

The Law of Freedom

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[0 : 00] Well, again, good morning and welcome to Advent. My name is Jeff, and I'm one of the pastors here. And if you're new to our church, or if this is your first time joining us for worship, I just wanna welcome you.

I would love to meet you after the service. I'll be out there by the entrance and would love to connect with you and hear your story. We're so delighted that you're here this morning. In his book called *The Year of Living Biblically*, writer and journalist A.J. Jacobs tells about the story of a year-long experiment that he did.

And his experiment was to follow all of the laws in the Bible as literally as possible. And he says that he did this experiment for a couple reasons. One is that he was culturally Jewish, and so he wanted to understand the traditions in his culture better.

But he said that the main reason why he wanted to do this is that he had a growing concern about religious fundamentalism and all of the various problems in society that arose when people took their religious texts like the Bible literally.

He wanted to understand not just what Scripture said, but he wanted to understand communities of people who took the Bible literally from the inside. And so for an entire year, he wrote about his journey of taking all of the commands of the Bible as literally as possible, even ones that sounded arcane and strange, like some of the ceremonial laws in Leviticus, like not wearing clothes of mixed fabrics or not trimming your beard.

[1 : 41] But he also tried to follow all of the moral commands of the law too, like don't steal, don't lie, love your neighbor, some of the commands that we read earlier this morning in the Ten Commandments.

And if you watch the TED Talk that he gives explaining this experiment, he talks about the surprising positive benefits of this year-long experiment that he had in his life.

He says that the ritual of taking a Sabbath was transformative for him because by nature he was a workaholic. And so even though there were some positive benefits that he experienced from this experiment, he says in the end, his conclusion was that even though there might be some positive benefits from taking the Bible literally, in the end, if you want to benefit from the Bible's teaching, you really just have to pick and choose.

You have to pick and choose which parts you want to follow because some are helpful and other parts are unhelpful and even immoral or morally regressive.

And A.J. Jacobs' experiment gets at a question that's at the heart of our text here this morning in Romans 7. Are the commands and the laws in the Bible just an antiquated, morally regressive system of morality?

[3 : 04] Or do they actually have some sort of relevance for our lives today? That's a question Paul is addressing here in Romans 7. In the previous chapters, 1 through 6, Paul has been expounding the heart of the gospel, which is that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not by good works, not by works of the law.

Now if that's true, if we are saved by grace, a natural question follows and it's a question that Paul anticipates and it's a question that Paul answers. And the question is this, well if we're saved by grace, then what was the purpose of the law?

Does it even matter? Is there any relevance for our lives? And I should clarify briefly what we mean when we talk about the law. And I wanna talk about three ways that Paul uses the law so that can help us the rest of our time together as we refer to it.

There's a few different ways to think about the law. The first is the Mosaic law that God gave Israel in the Old Testament. So we're thinking Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Deuteronomy.

There's the Mosaic law. More broadly, we can think about all of the commands in Scripture, both Old Testament and New Testament. But another way that Paul talks about the law in Romans is the moral law inside each of us.

[4 : 24] The moral law that all of humanity experiences. Every person, whether you're religious or secular, whether you believe in God or not, has an innate sense of right and wrong.

You might be here this morning and you may think that the Bible has absolutely no relevance to your life. But I can almost guarantee that you're also not a moral relativist either.

At least not in practice. You probably have a keen sense of moral obligations and duties, of justice, of human rights. And that's what we call the moral law.

It's this deep sense of right and wrong that all of humanity has in common. And so whether you're a Christian or not, whether you believe in God or not, this question about whether or not the law has relevance for our lives, it's a question that's relevant for all of us.

So what is A.J. Jacobs' experiment of following the Bible literally for a year? What does that get right?

[5 : 30] Where is it incomplete? Where is it worthy of critique? That's what I wanna look at this morning. We're gonna look at three things from Romans chapter seven. We're gonna look at the goodness of the law, the problem with the law, and the fulfillment of the law.

The goodness of the law, the problem with the law, and the fulfillment of the law. So first of all, the goodness of the law. At the beginning of Romans chapter seven, Paul is explaining that those who have faith in Jesus Christ now have a new relationship to the law, to the laws of the Old Testament. They no longer live under its obligations and expectations. This then anticipates an objection in verse seven, and he anticipates this objection.

What then shall we say? Is the law sin? If the law couldn't save us, to begin with, and if we now, through faith in Christ, are no longer under the law's obligations, then does that mean that the law was bad in the first place?

Does that mean that the law was a morally regressive system to begin with? And his emphatic answer throughout this whole passage is absolutely not. No.

