Dead *Letter*

ROMANS 7:1–6 · PASTOR BRIAN CARROLL · NOVEMBER 1, 2026

A dead letter is mail that can't be delivered, because the person it was addressed to no longer lives there. In Romans 7:1–6, Paul says the same is true of every believer: through the body of Christ, we have died to the law's claim, so its demands now come back marked "addressee deceased." That death isn't the end of the story, because we've been joined to the risen Christ to bear fruit for God in the new way of the Spirit, not the old way of the written code.

Introduction

- Raise your hand if you've ever lost something in the mail.
  - Keep it up if you ever found out where it went.
  - Most of us assume lost mail just evaporates.
    - It falls behind a machine somewhere.
    - It gets eaten by a dog in Ohio.
  - It doesn't.
    - It goes somewhere.
    - And for most of American history, that somewhere had one of the most ominous names our government has ever come up with: the Dead Letter Office.
    - If that name sounds familiar, you're either a postal historian or you owned an R.E.M. album in 1987.
    - And I'm guessing there are more of you in the second group.
- The idea is older than the country.
  - In 1737, back when the person receiving a letter paid the postage instead of the sender, Ben Franklin warned that letters nobody came to pay for would be sent off to the General Post Office as "dead letters."
  - In 1825, it became official.
  - From then until 1917, every piece of undeliverable mail in the country went to a single central office in Washington, D.C.

  - And the volume was staggering.
    - By the end of the 1800s, clerks handled as many as 23,000 pieces of dead mail a day.
    - That's about 7 million a year.
- This wasn't a warehouse. It was detective work.
  - Only the Dead Letter Office had the authority to open mail that couldn't be delivered.
  - Clerks worked with maps, city directories, guidebooks, and their own memory of every strange address they'd ever seen.
  - During the Civil War, with men gone to the front and mail piling up, the office began hiring women in 1862.
  - By 1879, all 55 clerks in the Dead Letter Office were women.
- At one point, most of the clerks were women and retired clergymen, because they were believed to have the moral character to be trusted with people's private mail.
  - The best of them was a widow named Patti Lyle Collins.
  - She processed about 1,000 letters a day.
  - She knew people would mix up Niagara and Saratoga, and that nobody in America could spell "Bellevue."
- And they were good.
  - One letter came in addressed to a doctor at "Roberts College."
  - The clerks knew there was no Roberts College in the United States.
  - It was in Constantinople, Turkey.
  - Sixteen days later, the doctor had his letter and his money.
  - If they failed, the letters were burned or pulped.
- Not everything that came through was a letter.
  - So they started a museum.
  - By the 1850s, visiting the Dead Letter Office was one of the most popular things a tourist could do in Washington.
  - On display: a pickled ear, a jar of centipedes, a letter written on a shirt cuff, and a box of snakes.
  - Also loaded revolvers and pipe bombs, sent by people with no regard for postal law. A living tarantula escaped from a package once, causing quite a panic.

  - At the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, the Post Office brought about a thousand of these items, and newspapers said the dead letter exhibit drew the biggest crowds.
  - Not all of it was funny, though. The most somber items on display were thousands of photographs of Civil War soldiers, pictures mailed home that never made it.
  - The museum closed in 1911, and most of its contents went to the Smithsonian.
- The office itself never closed.
  - In the 1990s, they gave it a friendlier name: the Mail Recovery Center.
  - Today, every piece of undeliverable mail in the country ends up in one building, in Atlanta, Georgia.
  - In one recent year it took in 88 million items.
  - Anything worth more than $25 gets opened to look for an address, then held for 30 to 60 days.
  - What nobody claims gets auctioned online in bulk lots: gift cards, phones, laptops.
  - And this is my favorite part: if you win, you have to go to Atlanta and pick it up. The Postal Service will not mail you the lost mail.
- Here's what struck me.
  - Most of those letters weren't wrong.
  - The postage was paid. The message was real.
  - The sender meant every word.
  - The problem wasn't the letter.
  - The problem was the address.
  - The person it was written to wasn't there anymore.
  - They had moved, or nobody knew them, or they had died.
- In 1853, Herman Melville wrote a short story called "Bartleby, the Scrivener."
  - At the end, we learn that Bartleby once worked in the Dead Letter Office, spending his days handling letters for people who were already dead.
  - And Melville writes, "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?"
  - For Melville, that was a tragedy — good news arriving too late.
- For Paul, it's the best news you'll ever hear.
  - This morning he's going to tell us there are demands with your name on them that can't be delivered anymore.

