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Homiletics

Freed to Serve

Romans 7:4-6

Proposition: Now that we belong to Christ we are free to serve God.

I. Once we were bound to the law (vs 6)

A. It intensified our rebellion (vs 5)

B. It condemned us

C. It was misused by us:

1. Legalism

2. Letter-of-the-lawism

II. Now we have died to the law (vs 4,6)

A. Therefore, we can belong to Christ

1. Free from condemnation

2. Free from rebellion

B. Therefore, we can serve God

1. Free from Legalism

2. Free from Letter-of-the-lawism

Intro:

Have you ever felt a tension between the attitude toward the law in the OT and the attitude toward the law in the NT? Have you noticed that the Bible seems to speak about the law in two different ways? For instance, David seems to have a very exalted, positive view of it in Psalm 119. [Read Ps. 119: 18, 20, 24] However, Paul in places seems to have a rather negative view of the law. [Read Rom. 7:4-6] Here Paul seems to think that the law is something negative that we need to be released from. On the other

hand, Paul says in Rom 7:12 that the law is righteous, holy, and just! And if the law is an expression of God's will then how can the law be bad? Can God's will be bad? The answer is not that God's will is bad or that the law is bad but that the law is not able to accomplish its purpose. It is not able to make for God a holy and righteous people. Because of the law's failure Paul can say that we needed to be released from bondage to the law. Though we were once in bondage to the law we now belong to Christ and are free—free to **serve** God.

I. Once we were bound to the law (vs 6)

Before we became Christians we were in bondage to the law. In what ways were we in bondage to the law? First, the law intensified our rebellion against God (vs 5). It became the springboard for our own sinful desires. Our sinful passions were stimulated and intensified by the law. The law succeeds incredibly well at revealing to us just how sinful we are. For, instead of obeying God's commands our sinful natures seem to push us into even more sin through defiance and rebellion. Indeed, prohibitions tend to awaken desires to do exactly that which is forbidden! [Illustration of how little Daniel B. likes to pluck leaves off of plants especially after his mom or dad tell him not to!] That is how the law affected us. We were in bondage to the law because we in our sinfulness were driven to sin all the more in an attempt to rebel against it.

We were also in bondage to the law in that it did not have the power to make us righteous but instead served to condemn us for our disobedience. As we just saw, we were encouraged to sin all the more by our sinful passions which were stimulated by our knowledge of the law. This only led to the law condemning us all the more for our failure to obey it and our rebellion against it. If we fail at just one point we transgress the whole law. Because "the wages of sin is death" the law condemns us to die. Indeed, Paul implies in Gal. 3:21 that the law never justified anyone. Instead, the law has served to show that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." So, instead of helping us to be righteous it has actually driven us further from God because of our lack of ability to obey it. The law only served to accuse us before God when our behavior was measured against its holy statutes.

Not only were we in bondage to the law because of these two things but we were also in bondage to the law because of our misuse of it. This occurred in two ways: legalism and what might be called letter-of-the-lawism.

Legalism:

It is important to understand that legalism is the idea that **we can merit something from God based on our behavior**. In other words, we once thought that if we were good enough then God would allow us to go to heaven or would in some measure be pleased with us. This thinking is based on the idea that we can earn something by working for it. Perhaps this is a misunderstanding that all of us had before we became Christians. I have had sad discussions with people who thought that they could earn acceptance with God because they went to church every Sunday and tried to believe in him. Perhaps you have had similar discussions with people. And then we have the biographies of people like the great reformer Martin Luther. He apparently was so engrossed in winning God's favor that he would many times fast three days in a row without a crumb of food, he would decline the use of blankets at night so that he would nearly freeze to death, he would strip himself of clothes except what was needed in order to be considered descent. Still he felt no peace. This is how legalism—to think that we can and must gain favor with God by obedience to a certain set of do's and don'ts—keeps us in bondage. It is a misuse of the law in which we try to obey it in order to put God into a situation where he would have to owe us something. This mistaken understanding is what leads to legalism. Therefore, we were also in bondage to the law because of our legalistic attitude toward it.

Letter-of-the-lawism:

But we were also bound to the law because of our misuse of it by what I call a "letter-of-the-lawism". This is a shortsighted view that thinks that the law can be obeyed completely just by following the letter of the law. However, it is possible to obey the exact letter of the law while violating the spirit of the law. Jesus taught us this truth in the Sermon on the Mount. He told us that not only is it a sin to commit adultery

it is also wrong to lust in the privacy of our own mind. Not only is it wrong to commit murder it is also wrong to hate your brother or to call him a fool. Following only the letter-of-the-law makes it easier to be self-serving. We can see this very well in the Pharisees were quite good at letter-of-the-lawism. Remember the incident recorded in Matt 12:9-14 where they asked Jesus if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath?

[Dramatize the encounter] Kids also give us many illustrations of this as they are good at finding ways to get by with as little as possible in order to obey just the letter of the law of the command given by mom or dad. A friend of mine tells me that when he tells his kids to clean their rooms he must give them a very detailed list of things that must be done in order for them to satisfy him. It isn't good enough just to say, "Clean your rooms." However, he tells them to make sure to pick up their socks off the floor he might very possibly find their underwear still laying on the floor next to where the socks had been! We may laugh knowingly at this parental difficulty yet is this not exactly how we have treated God's laws at times? By trying to follow the letter of the law it may become difficult to obey the spirit of the law. One can feel satisfied with oneself after obeying the letter of the law without having any regard to the intention that was behind the law. In as far as we thought that God would be pleased with us by our merely obeying the letter of the law we were in bondage to the spirit of the law.

