

"The New Marriage"
Sermon Series on *The Fifth Gospel*
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First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC
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(Romans 7:1-13)

Introduction.

Have you ever had a conversation with someone who seemed to skip over all the preliminaries and just launched into their topic? When this happens, I think that the person who does it has been carrying on a conversation in their head, and now they just turn up the volume so that we can hear it, too. But it can be very confusing at times. All of a sudden, you're right in the middle of it.

This morning we return to our study of the book of Romans (which NT scholar Dale Bruner calls the Fifth Gospel), and as we do so it may feel like this to some of you because we're jumping right in the middle a conversation in which Paul has been engaged. In case you feel lost, let me remind you of where we left off in the book of Romans from our previous study earlier in the year and what we've also covered the last two weeks so that we can all be on the same page together today.

Up until now in the book of Romans the apostle Paul has been presenting an explanation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Christians in the city of Rome, and it is a gospel he has been proclaiming for almost 20 years. He is writing this letter in order that he might become better acquainted with the recipients and in hopes that he might also be able to set up a missionary base of operation in the future there in Rome as he makes plans to take the gospel all the way to Spain. To some extent, his letter to the Romans is a calling card, so to speak.

As Paul has been outlining the message of the gospel throughout the letter, the apostle has talked about our need of salvation -- that we may be a very moral person, we're still lost apart from Christ. We may even be very religious, but we're also lost apart from Jesus. In the final analysis we are all in need of God's mercy and grace, and it is our only hope of salvation. Then Paul says in chapter 6 when you come right down to it, every single one of us has a master -- either we are enslaved to sin, or our master is righteousness. You've gotta serve somebody.

And now in chapter 7, the apostle takes up the subject of God's law and its purpose for the follower of Jesus. The words "law," "commandment," or "written code" are mentioned in every one of the first 14 verses of this chapter, and some 35 times in the whole passage which runs from 7:1-8:4. The question Paul trying to answer is this: "If a person can't find a right relationship with God by being a good moral person (by keeping the law), or by being very religious (doing everything that God expects of them), then what is the place of the OT law in a Christian's life?"

I. The New Marriage.

To answer this question Paul uses the metaphor of marriage in verses 1-7 to show us that what is needed now isn't to observe the dictates of the OT law, but rather what is needed is a

radical change of heart that comes from within when we die to ourselves, give up ownership to our lives, and become joined, or wedded to, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

John Stott has pointed out that in the course of his letter to the Romans Paul suggests that there are three possible attitudes a person can have toward the law of God. The first two Paul rejects, but the third he commends. The three possible attitudes are: legalism, antinomianism, and loving freedom. He says that legalists are "under the law," and they are in bondage to it. Antinomians go to the opposite extreme. They reject it all together, and they claim to be rid of all obligation to its demands and turn liberty into license.

However, law-fulfilling people of loving freedom preserve a balance. They rejoice in the fact that they no longer have to measure up to the high demands of the law in order to be accepted by God because of the death of Jesus on the cross, but they also rejoice that they are now free *fulfill* the law. They delight in the law as the revelation of God's will, but they also recognize that the power to fulfill the law isn't in themselves or in the law itself but in the Holy Spirit. People who are legalistic fear the law, and they are in bondage to it. Antinomians hate the law, and they repudiate it. But law-fulfilling people of freedom love the law, and they seek to abide by it, not to earn God's love and favor but to show their love for God simply because they delight in pleasing Him.¹

But how does this happen? Dick Leon, who was the senior pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Bellevue, WA, has expanded this metaphor of marriage into a little drama which I think helps explain what Paul is saying here. It goes like this. Once upon a time, a beautiful maiden named Esmeralda fell in love with a strong, noble, and upright young man named Perfect. And soon the two were married. Mr. Perfect did everything right, and he expected Esmeralda to do everything right, too. When he left for work every morning, Mr. Perfect would leave on the kitchen counter a list of all the things Esmeralda should do that day. At first this was a great help in instructing Esmeralda how to order her day and how to please her perfect husband. She wouldn't have known just the right things to do without the help of this list.

However, in time the list became a burden to Esmeralda, and she grew to resent it. She tried hard to do everything on it, but she never quite got it all right. And when Mr. Perfect came home at the end of a hard day at work, having done everything perfectly himself, he would check the list and test his lovely wife to see if she had done it all perfectly, too. Somehow, she never quite measured up or did everything right.

Esmeralda found that she not only had trouble keeping the rules for Mr. Perfect, but she grew to hate the list. And inside she found she actually didn't want to keep the rules. The list would tell her to bake bread, but she would find a way to leave out the yeast and secretly delight in the fallen loaf. She was told to record the Super Bowl when they had to be out of town for the big game, but she "mistakenly" recorded "The Great British Baking Show" instead!

