

Old and New

Devotional Reading: [Jeremiah 7:1–15](#)

Background Scripture: [Romans 7:1–25](#)

[Romans 7:1–12](#)

¹ Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives? ² For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him. ³ So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man.

⁴ So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. ⁵ For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death. ⁶ But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

⁷ What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” ⁸ But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead. ⁹ Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. ¹⁰ I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. ¹¹ For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. ¹² So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

Key Text

Now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.—[Romans 7:6](#)

God’s Law Is Love

Unit 2: Faith Triumphs, Law Fails

Lessons 5–9

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify what made Paul know what sin was.
2. Define “flesh” as Paul uses the term in the lesson’s passage.
3. State a way to guard against a wrong view of the Old Testament law that he or she has heard expressed.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. The Ten Commandments
- B. Lesson Context

I. Bondage of the Law (Romans 7:1–6)

- A. Released by Death (vv. 1–3)
- B. Released by the Spirit (vv. 4–6)

“Either/Or,” Not “Both/And”

Don’t Touch

II. Bondage of Sin (Romans 7:7–12)

- A. Sin Defined by Law (vv. 7–8)
- B. Death by Sin’s Deception (vv. 9–12)

Conclusion

- A. The Law Today?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

How to Say It

Gentiles *Jen-tiles*.

Mosaic *Mo-zay-ik*.

rabbi *rab-eye*.

Introduction

A. The Ten Commandments

While teaching at a college, I became aware of a local controversy with national significance.

Beginning in the 1950s, a fraternal organization began donating monuments of the Ten Commandments to state and local governments. This project gained traction when endorsed by film director Cecil B. DeMille as publicity for his movie *The Ten Commandments*. The number of these impressive granite slabs is not known but estimated to be over 150.

One of these was donated in 1959 to the city where I lived decades later. It stands on the street corner outside of the downtown police station. A lengthy court battle to remove this monument ensued, citing violation of the separation of church and state. That was resolved in 2005: the monument could stay. When I worked in that city, it was a block from my office. Overgrown shrubbery partially blocked sight of it, and few passersby even noticed its presence.

Does this reflect the attitude of Christians to the Law of Moses, of which the Ten Commandments form the core? Is that body of law merely a relic from a long-ago past? Does freedom from that law mean we can ignore it?

B. Lesson Context

Paul addresses the above questions in [Romans 7](#), a deep dive into the purpose and applicability of the Old Testament law to Christians. Tension between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds is a context of the book of Romans—something that is no longer an issue in the church today. Even so, the question of the place of the Law of Moses as regulations for human behavior is still debated. Therefore, while understanding Paul’s ongoing argument in Romans can be challenging, diligent study of this book is essential for the practice of biblical Christianity. The book of Romans is the fullest expression of Paul’s teaching—what he calls “my gospel” ([Romans 2:16](#); [16:25](#)). Paul refers to his teaching this way as he draws frequently on his Jewish heritage. By one count, Romans features more than 50 direct quotes from the Old Testament.

In [Romans 5](#), [6](#), and [7](#), Paul identifies three great tyrants of humankind: *sin*, *death*, and *the law*. Each of these has had a role in oppressing men and women and robbing them of the possibility of a reconciled relationship with the Lord. Each of these three has had “mastery” and “authority” ([Romans 6:9](#); [7:1](#); compare [6:14](#)), the language of tyranny. Death has reigned in terror since the sin of Adam ([5:14](#)). Sin has reigned in the lives of men and women ([6:12](#)), leading to the consequences of judgment. Law (whether Mosaic or secular) exists as the authority to define and punish wrong behavior ([6:15–23](#)). In [Romans 7](#), Paul returned to a discussion of the rightful place of the law in God’s plan.

I. Bondage of the Law ([Romans 7:1–6](#))

A. Released by Death (vv. 1–3)

1. Do you not know, brothers and sisters—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law has authority over someone only as long as that person lives?

