

Not Under the Law as a Covenant of Works

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 October 2026

Preacher: Jeremy Sarber

[0:00] Well, last time we considered the Christian's perpetual obligation to obey God's moral law. Just because the Bible teaches that we are justified by faith apart from works of the law doesn't mean that God's commandments have become void or unbinding.

It doesn't mean that God has changed His standard of righteousness or the expectation He has of His creatures. Becoming a Christian, for example, doesn't mean that dishonesty suddenly becomes honesty or selfishness suddenly becomes love.

It doesn't mean that God no longer cares whether we're honest or dishonest. But what I want to do today is continue on this theme and consider more closely what exactly has changed for the Christian.

And I will say from the start that Christ has not merely given us additional reasons to obey, though He has given us more reasons to obey, but He has also delivered us from a relationship to the law in which we stood condemned.

So if you will, turn with me to Romans chapter 7. This is an excellent place to start to understand what I'm talking about because Paul not only explains things systematically, but he also provides a very helpful illustration.

[1:30] And as I read this, I want you to notice how the former relationship to the law comes to an end and exactly what takes its place. This is Romans chapter 7.

I'll read the first six verses. 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.

[2:53] Now, just as a side point, this passage does teach us something about marriage, but it's not primarily about marriage. It's primarily about the believer's relationship to the law.

So, with that in mind, Paul begins with a principle in verse 1. He says, The law is binding on a person only as long as he lives. So, he expects his readers to understand that death changes a person's relationship to certain legal obligations.

And then he provides a very simple illustration of this. Obviously, a married woman is bound to her husband while he still lives.

The marriage covenant is a covenant for life until death do us part. So, she cannot simply decide that she doesn't want to be married any longer. I suppose she could, but that alone would not change her relationship to the law or her obligation to keep that law.

So, what would change her relationship to the law? Well, suppose her husband dies. Paul says that she is then released from the law of marriage.

[4:04] Her husband's death would mean that the marriage has officially ended. She is no longer bound by that particular covenant, and she is free to marry another man. That's the contrast in verse 3.

As long as her husband is alive, entering into, let's just say, a romantic relationship with another man, would violate her marriage obligation.

But after his death, she can enter into a new marriage without violating it. Again, Paul is not giving a complete treatment of marriage here, or divorce, or every circumstance that might arise, but he's using this familiar situation to establish a very specific point.

Death brings the former binding relationship to an end. Now, what doesn't change here is the law itself. Her relationship to it changes, but the law itself remains the same.

Even after her husband's death, the law of marriage, as it's described here, does not somehow become immoral or even irrelevant.

[5:16] If she were to marry again, she would be bound by the same law of marriage, right? If she were thinking about having an affair with a married man, the law of marriage would still be binding.

So, even though her husband's death has ended her obligation to him in particular, and to their covenant, that covenant they shared with one another, it's not as though she or God or anyone else arbitrarily decided that the law no longer matters and that it can barely be set aside.

Even so, something has genuinely changed her position and her relationship to that law. And I think this is where that distinction will become important as Paul continues and applies this illustration.

You see, we tend to think that the only way to be free from a law is for that law to be revoked, for that law to disappear.

And I think that's why perhaps so many Christians have this wrong idea that we don't really need God's law anymore. In fact, some will go as far as to say we don't really need the Old Testament.

[6:26] We are free in Christ, they'll say. But removing the law is not the only way to be free from the law. As Paul shows us here, there's another possibility.

This woman was free from the law of marriage without anyone ever taking that law away or without that law ever ceasing to be binding, generally speaking.

Now, if we stopped here, we might get the false idea that physical death somehow releases us from being judged by God's law. But that really isn't the case.

Elsewhere, Paul writes, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each one of us may receive what is due for what we have done in the body, whether good or evil. We're even told that God will judge the secrets of men.

So, if not our deaths, what does change our relationship to the law? Verse 4, Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ.

[7:34] In the case of the marriage illustration, the husband physically died. But in the application, Paul says that believers have died, though not personally and physically.

And the key phrase here is, through the body of Christ. Our release from the law has been accomplished through the crucifixion and death of the Son of God.