As much as Mr. Perfect wanted to have a family, this marriage never produced a child. It was barren. A dark cloud fell over the house, and there was no joy in their home. But what was Esmeralda to do?! She knew that if she left her husband for an easier life, she would be breaking her vow. No, as long as they both lived, she was bound to him by their marriage.

Suddenly, Mr. Perfect died. To her surprise, Esmeralda was filled with as many sighs of relief as she was tears of grief. She missed Mr. Perfect, but she felt as though a great weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Death changed her situation, and she was no longer bound to Mr. Perfect. She began to breathe easily again and to laugh and sing.

Then a wonderful thing happened. She met and fell in love with a quiet and gracious gentleman. He was good to her, and soon they were married. He didn't have a list for her every morning, and he didn't test her every evening either. But now, to her surprise, Esmeralda found that she did all the things Mr. Perfect demanded of her, and she even did more! And what was better, she did them freely, of her own accord, out of love not out of duty. Her new husband was so appreciative, and if anything didn't get done, he was so forgiving and generous that she loved him even more and tried even harder to please him. Oh, did I mention her new husband's name? His name was Mr. Grace, His first name was Jesus, and His middle name was Love. And they lived happily ever after!²

What Paul is saying in these verses is not that the law is bad, or wrong, or anything of the sort. In fact, he says, the law is initially helpful in telling us what we should do to please God. What the law asks of us is right, and true, and good. There is nothing wrong with the law itself. The trouble is with us, and very soon the law becomes onerous to us. It becomes burdensome. It's when we must obey the law that we don't like it, and soon we begin to resent it. It prompts in us a desire to rebel.

Then Mr. Perfect dies, and the legal obligation of our marriage to the law is broken. But here Paul switches horses in the middle of the stream. The point he is making is that as long as both partners are living, the legal contract stands. But when one of them dies, then the legal contract is broken. However, Paul says that the law itself doesn't die. *We are the ones who die in that we die to ourselves in Christ and to our obligation to the law. This death to the law comes by our death in Christ through baptism and by our dying daily with Him, taking up our cross to follow Jesus each day.*

So coming to faith in Christ changes our lives, and we can say with the apostle, "*[I] have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that [I] belong to another, to Him who has been raised from the dead in order that [I] may bear fruit for God*" (7:4). We now desire to fulfill the law of God, not out of obligation, but out of love and appreciation for all that God has done for us in Christ.

When I was growing up my mother used to remind me, "Comb your hair, Peter. Brush your teeth. Take a bath. Take off those dirty jeans. You can't go to school looking like that!" Sometimes I would do what she asked me, but a lot of the time I would just fudge and try to slide by. Like most boys, my habits of personal hygiene left something to be desired. I knew what I was supposed to do, and I knew what my mother was going to say, and I knew down deep that that she was suggesting was good and right. But I still didn't want to do it.

But then, when I was in the 9th grade, I met Jill! And after I met Jill, my personal habits began to change quite a bit. Before my mother could say anything, I was brushing my teeth, I was combing my hair (yes, I had hair back then!), I was looking for a clean shirt, and I even got some breath mints, too! I not only did what the rules commanded me to do, I did them gladly. And I even went beyond the minimum requirements. I was now living under the compulsion of love, not the gun of the law. And that is what Paul is talking about on a much larger scale here in Romans 7.

II. Our Freedom in Christ.

Last Sunday we celebrated the Fourth of July, and I hope you had fun with your family and friends celebrating this wonderful national holiday. The Fourth of July is the day in our country

when we celebrate the great freedoms, we enjoy which our forefathers and -mothers won for us in creating this nation and freeing us from the rule of King George in England. We truly live in a great country, and millions of people around the world wish they could experience the freedoms we enjoy.

Freedom has always been an important word for Americans, but the word has often had different meanings for different people in our country. For example, when he was running for President, one of the observations Abraham Lincoln made was that Americans tended to have different definitions for the same word. In particular, he was thinking about the word “Freedom.” He said that the North felt that they were champions of freedom because they didn’t want slavery, but the South felt like they were being tyrannized by the North because they thought that freedom for them was the right to continue to own enslaved people. Same word but different definitions.

In our day, the notion of freedom most often refers to freedom *from*. (And I’m indebted to my friend John Ortberg for this insight.³) We want to be free from restraints. We want to be free from anybody telling us what we can and cannot do. We chafe against a loss of freedom because we want to be in charge of our own little kingdoms. And if anybody else tries to tell us what to do, it rubs us the wrong way.

