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What About the Law

Romans 7:7-25

After we returned from our ill-fated trip to the UK, Rachel and I bought a new kitchen gadget. A SodaStream. If you're unfamiliar with it, it uses CO2 canisters to carbonate water from your tap so you can drink soda water without having to buy it from the store. Now, I grew up with a SodaStream, but what I didn't realize is that they are kind of dangerous. You've got this high pressured canister of CO2 sitting on your countertop, ready to explode at any moment and take your head off. As I was making the purchase online, I'm getting all these warnings about how I was ordering a dangerous package to be delivered!

So, I was tracking it online to make sure it didn't like, blow up on the way or something, and it got delivered while I was out. I got home in the evening and my wife, Rachel, had already set it up, and it didn't seem like anyone had got hurt in the process. Phew... until she said to me, "I hope I did it right." In my mind my thoughts were, "What do you mean, you hope you did it right?" I said, "Well, didn't you follow the instruction manual?" To which, she obviously replied, "No." In my mind I'm going, "Red alert! Red alert! It's going to explode!" More on that later.

So I want to know, who do you relate to better in this story? Me or Rachel? I believe that everyone should follow the instruction manual. I used to love building Legos by following the instructions to the T. I always follow the recipe exactly. I believe it is the best way to live. The rules are there for a reason, right? Well, Rachel doesn't quite agree, and maybe some of you don't either. For you the rules are more like guidelines.

We're carrying on in our journey through the letter that Paul—one of the earliest church leaders—wrote to the church in Rome. We're right in the middle of Paul's letter now, and in the last two weeks we've looked at chapter 6 where Paul tells us that as believers in Jesus, we are dead to sin. We have been united to Christ in his death and have risen with him to new life. Sin longer has power over us anymore. No longer are we slaves to sin, but instead we are slaves to righteousness. And what a challenge that was last week from Pastor Mark.

But it did leave me with a question, and maybe you too... How do I live as a slave to righteousness? How do I know what is right living? Well, Paul was Jewish, and for the Jewish people they knew that righteousness came through obedience to the Law. The Law for Jews were the 613 commandments laid out in what are now the first five books of the Christian Bible, known as the Torah. For a Jew, hearing Paul tell them to be a slave to righteousness, they knew that meant they had to obey the Law. And Jews thought this was really quite achievable. They honestly thought you could obey the 613 commandments.

But Paul is about to break out another implication of the gospel that is going to blow their minds. Paul is about to tell them: the Law doesn't apply any more. It would be a bit like someone coming to me and telling me: Ellis, the instruction manual for your SodaStream doesn't apply any more. I would be

like, “What on earth do you mean? How am I going to make it work? And why doesn’t it apply? What was wrong with the instruction manual?”

This weekend, Paul is going to show us that there is a much better way than following the instruction manual... that there is a much better way than obeying the Jewish Law. So, grab your Bibles, and turn with me to Romans 7.

“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.

“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. 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. 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.”
(Romans 7:1–6 ESV)

As many of you know, my mom is recently widowed. When she was still married to my dad, she was bound to that relationship by law. If she were to enter into a relationship with another person, she would have committed adultery. However, now that my dad is no longer alive, she has been released from that marriage. She is now free to enter into a relationship with someone else.

Paul says that we as believers have similarly been set free from the law. He writes in verse 4, “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.” (v. 4) Before Christ, the people of God were subject to the Law, but now, God’s people have died with Christ, and therefore, just like my mom is no longer subject to the law of marriage to my dad, the people of God are no longer subject to the Law we find in the Old Testament. Instead the people of God have been united to another person—Jesus Christ—as we’ve been hearing about these last two weeks.

Just like we died to sin, we have died to the Law. Just like we are no longer slaves to sin, we are no longer slaves to the Law. God’s people have been released from the Law. They are no longer bound to obey it. They no longer have to serve it. They are free from it.

Now to say this was radical to the early Christians is an understatement. The early Jewish believers, who had lived in obedience to the law, probably felt very unsettled by this all. Just like my mom felt very unsettled by suddenly finding herself as a single woman again. And those early Jewish believers would have been plagued by questions. Why? Why has this happened? Why release us from the Law? Didn’t God give us the Law? Isn’t the Law good?

