

In a Marriage Covenant with Christ

Ps. 125: 1 – 4

Ps. 126: 1

Hymn 13: 1, 3, 6

Hymn 14: 1, 4

Ps. 27: 2, 5, 6

Scripture reading: Rom. 6: 1 – 7:25

Text: Rom. 7: 1 – 6

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

There was a man with the name, Marcion, who lived in the 2nd century after Christ, who rejected the God of the Old Testament.

Marcion said that the God of the Old Testament was a cruel God.

He called the God of the Old Testament a “wrathful Hebrew God”.

He simply did not like the God of the Old Testament.

But he liked the God of the New Testament – or rather: he liked his own reconstruction of the New Testament God. Over against the cruel God of the Old Testament there was the all-forgiving and loving God of the New Testament.

Yes, Marcion thought that the God of the New Testament is altogether a different God than the God of the Old Testament. He viewed the God of the Old Testament as a separate and lower entity who stood over against the better God of the New Testament.

In order to get rid of the God of the Old Testament, Marcion, first of all, rejected the Hebrew Bible; but he also rejected large parts of the New Testament, which he thought contained “traces” of the Old Testament God.

And so this man, Marcion, made his own Bible, a thin one, which contained only some parts of the New Testament. And, of course, he ended up with a god of his own imagination.

Dear congregation, the heresy of Marcionism is still very much alive. Also in the church – although, then, in a milder and more popular form.

The error of making false or imaginary contradictions between the old and the new covenant is so popular in our day that it has become not even uncommon among theologians in Reformed churches.

On the surface this error reveals itself in a multitude of superficial and incorrect readings of some much abused Bible verses. I’m thinking of texts such as John 1: 17:

“...the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ”

Many have used that text, for example, to say that the old covenant was a covenant of law while the new covenant is a covenant of grace; or thought that the apostle is placing grace and truth over against the law!

Such twisting of Scripture leads to fatal conclusions.

The error of false contradictions between the old and the new covenant is a popular error which leads to all kinds of heresies as it rests on a misconception of both the covenant and the God of the covenant.

Brothers and sisters, God, in His one eternal covenant revealed Himself to us **as He is**. The conditions for life in communion with Him is unchangeable, for it is based on the very attributes of His own holy being, which is unchangeable.

Any supposed contradiction between old and new covenant is a foolishness that ultimately leads to a kind of New Testament idolatry. It is not only a shallow gospel, but a distorted gospel.

This thinking produces a reduced canon (a Bible in which large parts of the Old Testament is viewed as irrelevant or less important for us) and a closed Bible (in which the understanding of Scripture is darkened by a practical denial of its unity).

Yes, this error is one of the root causes for most of the heresies in our day.

It leads to a different ethics – a so called Christian ethics which does not proceed from God's law as the only norm for righteousness.

It also leads to a different gospel: a lawless gospel.

It also leads to a different Jesus – a Jesus soft and mild, who is only love, who will condemn no one for anything, a Jesus who got rid of the law, a Jesus who invented His own law – a better Jesus than Jahve!

Our text this morning is one of the main passages popularly used to convey a different gospel, a false gospel, in which God's law has become outdated. According to this view, God's law can, at best, only remind us of a past condemnation.

Now we are dead to the law, they say.

We have been delivered from the law, they say. Is it not clearly stated in this text?!

But, brothers and sisters, this afternoon we will listen more carefully to the words of this text.

Before we proceed, we first have to understand the basic error that underlies this heresy.

The error with which we are dealing is not simply a matter of misunderstanding a few individual Bible verses. The error flows from a failure to grasp ***the unity of the whole Bible***, and from a misconception of the ***nature*** of God's revelation.

At the root of the problem lies the idea that the truth of God's revelation has evolved from a lower truth in the old covenant to a higher truth in the new covenant.

Then also the righteousness revealed in the new covenant is seen to have evolved from a lower righteousness proclaimed by Moses to a higher righteousness revealed by Christ.

Or the moral law proclaimed by Christ is then viewed as a better law than the one proclaimed by Moses, and so forth.

However, the truth that has been revealed from the very start, in the first books of the Bible, has ***not*** gone through a process of evolution to reach a higher truth in the last books of the Bible. God's revelation did not evolve from a lower level of truth to a higher level of truth.

The absolute and divine truth of God's revelation was perfect in all stages of history. When we follow the line of progressive revelation through all the stages of history we see the same truth revealed more clearly and fully, so that from the perfect germ in the book of Genesis the perfect plant and flower and fruit successively unfolds before our eyes in the rest of Scripture.