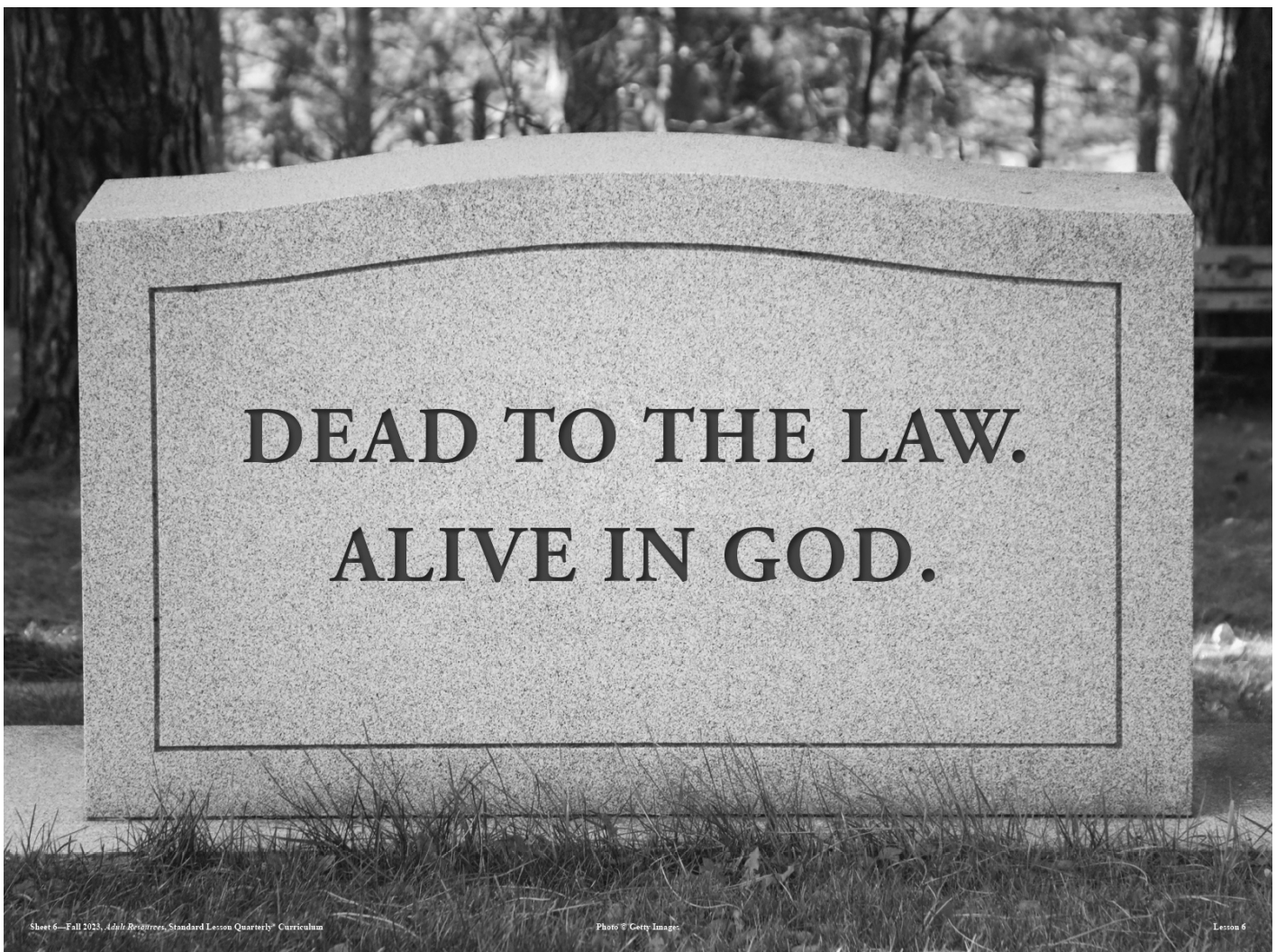
For Paul to speak *to those who know the law* probably indicates the intended audience to have been those Christians who were of Jewish background. His presentation at this point is characteristic of the

intricate argumentation of a learned rabbi of his day. It is a style that was both appealing and persuasive to Jewish readers. But Paul was certainly aware that Christians of Gentile background would be listening, too, and that some of them were well acquainted with the Jewish law.

Paul begins with a basic legal principle, one that is not confined to the Law of Moses: laws don't apply to dead people. A corpse cannot be charged and convicted of theft, even if the dead body belonged to a person who was a thief before dying. In that sense, death nullifies any *authority* a law might have over a person.

