

## Romans 7

### The Marriage Analogy

Paul has been using analogies to describe the break with sin as a ruling factor in the lives of those who follow the risen Christ. So far, the law has been left out of the conversation. In a brief, but potent analogy, Paul will bring the law back into conversation.

#### Romans 7:1-3

“Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law is binding on a person only during that person’s lifetime? <sup>2</sup> Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law concerning the husband. <sup>3</sup> 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.”

“This is the general principle, and it seems straightforward: legal obligations, for example, may be canceled at death. This returns us to the discussion of the sharing in the death of the messiah at the beginning at chapter 6. It also reminds us of the function of the law, like that of sin and death, as ruling or governing, and so keeps in play the sphere of the political (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 108).”

This analogy places the men in the group into a frame of mind that opens them to think of themselves as the wife. This would have been truly shocking. Women were little more than property in the economic exchange of the masculine-driven social structure.

“For the women the only way out of this patriarchal [or andri-archal] law is the death of the male! [There is no specific term for ‘husband’ as opposed to ‘male’ in Paul’s language] (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 109).”

“This [verse 3] indeed shows that the law of adultery is a male law. It is how the male assures himself of property rights (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 109).”

#### Romans 7:4-6

“In the same way, my friends, you 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.”

“We are discharged from the law [this is like that male law for the woman] but now not through the death of the male but through our sharing in the death of the messiah (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 110).”

Our new life in the risen Christ has delivered us from being under the power of sin, which is the power of death. We can now live freely into the new reality of God's unfolding justice.

## **Death and the Law (Romans 7:7-25)**

### **Romans 7:7**

“What then should we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”

Paul enters into a series of statements that explore his understanding of the law and how sin entered into the mechanics of our relationship with the law.

“First, there is a connection between the law and the knowledge of sin or violation or, as we heard before, the measuring of sin or crime. **Sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not measured [reckoned] where there is no law [5:13].** Earlier he had said that **where there is no law, neither is the violation [4:15].** Paul has thus signaled before that this theme must be clarified or addressed. He now turns to that task (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 112).”

“What Paul says now is this: **If it has not been for the law, I would have not known [about?] sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’** (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 112).”

“Here we have a summation of the law already found in emergent Judaism in Paul's time [Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 194] as that concerning covetousness: the desire to have something that belongs to another as the very summary of all sin. This has a certain resonance with Stoic wisdom as well, in which the good life involves staying within the limits of what is one's own (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 112).”

“And here it seems clear that this ‘I’ can only be what we encountered earlier as Adamic humanity [in contrast to messianic humanity]. It is essential to recall that Adamic humanity is regarded in the argument of 5:12-21 as both before and [then] under the law... it seems clear that the ‘I’ is the Adamic humanity of sin and death, but it is also cognizant of the law and even [as it will be said later] loves law (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 112-13).”

To covet something that is not yours is a basic instinct. In our struggle for survival the seeking and attaining of resources is all that matters. If we do not have the resources to meet our needs, and we see that they are possessed by another, we will do anything to attain them for ourselves. We covet what we do not have and act to possess. This leads to a breakdown of relationships, to injustice, what Paul would name as sin.

### **Romans 7:8-11**

“But sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived 10 and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.”

“First we notice that life and death come into the picture again but in a very different way than in the previous discussion of the Adamic and the messianic. They are redeveloped now with a rather different effect:

Before the law = I am alive; sin is dead.

Under the law = sin is alive; I am dead.

This contrasts with what was happening before in that there we were concerned with a different transition: from death to life, that is, we were focused on the transition from messiah [or messianic human] as dead, to being made alive. Now we are clarifying how it is that the human came to be ‘dead’ or one who was ruled by death. This has to do [again] with the advent of the law (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 115-16).”

“Let us begin [appropriately] with Adam. He is alive; sin is dead. Or in this case sin is not yet in existence. The commandment says, Don’t eat the fruit of the tree. This is already the prohibition of covetousness, that is, of desiring that which does not pertain to oneself. It is then ‘sin’ that takes hold of the command and turns it against Adam to deceive. That is, after all, that way the story is constructed, that the human is deceived by that which turns the commandment into provocation... Even though Adam doesn’t die at once, he is under the dominion of death - which subsequently comes to expression, as we saw, as murder (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 116).”

### **Romans 7:13**

“Did what is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, working death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.”

“The law is good in that it aims at life, so it does not aim at death. Rather, sin itself [personalized it would seem, almost like Satan] turns the law from being what gives life to what gives death. In this way we see how really awful sin is: it produces, procures death, and does so even through what is intended for life (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 118).”

The law was meant to protect our relationships, first with God, and then with each other. The law protected the common life of the community and extended to those who were outside of the covenant. Paul honors this with his argument. The issue at hand is our sin breaks down our relationship with God and with others, leading to injustice and sin.

“In the same way, that state that promises to restrain violence does so through giving itself a monopoly on violence and thus institutionalizes violence, thereby making violence not an individual act but the very foundation and articulation of the social order (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 118).”

#### **Romans 7:14**

“For we know that the law is spiritual; but I am of the flesh, sold into slavery under sin.”

“So far, we have seen that the law is spirited as that which aims at life, just as something like the resurrection of the messiah produces life. And chapter 5 contrasted messianic life and Adamic death. That is precisely where this argument is heading. Here the Adamic ‘I’ is what is ‘sold’ into sin, as a slave to sin and injustice, an instrument or weapon of injustice Paul has written. Wed to sin, he has also said. Owned by sin (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 119).”

#### **Romans 7:15-20**

“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. 17 But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. 18 For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. 19 For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. 20 Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.”

“Here it is crucial that we are not dealing with the worst of human beings but the best, which distinguishes what is going on here from the indictment that started out Paul’s letter. It is the problem of humanity that has the honor of Adam as well as the shame (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 120).”

#### **Romans 7:21-25a**

“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

“The human, the would-be good and just human, is caught in a vice, incapacitated (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 120).”

“The exclamation is inserted following the lament, preceding the summary because ‘the answer’ is what determines the diagnosis and the answer to the problem is what Paul supposes to be the glad-making proclamation, the one that incites gratitude, rejoicing (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 120).”

**Romans 7:25b**

“So then, with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin.”

“This applies not just to the worst, who perhaps gladly indenture themselves in this way, but also to the best, to those who want to be good, just, holy - who want what the law ‘wants’ or intends. After all, for this reason there is law, even that law we pass in a democracy... It is precisely when we intend or want or aim at doing what is good that we find ourselves brought up against the tragedy of law... That one aims at justice only makes clear one’s immersion in injustice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 121).”