will die to the law. Paul is not speaking metaphorically. “You have died to the law, as it were.” Instead, he says, “You have died to the law.”

There was a pastor named O.M. Norlie who wanted his congregation to understand that in Christ they have really died to the law. So Norlie came up with the idea to write and have published obituary about his congregation. He even put down the regular Sunday Service as the time for the funeral service. The church was filled on Sunday.

Not civil but theological

What does it mean that we have died to the law? Does this mean we are no longer under the civil law? That would be kind of fun. Could you imagine a police officer giving you a speeding ticket to which you reply, "Sorry officer, according to St. Paul, I have died to the law"? I imagine the officer would say, "Well, according to the State of California, you are still under the law so here is your ticket."

Paul is not referring to the civil law. He has a higher authority in mind. Paul is referring to God's law – the Law of Moses as well as the law written on our hearts. Paul is telling us that God's law no longer has a claim on us. We are dead to God's law.

It is at this point when we get a bit nervous. This seems dangerous. A few weeks ago I told you about the man named Ed who when struck by the freedom of the gospel said to the pastor, "Well, just don't tell the kids." It seems dangerous to talk about being free from the law.

What has the law done for you? The law causes wrath (4:15), it increases the fall (5:20), it works the realization of sin (3:20) but the law never produces a good work. These words are not dangerous.

It is the old Adam who wants to keep you under God's law. The old Adam wants you to depend on the law instead of Christ. The old Adam makes you think that the best way to resuscitate you is with the law. The old Adam knows just how powerful the law is.

Verse 5 tells us, "For when we were controlled by the sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death." In other words, the law actually arouses passion within us. The law says, "Thou shall not, thou shall not, thou shall not. And we say, "Thou shall too."

Even more, the old Adam convinces us that if we obey then everything will be okay. When I was new to the faith, I was so happy and free. I had become a Christian by the grace of God. Christ died for me. That was it. Then I started listening to sermons over the radio. These preachers spoke about being a serious Christian. They gave rules on how to pray, rules on what to give, rules on who to hand out with... Before I knew it, I stopped hanging around my friends because they could lead me astray. I stopped listening to music. I only went to PG movies. I even had dreams where I would cry, in my dream, because I had broken some rule. The law nagged and tormented me. That is what the law does.

Paul understood the nagging and abusive nature of the law. That is why Paul refers to the law as a terrible spouse. Verses 1-2: "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" (7:2-3). Paul is not speaking against marriage. He is using marriage as an example about our relationship to the law. Paul is saying that we are effectively married to the law. We are bound to the law. We cannot escape it. It is a bad marriage. The only way out is death.

Did you hear about the two brothers, Tom and Jack, who were the meanest men in town? One day, Tom died and Jack told the pastor to call his brother a saint. Knowing the pastor was in the middle of a building campaign, Jack offered the pastor \$10,000 to say Tom was a saint. Everyone knew about the deal and attended the funeral to see if the pastor would lie. During the funeral the pastor said, "Tom was a mean man. He was a thief and a drunk who mistreated his wife. But compared to his brother Jack, Tom was a saint."

I bet Tom's wife was relieved after his death. She was now free from the wretch. She no longer was under that tyrant.

The law is a tyrant. The law cannot help us. The law cannot resuscitate us. The law is the one that put us in the bind to begin with. Either the law must die or we must die.

You have died to the Law and have married another

Reformation, I have good news for you. "You have died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong [literally, be married] to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God." In other words, the law has no claim over you because you are now married to Jesus.

If the law caused passion within us leading to death, Christ's passion leads to life. On the cross, when Christ died so too did you. "You have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer you who live, but Christ who lives in you" (Galatians 2:20). In the waters of Holy Baptism, "you were buried with Christ into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, you too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). "You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Colossians 3:3). You are no longer under the conditions of the law. You are free.

The obvious question is then what should we do? That is easy. Bear fruit. Come to the Lord's Table and have a foretaste of the wedding feast to come. After the service, go home and play with your children or grandchildren. Go to the beach and swim in the ocean. Tell your friends about Jesus and invite the neighborhood kids to VBS. Pray to Jesus. He loves to hear your prayers. Most importantly, look forward to the wonderful day, when he who raised Christ from the dead, will also raise you in glory!

Not bad for one who has died!

**In Jesus' Name,
Amen**