During the pandemic last year, I read a great book by James K. A. Smith entitled *On the Road with St. Augustine*.⁴ In it he writes that this notion of freedom, freedom from, is the only freedom most of us know nowadays. We think of freedom as self-determination, and he says that the freedom to decide what is my own good is even enshrined in Justice Anthony Kennedy’s Supreme Court’s majority opinion in *Planned Parenthood vs. Casey*. There it says, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence – of meaning, of the universe, of the mystery of human life.” In other words, Smith writes, for many of us freedom means, as Justice Kennedy suggests, “Hands off! I’ve got this. I know what I want, and I will know that I am free when I get to decide, and no one else, what is good for me, and when every choice I make is a blank check of opportunity and possibility.” Freedom by this definition is freedom *from*. It means freedom from any kind of constraint or authority but my own.

Ortberg says there is problem with this, and it is that we’re not God. We are creatures. We are embodied creatures who have desires, and we’re molded around habits. Eventually, if we’re not careful we can become the kind of people who are enslaved by the very desires that we think we are choosing to satisfy.

Augustine talks about what he called “the chain of slavery,” and he says that part of our difficulty is we have disordered loves and distorted wills. He says we all tend to go after the wrong things in life, and the consequence of our disordered loves and distorted wills is passion and unchecked emotions. When passion is served, it leads to habit. And habit, when it is no longer met with resistance, leads to necessity. And necessity, when there is no power against it, leads to bondage. That is where many people find themselves today...addicted to so many things. We’re not really free.

However, there is another kind of freedom. It’s not the freedom *from*; it is freedom *for*. It’s the freedom to become the person God created you to be and deep down you really want to be – generous, loving, sacrificial, forgiving, kind, and grace-filled.

There is a famous book by Norman Maclean that was made into a movie entitled *A River Runs Through It*. Maybe you’ve read the book or seen the movie. Maclean writes about the

way in which when he was growing up there was no distinction between religion and fly fishing. He said that his father, who was a Presbyterian minister, was certain about some truths in the universe. For example, he believed that all good things, from trout fishing to eternal salvation, come by grace, and grace comes by art, and art does not come easy. That's why we become disciples and practice spiritual disciplines. It's always about freedom, and freedom doesn't come easy.

Deep down we all realize that true freedom isn't freedom *from*; it's freedom *for*. It's the freedom we can have to live as a child of God empowered by His Holy Spirit to choose to live a life that is pleasing to God, and which joins Him on His mission of love for a lost and broken world. It's the freedom to say no to the things that draw us away from God and to say "yes!" to Jesus with our whole lives. It's the freedom and the power to choose to do the good and right thing, and to reject that which is base, evil, and headed in the wrong direction.

You know, the freedom of an expert fly fisherman is that he is able to cast a fly at just the right time in just the right place and in just the right way. That freedom has been acquired by discipline and the transformation of one's heart. It comes by grace, and grace comes by art, and art does not come easy.

That's the freedom for which we were made. Elsewhere the apostle Paul writes, "*It is for freedom that you have been set free.... But do not use your freedom as an occasion to indulge the flesh*" (Gal. 5:13). "Oh, but I'm free to do whatever I want whenever I want to," we boast. Friends, that's not really freedom. That road leads to bondage and destruction, and when you go down that road you actually lose your freedom. You become a slave to your desires. The only freedom that is really worth having is freedom in Christ. It's the freedom to live the right kind of life and become the right kind of person, and it only comes from the power of God's Holy Spirit. Let's pursue that freedom today.

Conclusion.

Think about your relationship with Jesus. Think about all that God has done for you in Christ through the sacrifice of His Son and the many gifts of His grace. Meditate on His goodness and His generosity. Drink deeply of His mercy and see if in the midst of this reflection on His love your heart isn't strangely warmed and your desire increased to freely serve Jesus, the Lover of your soul, ever more faithfully.

The marriage of Mr. Perfect and Esmeralda was barren. No children. No joy. No new life. It bore no fruit. But in the marriage to Mr. Grace, she bore fruit for God, which is holy living, consistent worship, faithful marriages, loving parenthood, generous stewardship, missional living, and sacrificial service to others -- all done, and more, because we live now under the freedom of love which has no limits.

William Barclay has written, "...having died [to Christ], we are [now] discharged from all obligations to the law and become free to marry again. This time we marry, not the law, but Christ. When that happens, Christian obedience becomes, not an externally imposed obedience to some written code of laws, but an inner allegiance of the Spirit to Jesus Christ."¹⁵ Thanks be to God for our new spiritual marriage in Christ. Amen.

¹ John Stott, *Romans*, pp. 191, 192.

² Dick Leon, "The Compulsion of Love." A sermon preached in Bellevue, WA, in 1996. p. 1.

³ John Ortberg on the podcast "Become" in July 2021.

⁴ James K.A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019).

⁵ William Barclay, *Romans*, p. 92.