When we look at the Biblical concept of truth, it is impossible for truth to develop through a process of evolution.

Scripture does not contain a truth that evolves from something less true until it becomes more true, or better truth.

There is a difference between evolution of the truth and an organic unfolding of the truth. In fact, evolution of the truth does not exist. Evolution implies that there is a process of change, but truth can never change.

When a flower bud opens up, then a tulip does not become a daisy. The tulip that opens up, remains a tulip. And the tulip that unfolds does not receive rose leaves added to it. All its leaves and all its parts come forth from its own germ.

In the same way, what we have in Scripture is no evolution of the truth, but an unfolding of the same truth as God's revelation became all the more clear, until everything was fully revealed.

The new covenant is then in no respect in tension with the old covenant, nor does the new covenant contradict anything of the old covenant. Instead, the new covenant flows completely and logically forth from the old covenant. It is one covenant, one revelation, one truth.

The new covenant is not called a new covenant because it contains a different content or structure or nature, or because it contains a different law or a different gospel, or a different teaching, or a different way of salvation, or anything of that sort. It is called new only because it contains the fulfilment and the fullness of that which was promised by the old.

The greater glory of the new covenant does not lie in **different** promises or in a different doctrine or in a different Saviour, but in this that the same promises and the same doctrine and the same Saviour is administered to us in greater measure and with greater clarity. The old covenant has its fulfilment in Christ; and since Christ has come, the content of the old covenant has reached its fullness in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear congregation, the same applies also to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Since Pentecost the Spirit has been given to God's covenant people in greater measure, **but**: it is not a different Spirit from the One who was active in the old covenant. Neither does the new covenant promise a different working of the Spirit, or different gifts than that which was promised in the old covenant. We do not find a different Spirit or a different working of the Spirit in the new covenant, but the same in greater measure!

We find then no evolution of the truth of the gospel, and no evolution of revelation producing a better or higher gospel, but we find in Scripture as one unity the truth of God and of His gospel and of His holy will organically unfolded in old and new covenant.

The unity of old and new covenant is such that the two covenants are in essence one covenant, of one God, containing one gospel, and one law, and one salvation.

Any explanation of any part of Scripture that deviates from this unity leads to heresy.

In fact, every deviation from this inherent unity and oneness of the old and new covenant has in it the seed of Marcionism, leading to a twisting of both law and gospel.

What then does it mean that we are dead to the law? And what does it mean that we have been delivered from the law?

The right understanding of this text is pure gospel. The doctrine contained in this text is indeed liberating. But when this text is read hastily, without careful discernment, the heresy of Marcionism is bound to follow.

And thus we turn to our text this afternoon with careful discernment.

I preach God's Word to you with the theme...

We are living in a marriage covenant with Christ

We will note...

1. That we died to the law
2. That the law cannot cure our sinfulness
3. The newness of the Spirit

In the first place we note that...

We died to the law

In the previous chapter, in chapter 6:14, the apostle Paul said:

“...sin shall not have dominion over you, **for you are not under law but under grace**”.

Our text, Rom. 7: 1 – 6, refers back to these words in the previous chapter. Here in chapter 7 the apostle Paul again picks up that theme, when he says:

“Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives?”

The words “Or do you not know, brethren...” refers back to chapter 6: 14 where he said that we are not under law.

He is now returning to that statement in order to explain it further.

When he said in chapter 6 that we are not “under law” he was saying that it is not law that deliver us from sin and death, but that our deliverance and new life in Christ is by God’s grace. If you are under law, if you are dependent on law to save you, then you are still dead in your sins and helplessly lost under the dominion of sin. In the context of chapter 6 the expression “under law” meant: to be dependent on law to save you. And in reality that would mean: being without grace; dead in sins.

To be “under grace”, on the other hand, means that you are under the powerful working of God’s saving grace in Christ.

The contrast that he made in that text was not a contrast between old and new covenant, as if the Old Testament was a covenant of law and the New Testament a covenant of grace. Not at all! No believer ever lived “under law” in the sense which Paul uses the term in chapter 6. In the context of Rom.6 Moses was not under law, but under grace.

With the term “under law” Paul did not refer to the Old Testament, but to the helpless and damnable state of man outside of God’s grace.

But there, in chapter 6:14, the apostle Paul did not give any further **explanation** or **reason** for his statement that we are not under law. Immediately after he said that we are not “under law” he asked the question:

“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!”