His physical body was given over to death, and through our union with him, that death changes our standing before God. The physical death happened to Christ, but its saving consequences belong to everyone who is joined to him by faith.

And if we were to go back to Romans 6, we would see this union we have with Christ. It was there that Paul explained that believers have died with Christ, and they share in his resurrection life.

And here he identifies another consequence of that same union. We have died to the law. Because Christ acted as our representative on the cross, what he accomplished was for our benefit.

[8:55] When God brings us to faith in his Son, we share in the benefits of his death and resurrection. Now, let's pause here for just a moment and think back to the first paragraph of the confession.

In fact, let me read it. God gave Adam a law of comprehensive obedience written in his heart in a specific precept not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

By these, God obligated him and all his descendants to personal, total, exact, and perpetual obedience. God promised life if Adam fulfilled it and threatened death if he broke it, and he gave Adam the power and ability to keep it.

So under this original covenant of works, life was promised upon obedience, and death was threatened upon disobedience. And there was no room for anything in between, right?

The demand was not that a person do reasonably well. Well, it required complete, total, perfect obedience. Well, as we've discussed, we all failed in that regard.

[10:10] Adam failed, and we have failed. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But, thinking back to what Paul said in Romans 3, we are justified by God's grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

Why could Christ suffer the consequences of our sins and die on our behalf? It was because he was the sinless son of God, sent by the Father to act as our representative.

He rendered the obedience God required, the obedience we all lacked. And he willingly bore our judgment, the judgment that our disobedience deserved.

And those truths are foundational here, as Paul is showing us what they mean for our relationship to the law as believers united to Christ. So, to be clear, the law never made a false accusation against us.

We really did sin. And it's also true that the penalty for our sin was not something that God simply disregarded at some point.

[11:31] He could not do that and continue to be just. So, our deliverance required more than a mere announcement that we should stop worrying about the law, that God will no longer hold us accountable.

No, it actually required a Savior to answer its demands on our behalf. As Paul says to the Galatians, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

And he could do so because he met God's standard of righteousness completely, thoroughly, totally. He fulfilled the righteous demands of the covenant of works on behalf of his people.

So, when Paul uses the phrase through the body of Christ, he is teaching us that Christ has borne the sentence of our lawbreaking.

His people are released, not because God has discovered they were innocent after all, or because he no longer cares about his moral law, but because their guilt has been dealt with through our substitute.

[12:44] The law's claim upon condemned sinners has been answered in the death of the one to whom they belong, for whom he died.

And this is what the confession means in this opening sentence of the paragraph when it says, true believers are not under the law as a covenant of works to be justified or condemned by it.

Now, that's not a denial of what we talked about last time regarding the moral law. The confession is not suggesting that God's commandments have lost their authority or that they are no longer binding.

What it does is identify a particular relationship to the law. Believers do not stand before God awaiting a verdict based on whether our own obedience meets the law's demands.

We know that verdict. We know that our acceptance with God rests upon Christ alone who has already fulfilled those demands for us.

[13:53] But having said that, Paul does not end verse 4 with our release from the law. He goes on to explain what takes the place of this form of relationship.

Again, the relationship changes while the law remains the same. So look at what he says next. 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.

You see, Christ delivered us for a purpose. And that purpose is not to free us from our moral obligations to God, our Creator.

We often think of freedom as simply having no obligations. No one can tell me what to do. That's freedom, right? But that's not the kind of freedom Paul describes. In the marriage illustration, death ends a particular covenant bond without making faithfulness itself irrelevant.

And likewise, believers are released from the law's condemning claim, but not from the authority of God who gave that law. But more to the point, Paul does not present the Christian as someone who has escaped God's authority and has now become his own master.

[15:15] He identifies the Christian as one who has been brought into vital union with Christ. This one who has been raised from the dead. So while his death dealt with our condemnation under the law, our relationship with him does not end at the cross.

The risen Christ is now the one to whom our lives belong. And what comes from this new relationship? What's the result of this? Paul says that we bear fruit for God.

Well, before we talk about what it means to bear fruit, let's focus on that phrase for God. That tells us something significant about the direction of this new life, doesn't it?