2. For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law that binds her to him.

To illustrate this, Paul uses the customs of marriage. We should be careful how we apply this, for he is not teaching about marriage here. Rather, he is teaching about the applicability of law regarding death; in so doing, he uses marriage as an example.



Sheet 6—Fall 2023, *Adults: Bereavement, Standard Lesson Quarterly* Curriculum

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Lesson 6

Visual for [Lesson 6](#). Allow one minute for reflection on this fact at the beginning of class and again at the end.

Paul's point is that in a marriage the wife is bound by the law to her husband. This recognizes a reality of both Roman and Jewish society of the day. A man might divorce a wife, but among the old-

covenant Jews there was no such thing as divorce initiated by a wife (compare [Deuteronomy 24:1–4](#); contrast [1 Corinthians 7:11–13](#)).

We should take care to not be distracted at this point by pondering how the modern legal system is superior in this regard. Paul is not defending the divorce law of his day. Rather, he’s using that law as an example to make a point: marriage is a lifelong commitment, but the commitment would terminate if the husband were to die (compare [1 Corinthians 7:39](#)).

3. So then, if she has sexual relations with another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress if she marries another man.

Paul introduces into his example a hypothetical situation (compare and contrast [Matthew 19:9](#); [Luke 16:18](#)). The situation is not one of bigamy but of adultery. The bond of the woman’s initial marriage had not been broken by death of the first husband. Therefore she would rightly be *called an adulteress*—someone who had violated the seventh commandment ([Exodus 20:14](#); compare [Leviticus 20:10](#)).

But *if her husband* died, the situation is different. She is free from lawful requirements toward her deceased husband. She is legally able to marry another man without being an adulteress. But let’s not miss Paul’s main point: it’s not merely that death frees the woman from marital obligations to her first husband, but also that she is permitted to remarry without breaking the law. This is because the situation with her previous husband no longer applies after his death.

B. Released by the Spirit (vv. 4–6)

4. So, my brothers and sisters, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God.

Paul now turns the marriage analogy toward its spiritual parallel. In the previous chapter, he had presented the fact of Christians’ being “dead to sin” ([Romans 6:2](#)) as concurrent with beginning a new life in Christ ([6:3–4](#)). It is not that the law itself had died, but that Christians *died to the law*. “The law that binds her to [her husband]” ([7:2](#), above) still stands whether the husband lives or dies. But if he dies, it no longer applies to the surviving wife. As believers who have died to sin—and therefore the law, since the law defines what sin is ([5:13](#); [7:7–8](#))—we can *belong to another*. This is a union with *him who was raised from the dead*, Jesus Christ. There is no unfaithfulness to our first “husband” (the law) due to the fact that we are no longer under its control. The result is that we begin to live in ways that *bear fruit for God*. This is the new life in Christ (see also [6:6](#); [8:2](#); [Galatians 2:19–20](#); [3:23–25](#); [4:31](#); [5:1](#)).

What Do You Think?

How does dying to sin and being set free from the law help us become more fruitful for God?

Digging Deeper

Which of the fruit of the Spirit in [Galatians 5:22–23](#) could be even more abundant in your life if you had a deeper sense of freedom in Christ?

“Either/Or,” Not “Both/And”

My wife felt the engine clunk. The steering wheel wouldn't turn. She managed to get off the busy road and breathed a sigh of relief. She glanced in the rearview mirror at the worried faces of our children.

I left work to go get them. A glance under the hood revealed that the alternator belt had come off. Our 15-year-old van had served us well, but that would be the fourth time in a month that I had to take it to a mechanic. I had known for a couple of years that we needed a new(er) van—one with a wheelchair ramp and unlikely to leave family members stranded.

But as long as I mentally clung to the old van, the new(er) one wouldn't happen. My psychological attachment to the old would only be released when it was no more. I was comfortable having it paid off, hesitant to commit to a replacement. But it had to be either “either/or,” not “both/and.”

The same is true of Christianity. It's a life of law *or* grace ([Romans 5:20](#); [6:14–15](#); [Galatians 5:4](#)). Is there something in your life that needs to die? Think about this carefully: it's not that the law (which condemns your sin) has died; rather, it's the attraction to sin itself that has to die so that you are not condemned as a lawbreaker.