Has anyone ever played Clue? We call it Cluedo in the UK which is a play on words with the Latin “ludo”—meaning “I play”. If you haven’t played it then it’s a board game where someone has been murdered and you have to work out who did it, with what weapon, and in what room before anyone else works it out. Now, when it comes to the weapons, what is interesting to me is that only one of them is designed as a weapon: the revolver. The other five were never designed as weapons: the candlestick, the lead pipe, the wrench, the rope, and, well, the knife I guess could go either way. But most of the weapons are not, in fact, weapons. They are good tools that have been used for a sinful purpose.

Paul says the Law is the same thing. The Law is a good tool that has been used for a sinful purpose. Paul says that when we were held captive by our sin, when sin controlled us, when we were slaves to sin, we took God's Law, which was a good tool—like a candlestick—and our sin used the Law to bludgeon ourselves to death. This is what he means in verse 5 when he writes: "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." (v. 5) Sin—our desire to be our own captain, to go our own way—used the good Law to kill us. Just like in Clue, it was Mrs. White in the kitchen with the candlestick. For us, it is our sinful passions, in our bodies with the Law.

But Paul writes, in verse 6, "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." (v. 6) Since we have now died with Christ, we have been released from not only the power of sin—as we heard about the last two weeks—but we have also we have been released from the Law. We no longer serve in the old way of the Law, but instead, we serve in the new way of the Spirit.

Now, Paul has to clear up a couple of objections to this. The first comes in verse 7, and the second in verse 13. The first objection is this: "What then shall we say? That the law is sin?" (v. 7) Paul's answer is, "no!" Of course the law isn't sin. He says, it's "holy and righteous and good." Just like in the game of Clue. The candlestick isn't sinful, in fact it's good! It holds a candle that brings light to the house. But yet, when in the hands of Mrs. White in the kitchen, all hell can break loose. Paul says the same thing about the law. Look at verse 11: "For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me." (v. 11) Is the law sin? No. The Law is good, but sin used this good tool to kill us.

But then Paul has to respond to a second objection: "Well doesn't that mean the Law killed us?" Take a look at verse 13: "Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?" (v. 13) Paul's answer is again an emphatic, "no!" He says it wasn't the Law that killed us, it was sin that killed us, using the Law. In the same way we wouldn't say that the candlestick killed Mr. Black, but rather than Mrs. White killed Mr. Black using the candlestick. Sin killed us, using the Law. This is how Paul puts it in verse 13: "It was sin, producing death in me through what is good." (v. 13) Did the Law kill us? No. The Law is good, but sin used this good tool to kill us.

Does this all make sense? Just like my mom has been released from her marriage, believers in Jesus have been released from the Law. Why? Because, sin used the Law to kill us. But this doesn't make the Law bad or mean that the Law killed us. Just like it doesn't make the candlestick bad in Clue or even mean that the candlestick killed Mr. Black in Clue. The Law is still good, but sin used the good Law to kill us.

But what does that even look like? I remember one time visiting a man in hospital who was an alcoholic. His liver was shutting down on him. His body was giving up on him. This man knew that he was dying. And he knew what he had to do. He had to stop drinking. And yet, he just couldn't give it up. He would come out of the hospital and go straight back to the bottle. Weeks later he was back in the hospital again. Sadly, the end of this story was this man's death. This man knew the "law," so to speak—don't drink—but his sinful passions completely controlled him, waging war against this "law" and overpowering him until he was dead.

And this may seem like it's only for people with severe addictions, but Paul goes on in this chapter to tell us that this was his experience when he tried to obey the Law. He wanted to obey the Law, but the overwhelming power of sin kept him from doing so. He writes in verse 18, "For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not

want is what I keep on doing." (vv. 18-19) He is caught in a struggle between two powers: his desire to obey the law, and his much stronger sinful passion. And sin keeps winning out. Eventually in verse 23 he says he becomes captive to sin.

Now, one short aside... I don't believe these verses refer to Paul's experience as a Christian; rather, I believe they refer to his life before he came to know Christ. Why? Two main reasons: (1) The end of Paul's struggle in these verses is his becoming captive to sin; yet in all of the last chapter he has talked about how believers have been set free from sin! (2) In these verses Paul is talking about trying to obey the Law; yet, he has just said that Christians are free from having to obey the Law! Therefore, I don't believe Paul is referring to his struggle as a Christian, but rather referring to his struggle as a Jew living under the Law.