We've already established that God's moral law reflects his unchanging character. So what changes under the gospel is not God's character.

It's not his standard of righteousness, but the standing and the hearts of those whom he saves.

We've traced this history already.

[16 : 26] Adam, he received God's law and he disobeyed. Israel received that law in written form and they also disobeyed. Yet, God promised something more than another commandment or another iteration of those commandments or another warning.

He announced a new covenant through his prophets. But of course, even Israel failed to keep the law. So what does God do? He announces the coming of this new covenant and I'll read again from Ezekiel.

I read this last time but through Ezekiel God says, I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

I often describe this as God essentially saying if you want something done right you've got to do it yourself. Of course, I don't mean that God no longer requires his people to obey.

Quite the opposite actually. Israel's history demonstrated that the law by itself would not make sinful people obedient.

[17 : 53] So God promised to act. He says he will cleanse his people. He will give them new hearts. He will put his spirit within them and he will cause them to walk in his ways.

And as we've seen this saving work rests upon his son who obeyed where we failed and bore the judgment we deserved. But then what?

What happens once we are joined to Christ by faith and receive that not guilty verdict from God on the basis of Jesus' perfect obedience and death? Well, this is where some Christians are tempted to argue that we're freed from the law so we're no longer obligated to keep the law.

But that's not what God promised in the new covenant. Yes, he will free us from the eternal condemnation that our law-breaking required. But he doesn't free us from the obligation to keep the law.

In fact, it is the very opposite of that. God says, I will put my spirit within you and I will cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

[19 : 08] You see, God's concern from the beginning was that his people obey his moral will. God's solution to our failure then is not to declare his righteousness as irrelevant or stop holding us accountable to it.

He promises both forgiveness and inward renewal. He doesn't say, Jesus has suffered the punishment so you're free to live however you want.

You won't find that anywhere in Scripture. He promises to make a people who love him and seek to obey him. So God's solution is to remove our condemnation in Christ and give us his spirit who enables us to obey.

You might say we are saved to keep the law, namely, the Decalogue or the Ten Commandments.

And this is not as a way to earn life, but as the fruit of the life God has given us.

So what does it mean to bear fruit for God? It means we've been changed from a people who rebel against the law to a people who love the law and better yet strive to keep the law.

[20 : 27] In Ephesians 2, Paul says, we were a people who were dead in trespasses and sins in which we once walked following the course of this world and so on, but now, in Christ, he says, and through the Spirit, we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, or we might say for keeping the commandments which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

So clearly, God's law does not cease to matter. Christ has borne its condemnation for his people and the Spirit now changes us so that we can finally begin to do what God created us to do in the first place.

Obey him. Keep his moral law. Notice the contrast here in Romans 7. 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.

So verse 5 describes our former condition when we were living in the flesh, and verse 6 describes our new condition in Christ. Now, Paul uses what may seem like a strange expression in the middle of verse 5.

[22:02] He says, our sinful passions were aroused by the law. Well, how can that be? How can God's good and righteous law stir up sinful desires within us?

What is he saying here? Well, he actually anticipates that question. If you glance down at verse 7, he asks, what shall we say then?

That the law is sin? By no means. Then in verse 8, he explains, but sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.

So Paul says, the law is not to blame. Sin is to blame. The law is good, but our fallen nature takes even God's good commandments and turns them into opportunities for rebellion.

So when God says, you shall not covet, our sinful nature responds by coveting. Sometimes merely being told that we cannot have something makes us want it all the more.

[23:10] And we've all seen this in children, haven't we? You can put something in front of a child that they previously had no interest in whatsoever, but the moment you tell that child, don't touch this thing, that's the only thing in this world he wants to do.

And that's not usually because the object itself has become more desirable. Sometimes the appeal is simply that he's been told he can't have it. Well, let's be honest, adults are no different.

We're just more sophisticated in the ways we justify our disobedience. The commandment did not create the rebellion. is what Paul is saying.

It simply revealed and it aggravated that rebellion that was already there. That really helps us understand why the law cannot save us. Helps us understand why it cannot produce genuine righteousness within us.

It tells us what God requires, but it can't change the heart. It can't overcome our sinful nature. We need something more than the law's instruction.

