

The Sin Nature and the Law

📖 Romans 7:7-13

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We are studying Romans. What is Romans all about? The gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. Paul was planning to come to Rome and he wanted these believers to be doctrinally grounded in the gospel of salvation prior to his arrival. How many tenses of salvation are there? Three tenses. What are the three tenses? Past, present and future. Is the gospel the power of God unto salvation in all three tenses? Absolutely. What's the past tense of salvation? Justification. We have been justified. What's justification? The legal declaration or crediting of Christ's righteousness to the believer at the moment of faith. What chapters does Paul communicate this doctrine of justification? Romans 4-5. What's the present tense of salvation? Sanctification. We are being sanctified. What's sanctification? The gradual setting apart of the believer for the specific purpose of living a life that is pleasing to God. In what chapters does Paul communicate the doctrine of sanctification? Romans 6-8. We'll add the future tense of salvation later. For now we're dealing with sanctification.

What are the basics of sanctification that we have learned so far? As an unbeliever you were unregenerate, dead in your transgressions and sins and as such a slave to your sin nature which was your master. In this condition, by grace, the Spirit of God used the gospel to set you free through faith from your obligation to the sin nature by applying the blood of the Lamb to you. The Spirit then baptized you into the death, burial and resurrection of Christ so that you have a new regenerate identity in Christ. Now you are slave to your new nature which is your master. You continue to carry the old sin nature with you but you are no longer obligated to obey the sin nature. You are now obligated to obey your new nature. Yet the two natures war within you, each desiring to have its lusts satisfied. The way for your new nature to have victory is to put yourself under the principle of grace and not law. If you put yourself under the principle of law it will only arouse your sin nature to exert itself against the law and bear fruit to death. Does this then mean that you are to be lawless? May it never be! The principle of grace is not lawlessness. It is a new way of living. If you put yourself under the principle of grace then it will arouse the Spirit of God to bear fruit to God. This life by the Spirit is the grace life and our responsibility in this life is one of conscious and active dependence upon Him, that is, living by faith, the result is passive production, the bearing of fruit.

Today in Romans 7:7-13 Paul is dealing with the nature of the Law and the sin nature's relationship to the Law. This might be particularly problematic for a Jew who had been trained under Law from birth and is now a Christian but it has turned out to be equally problematic for Gentile Christians. Most Christians think that the Christian is under the moral law as it was revealed in the OT. They arrive at this conclusion by dividing the 613 laws of Moses into moral, legal and ceremonial aspects, then claim that the legal and ceremonial aspects have been put to an end with the death of Christ but the moral aspects continue and are binding for the Christian. We showed last time that dividing the law into these three aspects is unbiblical and we also showed that claiming that the moral law continues after the death of Christ is contradicted by several NT passages. The Law is to be viewed as a single unit and the entire Law came to a close with the death of Christ. Other Christians who are more naïve hold that the Christian is at least under the Ten Commandments. We showed last time that the Ten Commandments are the basis of the entire Law and to therefore take just ten of them is really shortsighted. Further we showed that when the Ten Commandments are rightly understood then nobody has kept any of them anyway. Ultimately the Law was designed to give Israel life but it resulted in death. The Law was excellent at killing people. Because it could not give life, when we believed in Christ He killed us to the Law so that we might be joined to Christ and live in the newness of the Spirit. Does it follow then, that since the Law only killed, that the Law is bad? That the Law is sin? These are the questions raised in Paul's mind in Romans 7:7.

He asks, **What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?** And what is Paul's answer? **May it never be!** The Law is not sin because if the Law is sin and God gave the Law then God is the author of sin. That would be a serious theological problem. God is good, God is not the author of sin. Man is the author of sin. Since God authored the Law then the Law is also good. Paul says as much in verse 12 where he says, "so then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good." Therefore we should never conclude that because the Law only put people to death the Law is therefore sinful. It is not. It is holy and good, a revelation of God's own holiness and goodness. But if the Law is holy and good then why have we been released from it as regenerate people living after the cross? Can't we now, as regenerate people, keep the Law? Well, Paul's answer is no. This doesn't mean we're lawless but we are not under the Law for our sanctification. It simply cannot sanctify.

