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Recommended Citation

Vitrano, Steven P., "From What Laws Are Christians Made Free?" (1973). *Faculty Publications*. 3807.
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FROM WHAT LAWS ARE CHRISTIANS MADE FREE?

By STEVEN P. VITRANO

WHAT DOES PAUL mean when he says that Christians "are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive" (Rom. 7:6; all texts are from the R.S.V.).

Does this mean that Christians are no longer to keep the law or laws of God? Few would say that. Does it mean that Christians are no longer obliged to keep the Jewish law? Some would say that. Does it mean that Christians are no longer to keep the Ten Commandments? Some might say that.

What is Paul saying to us as Christians today?

We should first observe that Paul's seventh chapter of Romans is an analogy followed by an analysis. In his analogy Paul states that a woman is bound by the law of marriage to her husband as long as he lives. When he dies, she is free to marry another, but if she lives with another while her first husband is still alive, she is guilty of adultery.

This is readily understood by Christians who have, through the years, lived under a similar law of marriage. What is not so clear is how Paul employs this situation by way of analogy to teach something profound and important about man's relationship to sin, the law, and Jesus Christ. For instance, what does Paul mean by: "Likewise, my brethren, you have died to the law through the body of Christ" (verse 4)?

He begins his analysis by asking:

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"What then shall we say?" Apparently Paul wants to make clear what he means by the use of his analogy. He seems aware that it may be misunderstood.

What Paul does *not* mean to say is that the law is "sin" or that there is something wrong with the law: "If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet'" (verse 7). Further in the chapter he wrote: "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good. . . . We know that the law is spiritual" (verses 12-14).

Sin Responsible for Sin

Paul's next step in his analysis of his analogy declared that sin is responsible for sin. Now it may seem strange to put it that way, but that is precisely what the text says: "But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. . . . For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. . . . It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure" (verses 8-13).

In other words, there is "sin" in us which becomes apparent and obvious when we are confronted by the law of God. "Sin" in this context is personified and represents something other than the mere act of transgression; it is that element in man that produces the transgression. This distinction should be firmly grasped because, in the end, it is Paul's use of the word "sin" that provides a key to an understanding of his analogy.

To illustrate this point, Paul refers to his personal experience, going back to the time when he "was once alive apart from the law." In verses 15 to 20 he tells of his frustration and despair because of the "sin" that dwelt within him. What he wanted to do he did not do, and what he did not want to do, he did.

In the light of all this, Paul draws a conclusion: "So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand" (verse 21).

Note the expression: "I find it to be a law." As the word "sin" is used to represent something even more encompassing than the transgression of a commandment, so "law" is used to represent something more than a commandment or series of commandments. Here Paul uses "law" to describe a reliable fact of life—a principle that operates. In the next verse Paul uses "law" to represent God's commands or instructions: "For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self," and in verse 23 he uses "law" in an amplified sense: "But I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members."

According to the text "the law of my mind" is equivalent to the law by which God wants all men to live. One is particularly aware of "the law of sin" when he wants to do right.

This point should also be firmly grasped, because it provides another key to an understanding of this seventh chapter of Romans.

For Paul, the "law of sin" explains the reason for human depravity. It is the law that describes how a man without Christ reacts when confronted by the well-known law of God. The "law of sin and death" is *not* the law of God. To equate these two concepts of "law" hopelessly confuses an understanding of verses 1 to 6 and makes Paul say something he did not intend.

In chapter eight, Paul introduces us to a third law, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus." "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (verses 1, 2). Here is a law that frees man from "the law of sin and death"—from the law of human depravity. It is a new principle of life that breaks the bondage of the old principle. Success in obeying God's law is determined by the extent a man chooses to permit this new principle to control his life.

Christ came to condemn "sin in the flesh." He came to destroy the law of sin that enslaves mankind:

"For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness

of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (verses 3, 4).

Just as our depraved nature rebels when confronted with the law of God, so a new nature, "the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" seeks to fulfill the righteousness of the law.

But does one who is in Christ—who has been freed from the law of sin, the law of human depravity—never again disobey the law of God?

In the passages under consideration Paul does not give an explicit answer to this question. His primary concern seems to be whether it is possible for man to obey God. Paul sees man so hopelessly bound by the cords of sin that, without liberation "according to the Spirit," man cannot, even with the best intentions, do God's will.

In the first eleven verses of Romans 8, Paul uses a number of important expressions, one expression often defining another. Paul equates being

"in Christ" with being "in the Spirit" (verse 9). To be "in the Spirit" is to have the Spirit of God dwelling in us. To be "in the flesh" or to walk "according to the flesh" (verses 3, 4) is, of course, the opposite experience, to be without Christ.

