

New Life: Through Death

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[0 : 00] Let's pray together as we stand. Father, we thank you that you have enabled us to proclaim that creed.

Thank you that you have given us faith that we may believe indeed in your Son, that we may call you Father by the Holy Spirit.

And pray, Father, that you would grant us now your Holy Spirit, that we may hear your word clearly, and that our union with Jesus may be renewed and strengthened.

And it is in his name that we pray. Amen. Well, good morning, everyone. Please take out your Bibles, the Black Pew Bibles there, and turn open to the second reading, which is on page 943.

We're looking at Romans chapter 7, the first six verses. The passage that we are looking at this morning takes one of the most intuitive approaches to religion and turns it on its head.

[1 : 25] If you were to go out into the street and ask just random people around the city what they felt was the heart of Christianity, if you were to ask people, what's the point?

Or if you were to broaden the question, maybe, and ask them, what's the point of religion generally? What's the thing that's really important about religion? A lot of people would say very different things, but you would get a lot of answers that would fall into one of two categories.

One group would say that religion, all the different religions of the world, boil down fundamentally to ethics and morality.

So they would say something like, the thing that's really important about religion, all different religions, is that religion tells us right from wrong, and then tells us it is very important that you choose rightly in your life.

And if you choose rightly, then maybe you'll be blessed or something good will happen or you'll be rewarded somehow. And this is the view of religion that actually motivates a lot of people to bring their kids to church.

[2 : 47] Even if they don't personally believe the doctrines of the church or whatever, a lot of people bring their kids to church because they want their kids to get a good moral education and they want their kids to grow up making good choices.

So that's one group, one category. But then there's another group. And the other group is a lot more cynical. And the other group says that religion is all about controlling people through guilt and fear.

A lot of people think that when you boil religion down, it is an elaborate scheme to manipulate people and control their behavior.

And you manipulate people and you control their behavior by making them feel very, very guilty about what they've done and making them very, very afraid of future punishment. And you can tell it's a very cynical approach to religion.

Often times, it's born out of their own personal stories of pain and things like that. And if the first approach is what causes a lot of people to bring their kids to church, the second view of religion is what keeps a lot of people away from the church.

[4 : 01] And both of these approaches to religion are very intuitive. They're very widespread. But both of them completely miss the point of Christianity.

And the passage that we're looking at today turns both of them on their heads. And I want us to look at this passage. I want us to see the problem in this passage.

Number two, I want us to see the solution in this passage. And then thirdly, I want us to see the result. Problem, solution, result. And when we see those three things, we're going to see how this passage rejects both those approaches to religion.

And this passage gives us an insight into the very heart of the Christian life. Okay? So first of all, the problem. Romans chapter 7 is one of the most shocking passages in the entire book of Romans.

We're going to be looking at it a little bit this week and the rest of it next week. The reason Romans chapter 7 is one of the most shocking passages in the book of Romans is that Paul talks about how Christians have been released from the law.

[5 : 12] And you've got to see right out of the gate, you've got to appreciate how absolutely outrageous that must have sounded. Now when he talks about law, he's talking about the Old Testament law.

He's talking about the Ten Commandments and the first five books of the Old Testament. And if you were to read through the Bible, the Bible is absolutely clear that the law of God, the law that God gave Moses on Mount Sinai is absolutely good.

And if you read through the Bible, the Bible is very, very clear that the law is wonderful. It's one of the best gifts God ever gave his people. Through the law, Israel, Old Testament Israel, was able to achieve a remarkable degree of order, remarkable degree of freedom, remarkable degree of peace.

But according to the Apostle Paul and according to the book of Romans, there was one thing, there was one thing, one crucial thing that the law could never do.

It could never change our hearts. The law was good at regulating our outward behavior, but it could not change our inward problem.

[6 : 34] Look at verse 5, chapter 7, verse 5, Paul 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.

Now, look at that verse. Do you see what's absolutely shocking about that verse? Just absolutely shocking. Paul is saying that the law, which is very good, but the law, as good as it is, the law became complicit with sin.

The law of God, this wonderful gift that God gave Israel, the law became a tool in sin's hand that sin used to rule over us. You see what he says, our sinful passions.

What does he mean by that? He means within the human person, within every one of us, is a deep and fundamental desire to be autonomous from God. Within all of us is this deep and fundamental desire to be independent from God and to be the masters of our own fate.

And what Paul's saying is that those sinful passions, that deep desire, co-opted God's law and used God's law as a tool not to drive us closer to God, but to drive us in the opposite direction, to drive us away from God.

[8 : 03] Now, can you see why that is a terribly incendiary thing for Paul to say? Now, how in the world did sin use the law to drive us further from God?

Okay, there's two ways. Two ways. The first way is pretty intuitive. I think we'll all be able to, we've all experienced it. laws generally and rules generally.

Rules tend to raise our appetite for the thing they forbid. Do you know what I mean by that? I was never so tempted to steal a cookie until my mother told me not to touch the cookie jar.