Nevertheless, the Law does serve some good purposes. Notice verse 7, **Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law.** So the Law serves the good purpose of showing us our sin. Paul is using the first person **I** either to make a personal application or he is using it as a visual aid to refer to all of us, meaning we should put ourselves in the **I**. Either way, one thing the Law does is point out our sin. The Law was given by God at Sinai to reveal His standards for living in His kingdom and as such it pointed out that their hearts were sinful and were therefore in need of a new heart, one where the Spirit of God could dwell to reproduce His life in them.

Therefore, did the Israelites have a heart that would obey? Even at the giving of the Law God said, "Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me and keep all My commandments always..." So they did not

have such a heart! When Moses came down the Mount and he found them breaking the Law he took the Ten Commandments and what did He do with them? He smashed them to the ground, breaking them in half. Why did he do that? To reveal that their hearts were broken and they needed a new heart. So the Law is not sin, on the contrary it showed us our sin and therefore our need of a new heart.

The second half of verse 7 is given as an example. **For I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET."** Paul probably could have used any one of the Ten Commandments but he decided to use one that obviously gets into our hearts. All the commandments actually reached down into the depths of the heart but this one is very obvious. What is coveting? Coveting is where you desire to have something that someone else possesses. I don't know if Paul had a particular problem or if he just chose this because it was so obviously a heart issue. But I do know that when knowledge of this law comes we all have a not so pleasant realization of how sinful we are in our hearts. So his example shows that the Law gave a greater realization of our sin, not that the Law made us sin. We already were sinning. The Law just pointed it out more clearly! That is the first thing the Law did.

The second thing the Law did is verse 8 and this brings the sin nature into the picture. This is actually telling us why when the Law came it was such a good revealer of sin. **But sin, taking opportunity**, and before we go on, is **sin** here a personal act or the sin nature? It's got the definite article and it's singular so it's the sin nature. So let's read it that way, **But the sin nature, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.** So here we learn something about the sin nature and what Law does to the sin nature, how it stirs it up to rebellion. Let's say here you are and you have a sin nature. Then a law comes in the picture, "Don't do X," you fill in the blank. Whatever suits your fancy, whatever X is for you. What does your sin nature now want to do? Rebel against the law that says do not do X. It wants to do X and it will get under your skin and won't leave you alone until you do X. Now why does it do that? Because obviously the Law was given by someone, some external authority and does the sin nature like to submit to an outside authority? No, the sin nature wants to be the authority. It wants to make the laws. It is a law unto itself. It is autonomous! So every time you come to know a law the sin nature to some extent recognizes that he law did not come from itself and this is an affront to the sin nature so the sin nature wants to rebel. It's just that simple. Showers says, "Thus, the more the law asserts itself, the more the sinful disposition exercises its power to cause the person to violate the law."¹ Now that is what Paul is explaining in verse 8 so let's look at it closely.

Paul says the law pointed out my sin of coveting but my sin nature took opportunity through the commandment and produced all kinds of coveting in me. So was it the Law that produced in Paul the coveting or was it Paul's sin nature that produced the coveting? It was Paul's sin nature. Because the sin nature recognizes an external law and it doesn't like any external law, it wants to be the law, so it rebels more and more. You can see then why the **sin nature** took **opportunity through the commandment**. It did so to try and reassert its own authority.

Now did Paul already have a **sin nature** before the Law came? Of course he did. Was Paul already expressing his sin nature before the Law not to covet came? Of course he was. What's the difference then? The sin nature had not been challenged in this area. It was being allowed to be a law unto itself. But when the Law came the sin nature was challenged and in order to reassert its authority it rebelled, producing in Paul **coveting of every kind**.

He explains saying, **for apart from the Law the sin nature is dead**. What does Paul mean the sin nature was **dead**? Certainly he doesn't mean he didn't have one. What he means is it was inactive or dormant. Why apart from the Law was the sin nature dormant? Because its authority wasn't being challenged. As long as the sin nature's authority isn't being challenged it has no reason to try and reassert its authority. It's already the authority so it remains dormant. It's only when the Law comes that the sin nature is challenged and wakes up in order to reassert its authority causing us to sin more and more because the more we sin the more entrenched the authority of the sin nature becomes.

