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The Roman Road: From Religion to Relationship

May 5, 2024

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Romans 7:1-6 (ESV)

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.

John 1:9-17

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

In our gospel text today, John mentions two eras or epochs in history. He describes the first era as the era of the law, given through Moses from the time God burned the Ten Commandments onto those tablets of stone. From Moses forward to the time of Christ was the era of the law.

Then John says, "Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ our Lord." Now, a new era has begun, an era of grace and truth. So you have these two eras that John mentions: an era of the law of God and now the era of grace and truth. What is being described here are two different covenants or two different ways of relating that God established in history with humankind. The first is known as the old covenant relationship God had with his people through the law and the giving of the law. It's a law-based relationship. If the people obeyed what God had said to them, then things were okay; if they disobeyed, then things were harsh for them.

Then there's the new covenant, the time of Christ that was ushered in through Jesus coming into the world. And now there is a period of grace. We're in a grace-based opportunity with God. Almost every relationship we have falls on a spectrum of law or grace. And truth is what's mentioned here. In every relationship we have, we can sense or feel these things. I want to describe for you a law-based relationship and then a grace and truth-based relationship.

And I want you to think about which one you would rather be a part of. A law-based relationship is a relationship based on a person's performance in the relationship, and a law-based relationship with God is one based on our perfect performance before him. The Scripture says we should keep every law, and if you're in a law-based relationship, you know what the standards are. You know what the measuring stick says. You know what's expected of you, and you strive to keep up and accomplish those things. And there are many relationships in our world that are somewhat law-based. My son happens to play sports. He plays football, and he's expected to do certain things on the field. If he doesn't accomplish certain things, then he doesn't have the relationship very long. He'll get cut from the team; he'll get excused from the relationship. Oftentimes, those aren't standards set by the law givers; it's more of a comparison with other players. Are you doing better than expected from other players, and are you excelling more than them? There's constant pressure for performance in a law-based relationship. Some families are very law-based. There are very strong expectations of people, and if people don't live up to those expectations, here's a second characteristic of law-based relationships: retribution or punishment. If you fail or fall short of the expectation, there's correction and strong instruction.

So law-based relationships don't have a lot of room for feelings, emotions, and discussions. Either you hit the mark or you don't hit the mark. And if you don't hit the mark, you're punished. If you do hit the mark, in extreme law-based relationships where the only thing that matters is the measuring stick, then if you do good, you're not necessarily rewarded because that's what was expected of you. So you're not encouraged so much for doing good as you are

reprimanded for doing bad. These relationships, I would say, are somewhat fun for the law giver or the taskmaster, but they're not so fun for the imperfect person who's being expected always to live up to certain expectations. If you've ever been in a harsh, law-based relationship that requires great performance, perfect performance all the time, you know how exhausting such relationships can be. They can even drive a person to become hopeless and despairing.

Now, on the other end of the spectrum of relationships is a relationship based on grace and truth. These are relationships that are based on an initial idea of acceptance for who you are, where you're at in the now, and where all your missteps are forgiven and discarded. Grace is unmerited favor. There's just no end to what grace will overlook. The Bible describes this as where mistakes are there, grace covers them even more. So it's based on love and acceptance. Where you're at in the now, and missteps are forgiven and discarded, and where when you do what is right, it's often rewarded and encouraged. This is what the Scripture says about a grace-based relationship, that God knows that we're dust and we can't live up to all his expectations. And so he has done some work to bring us grace. We're accepted and forgiven all of our past, present, and future missteps, mistakes, failures, sins can be forgiven and done away with. What happens in this kind of relationship is as a person is extended grace, even though they know they're falling short of expectations and not doing all they could, they start to love the grace giver back. And what happens in a grace-based relationship is love grows. The law giver extends grace and mercy, honesty and truth. And they're forgiven. The one who broke the law. And then the one who's forgiven says, well, I love you. Thank you for forgiving me in that way. And now I want to please you more, and I want to walk more with you. And it's an upward spiral of growing love. The Grace giver receives more glory and praise from the one who's receiving the grace, and the one who's receiving the grace is more and more inspired by the love and the kindness and the mercy of the grace giver.

Now, what Paul is describing here in his text in Romans seven is the movement in history from people relating to God in a law-based relationship, to moving towards relating to God in a grace-based relationship. And he uses the analogy of marriage from the Old Testament covenant God had with people to the New Testament covenant and marriage itself. A marriage relationship is a covenant. It's a promise. It's stipulations of the way we're going to relate with one another, some guidelines for the relationship. In Romans seven, Paul is saying the guidelines have changed from a time of law to a time of grace. We're no longer relating with God through the law, but we're relating with him through grace. And he uses a marriage analogy to describe this. "Do you not know the law is binding?" he says, Romans chapter seven, verses one. The law is binding on a person only as long as they live. Which means if you

and I are driving down the road and we're speeding and going too fast, and we get pulled over because the law says we should go 55 miles an hour and we were going 85 miles an hour. The law is binding on us, and the authority there can give us a ticket. But if by chance we happen to die in the middle of that process, which is kind of a morbid thought. But if it happens, well, the law is no longer binding on us. It's irrelevant to us. And Paul says this: "the law is binding on a person only as long as they live." And then he says this, "for a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives.