- Not because the sender was wrong.
- Not because the message was false.
- But because the person they were addressed to died.

- Turn with me to Romans 7.

Scripture Reading

ROMANS 7:1-6 (ESV)

[1] 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? [2] 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. [3] 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. [4] 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. [5] 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. [6] 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.

- As we move into chapter 7, it is good to remember that a change in chapter doesn't mean a change in context.
  - In fact, Romans is kind of like one of those Russian nesting dolls…everything is continuing to build on what came before it.
  - So our battle against sin is still very much in view as we move into a new chapter.
  - Paul said we were crucified with Christ and that principle is still guiding the argument that Paul is making here.
- But one of the greatest questions that continued to linger over this argument is our relationship to the Old Testament law.
  - I think it's fair to say that well-meaning Christians still wrestle with this.
  - We read the Law and we know that it is inspired Scripture, but generally speaking, we pick and choose the portions we adhere to and the portions we pay little attention to.

- Even taking something as baseline as the Ten Commandments.
  - We don't particularly wrestle with blatant idolatry or graven images.
  - I wish more Christians were put off by using God's name as a curse word.
  - But, let's not talk about sabbath keeping.
  - But the rest…we're all good with:
    - Honoring parents – check
    - Murder – check
    - Adultery – check
    - Theft – check
    - Lying – check
    - Coveting – well, maybe we're still working on it.
  - Even if we don't get these right, we still mostly acknowledge something of a standard.
- But dietary laws – those got tossed pretty early.
  - Hygiene laws – we wash our hands because of science, not because of concerns with the law.
  - Sacrifices – let's just say they're generally already butchered, wrapped, and refrigerated these days.
- But then we have differing degrees of discomfort with the law.
  - You might have no issue doing manual labor on Sunday (which really isn't the sabbath, but that's not the point) and somebody else might have serious hesitation.
  - If you head up to Collegedale, you'll find a large community of people there who have an entirely different perspective on keeping the law.
- This is where chapter 7 of this book comes in.
  - The next 4 sermons will feature 4 principles to help us understand our relationship to the law as followers of Christ.
  - The first one is this: Through our identification with Christ's death, we have been released from our old binding relationship to the law.
  - We now belong to the risen Christ, so that we may bear fruit for God.
- To make this point, Paul turns to marriage as a simple illustration…take a look at vv. 1–3.

Signed, Sealed, and Binding

ROMANS 7:1-3

- I've officiated quite a few weddings over the last 25 years and every one of them has been unique.
  - There was the time the best man handed me a Cracker Jack box during the ceremony – buried somewhere in a box of sticky popcorn was the bride's ring.
  - I did another wedding on a couple's back porch. To make room, I had to squeeze in between the gas grill and the porch rail.
  - But despite all of their different settings and the different plans and ideas of the couple, one of the things I'm pretty sure I've said at every wedding has something to do with "'Til death do you part."
  - Not every couple took that part seriously in the long run – but at the time they did.
- I know we live in a culture where we've gotten a little sloppy with our understanding of marriage.
  - Sadly, many couples enter into marriage with an exit strategy already in place.
  - And even though that may be the reality of our day – that's not the expectation of Scripture.
  - So when Paul uses marriage as an illustration – he can do so because of the biblical ideal, even if the carnal reality is less-than.
  - Paul isn't trying to answer every question about marriage and divorce here.
- He's using a familiar relationship to establish one principle: death ends a binding obligation.
  - That's the only, for lack of better terms, clean way to end a marriage.
  - There are no claims to be made, no custody to be settled, no assets to be divided, no arguments to be litigated.
  - Likewise, there are no spiritual complications either.
  - Obviously, this is not diminishing the pain or grief associated with death, simply a recognition of the clinical reality.
  - Now, I could spend this sermon talking about the biblical ideal for marriage, but that's actually not Paul's point here.
  - He's not making a marriage argument, he's using a marriage illustration.
  - His point here is about how our relationship with the law changes.