—N. G.

5. For when we were in the realm of the flesh, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in us, so that we bore fruit for death.

Paul now introduces a different way of expressing the pre-Christian life: as that of being *of the flesh*. The Greek word being translated “flesh” occurs 147 times in the New Testament, and more than 60 percent of those occurrences are in the writings of Paul. The word is flexible, and it must be understood in different ways, depending on context. Paul uses the Greek word translated “flesh” in at least six ways:

- of creatures generally ([1 Corinthians 15:39](#))
- of our bodies specifically ([1 Corinthians 6:16](#))
- of the human race generally ([Galatians 2:16](#))
- that which is morally neutral ([Romans 1:3](#))
- that which is morally negative ([Galatians 6:12](#))
- of rebellious human nature ([Romans 8:3–12](#))

The word *flesh* as used here matches the last of these six: our physical existence as opposed to the spiritual. This fleshly existence is characterized by the *sinful passions* (or “desires,” as the same word is translated in [Galatians 5:24](#)). Our material existence is weak, even prone to sin (see [Romans 6:19](#)). Our physical desires are gateways to violations of law.

Thus, sin's dominion over us uses our own body's impulses to control us. We produce fruit, but this is the fruit of sin that leads to *death*, spiritual death (compare [Galatians 5:17–21](#)). Sinful behavior wreaks havoc on us personally, on our marriages, on our families, and in our communities. It can have deadly consequences in our churches. Paul may have in mind the admonition from the law itself that the Lord continues the iniquities of fathers to the third and even the fourth generations (see

[Numbers 14:18](#)). It is not so much that God continues to punish our children and grandchildren for our sins ([Ezekiel 18:20](#)), but that sin has a lasting effect, a persistence of *fruit for death*, that affects more than just the one who commits it.

What Do You Think?

Thinking back to your pre-salvation self, what are some examples of deadly fruit that were evident in your life?

Digging Deeper

If some of that deadly fruit is still present in your life, what can you do about it? Would [James 5:16](#) be a practical first step for you?

6. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

Our new existence allows us to be free from sin and, therefore, *released from the law*. This does not mean we are delivered into a state of permissible lawlessness. Paul has already made the point that freedom from sin is not a license to sin ([Romans 6:1–2](#)).

Instead, the focus of our new life in Christ is no longer to be “the flesh,” reveling in the passions of our body. The focus and driver of our new life is the opposite of material existence: it is *the new way of the Spirit*. Serving God is not simply a matter of keeping rules, obsessing over *the old way of the written code*. We no longer behave in a right manner out of fear or in the hope of being rewarded. Rather, we obey Christ’s commandments out of love for God and for others (see [John 14:15](#); [Galatians 5:14](#); [1 John 5:2](#)). This yields the fruit of the Spirit as life transcends restrictions of the law ([2 Corinthians 3:6](#); [Galatians 5:22–23](#)).

What Do You Think?

When do you experience tension between obeying the Lord out of love versus out of fear?

Digging Deeper

Does fear have any role to play when following the Lord from a loving motivation? Back up your answer with scriptures.

Don’t Touch

“Don’t touch the hot oil. It will burn you.”

The little girl looked up at her dad’s face, and her eyes hardened. She plunged her finger into the skillet.

Crying out in pain, she thrust her finger into her mouth.

“I told you, honey, that hot oil will burn you.”

Her tear-filled eyes hardened again, and she plunged her finger back into the skillet. The oil wasn’t hot enough to blister her, but her tears ran freely as she pulled her finger back the second time.

Her dad shook his head as he went to get the first aid kit. He said one last time, “That oil is hot.”

Don't touch it."

So she did it again.

My coworker told this story about his daughter, who had been a strong-willed child. His thrice-voiced warning was a good one, but it resulted in her rebellious spirit's burning her finger three times. He decided not to tell her a fourth time!

Has your church, your parents, or other authorities given you a warning that you ignore or a rule that you rebel against? Are you harming yourself or others by ignoring them?

P. S. That little girl is now grown and serving as a missionary. There is hope for us all through the gospel of Jesus!

—N. G.