II. Now we have died to the law (vs 4, 6)

The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus died on the cross on our behalf. His death accomplished our release from the law. We need no longer be bound by the law because we have died with respect to it. Both verses 4 and 6 tell us this. Because we have died to the law we are in a new relationship to the law. [Illustration of "Suicide being illegal in this state!"—The humorous incongruity of that. The person would have to have been successful in order to be charged but then the person would no longer be able to be arrested because that person was dead. The person would have a changed relationship to the law.] In the same way we have a changed relationship to the law because of Christ's death on the cross. Not that the law has died but that we have died to the law. We have been freed from it so that we can now belong to Christ. We have

been freed so that now we can commit ourselves fully to Christ. This can be understood in that the Church is not interested in honoring an external collection of laws. Instead, the Church as the bride of Christ seeks to honor Christ above all things.

“Now that we belong to Christ we are free from the condemnation of the law. The law no longer has the power to condemn us. Romans 8:1 says, "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Praise be to God! We are no longer required to pay the penalty for our sins if we belong to Christ. If we belong to him then he has paid the penalty for us and the law can no longer condemn us! This is no small point! For if God is for us who can be against us?! Not even his law can condemn us!

Not only are we free from the condemnation of the law but we are free from the weakness of the law. God has given us the power to obey his law. We now serve in a new way: we serve in the Spirit—in the power of the Spirit which dwells within us. The law had no power to encourage obedience. But the Spirit of Christ who lives within us prompts us to obey. He guides us and leads. He provides the strength that we need to resist temptation. We are no longer bound by our sinful passions that drive us to sin in rebellion against God's laws. No longer can we use the excuse "I couldn't help myself" or "I'm only human" implying that we had no choice but to sin. All we must do is listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit within us. He works together with God's word to lead us in righteousness. He gives us the power to serve God which the law could not do.

Not only have we died to the law but we are also free to serve God. It is not that because we have been released from the law we therefore have no ethical obligations. We have not been released from the law so that we could do what we want to do. No! Instead of being obligated to an external set of rules we are free to serve God from an internal code that he has placed within each one of us as his children. Eph. 2:10 says that we were created for good works in Christ. The written code of laws found in the OT is not contradicted in any way by this internal law. They can still serve to point us in the right direction. But we have something better. God promised to write his law upon our

hearts in Jer. 31:31. Instead of having an external set of laws we now have God's law within us. It is interesting to note that Paul never cites the law (except in Eph. 6 where he tells children to obey their parents) when he exhorts people to obedience. Instead, he always used phrases such as "Walk in the Spirit", etc. Though he doesn't cite the law he still exhorts people to moral living. He encouraged people to obey Christ. As Christians we cannot cite an all inclusive collection of external laws in which to live. Instead, God has written his law upon our hearts. This is how we have been freed from letter-of-the-lawism.

We are now also able to serve God because our death to the law means freedom from legalism. As I have defined it, legalism is a misunderstanding based on the mistaken notion that salvation can be won by obedience to the law. In chapters 3 and 4 of Romans Paul argues that even the Jews were never to be justified by obedience to the law. Justification was always to come by faith. He cites the example of Abraham who was justified by faith because he believed God when he said that he would be a father in his old age. **Legalism should not be confused with obedience.** Legalism is obedience with the wrong motivation as we saw earlier with Martin Luther. Luther saw the law of God (and in rules that the church of his time created) as a list of requirements that he could attempt to meet in the hope that he might gain favor with God. Only later did Luther discover much to his great joy that salvation comes only through faith in Christ's redeeming death on the cross. However, with respect to obedience notice that with legalism it is our motivation that is wrong not necessarily our actions. We seek to obey God in order to get something. Our motives are purely self-centered. This in itself is even wrong. What is missing is a right motivation. But the law cannot provide us with the correct motivation. However, having died to the law we need no longer view the law as a way to gain salvation. Christians are saved because of their faith in Christ. We have received new life from God with his law being written on our hearts. It is an internal law that is based on love and results from trust in him. We are able to serve God from a new motivation. Jesus told us that the law can be summed up in one word—"love". Love should be the motivation for all that we do and say. Love for God and love for others. No longer do we need to feel that we have to obey the law in order

to be in right standing with God. We can serve him out of love and gratitude for what he has done for us through his Son Jesus Christ!

Conclusion:

It should not be new to you that as Christians we are no longer condemned by the law. However, it is possible that you are still feeling in bondage to the law through legalism or letter-of-the-lawism. We have died to the law and need be no longer in bondage to it. There is no need to try to obey it in order to gain favor with God. There is no need to try to obey it out of fear. We serve God out of love for him and gratitude for what he has done for us in Christ. In this light I urge you to be obedient to Christ. The Church is in bad need of people who are willing to follow Christ fully and not compromise with the world. Charles Sheldon, in his book, "In His Steps", writes of Rev. Henry Maxwell of First Church who convinced a number of people from his congregation to pledge themselves to do everything in their daily lives only after asking the question, "What would Jesus do?" and following it through regardless of what might be the result. Perhaps that is the best way to sum up what obedience to Christ is. The answer to this question of course must not be made apart from God's revealed written word to us but we would do well to apply the question to our daily circumstances in order to make an attempt at finding an answer. When you face a discussion today and this week ask yourselves, "What would Jesus do?" We have been freed from the bondage of the law but we have been freed for a purpose—that we might serve God—and serve him out of gratitude and love.