[24:19] We need the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. We need God to do something within us. And that's why Paul says what he says in verse 6, we are released from the law having died to that which held us captive so that we may serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code.

So remember what God promised through Ezekiel. He said he would put his Spirit within his people and caused them to walk in his statutes and be careful to obey his rules. Here we see the fulfillment of that promise.

Through our union with Christ we have been released from the law's condemnation and then through the Holy Spirit we have been given new life so that we can serve God in a way that pleases him.

And when Paul contrasts the new way of the Spirit with the old way of the written code he isn't telling us to set aside Scripture to set aside the law and just follow your own private impressions. This is the new way. He is contrasting the written command confronting an unrenewed heart with the Spirit's work of renewing the heart and enabling obedience.

[25:40] Paul's own written instructions here to Christians show that the the word remains necessary. What has changed is the power and the disposition with which we receive it.

You see. Now at this point in the passage we might be tempted to revert back to antinomianism that wants to disregard God's law because Paul even says here we are released from the law.

but notice what's on the other side of that freedom. We are released from the law so that we may serve in the new way of the Spirit.

So we're not released to go our own way or to establish our own rule of righteousness. We are released to serve God and to bear fruit for Him.

We can stop struggling in vain to secure our acceptance with God by obeying the law and we can now willingly and gladly strive to obey.

[26:50] Our sinful passions were once aroused by the law and now in Christ we serve in the new way of the Spirit. It's a joy. Now having said that I don't want to give the impression that the Spirit enables us to obey the moral law perfectly.

As we all know Christians continue to struggle with sin. We've been genuinely changed but we have not yet been made perfect. Christians have understood the next part of Romans 7 in different ways. Some take Paul to be describing his former condition while others understand him to be describing the continuing struggle of a believer. I take the latter view particularly because of the delight in God's law that He expresses.

Look down at verse 22. For I delight in the law of God in my inner being but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

Wretched man that I am. Who will deliver me from this body of death? Notice that. Paul delights in the law of God. I understand him here to be describing the renewed desires of a believer.

[28:08] He genuinely loves God's law but he also recognizes that sin remains in him. Galatians 5:17 similarly says that the desires of the flesh are against the spirit and the spirit the desires of the spirit are against the flesh.

So we need to distinguish sin's continued presence and influence from its dominion. And there's a difference there. The Christian still battles sin sometimes painfully but sin is no longer his rightful master.

Paul cries thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. So then I myself serve the law of God with my mind but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.

This is great news. Now you might ask well how is this great news? How is this good? Well it's good because it points to the work of Christ within us.

Now even unbelievers can struggle with guilt and regret over sins but what Paul describes here is something more than that. He genuinely delights in God's law.

[29:23] He wants to obey God and he grieves when he fails and that's the difference. The Christian has been given a new heart with new desires.

Sin is still present but it no longer has the same place in his affections. He now loves the righteousness he once resisted and that change is evidence of the Holy Spirit's work within him. So the struggle is not good in and of itself but it points to something wonderful in the believer. And at this point we might ask what happens when the Christian sins?

Does the law once again pronounce its condemnation against us? Does our standing before God become uncertain every time we sin? Well that takes us to the beginning of Romans chapter 8.

You see how systematic Paul is here. Listen to this clear and emphatic statement Paul makes in verse 1. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

[30:33] Why? Jump to verse 3. For God has done what the law weakened by the flesh could not do by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh.

In short the believer can't be condemned because God has already condemned their sin in Christ. Jesus satisfied the demands of God's justice and those who are united to him by faith receive the benefits of his finished work.

and what this really means is that the Christian life is not a second probation. Christ did not forgive our previous sins and then suddenly place us on a new trial in which our final acceptance depends on how well we obey from this point forward.

What does the confession say? True believers are not under the law as a covenant of works to be justified or condemned by it. And this is something Paul addresses very directly in Galatians chapter 3 when he asks did you receive the spirit by works of the law or hearing with faith?

Are you so foolish having begun by the spirit are you now being perfected by the flesh? You see in their case the Galatians had begun by trusting in Christ but now they're tempted to return to law keeping as though that were necessary to complete what Christ began.