II. Bondage of Sin (Romans 7:7–12)

A. Sin Defined by Law (vv. 7–8)

7. What shall we say, then? Is the law sinful? Certainly not! Nevertheless, I would not have known what sin was had it not been for the law. For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, "You shall not covet."

If death to sin frees us from the dominion of the law, then what is the purpose and value of the law? This is a concern often debated in the history of the church and even today. It can be framed more broadly as questioning the value and applicability of the Old Testament to the Christian and the church.

Paul often drives his teachings with rhetorical questions. These are questions he asks for which the answer is obvious. By having the readers answer these questions as they read, they follow Paul's line of thinking in the direction he desires. In this case, Paul anticipated that his readers would ask themselves *Is the law sinful?* He has drawn many parallels between sin and the law. Both have been described as having enslaving dominion over humankind. So it is important to recognize that there is no sin without the law's definition.

We might further say that there would be no need for law if there were no sin. The connection is so strong that some might see an equivalency, such that the law wears sin as its clothing. So Paul answers his own question with a strong statement, *certainly not!* To conclude that the Law of Moses—Paul's area of expertise—was just sin in another form would be both ridiculous and insulting.

So then, what is the connection between sin and the law? Paul has addressed this issue before (see [Romans 3:20](#); [5:13](#)), and now offers a personal example. He chooses the tenth commandment, the prohibition against coveting ([Exodus 20:17](#); [Deuteronomy 5:21](#)). Coveting is the desire to have something possessed by another person and to which we have no right. Coveting is characterized by lust, but this refers to more than sexual desires; it includes all sorts of greed, jealousy, and obsession.

If coveting is a natural impulse of our self-centered, material nature (the desire to have the best for ourselves), then why is it sinful? Paul's answer is simple: the law forbids it. The Lord, in giving the command against coveting, knows what is best for us as individuals and as larger society. Coveting is

sin.

8. But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of coveting. For apart from the law, sin was dead.

The phrase *every kind of coveting* casts a broad net over many kinds of undue desires. Paul had experienced covetousness, but he had been able to control it.

Knowing of the tenth commandment had made Paul aware of all sorts of wrong desires harbored in his heart. Lust is a by-product of our material existence, the “flesh” (compare [Romans 13:14](#); [Ephesians 2:3](#)). The point is that *apart from the law*, we would be unaware of God’s desires. We would just experience the destructive effects of covetousness and inflict it on others without thought of its being inherently wrong or sinful.

B. Death by Sin’s Deception (vv. 9–12)

9–10. Once I was alive apart from the law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death.

Paul seems to broaden the discussion to include the larger human experience. Without the law, Paul had been *alive*, oblivious to the definition and consequences of sin. This could describe the behavior of a child, who may have no guilty feelings about selfishly taking a toy away from another child. But it also describes the pagan world of Paul’s day, where ambitious self-gratification was often encouraged and celebrated, even in laws.

When such a “pre-law” person is confronted by *the commandment*, then *sin* takes on a new life. The result might seem like harmless greediness, but its toll is much higher: spiritual *death*. One cannot know of God’s commandments, spurn them, and be in relationship with him. Therefore, Paul’s ironic conclusion is that even though the law was given for our benefit, our violation of it leads to death.

11. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death.

Here we become aware of a dangerous deception as it plays out in modern culture: whatever happens between consenting adults is proclaimed to be nobody’s concern but their own. We want to be allowed to follow our desires as valued by today’s world. Yet this is a fraudulent approach to life. Our lusts and desires are too often fed by self-centered sin. We think we find the rich life by following our passions. But the end of our pursuits is *death*.

12. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.

To leave no doubt, Paul expands on his answer to the question of verse 7, “Is the law sin?” The Law of Moses is neither sin nor sinful. It is not the cause sin, but the definition of it. *The law is holy* because it defines, and is the definition, of moral purity. It is *righteous* because it promotes justice. It is *good* because it was given by the Lord for people’s benefit.

While Christians may disagree over certain aspects of the applicability of the Old Testament law to today, we should agree as to its value and place for study. We will never understand sin and its dire consequences if we ignore the law and its teachings. It is still holy. It is still just. And, most of all, it is

still good.

What Do You Think?

What value have you experienced because of your own study of the Old Testament?