What does walking "according to the flesh" and walking "according to the Spirit" mean? Paul again is explicit: "For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God" (verses 5-8).

The "walk" of verse 4 signifies a living day-by-day experience (verse 5) that reflects a certain set of mind. Either the mind is set on the things of the flesh or on the things of the Spirit. Those who walk according to the flesh

exercise their will in behalf of the things of the flesh and those who walk according to the Spirit exercise their will in behalf of the things of the Spirit. This is not to say that we are saved through will power. But it does say that one who is saved exercises his will and chooses the Spirit's way.

The good news Paul emphasizes is that through Christ Christians are free to will and to do those things that the Spirit represents and empowers, whereas without Christ we have no such freedom.

For Paul, to be without Christ is to be without the power to obey God even if one wants to. A person cannot do what he should, even if he wants to, because his will power is not enough—he is a servant of sin—he has a depraved nature. But in Christ this is changed. He in whom Christ dwells is free from the bondage of sin—he is freed from the law of sin and death. In this freedom he not only wants to do God's will but he has the power to do God's will, and thus the just requirements of the law may be fulfilled.

For the sinner who is without Christ, the law of God or any law of God is a yoke of bondage. For the person in this condition the very commandment that promised life proves to be death to him. This is why Paul said, "You have died to the law" (chap. 7:4) and we are "discharged from the law" (verse 2). For the person who is in Christ, the law of God is not a yoke of bondage. The commandment that promised life does not prove to be his death. Rather, the just requirements of the law are fulfilled because he sets his mind on the things of the Spirit; he is led by the Spirit of God; he is a son of God.

In commenting upon this great truth, Ellen G. White has written: "Every soul that refuses to give himself to God is under the control of another power. He is not his own. He may talk of freedom, but he is in the most abject slavery. He is not allowed to see the beauty of the truth, for his mind is under the control of Satan. While he flatters himself that he is following the dictates of his own judgment, he obeys the will of the prince of darkness. Christ came to break the shackles of sin-slavery from the soul. 'If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.' 'The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' sets us 'free from the law of sin and death.' Rom. 8:2."—*The Desire of Ages*, p. 466.

When the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus operates, men are free. They are not in bondage to sinful thoughts or habits. The emphasis is upon freedom. The result of that freedom is victory over all that would otherwise destroy men and women now and forevermore. □

Three Lonely Days

By PATSY MURDOCH

FOR THE YOUNGER SET

"MAY I GO and play with Lonnie, Mother?" Greg had just come in from school.

"Yes, dear," Mother told him, "but please change your clothes first."

Soon Lonnie and Greg were riding their bikes up and down the sidewalk and Lonnie's little brother, Ronnie, was riding his tricycle.

A little later the boys came into the house and laid their jackets on a chair. They went downstairs to the playroom and got out Greg's farm set.

When they got tired of playing with the farm set they put it away and got out a game.

Greg got so excited over the game that he began shouting.

"Greg," called Mother from the basement door, "you are too noisy."

"O.K., Mother. I'm sorry."

But Greg kept forgetting, and soon Mother got tired of reminding him.

"Greg," she called, "will you please come up here?"

"Yes, Mother," said Greg as he came upstairs.

"Son," said Mother, "you were naughty not to quiet down when I asked you to. I am afraid the boys will have to go home now."

"All right, Mother." It was a sad-looking Greg who saw his friends to the door.

"Maybe we can play with you tomorrow," said Lonnie as he and Ronnie left.

"Sure," said Greg wishing he had obeyed.

As he shut the door, Mother said,

"Come here, honey. Let's talk."

Greg sat beside her on the couch. "Greg, you have been having trouble remembering to obey lately," she said. "Maybe it will help you to remember if you don't play with anyone after school for three days."

Tears trickled down Greg's freckled cheeks. That was the worst punishment Mother could give him! He wanted to play with someone almost every day, and now he could not play with anyone for three whole days!

The next day when Lonnie rang the doorbell Greg had to say, "I can't play today." And the next day and the next!

By the third afternoon, Greg was very unhappy. "I want someone to play with," he said, a big frown on his face.

Right then Mother and Greg sat down and had a talk about obedience. She reminded him that he had been unable to play with anyone for three days because he had disobeyed. Then she read the fifth commandment which says, "Honour thy father and thy mother" (Ex. 20:12), and explained to Greg that it meant he should obey Mother and Daddy.

Greg told Mother he was sorry, and then they had prayer.

Greg had a very good time when he was allowed to play with Lonnie and Ronnie the next day.

And from then on when he was tempted to disobey he would remember the three lonely days and ask Jesus to help him obey.