[6 : 41] His own answer to his own question in verse seven is by no means. Later on in verse 12, he says the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. He is affirming the goodness of God's law as something to be cherished and delighted in.

This is the attitude of Psalm 19, which we read earlier. Psalm 19 says, the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb. Psalm 19 is not only saying that God's law is true, but that it's desirable, that it's more precious than gold.

It's sweeter than honey. That it keeps us from destructive paths. It leads us towards flourishing in life. And you can imagine that Paul may have even had Psalm 19 in the back of his mind as he is writing Romans chapter seven.

He's affirming that the law is good because it's meant to show us what freedom looks like. The law is good because it's meant to show us what freedom looks like.

[7 : 54] God gives us the law to show us the design and the grain of his creation. How we're to thrive and flourish as human beings. Now this might sound ridiculous or even offensive to a lot of people in our culture today because a lot of people think about freedom today in our modern culture not as the presence of rules or constraints, but as the absence of constraints.

I'm most free when I don't have any constraints or limits or rules in my life. If you've ever seen the TED Talk from psychologist Barry Schwartz called The Paradox of Choice, Barry Schwartz says that he defines what he calls the official dogma of Western industrial societies.

And it's this, that to maximize the welfare of our citizens, we have to maximize individual freedom. And the way that we maximize individual freedom is that we maximize choice.

That the maximization of choice leads to freedom and leads to welfare for all. And so that's why if you go to the grocery store this afternoon, you don't just find three kinds of salad dressing, you find 53 kinds of salad dressing because more choice leads to more freedom, leads to general welfare.

This is how most modern people think about the good life. The good life is about the maximization of choice. It's about freedom from constraint. But I actually don't think that you have to be a religious person or believe the Bible is true to actually understand that there's a lot of issues with that.

[9 : 32] Because practically, you can't actually live that way. How many of you drove here this morning ignoring the lines on the road, ignoring the stoplights, ignoring the stop signs?

Hopefully none of you. It was in following the constraints of the road that you were actually free to arrive at your destination. If I decided that I totally wanted to be free, by removing all constraints from what I ate, that I just wanted to eat whatever I wanted all the time, it would probably involve a lot of steak and cheeseburgers and a lot of oily, fattening, fried, sugary stuff.

But if I did that, it wouldn't go well because I would be ignoring the constraints and the limits of my body. I'm actually most free when I follow the constraints of my body by eating healthy food.

That's good for me. Let me give you one more example. Oxford mathematician John Lennox makes the connection with music. He says, When a great musician wants to play beautiful music, they first have to read the sheet music.

The success of their performance depends on their ability to read and play those notes as they are written. It is only when you know the notes and submit yourself to their discipline that you are free to play beautiful music.

[11 : 03] And it is the same with our lives. We want to make music with our lives and the quality of that music depends our attention to the score of God's law.

True freedom isn't the absence of constraints, but it's embracing the right constraints. And this is what Paul is affirming here about the law, that it's meant to show us the design and grain of God's creation that lines us up with life and flourishing.

And this, by the way, is why we read the summary of the law every week in worship. It's why during Lent, we rehearse the Ten Commandments. Because the law is good.

It's meant to show us what freedom looks like. But there is a problem. And that's the second thing we want to look at. We want to look at the problem with the law. In verses 7 through 11, Paul says, For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, You shall not covet.

But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me.

[12 : 13] And this is the biblical understanding of sin. It's a power that has influence and dominion and control in our lives. It's something that we are enslaved to and held captive by and that dwells in us.

And part of our captivity to sin is seen in the fact that the more that we understand the law, the more it provokes the power of sin inside of us.

The better we understand God's law, the more sin is provoked. The example that Paul gives here is coveting, or jealousy, the last and tenth commandment. Coveting is the disordered longing for stuff that doesn't belong to us.

And Paul is saying, knowing that the law says you shall not covet didn't make me not covet. Actually, it helped, it gave me, it made me think of 900 creative ways in which I wanted other people's stuff.

It actually produced lots more creative ways to sin. That's what it did. And we can think of all sorts of ways that we experience this in our daily lives.

[13 : 25] And if you, this afternoon, were to make a dessert or a batch of chocolate chip cookies and you were to tell your kids or your roommates or your housemates, you know, I made these cookies, but you can't eat them before dinner.

You know, cookies are for after dinner. What are you doing? You're trying to do something good that leads to freedom, and you're trying to protect your kids from ruining their appetite. But if you were to do that, what is that gonna do for them?

It's gonna create this longing and desire to eat, to swipe one of those cookies before dinner. And maybe it won't just do that for your kids, but maybe it'll do that for you too.

There's lots of other examples we can think of where knowing more about the law actually provokes sin inside of us. And this is not because the law is bad, but because sin is sinful.