He first had to guard that statement against any misunderstanding. He immediately confirms that the law is not abolished, and that we are not now free to break the law. Lawlessness still deserves death – chapter 6: 16 – 23.

And so, with great care, he confirmed that the norm for holiness and righteousness has not changed.

Dear congregation, love for God still means obedience to His law. There is no **other** or **higher** norm for righteousness or for Christian ethics than the perfect and divine righteousness which God has revealed to us in His law.

God's law is not an outdated set of rules. It is God's covenant law. It is the revelation of God's own righteousness and holiness as it relates to us. **God** cannot change, therefore His **law** cannot change. His will cannot change. His holiness and righteousness cannot change. His law, as the revelation of God's holiness and righteousness, does nothing else than to demand conformity to the very image of God.

Christ, in His obedience to the law, did not put on a foreign righteousness. The holiness and the righteousness of Christ is **that** holiness and **that** righteousness which the law demands.

Therefore, no one may add anything to God's law, and no one may retract **anything** from it. Any religious activity which is not based on God's law, or that deviates from it, is nothing but unrighteousness.

Yes, God's holy and perfect law can never change, for God Himself will never change.

We cannot separate God from His law.

If anyone has a negative view of the law, then he has a negative view of God.

If anyone criticises the law, he criticises God's holiness and righteousness.

Shall we transgress the law, because we are not saved by law? That was the question in chapter 6. And Paul answered it with a definite "**Certainly not!**"

So concerned was he to prevent any such twisting of the gospel that he spent the rest of chapter 6 fencing off the gospel against such a lawless gospel.

It is only now, here in chapter 7, that he finds the opportunity to return to the statement that we are **not under law**.

"Or do you not know, brethren (for I speak to those who know the law), that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives?" – chapter 7: 1

In order to prove the point that we are not under law, he now takes an example from the law itself: a husband and wife are united in marriage for as long as they both shall live.

And what the law says about marriage, the apostle will now apply to our union with Christ.

Let us follow his argument.

First he speaks of marriage as the lawful union between husband and wife. If the husband would die, then the widow would no longer be bound to her husband who died. The marriage law binds her to her husband only as long as he lives.

He states this in verses 2 and 3:

“...the woman who has a husband is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives. But if the husband dies, she is released from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband lives, she marries another man, she will be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from that law, so that she is no adulteress, though she has married another man”.

Death puts an end to the marriage covenant.

The example itself is clear and it needs no further explanation.

But now the apostle applies this same law to our marriage covenant with Christ! He says:

“Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another – to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God”

We have been put to death by the death of Christ. Our old man died, and we are now married to Christ. Our marriage covenant with Christ is no adultery, because: our old man is dead, crucified with Christ. We are no longer in a marriage covenant with sin, but with Christ. We no longer have sin as our lord and master; we are now lawfully bound to a new man: Christ – so that we may bear fruit unto God.

That is what the apostle Paul is saying.

What a wonderful gospel! Through the death of Christ our old man has been put to death, and we were raised with Him in a new life of obedience bearing fruit unto God. This new life is the fruit of our union with Christ.

However, the apostle does not say that we were married to the law and that the law died. No, we were married to sin, and in Christ **we** died to sin, so that our new man, raised with Christ, is no longer bound to sin, in a marriage covenant with sin.

The contrast is between our old husband, sin, and our new husband, Christ.

The **law** did not die. **We** died. That is: our old sinful man has been put to death in the death of Christ.

Let us therefore look at the apostle's application with careful discernment.

Many people explain this text, Rom. 7:4, as if the apostle is saying that we were married to the law and that the law died and that we are therefore freed from the law.

Or they say: to be dead to the law means that we have nothing to do with the law anymore; through Christ we got rid of the law!

By explaining it in that way they come to the conclusion then that the law has been abolished. Then, by marrying Christ, we turn our backs on a dead law. But the apostle is not saying anything like that.

He says:

“...**you** also have become dead to the law...”.

There are people who say that although Paul did not expressly **say** that the law is put to death, that he in fact does **imply** it. Thus, they say, we must see the law as dead; the law has been put to death. But such a thought is contrary to all of Scripture. Nowhere does Paul in any of his letters write that the **law** has been put to death, and neither does he say it here in our text. He clearly states that **we** have been put to death; not the law – verse 4.

We died – verse 6. Not the law.

In the same way he says in Gal. 2:19:

“...**I** through the law died to the law that I might live to God”.