Now in verse 9 Paul says **I was once alive apart from the Law**. Paul's saying it was the good old days when I didn't have the Law because then I didn't have the struggle. My sin nature was just dormant **but when the commandment came, the sin nature became alive and I died**. In other words the sin nature came out of dormancy. Why did it come out of dormancy? Because its authority was being challenged and so it woke up in order to try and reassert its authority. And when it did Paul says, **I died**. What does he mean **I died**? He means he realized his spiritual deadness. He realized he did not have it in him to do the Law. The Law killed him not because the Law was bad but because Paul's sin nature was bad and what the Law did was wake it up to rebel in an attempt to reassert its authority. So the Law was accomplishing what it set out to do and that is to show that sin is utterly sinful and that we are in need of God's grace.

Verse 10, **and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me**. What was **this commandment** in particular, the commandment not to covet, supposed to result in? **Life**. In other words it's a good thing not to covet, not to want other people's things but merely to be content with what you have. That is an enjoyment of life. Were the commandments designed to result in life? Absolutely. What passage was Paul thinking of when he wrote this? Probably Deut 30:15, 19 "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, and death and adversity." To follow the Law meant life; to break the Law meant death. Verse 19, "I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants..." So the commandment was to result in life. But Paul says when the commandment came to me, the commandment that was to result in an enjoyment of life, what did it do instead? It resulted in **death**. Why did it result in death? Because the moment the commandment came it was an affront to the authority of Paul's sin nature and therefore it began to try and reassert its own authority. In doing so as Paul gave in he sinned more and more. Was it the Law that killed Paul then? No, it was the sin nature.

Verse 11, **for sin**, and again, is this an act of personal sin or the sin nature? It's the sin nature. **For the sin nature, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.** You see that it's the sin nature that killed Paul, not the commandment. The commandment just provided the opportunity or the situation since the moment the commandment came the sin nature said, no, I don't submit to authority, I am my own authority and it rebelled. Paul says the sin nature **deceived me**. The Greek word *εξαπατω* means "to cause someone to accept false ideas about something." The idea is that the sin nature led Paul to accept the false idea that he could keep the commandment if he just tried hard enough. But this was a deception. This is trying to crank out the good life. Paul found he could not keep the commandment. Every time Paul tried to keep the commandment His sin nature **killed** him by rebelling and causing him to sin more and more. The only good thing that came out of this is it reminded Paul that he was spiritually dead and in need of God's grace.

Verse 12 gives the conclusion to the question in verse 7, **Is the Law sin? No, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.** Why is the Law **holy and righteous and good**? Because God is **holy and righteous and good**. Anything that is authored by God is **holy and righteous and good**. What then is sin? We are sin. There is nothing about the Law that is sinful. We are the problem. The problem is not the Law. The Law just pointed out that we were sinful.

Verse 13 summarizes, **Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be!** The good Law is not what killed me. The Law was to result in life. So what then is the **cause of death**? Paul says, **it was sin**. Not an act of sin but the sin nature. Why? **in order that it might be shown to be sin**, that is, the Law showed specific things **to be sin**. That was a vital purpose of the law, vital not because it gave life but because it showed the need for life, a life outside of self. And so, he says, the sin nature **effected my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful**. In other words, it showed me that I am spiritually dead. You see then that the Law is good and I am not good. I am **utterly sinful** and in need of grace. But as long as I think I can whip up goodness I am being deceived by my sin nature. Most Christians don't want to admit that they are in need of grace. They want to claim that they are saved by grace but then that they grow by doing good works, cranking out good from their sin nature and presenting it before God as if He's interested. Paul is saying that is impossible and if we put ourselves under the Law we are not going to do anything but crank out sin. That is what the sin nature cranks out. And because of that that is why in verse 4 we were made to die to the Law. We were being set free from the Law that killed and being joined to Christ in order to live a new life by the Spirit. Life by the Spirit is the grace principle of dependence upon another, dependence upon the Spirit of God, living by faith and when we do we truly live and bear fruit to God.

¹ Renald Showers, *The New Nature*, p 87.