Digging Deeper

What attitudes or practices could you change to enhance the benefit of this study?

Conclusion

A. The Law Today?

[First Peter 1:16](#), quoting [Leviticus 11:44–45](#), says “Be holy, because I am holy.” We may disagree on which aspects of the Law of Moses still apply in the New Testament era, but this is one area where there is no doubt. We press further when we wonder *how* to be holy as God is holy. That is a profoundly important question, and we must commit to growing in holiness throughout our lives.

To be holy requires a distinction from that which is unholy—and God is the one who makes that distinction known in his laws. Same thing with being loving versus being unloving (see [Galatians 5:14](#), quoting [Leviticus 19:18](#)). If there is no God, no lawgiver, then there can be no absolute laws with regard to being holy, loving, etc. But God does exist, and he has given laws for the good of humankind. The way to counteract deadly, worldly influence is to study the ways God intends as presented throughout our Bibles.

What Do You Think?

What do you find most challenging about today’s lesson?

Digging Deeper

What change in thought, word, or behavior will you make based on that challenge?

B. Prayer

Lord God, may we never despise your laws! May you guard us from the deception of the world which claims that sin is good and satisfying. May your Spirit continue to form us to become more and more like your Son, Jesus, the one without sin. We pray these things in his name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

The law is necessary to teach us what is sinful.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity

Into the Lesson

Ask the class how they think people would react if all laws, good and bad, great and small, were strictly enforced. Examples to focus on might be outdated or oddly specific laws. (*Option.* Research examples in your city or state of these kinds of laws, or allow the class five minutes to do the research themselves.) Ask whether people would become better because rules were strictly enforced, or seek out more devious ways to circumvent the law, or something else entirely?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Still on the Books” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have students work in pairs to complete as indicated. Then discuss the activity as a whole class.

Transition to the Bible study by introducing Paul’s discussion of the law’s nature and impact on people.

Into the Word

Begin by asking the class what they consider the role of the law. They should keep this concept in mind throughout the lesson to see how their definition of role of law compares and contrasts with Paul’s own.

Invite a volunteer to read [Romans 7:1–3](#) aloud. In pairs, have learners read [Revelation 21](#) together. Ask these pairs to write down how the bride’s status depended on being released from the law, as in Paul’s analogy. After several minutes, bring the class back together to talk about what they found.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “World-Record Marriages” activity from the activity page. Have learners discuss conclusions in small groups. Be sensitive to those members of the class who may have experienced loss of a spouse or divorce and remarriage.

Ask a volunteer to read [Romans 7:4–6](#) aloud. In the same pairs, have learners read [Galatians 5:19–21](#). What do these examples of “fruit for death” ([Romans 7:5](#)) and the law have to do with one another?

Ask a volunteer to read [Romans 7:7–12](#) aloud. Based on learners’ answers to the Into the Lesson activity, how do these verses either confirm or refute their previous responses? Divide the class in half. One half will discuss how [Romans 7:1–12](#) supports or modifies the aphorism “knowledge is power.” The other half will do the same with the phrase “ignorance is bliss.” (*Option.* Distribute a handout (you create) with both phrases printed on it so that pairs or small groups can consider both phrases at once.) After about 10 minutes, bring the groups together for a whole-class discussion on how these two phrases relate to Paul’s teaching on the law’s role and value.

Into Life

Ask a volunteer to reread [Romans 7:7–12](#) aloud. How might learners’ previous definitions of the

role of the law be tweaked or overhauled in light of Paul's explanation? Ask how law is necessary as a tool to teach right from wrong. Encourage learners to provide both biblical and personal examples.

Distribute note cards and pens to learners. Ask class members to write down one wrong idea they have heard or believed about the Old Testament law. On the reverse side, ask learners to copy or paraphrase a verse from today's lesson that refutes that wrong idea. In pairs, have the learners talk about why it matters to think correctly about the role of the Old Testament law. Reasons might include: understanding the lives of the New Testament men and women better; learning to value the law without giving up freedom in Christ; etc. Encourage them to refer to this card throughout the week and jot down in the margins any new insights that occur in that time.

Close class with a prayer of thanks for what the law has taught us and for the freedom we experience in Christ.