[32:16] And Paul rebukes them for it. If our acceptance with God depends upon Christ at the beginning it will always depend upon Christ. We will never outgrow his need our need for his righteousness.

And think about how this applies to our own consciences. Let's say you've had a particularly difficult week.

Maybe you've neglected prayer. Maybe you've been impatient with your family. Maybe you've fallen into some sin. You know that you have disobeyed God and your conscience troubles you.

Well what should you do? Well first of all you should acknowledge your sin. You should confess it to God repent of it seek to make things right wherever you've maybe wronged someone.

Being under grace does not mean that your sin is somehow less sinful. God's law still tells the truth about your conduct and you should agree with it.

[33 : 19] But here's what you should not conclude. I have broken God's law so I must now be condemned. Why not?

Because the law's condemnation has already been borne by Christ. Your failure does not undo his obedience and your sin does not make his sacrifice insufficient.

If you belong to Christ your standing before God is not determined by whether you've had a good week or a bad week it rests upon the righteousness of your Savior. Always.

Now that doesn't mean our obedience or disobedience has no bearing on our relationship with God though. It does. Sin can disturb our fellowship with him severely.

It can weaken our assurance. It may bring very painful consequences. We're going to talk about this more as we continue in the confession but Hebrews 12 even tells us that God disciplines his children.

[34 : 21] But notice how the writer describes that discipline. He says that God disciplines us for our good that we may share his holiness.

Well that's a far cry from condemnation. God is not punishing his children to satisfy a debt of justice that Christ left unpaid.

He's correcting them as a loving father who intends to make them holy. Again to keep his commandments. And I think this is an important distinction for us to remember especially when we're feeling troubled in conscience.

Sometimes we behave as though we need to earn our way back into God's favor after we've sinned. We may hesitate to pray. We may think we need several days of better behavior before we can return to him approach him with confidence but that's just not how the gospel works.

We don't begin the Christian life by trusting in Christ and then continue it by trusting in our own performance or our own goodness.

[35 : 35] The same Savior who justified is the one upon whom we continue to depend until the very end. Now someone might hear all of this and ask well if my obedience doesn't determine whether I'm accepted by God why should I be so concerned about obeying?

But notice what that question assumes. It assumes that the only meaningful reason to obey God is to avoid condemnation or to earn his favor.

And that's precisely the thinking that Paul has really been challenging. The Christian has been brought into a new relationship with God. We belong to Christ. We have received his spirit and increasingly we desire to obey because we love the God who has saved us.

So there is genuine freedom here but it's not freedom from righteousness. It is freedom from the impossible burden of establishing our own righteousness before God.

We no longer need to approach his commandments as though our eternal acceptance hangs upon our success or failure in keeping the law. Instead we can receive them as the good and righteous instructions of our heavenly father who has already received us in Christ.

[37 : 06] And that brings us back to Paul's words in Romans 7 4 we have died! to the law through the body of Christ so that we may belong to another to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God.

That's the Christian's new relationship to the law. We're no longer under it as a covenant of works to be justified or condemned by it.

We belong to Christ now and because we belong to him we are free to serve God in the new way of the spirit and what a blessing that is we can now delight in the very righteousness we once resisted we can enjoy the peace of knowing our acceptance with God rests securely in Christ not upon us and we can discover that obedience is not merely a duty to fulfill it is but it's not merely a duty to fulfill it's a privilege to enjoy there is genuine joy in pleasing our heavenly father and in growing in holiness and in living as he our creator created us to live so the Christian life is not freedom from serving God it is the wonderful freedom of finally finally being able to serve him willingly gratefully and with great joy let's pray heavenly father i thank you for this new covenant what a blessing it is to know that our striving can come to an end we were in a position that we could not please you before we could not keep your law and to know that we have been released from being judged by that law and our performance of it but rather being judged by that law through our

Lord Jesus Christ who obeyed perfectly and gave himself for us what freedom there is Lord what joy there is in serving you and striving for holiness and trying our very best to keep the commandments enabled by your spirit helped by you every day Lord let us not lose sight of either our freedom in Christ nor the joy it is to follow your commandments in Christ I pray Amen