There's a great classic Puritan book called *The Sinfulness of Sin*. It's a great title. And that's what Paul is saying here, actually, in verse 13.

[14 : 34] If you look in verse 13, Paul says, did that which is good then bring death to me? By no means. It was sin producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin.

And so just to summarize where we've been, the law is good because it's meant to point us to what freedom looks like. But even though the law can point us to freedom, it can't actually make us free. And that's because the problem with the law is not with the law itself, but with the power of sin. Our struggle with sin is perhaps most clearly articulated here in verses 14 through 20, perhaps more clearly articulated here than anywhere else in Scripture, where Paul here gives us a glimpse of his own inner struggle with sin.

And see if you find yourself resonating with these words. In verse 15, he says, for I do not understand my own actions, for I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing that I hate. Now, if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that the law is good. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.

[15 : 52] For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Friends, doesn't this describe our daily, inner, unrelenting struggle with sin?

I know it describes mine. We're constantly doing things that we don't wanna do, and the things that we wanna do that we don't want to do, we keep on doing. Perhaps this describes your own inner struggle with pride.

Pride. Or with anger. Or with jealousy. Or with lust.

Or with eating too much. Or with drinking too much. Or with working too much. Perhaps it describes your struggle against substance abuse or pornography.

We long to obey God, to do what will lead us into freedom, but there's a huge gap between that and how we actually live.

[17 : 00] And if we live in that gap long enough, if we live in that tension long enough, it can drive us to a really dark place. It can drive us to a place of despair.

It can drive us to a place of shame. It can drive us to a place of self-hatred. This is where it leads Paul. Did you notice Paul's conclusion? In verse 24, he says, his conclusion about this struggle is, wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?

It's a place of despair. It's a place of shame. And perhaps you know what this feels like. Perhaps you've heard voices like this inside your head.

I'll never be able to stop acting this way. I'll never be able to change. I'm such a terrible person. I'm such a failure.

I'm damaged goods. I'm beyond repair. I'm such a hypocrite. And if that's you this morning, I have good news for you.

[18 : 09] First of all, you're not alone. The fact that the Apostle Paul is describing this as his own personal experience should give us comfort because it means that this is the normative experience even for those who have mature faith in Christ.

That we live between the gap of how we know we should live and how we actually live. And second, the good news is that there is freedom to be found in our struggle with sin.

Even though the law can point us to freedom, it can't actually get us there. But we can find freedom. We can find freedom from the one who fulfilled the law in our place.

And that's where Paul goes next. And that's what I wanna look at finally. Third and finally, the fulfillment of the law. At the end of chapter seven, Paul says in despair, wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?

And where does he go next? Thanks be to God. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Jesus Christ brings us the freedom that the law points to but can't deliver.

[19 : 21] Specifically, we're gonna see in Romans chapter eight and the verses that follow that Jesus frees us from the penalty of sin, the power of sin, and the presence of sin.

Jesus frees us from the penalty of sin, the power of sin, and the presence of sin. The verse right after this, Romans chapter eight, verse one through four, Paul says, therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Because through Christ Jesus, the law of the spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do, what was the law powerless to do?

Help us keep the law. Free us from sin. For what the law was powerless to do, because it was weakened by the flesh, God did.

God did. By sending his own son. What the law could not do, God did. And friends, that is an incredible summary of the gospel. What the law couldn't do, God did.

[20 : 30] All of us are rule breakers and law breakers in God's sight. Because of that, we rightly deserve God's judgment for sin. But Jesus Christ came into the world to fulfill the law in our place.

He perfectly obeyed every single command in scripture. Not only the letter of the law, but the heart of the law. What's the heart of the law? It's love.

It's what we read every Sunday. To love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself. And Jesus did that. Jesus loved God with all of his heart, with all of his soul, with all of his mind, all of his strength.

Jesus loved his neighbor perfectly, completely. And Romans 8 verse 4 says that because he did that, for those who trust in him, that the righteous requirements of the law are actually met in us. Now that's an incredible statement. What does that mean? It means that if you have trusted in Jesus Christ, that when God looks at you, he doesn't see your moral failures, he doesn't see all the ways that you've completely blown it this week in your pride, in your anger, in your lust, in your jealousy, he doesn't see your sin.

[21 : 53] He sees you as if you have perfectly obeyed the law every day of your life. Because Jesus' perfect resume of law keeping is credited to you.

All who have faith in him not only have his forgiveness, they have his righteousness. That's what it means for the righteous requirements of the law to be met in us. And friends, this is incredibly good news as we struggle with sin in the midst of our daily lives.

