

If We Are Not under the Law, How Do We Avoid Sin? (part 1)

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"For sin will not have dominion over you. For you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin, because we are not under law, but under grace? May it never be!" (Romans 6:14-15). Many people read this, and then they tag on this assumption: Paul is saying that just because you are under grace doesn't mean that you should not strive to keep the law to avoid sin. But nothing could be further from the truth! If Paul were saying this, he would be contradicting himself. He would be saying, you are not under the law, but you must keep the law to avoid sin. This would be putting us back under the law. It would give us freedom from the law with one hand while taking it away with the other. It would be saying, you are not under the law, but you are under the law. This would be nonsense.

What is Paul saying? Let me add some emphasis to help. He is explaining that sin WILL NOT—not maybe will not, or possibly will not, or even probably will not, but WILL NOT—rule over us BECAUSE we are not under the law but under grace. Now, let's say it the other way around: If we ARE under the law, sin WILL rule over us. If we try to go back under the law, sin will master us! So, should we want to be under the law? Obviously not. Should we turn to the law to rid ourselves of sin? No. That would be the worst thing we could do. It would be like injecting ourselves with heroin to get rid of a heroin addiction.

What, then, does Paul mean? How can we avoid sin if we don't keep the law? Don't we need to use the law to keep ourselves in line? No. Remember, we have just learned that, if we are under the law, sin will overpower us. The way to avoid sin is to get out from under the law. As Paul succinctly states: "Sin is not charged when there is no law" (Romans 5:13b). Think of it in terms of traffic laws. If you are driving on a road without a speed limit, no one can find you guilty of breaking a speed limit law. Paul is saying that you cannot sin because, if you are not under the law, there is no law to condemn you of sin.

Look at verse 16: "Don't you know that when you present yourselves as servants and obey someone, you are the servants of whomever you obey; whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness?" If we insist on keeping the law, we are servants of the law and, thus, of

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sin to death. This is not something we should want. "But thanks be to God, that, whereas you were bondservants of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were delivered" (Romans 6:17). When we were under the law, we were the slaves of sin. But we are no longer. "Being made free from sin, you became bondservants of righteousness" (Romans 6:18). We just saw that the way to be free from sin's rule is to not be under the law. Thus, we can state "being made free from sin" as "being no longer under the law." Because we are no longer under the law, we are the bondservants of righteousness. Grace sets us free from the law and from sin and causes us to serve righteousness.

How Does Grace Set Us Free from the Law?

By what mechanism does grace set us free from the law and sin? By death: "Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be in bondage to sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin" (Romans 6:6-7). We believers have been spiritually crucified with Christ, and this death in Him frees us from the law and, thus, from sin. Paul continues this theme in Romans 7:

Or don't you know, brothers (for I speak to men who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man for as long as he lives? For the woman that has a husband is bound by law to the husband while he lives, but if the husband dies, she is discharged from the law of the husband. So then if, while the husband lives, she is joined to another man, she would be called an adulteress. But if the husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is no adulteress, though she is joined to another man. Therefore, my brothers, you also were made dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you would be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead, that we might bring forth fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were through the law, worked in our members to bring forth fruit to death. But now we have been discharged from the law, having died to that in which we were held; so that we serve in newness of the spirit, and not in oldness of the letter.

Romans 7:1-6

Having died with Christ, we have died to the law that held us and to the "sinful passions which were through the law.... We have been discharged from the law"! As Paul teaches in Colossians 2:12-15,

Having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. You were dead through your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh. He made you alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, wiping out the handwriting in ordinances which was against us; and he has taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross; having stripped the principalities and the powers, he made a show of them openly, triumphing over them in it.

Through His death and our death in Him, in which He nailed the law that condemned us to the Cross, and our being raised with him to a new life (see Romans 6:4), our Lord has freed us from the law and its resultant sin and condemnation.

Jesus Fulfilled the Law

You might rightly ask, How did Jesus nail the law to the Cross? Did He just walk in and destroy the law? No. Jesus specifically addressed this: "Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). As I explain in "In what way did Jesus fulfill the law?" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/jesusfulfilllawqa1.htm>), Jesus fulfilled, or brought to completion, the entire Old Testament, including its laws. This is what Jesus told His disciples after His resurrection: "He said to them, 'This is what I told you, while I was still with you, that all things which are written in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, concerning me must be fulfilled'" (Luke 24:44). He did this by living perfectly under the law and by paying all of our legal, penal obligations to the law by His atonement on the Cross, thus figuratively nailing the law to the Cross so that it died too. That's why, as we read in Romans 7, Paul likened our relationship to the law to the relationship of a wife to her dead husband. His death frees her. The old husband is the law and he has died, freeing her.

Because of this, Paul can write,

There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of

death. For what the law couldn't do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God did, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh; that the ordinance of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

Romans 8:1-5

Read the rest of that chapter. It's something that should be shouted from the housetops! It is a declaration of liberty from the law, freedom from what only brought us condemnation and death. How can people want to return to the law? But they do.