He says, **he**, Paul, died.

It is therefore a twisting of the apostle's teaching to say that **the law** has been put to death.

He is not saying that we were married to the law; neither does he say that the law has died. No, our old man was married to sin, but our old man has been put to death in and with Christ. Therefore we are freed from the marriage law that kept us in bondage to sin. We have no marriage covenant with sin anymore. Our death in Christ has put an end to that marriage. And so, according to the law, we were **lawfully** delivered from the (marriage) law

that kept us in a marriage covenant with sin. By the death of our old man in the death of Christ we were set free to marry Christ in all holiness.

Now, what does this expression mean when he says that we have become “dead to the law”? We are dead with respect to the marriage law which kept us united to sin. Now, in the eyes of the law our old man is lawfully dead, and our new man is lawfully free to marry another.

“Dead to the law”, in this context, means: **“dead in the eyes of the law”** or **“lawfully dead”**. That means that our marriage with Christ is lawful. It is no adultery. For, as far as the law is concerned, our old man is dead, crucified with Christ; and so the law pronounces that we are no longer in a marriage covenant with sin, but freed from that slave master, Sin, so that we could lawfully marry a new husband, Christ.

In this context, where he speaks about the law of marriage, to be dead to that law means to be lawfully delivered from our previous husband, Sin. We were set free to marry Christ, because our marriage to sin was terminated by **our** death in the death of Christ.

In **that** sense we were delivered from the law by which “we were held by” – verse 6.

There is no law that binds us to sin anymore, for in Christ our old sinful man has been put to death. We are delivered from the law of our old husband, and lawfully bound to our new husband, Christ.

That is the context, and that is what the apostle is saying.

Dear congregation, you see then how far are those removed from the truth who think that the law itself has been abolished, or that the law has become outdated. They think that when we marry Christ we leave an old and dead law behind. And so, they do not consider their new life in Christ as a life in obedience to the law. And they use these verses of our text to proclaim another gospel: a false gospel without law.

The apostle is teaching something totally different. When we follow his argument through from chapter 6, we note that he is speaking about our deliverance from sin. Our deliverance from sin is founded in our death to sin. We died to sin – chapter 6: 2.

Sin was our lord and master. We were bound in slavery to sin, rendering service to sin – chapter 6. But through our death in Christ we were delivered from the dominion of sin – that was chapter 6!

But now, through our death in the death of Christ, sin is no longer our lord and master. We are married to another. Through our union with Christ we now live a new life of obedience to God, bearing fruit to His glory.

His argument is not that we are delivered by the death of the law, but by **our** death to sin. **That** was his argument from the beginning of chapter 6 all the way through to chapter 7.

And now, what is the result of our union with Christ? The **fruit** of our marriage with Christ is the fruit of holiness and righteousness; it is the very same fruit which the law demands.

Our marriage with Christ bears fruit to God, and the law itself is satisfied with our new marriage.

Brothers and sisters, God saved us not by removing **the law**, but by removing **our sin** and the **dominion of sin**.

Let us now, in the second place, note...

The inability of law to cure our sinfulness

If anyone thinks that the apostle Paul has a negative view of the law, then he will never be able to understand what the apostle is saying. Such a person will constantly be twisting scripture because of his **own** negative view of the law.

The apostle Paul is **never** negative about God's law. What he is negative about is legalism. But legalism has nothing to do with God's law. Legalism is a man made religion. Legalism is a twisting of the law.

God has given His covenant law in the context of the gospel. We receive the law from the hand of our Redeemer. His covenant law contains all the promises of salvation. He has never given His law to Israel with the command that they have to redeem themselves.

The law does indeed contain the promise of life for those who obey, but that promise was given in a context where God Himself has delivered His people and where He revealed Himself to them as their only Saviour.

Legalism has therefore nothing to do with God's law. Legalism is a twisting of God's covenant law into a means by which man tries to save himself. Legalism is a man made religion. And of **that** the apostle Paul is very negative. Yes, he curses it.

Let us then clearly understand that the apostle Paul is not negative about the law. But he clearly shows us the inability of the law **to save us**. Only in **that** context does he contrast law and grace – we are saved not by law but by grace. Law and grace are only contrasted when he speaks about the **cause** of our salvation.

In no other context are law and grace to be contrasted.

In order to demonstrate the glory of God's grace, the apostle once more reminds us of the helpless state in which we would find ourselves if we were without God's grace. Verse 5:

“For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death”.