Right? I was never tempted to rummage through my parents' closet until just before Christmas as a child. My mom would say, don't go in my closet. And I knew that that meant there were Christmas presents there and I desired to go in there.

It became the most interesting room in the house. Laws tend to increase our appetite for the things they forbid. A few years ago, I heard a news report about a woman called Azar Nafisi.

[9 : 21] And Azar Nafisi is an Iranian woman who is a novelist living in the United States. She's in exile from Iran. And she wrote this about the Islamic Revolution.

She said, I can thank the Islamic Revolution for one thing. By depriving us of the pleasure of imagination, of love, and of culture, it has directed us toward them.

You see how that works? Laws increase our appetite for the thing they forbid. And that's exactly the way sin used the law of God.

It increased our appetite to pursue the things that would increase our independence and our autonomy away from God. That's the first way sin co-opted the law.

But there's a second way, and this is more subtle. even when Israel was largely compliant with the law, even when they did almost everything they were supposed to do, it still never changed their heart.

[10 : 31] It still never changed their deep desire to be independent from God. at best it kind of contained them within some boundaries, but the law was never able to make them love God.

The law commanded them to love God, but it wasn't able to produce love within their hearts. And that's the thing God was really after. Think about the Pharisees for a moment.

You remember the Pharisees? Jesus was interacting with them all the time. And the Pharisees observed the law more compliantly than anybody else in history, probably.

And yet they ended up being Jesus' worst enemies. Why is that? According to Jesus, he had a very nice word for them.

He called them whitewashed tombs. And the point is, they looked great on the outside. Outwardly, they were compliant, but inwardly, they were dead. Inwardly, they were full, still, of sinful passions, and they inwardly were rejecting God.

[11 : 37] Now let me stop there and point something out. This is why Christianity says that morality and ethics are never enough. They're never enough by themselves.

You can know right from wrong really clearly, and you can live a largely moral life, and you can still be miles and miles away from God.

You can seem to do everything right, and you can still get it all wrong when it comes to your inward life with God. Why?

This is why. The reason is our problem is deeper than our behavior. our sinful passions can use outward morality to keep God at arm's distance.

And the thing is, God wants more than just compliant people. God wants children who call him father. So that's the problem.

[12 : 39] The problem in this passage is that the law could never really change our hearts. What's the solution? The solution, according to Paul, is that we have to be released from the law so that we can be joined together with Jesus Christ.

Okay, what does that mean? In the first few verses there, chapter seven, Paul uses the illustration of marriage. When you're married, you form a relationship that should only end in death, right?

Once you're married to somebody, you're supposed to be married until one of you dies. But when one of you dies, when one of the spouses dies, the living spouse is free even to marry another person.

Now, Paul's saying that something kind of similar happened when Jesus died. When Jesus died, God's people were released from the law so that they can be joined together with Jesus.

You can think of it this way. Our relationship with the law in the Old Testament has been replaced with a new relationship with Jesus. Now, how does that solve the problem?

[13 : 53] Thank you for asking. I knew that was in your mind. How does that solve the problem? Think about Jesus for a while. Think about Jesus the night before he was arrested.

Remember where he is? He's in the Garden of Gethsemane, and he knows he's been betrayed, he knows he's going to be arrested, he knows he's going to die a terrible, terrible death, he knows he's going to be tortured, and he kneels down and he prays.

It's one of the most interesting pictures of Jesus we have. He kneels down and he prays and he says, Father, I don't want to do this. If there's any way that we can get this thing done without me going through what I'm about ready to go through, I want out of it if I can.

But then comes the really important bit. He says, nevertheless, do you remember? Not my will, but yours be done. Now here's my question.

What motivated Jesus to prefer God's will over his own will? What motivated him? We get a little bit of a clue in the Gospel of Mark.

[15 : 01] In Mark's Gospel, when Mark tells the story, Jesus uses a very, very special name for God. God. He calls God Abba. It's the one time in the Gospels that Jesus utters that phrase.

It's an Aramaic word. It's an Aramaic word. And it's a very personal word. It's a very intimate name. It's the name that a child would use for his father.

And the point is, it's an affectionate word. It's a word that expresses love. And that's the key bit. What motivated Jesus to obey God? It was his love for his father.

He wasn't merely conforming to some sort of outward standard of behavior. He was being motivated because he loved his father. Think of it this way.

Jesus went to the cross. Jesus paid the ultimate sacrifice above all else because he loved his father. And that's the one thing that the law could never accomplish.

[16 : 05] It's the one thing the law could never produce in us. The law could regulate behavior but it couldn't make us love God. And here's the thing that we have to see from this passage in Romans. When we're released from the law and joined together with Jesus, Jesus gives us his own motivation for obedience.

Jesus implants within us his own love for his father. And Jesus gives us his own love for the father so that our sinful passions, our desire to be independent from God is replaced with the opposite.

It's replaced with the same love for God that Jesus has. Now friends, that's the thing that motivates the Christian life.