- Paul's point in this illustration is simple: the law's claim on each of us was legitimate and binding.
  - Think about the woman in Paul's example.
    - She can't just decide she's done.
    - She can't walk away because she's tired of the arrangement.
    - As long as he's alive, his claim on her stands.
    - If she gives herself to another man, verse 3 has a word for that.
  - That's where we stand with the law.
    - The law has every right to make demands of you.
    - It isn't wrong. It isn't unfair.
    - You can't divorce it. You can't renegotiate it.
    - You can't outgrow it.
  - Someone might say, "I never signed up for that. I didn't grow up in church. Nobody ever read me the Ten Commandments."
    - Paul answered that back in chapter 2.
    - Israel got the law on tablets of stone.
    - Everyone else got it written on their heart, and your conscience has been reading it to you your whole life.
    - The letter is addressed to you whether you've opened it or not.
    - Only one thing ends a claim like that.
- Notice what Paul said before he ever brought up marriage, in verse 1: "the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives."
  - Marriage is the illustration.
  - That's the principle: the law has jurisdiction only over the living.
  - And the law isn't going anywhere. So if that claim is ever going to end, somebody has to die.

Addressee Deceased

ROMANS 7:4

- Today is November 1, for some of you it's the start of the Christmas season.
  - This will be our 9th Christmas season in our home.
  - Soon enough, Christmas cards will start to show up in our mailbox – but not every card will have our name on it.
  - Every year the people who used to live there will get 2 or 3 Christmas cards in our mailbox.
  - The first year, the mail forwarding thing took care of it.
  - But every year since, we get their Christmas cards.
  - And every year I write, "return to sender" and stick it back in the box.
  - Here's a good rule – free tip for the day – if you don't know someone well enough to know that they moved a decade ago, you should probably remove them from your Christmas card list…you're welcome, I just saved you a stamp!
- Those cards aren't bad cards.
  - Someone took the time to pick one out, sign it, address it, and pay for the stamp.
  - They meant every word.
  - The problem isn't the card.
  - The problem is that the people it was written to don't live there anymore.
  - Now, the people who used to live there just moved.
  - Paul says something much more final happened to you.
- Verse 4: "You also have died to the law through the body of Christ."
  - Not moved. Died.
  - Paul spent all of chapter 6 establishing this.
  - We were "buried with him by baptism into death."
  - Our old self "was crucified with him."
- So when the law shows up with a demand that has your old name on it, the honest answer isn't, "I'm trying harder."
  - The honest answer is, "Addressee deceased."
    - Now hear me carefully. The law didn't die.
    - Next week, we'll see Paul call it "holy and righteous and good."

        - The letter is still good. It is the addressee who is gone.
    - And notice how it happened: "through the body of Christ."
    - The demand didn't just get lost.
    - It was delivered. Jesus received it in his own body on the cross, and in him, you died too.
    - The Apostle Peter said it this way…

> **1 PETER 2:24** (ESV)
>
> [24] *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.*

- And Paul doesn't stop at the death.
    - He tells us why: "so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead."
    - The old resident is gone.
    - Somebody new lives at that address now, and that someone belongs to Jesus.
    - How new? Paul makes that pretty clear too…

> **2 CORINTHIANS 5:17** (ESV)
>
> [17] *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*

- Go back to Paul's illustration.
    - The widow is free to marry again.
    - And look who she marries: "him who has been raised from the dead."
- Do you see why that matters?
    - Her first marriage ended because somebody died.
    - This one never will.
    - Back in chapter 6, Paul told us Christ "will never die again."
- This old marriage to the law ended the only way it could. This new marriage can't.
    - And this marriage has a purpose: "in order that we may bear fruit for God."
    - The old arrangement couldn't produce that.

- Verse 5 is going to tell us what it produced instead.

- I recognize that this is a dense passage with a complicated illustration. So what are we supposed to do with it?
  - Some of you are still checking that old mailbox.
  - Every time you fail, the accusations show up.
    - "You've failed again. You're going to have to make up for this. Maybe then God will accept you."
    - And you keep signing for those demands, like you still live there.
  - Now, when God shows you your sin, listen.
    - Confess it. Turn from it.
    - Belonging to Jesus means taking sin seriously.
    - But there's a difference between "You have sinned" and "You must earn your way back into God's favor."
  - The first calls you to repentance. The second forgets what Christ has done.
    - When that accusation comes, your answer isn't a promise to do enough to make yourself acceptable.
    - Your answer is, "I died with Christ. I belong to him now."
  - A new resident lives differently, because he belongs to someone new.
  - But your standing with God doesn't rest on how well you answer the old mail.
  - It rests on who you belong to.
  - And that changes how you live.

New Address

ROMANS 7:5-6

- Verses 5 and 6 tell us what life looked like before Christ, and what it looks like now.
  - Verse 5: "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."
  - "Living in the flesh" is Paul's way of describing life before Christ.
  - And notice what the law did in that life.
    - It didn't fix our sinful passions. It "aroused" them.
    - You've seen this.