But if her husband dies, she's released from the law of marriage." Now, what he's saying here is there's a way out of covenants through death. When a promise is made in the Scripture, it's a promise or a binding for life. But even as we say in marriage, we say until death do us part. Now, you shouldn't read this. And if you're struggling in your marriage, you shouldn't take this the wrong way. Paul is describing legally how this works. If a woman is married to a man and he dies, she's released from the covenant made with him. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she's free from the law, the covenant that was made. And if she marries another man, she's not an adulteress. She's free to have a new relationship. Paul is saying something like this happens through the work of Christ in our lives, and his death and his resurrection, so that we can move out from under a law-based relationship with God and into a grace and truth-based relationship. In Romans six he says this: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" And so there the requirements of the Old Testament law are fulfilled in us through the death of Jesus, and our old nature is crucified with him. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead to the glory of the father, we too might live in the newness of life.

Do you understand what's being said here, friends? Through Christ, our old nature, which is striving always to measure up and always falling short of the law of God and deserving of punishment, that old sinful nature inside of us that all of us have. And the law reflects it back to us. It shows us the nature of our sin. That nature was put to death, so it's no longer held captive by the law. It's joined with something supernatural is happening here. Friends, our nature is crucified with Christ. When Christians talk about baptism, they're talking about being put to death with Jesus buried with him. And it's symbolic of our old nature being put up on the cross with Jesus crucified with him. So it's no longer alive and no longer under the requirements of the law, because in that death all of the punishment due us was fulfilled. But God Himself absorbed this for us. Friends, I don't know. It's transactional. It's a mystical work

where God absorbs our sinful nature. And then he imputes back to us his nature, his perfect and pure nature. We have been united with him in a death like his. We shall certainly be united with him. Paul continues Romans six five in a resurrection like his, we know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.

And in Romans seven verse six says, now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in a new way of the spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. Oh, friend, do you have any idea the transaction that takes place in a person's life when they come to faith in the risen Savior? I mean, it's miraculous. It's a spiritual rebirth. It's hard to grasp what is happening here. Nicodemus came to Jesus in John chapter three and he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life, to enter the kingdom of God?" And Jesus said, "very truly, I tell you, you must be born again." And that's what our text in John 17 said, you're born not of flesh or blood, not of human effort or human will, but it's a supernatural birth born of the spirit. Nicodemus. "What do you mean, born again? Do I enter my mother's womb again?" And Jesus said, "it's not a physical birth, a birth of water, but it's a spiritual birth, a birth in the spirit where the old man in us is crucified with Christ, buried with him in his death. And then a new nature is given us by the power of God's Spirit to walk in the newness of life. In this new nature is now under grace and truth, and our old nature, now having experienced the death of Jesus, imputed to it, even though it still swings itself around a little bit, is no longer held against us because we're seen in the righteousness of Jesus.

Oh friends, this is grace. And now the truth calls us forward. It becomes loving to want to be honest and open with God about our failures. And then he can work his saving grace in us. Now we're in a relationship based on love and acceptance, where missteps are forgiven and discarded, where then walking by faith, even the smallest amount of faith God will reward. He says he'll give us blessing and encouragement and inspire us in it. And then we respond back with glory and honor to the grace giver. And we want to love him more. And he pours out more grace on us and just upward spiral of love. Some people say that religion under the Old Testament law is spelled deo, which means striving, always working to do what's right before God. Going to church all the time, striving to always appear right. Striving to keep our behavior good. But it's a dead-end game, friends, and we cannot fulfill the law of God. We just can't do it in our own flesh. But if we'll turn this whole project over to Jesus, our flesh will be joined with him in crucifixion and put to death. And he'll, by His Spirit in his resurrection power, breathe a new nature, a new life into us that will slowly want to please God

and walk with him.

And as we experience his grace and his power and his mercy and love, we will want to respond more and more with love and obedience to His Spirit. And that is spelled when we think of it in our relationship with God. All the demands of the law have already been met. Done it is finished. Jesus said from the cross, it's all done now you. Can walk in harmony with me by the power of your spirit. And if you have missteps, I'm going to give you grace and invite you back on the road again. Although the mercy and the kindness and the grace of Almighty God, I hope you've opened your heart to Jesus, friend. If you haven't, why not today? Why not now? To receive him? You know our gospel text says this as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of the Most High God, not born of blood or flesh, or the will of man, but supernaturally born of God. He came to us full of grace and truth. Father in Heaven, thank you for this chance to look to you, to invite you to come work in our lives and transform us by the mercy and grace of your power and your kindness. Help us continue to walk in the spirit, this powerful spirit of the resurrected Jesus. It is in his name. Jesus name we pray. Amen.