Now, let me be clear, this interpretation is not without its problems, namely that Paul writes in the present tense. And it doesn't negate our struggles with sin as believers. As believers we really do fight a battle against sin in our live—more on that next week, so make sure you come back. And honestly, whichever way you read these few verses, the point Paul is making in this chapter is the same: the Law cannot deliver us from sin's power. The Law is a good tool, but it is used by sin for sinful purposes. Just like the "law"—don't drink—couldn't deliver the man in hospital from his alcohol addiction, we cannot look to the Law to find freedom from sin—we can only find freedom from sin in Jesus. As Paul says in verses 24-25, "Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (vv. 24-25)

The Law cannot deliver us from sin's power. Only Jesus can. And here's the good news: Jesus has. On the cross, Jesus won the decisive victory over our sin. When he said it is finished, he meant it. Sin no longer has dominion over us. We have been delivered from death to life. We have been rescued from the kingdom of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of God's beloved Son. We are no longer slaves to sin. We have been crucified with Christ, buried with him in baptism, and raised again to new life in Him. Jesus has broken sin's power. So don't go back to the Law looking for freedom from sin. You already have it in Jesus.

One of the significant areas of sin I've struggled with, throughout my life is my physical health. I believe God has called us to treat our bodies well—they are temples of the Holy Spirit. But I have always struggled with this, hitting 265lbs at one point. And I've always tried to solve it with creating my own laws. Track my calories on MyFitnessPal. Do couch to 5K. Do P90X. But here's what I've found. I can only ever keep these things up for a short period of time before I return to my old habits. I wonder how many of you have already given up on New Year's Resolutions that you made only 3 weeks ago?

But four years back, for the first time in my life, I listened to the Spirit and asked Him what he wanted me to do, rather than making my own law. And he led me to start attending a boot camp class at the Y, not necessarily to exercise and get healthy, but actually, so I could make some friends outside the church. Now you may say, isn't that just another law? Well, potentially, but I wasn't going there to lose weight, I was going there because I felt let by the Spirit to do so. And do you know what? For the last four years, I have sustained a healthy level of exercise in my body for the first time in my life. There has never been another four year period in my life where I have consistently exercised. I can't even think of a period of longer than several months. Every other time I've tried to exercise, I've followed a law and then returned to sitting on the couch. But this time, by listening to the Spirit, I have found freedom.

Look again at verse 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." (v. 6) As followers of Jesus we have been released from the Law, so that we can serve in the new way of the

Spirit. We no longer have to obey the Law, but we are called to obey the Spirit, who guides us. And very often, the Spirit is going to guide us to do exactly what the Law says.

It's like the SodaStream. Rachel didn't follow the instruction manual point by point like I would have done. She didn't follow the written code. She followed her own intuition—not the Holy Spirit, but her intuition worked in a similar way to the way the Spirit works. She was led to put together the machine correctly, without following the code. To this day, our machine hasn't exploded. It works perfectly. So she must have put it together right, even though she didn't follow the code.

This is how the Spirit works. He guides us into righteousness. He leads us to do what is right. And very often he's going to lead us to act according to the Law. To do what the Law says, because very often that's the best thing. But we don't need to obey the Law just because. And we should never obey the Law in the belief that it will set us free from sin, because the law is powerless, but the Spirit has power!

When we died with Christ, we were raised again to new life by the power of the Holy Spirit. God has given us his Holy Spirit to live inside each one of us. No longer are we help captive by the power of sin, instead we have the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the one who we need to look to for power to conquer sin, not to the Law. The Law has no power to overcome sin, so stop going back to it. Look to the Spirit to show you how to live, to empower you to do it, and to give you the courage to see it through.

So if you find yourself today, frustrated that you haven't stuck to your New Year's Resolutions... or you're struggling with an area of sin in your life, whether it's keeping your body healthy, a struggle with sexual sin or pornography, a struggle with anxiety, a substance addiction, and you just can't seem to break it through self-discipline... might I suggest that maybe, you're chasing after the wrong thing? Maybe instead of creating laws or rules or code for yourself, that maybe, what you need instead is to allow yourself to be led and empowered by the Spirit?