And that's what verse six means. Look at verse six at the very end. So that we serve in the new way of the spirit. He's talking about the Holy Spirit and not in the way of the old written code.

Let me show you something real quick. Turn over the page. Romans chapter eight down at the bottom of the first column. Verse 15. Paul's talking here about the work of the Holy Spirit.

- [17 : 18] It says this for you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Holy Spirit of adoption as sons by whom we cry.

What do we cry? Abba father. father. And the spirit bears himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God. Now we got to wait for a few weeks to unpack all that that means, but I couldn't quite wait.

What I want you to see here is that the Holy Spirit's job is to fill us with the exact same love that Jesus has for his father. So just like Jesus called God Abba, we call God Abba.

And just like Jesus obeyed the father out of his love for him, we get to do the same thing. Because we're joined to Jesus by the spirit. Okay, what's the problem?

The problem is that the law could never change our hearts. What's the solution? When we're joined to Jesus, he fills us with his own love for the father. What's the result? The result is fruitfulness.

- [18 : 23] It's good works. Look at verse 4. Likewise, my brother, 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.

And then note the reason we're joined to Christ. In order that we may bear fruit for God. Now, he's talking about good works there.

Bearing fruit for God. And as I close, I want to point out three things about bearing fruit for God. First thing is this.

now that we've been joined to Christ, we have a higher, not lower, standard for fruitfulness than we did before.

What do I mean by that? A lot of people think that the New Testament has lower standards for obedience than the Old Testament. That's not true.

- [19 : 24] We're joined to Jesus so that, the purposes, so that we can bear the fruit of good works. Remember Jesus' teaching on the Sermon on the Mountain?

Do you remember what he says there? He says, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes the law, the Old Testament law, but then he raises the standard for his disciples.

Do you remember that? He says things like, the law told you not to murder. I tell you, don't even hate people. In fact, not only should you not hate people, go ahead and love the people you would naturally hate.

Go ahead and love your enemies. You see how he raises the standard? In another place, he says, the law told you not to commit adultery. I tell you, don't even lust.

Don't even commit adultery in your imagination. Do you see how he raises the stakes of discipleship? The law tried to regulate our outward behavior, but Jesus requires an inward transformation, a transformation at the deepest core of who we are, at the level of our motivation and our desires, at the level of our imagination, at the level of what we love.

- [20 : 48] So when we're joined to Jesus it's not lower standards, it's higher standards than the law could have ever accomplished. Second thing, when we're joined to Christ, we're not motivated by guilt or fear, we're motivated by love.

Remember what I said at the beginning. A lot of people think that religion is an elaborate attempt to manipulate people through fear and guilt. And that's the reason a lot of people stay away from the church.

church. Now the reality is a lot of religions function exactly in that way. And the reality is a lot of Christian churches function in that way.

But you've got to see that that is not the Christianity of Jesus. And that is not the Christianity of Paul. And that is not the Christianity of the Bible. When we're joined to Jesus, the spirit fills us with Jesus' own love for his father.

And that's the thing that motivates our good works. That's the thing that motivates our obedience. Now this is really, really important because love is a far stronger motivator than either guilt or fear can ever be.

[21 : 58] Let me give you an example. I am a father. I have a little boy. And civil law requires that I care for my son.

Right? If I neglect my son, I can get in trouble. But that is not what motivates me to care for my son. I don't care for my son because I'm afraid of punishment.

I don't care for my son really primarily because I feel guilty about it. I care for my son because I love him. And you'd have to kill me to keep me from caring for him.

my love for my son makes me want to do the maximum for him, not the minimum. And that's the same exact dynamic that happens in the Christian life through the Holy Spirit when we're joined to Jesus.

The Spirit fills us with love so that we want to do the maximum for God, not the minimum. And if you're not a Christian, you need to know that you're being invited not to a life filled with fear and guilt.

[23 : 10] You're being invited into a life dominated by a love that is more intense than you've ever imagined and is the object of your deepest desire. Okay, one last thing before we stop.

If you want to grow in fruitfulness, you must be continually refreshed in your union with Jesus. All of us here who are Christians realize that we are not as fruitful as we want to be.

And so we're always trying to think how can I move forward in my spiritual life? How can I more fully reject sin and pursue God? How do I do the maximum for God, not the minimum?

And the answer is the Christian life is a continual process of being refreshed in our bond with Jesus. And as we come to communion this morning, we're very fortunate because the reason communion was instituted was exactly this, to refresh our union and our bond with Jesus.

And as we come to the table, and as we hear the gospel, and as we receive Christ in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving, that's how the spirit continually refreshes us, binds us more closely with Jesus so that we love God more and hate sin more and pursue him motivated not by guilt or fear but by love.

[24 : 32] And as we come to communion, we're being tutored, so to speak, in the process of how we are continually to be refreshed every day of our life in our bond with Jesus.

Let's ask him to do that. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord God, we desire to be more fully united to Jesus, that we might love you as he loves you.

So fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we may love you with everything we have and be fruitful for your glory. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.