When we were in the flesh we were controlled and directed by our slave master: sin. The word “flesh” refers in this context to our natural man as we were born dead in sin. When we were in the flesh, that is, when we were dead in sin, our sinful passions controlled us and bore fruit unto death.

But now, the apostle says that these sinful passions of our flesh “were **aroused** by the law”. Paul explains this further in verses 7 – 13 saying that the law revealed his sin to him. And by exposing his sin, it caused death. Thus the law which is holy and good, became death to him, **not because there is anything wrong with the law**, but because the sinfulness of his sin became so much bigger through the revelation of the law.

When you **know** something to be sin, then your sin is so much greater in committing it. And so not only the apostle's consciousness of sin grew bigger, but also his actual sin increased. In that sense sin found a helper in the law, for by the law his sin was increased so that he descended deeper and deeper into death.

And thus he says in verse 8:

“...**sin**, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead”.

Note that it is not the law that produces the evil desire. **Sin** produced in Paul all manner of evil desire. Sin itself produced evil desires in Paul, but his evil desires became all the worse when it was exposed to be sin. If there were no law, there could be no transgression. But since there is a law, sin is not only exposed to be sin, but sin also increases as it wilfully transgresses the law.

It is in that sense that we have to understand the expression in our text, when verse 5 says that our sinful passions were aroused by the law.

And why does the apostle mention this? To prove to us our helplessness without God's grace! The law is unable to redeem us. While we were in the flesh, while we were dead in sin, the law could only cause our condemnation to become all the bigger.

Far from redeeming us from sin, the law all the more confirmed our condemnation.

Something else was needed to make us alive unto God.

We look at that in the third place...

The newness of the Spirit

“But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter” – verse 6.

Through our union with Christ the Spirit of Christ makes us alive unto God to serve *Him*.

That is the result of our union with Christ. In Christ and through Christ we serve God in a new life of obedience through the powerful working of His Spirit!

He now calls this “the newness of the Spirit” and he contrasts it to the oldness of the letter.

The newness of the Spirit refers to the new life which is worked by the Spirit of Christ. The oldness of the letter refers to the law, and the law is called the letter because it was written. The writing may refer to the two tablets of stone on which the Ten Commandments were written, or to the fact that the law is contained in Scripture.

The oldness of the law refers to that binding of the law which no longer apply to us, namely that law which kept us bound to sin when we were dead in sin. Then the law was active in cursing and condemning us. That is now contrasted to the work of the Spirit who gives us new life in Christ.

Note carefully that when the apostle speaks in this context of “the oldness” of the law, he is not referring to the time of the Old Testament. He is not in this context contrasting the old and the new covenant. Neither is he saying that God’s law has passed away. Not at all! He is contrasting our bondage to sin under the law with our deliverance from sin under grace. The oldness of the law stands over against the newness of the Spirit. And this he does not mean as a contrast between Old and New Testaments, but a contrast between our old natural state as married to sin over against our new marriage to Christ. That law which kept us bound to sin, confining us to death, no longer applies to us, for our old man has been put to death in Christ.

In this regard we can also compare 2 Cor. 3:6 where the apostle says:

“...the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life”.

It means that the law condemn the natural man in his sin, but the Spirit of Christ makes us alive to bear fruit unto God.

The same Spirit who raised Christ from the dead is also powerfully at work in us to raise us unto a new life of obedience.

Dear congregation, our new Husband, Christ, will never die, but lives forever, therefore also our marriage union with Christ can never be broken again. There is no death that can separate us from Christ. Here is a marriage that will last forever!

Christ, being raised from the dead, dies no more – chapter 6: 9. He lives, and His Spirit lives in us, to bear fruit to God. Through His Spirit we are renewed from day to day to live unto God. The result of our eternal marriage covenant with Christ is that we will serve God in a new life of obedience forevermore – through the grace of God, by the powerful working of His Spirit!

“What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!” (6: 15)

Instead, in and through Christ our old man was crucified and put to death, and we were raised with Christ in a new life of fruitful obedience to God – a new life according to the demands of His holy law.

This was all God’s doing; it is all His grace, His salvation. And therefore we also have full confidence, that He who started the good work in us will also complete it to His glory.

Let us believe this gospel and rejoice in His salvation. Freed from the dominion of sin, dead to sin, we will now, by the grace of God, bear fruit to God – that good and holy fruit which His law demands, to the glory of our God and Saviour.

Amen.