        - Tell a child not to touch something, and suddenly it's the only thing in the room they want.
    - This isn't just anecdotal – it's backed by research.
        - A few years ago, researchers put toddlers in a room with a toy, told them not to peek at it, and stepped out.
        - Eighty percent of them peeked.
        - And a lot of them lied about it afterward.
        - Nobody taught them that.
        - The "don't" was all it took.
    - Paul is going to unpack that next week.
        - For now, just notice the result of living in the flesh: "bearing fruit for death."
        - The old marriage produced one thing, and it wasn't good.
- Then verse 6…
    - We saw the same thing last week in chapter 6 where these two simple words change everything.
    - But now…
- So what is the turn?
    - "We are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive."
    - But that doesn't mean anarchy and lawlessness.
    - Look at why we're released: "so that we serve."
- Freedom from the law isn't freedom from obedience.
    - Paul's definition of freedom isn't spiritual libertarianism.
    - It's freedom to obey in a whole new way.
    - And he defines that new way:
        - "In the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code."
        - That phrase, "written code," is literally "the letter."
        - The old way was life by the letter.
        - In 2 Cor. 3:5-6, Paul said:

> **2 CORINTHIANS 3:5-6** (ESV)
>
> *5 Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6 who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*

- So what's the difference?
  - God hasn't stopped caring about holiness.
  - But our relationship to the law has changed, and so has the power by which we serve.
    - The law could tell us what God required.
    - It could expose our disobedience.
    - But it could not give sinful people the power to become what it commanded.
  - That doesn't mean the Old Testament taught people to earn their salvation.
    - It means God's good commands could never cure our sinful hearts.
    - But now we belong to the risen Christ, and God's Spirit lives in us.
    - We don't obey to persuade God to accept us.
    - We obey because he has accepted us in Christ.
    - And the Spirit does more than give us a better reason to obey—he enables the obedience God desires.
  - The old way asks, "What's the least I can do?"
  - The new way asks, "What pleases the one I belong to?"
- Here's what that looks like in real life.
  - Take generosity. The old way asks, "Do I tithe on gross or net?"
  - The new way asks, "How can I be generous with what God has given me?"
  - Take forgiveness. In Matthew 18, Peter asked Jesus, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?"
  - That's a written-code question. Peter was looking for the limit.
  - Jesus answers, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy-seven times."
  - In other words, stop counting.
  - The old way keeps a checklist. Remember the Ten Commandments checklist from earlier?
  - The new way isn't less obedient. It's more. It just isn't keeping score.

- And here's the best part: you don't have to do this in your own strength.
  - Paul calls it "the new way of the Spirit."
  - God's Spirit lives in every believer.
- Paul will spend all of chapter 8 explaining that.
  - For today, just know this: the one you belong to doesn't just give you new rules.
  - He gives you a new heart to want them.

Conclusion

- We started this morning in the Dead Letter Office.
- Millions of letters every year, and most of them weren't wrong. The postage was paid. The message was real.
- They just couldn't be delivered, because the person they were written to wasn't there anymore.
- Melville looked at that and saw a tragedy: good news arriving too late.
- But Paul looks at the law and sees the opposite.
- The law's demands are real. They're holy. They're addressed to you.
- And if you're in Christ, they can't be delivered, because the person they were written to died with Jesus.
- That's not a tragedy. That's the gospel.
- The old you is gone, and the new you belongs to the one who was raised from the dead and will never die again.
- So this morning the question isn't, "How well have you kept the law?"
  - The question is, "Who do you belong to?"
- If you've never placed your trust in Christ you still live at the old address, and the law's claim on you is still in force.
  - You can't divorce it, and you can't outgrow it.
  - Only a death ends it. Jesus died that death, and you can be joined to him today.
  - Turn from your sin, stop trying to make yourself acceptable to God on your own, and trust Christ.
  - He was raised from the dead, and he will never let you go.

- If you're a follower of Christ and you continue to check your old mailbox, you've been signing for demands that aren't addressed to you anymore, living like your standing with God depends on how well you perform.
  - Repent of that. Not by trying harder, but by resting in who you belong to.
  - Then go serve him in the new way of the Spirit, because you love him, not because you're afraid of him.
- If you're not sure, if you honestly can't answer the question "Who do I belong to?", don't leave here guessing. Settle it today.
- I'll be down front, someone will be in the foyer.
  - If you need to talk with someone, pray with someone, or make that decision public, come.
  - We're going to sing "Free Indeed."
  - If you're in Christ, sing it like it's true. It is.