Because not only do we struggle with sin, but we struggle with those voices of shame and despair. I'm such a terrible person. I'm such a failure.

I'm beyond repair. I'm such a hypocrite. And if that's you, let me invite you to meditate on the truth of Romans 8.1. This is a verse that you probably should memorize until you know it, to let it sink down deep into your heart until it drowns out the voice of shame.

Romans 8.1, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. No matter how much we struggle with sin, we can be assured there is no condemnation for us.

[23 : 10] Why? Because Jesus has already stood condemned in our place. And because through him, the law is fulfilled in us.

So first of all, Jesus brings freedom. He frees us from the penalty of sin. Secondly, he frees us from the power of sin. From the power of sin. Romans 8.11-13, if the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his spirit.

For if you live according to the flesh, you will die. But if by the spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. What is this saying?

It's saying that the presence of Christ dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit allows us to experience the freedom that can never be gained through the law. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can experience real change, real healing, real freedom from the power of sin in our lives.

How does that happen? How do we experience the kind of freedom and change by the power of the spirit? Well, sometimes it happens in mysterious and miraculous ways in ways that we can't fully understand.

[24 : 36] And some of you have experienced that. But often it happens as we give ourselves to spiritual practices and habits over time. Spiritual practices, spiritual disciplines are like raising the sail of a sailboat.

They're like raising the sail of a sailboat. Raising the sail doesn't move the boat. But what raising the sail does is it opens the boat to the power and potential of the glory of the wind.

which does have the power to move boats great distances. Prayer, reading scripture, fasting, solitude, community, confession, worship, all of these are raising the sail of the sailboat.

It's not the disciplines themselves that bring freedom over the power of the sin, over the power of sin, but what they do is they open us up. They open us up to the power of the spirit that does free us and heal us and change us.

When you engage your body and your soul in any kind of spiritual practice, you're raising the sail and you're asking the power of the spirit to come and blow with his power to bring freedom and healing in your life against your struggle with sin.

[26 : 01] Now, will we ever be completely free from our struggle against sin this side of heaven? God, no, we won't.

Can we experience real and significant change and progress and healing in our struggle with sin this side of heaven? Yes, we can.

And this is what is promised to us. By God's grace and through the power of the spirit, we can experience real freedom and real change as we raise the sail moment by moment, day by day, living, walking in the power of the spirit.

So Jesus frees us from the penalty of sin by fulfilling the law in our place. Jesus frees us from the power of sin by dwelling in us through his Holy Spirit. And finally, Jesus will free us from the presence of sin by renewing all of creation.

This is what Paul goes on to talk about in Romans chapter 8. And if we had time, I'd love to go there, but that's another sermon for another day. The hope of the renewal of all creation is what the rest of Romans 8 is about, about the redemption of our bodies, about all of creation that longs and groans to be renewed.

[27 : 21] And that's our hope, that all of creation will be renewed from the presence of sin. And what this means for the present in our lives right now is that as we struggle and as we fight against sin in the power of the Holy Spirit, experiencing both triumph and defeat, we do so with the incredible hope that one day this struggle will be no more.

The greatest struggle that we will have against sin is right now. But one day, we will be freed, completely freed from the presence of sin. One day, we'll no longer have to fight the daily fight against lust or pride or envy or anger or our relationship with food or alcohol or workaholism or greed or substance abuse or whatever it is the thing that you struggle with.

One day, the freedom from sin that we can taste now by the power of the Holy Spirit will be the very air that we breathe.

And so to put it all back together and to bring us back to where we started, what A.J. Jacobs and his experiment of a year of living biblically, even though it sounds crazy, what it gets right, what he gets right is that the law actually does have incredible relevance for our lives because it's meant to point us towards freedom.

The problem is not that A.J. Jacobs explored the demands of the law. His problem is that he didn't deal enough with the power of sin, with a struggle that we war against and that holds us captive.

[29 : 12] but just as equally, he didn't deal enough with the one who has brought us freedom by fulfilling the law in our place.

He didn't deal enough with the Savior who came to bring the real freedom that only the law can hint at. Freedom from the penalty of sin, freedom from the power of sin, freedom once and for all, forever, from the presence of sin.

Having a better understanding of the law or even of our own culture's understanding of morality can only get you so far.

But what we need, what the world needs, is the freedom, the kind of freedom that only Jesus can bring. Let's pray. our God and Father, thank you that you have made us for freedom.

And thank you that, Jesus, you came and fulfilled the law in our place. Lord, help us to experience the freedom that you came to bring us by the power of your Holy Spirit.

[30 : 27] Lord, change us, heal us, free us, renew us, we pray. In Christ's name, amen.