

*Sin's Deadly Use of the Law: Romans 7:7-12*

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This is Palm Sunday, and we remember that our Lord had set His face toward Jerusalem and throughout His earthly ministry knew that's where He was headed: to the cross. He entered Jerusalem, received with palm branches and applause. Before a week had passed, He was condemned to a criminal's death. This Friday we will gather to meditate on that death. Next Sunday we will gather to celebrate His glorious triumph over death. This morning, as we're continuing our study in Romans 7, we're reminded of our desperate need for the cross. Part of what we'll see in our text today is how the law plays an important role in showing us our sin. We'll also see how sin manipulates the law in destructive ways.

In chapter 6 Paul had responded to questions concerning his teaching on justification by faith alone.

*"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"* (Romans 6:1, ESV)

*"What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"* (Romans 6:15, ESV)

Then, in the first 6 verses of chapter 7 he began to address this question of the law. And he said something very startling, very shocking. He said that believers have died to the law. He used the analogy of marriage. We used to be married to the law, but a death occurred so that we are now united to another—Jesus Christ. Thus, we can see how this next question arises.

*"What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!"* The same answer as he gave before to the other questions. Paul knows the objections that come against these truths. And as a good teacher, and under the inspiration of the Spirit, he addresses these objections, for the benefit of his first readers, and for us today. This is a key question. This is an important subject for us to wrestle with. Do these things which Paul has just said about the law, does this imply that there's something inherently wrong with the law? Does this imply that the law is wicked and sinful in and of itself? Paul's words seem to be so harsh against the law, saying that it aroused our sinful passions (v. 5) and that it held us captive (v. 6). So what are we to make of this? Is Paul saying that the law is sin? By no means! And verses 7-12 give us an explanation for why not.

Here are the four headings I'll use to take us through this paragraph. First, the law brings knowledge of sin. Second, we'll consider the law apart from sin. Third, sin apart from the law. And finally, how sin uses the law. And all of this fits under the sermon title, "Sin's Deadly Use of the Law." So the main point is that the law, itself, is in no way sinful. But sin hijacks the law and uses it for destruction.

### **The Law Brings Knowledge of Sin**

We've seen this point earlier in Romans: "*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*" (Romans 3:20, ESV)

The law will not justify you. God has to do that by counting us righteous in Christ. The law will not sanctify you. We need the indwelling Spirit for that. But the law will show you your sin. And this is something we must appreciate about the law. The law can be used to show unbelievers their sin and their need for a Savior. The law can be used to show believers their sin and remind them of their need for a Savior.

Here in verse 7 Paul says, "if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin." And then he uses an example, citing the last of the 10 commandments, "*For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'*" (Romans 7:7, ESV)

To lust after something that belongs to your neighbor is sin. We wouldn't consider that to be sin if it were not for our knowledge of God's law. The commandment makes it painfully clear to us that our deeds, our desires, are in opposition to God.

As those who have been regenerated, we should then thank God for the law, because it shows us our sin which we need to repent of and seek forgiveness for. This should point us to the cross. And so our Bible reading should be a time for repentance and confession, as we see God's good commands and how we have failed to live up to them. But rather than turning to despair, we look in hope to what Christ did for us.

### **The Law apart from Sin**

Verses 7 and 12 are like bookends to this paragraph. Verse 7 states the point negatively, and verse 12 positively. Verse 7 says that the law is by means sin! Verse 12 says that the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. There's nothing sinful about the law. The law shows us God's revealed will for humankind. It reflects His perfect character. It gives us a

glimpse into His infinite holiness. So we ought not denigrate God's law or ignore it. In spite of the other things we are going to see about how sin uses the law, we must remember that law itself is precious to us, for it's from God, and it is holy and righteous and good. This is why the Psalmists cried out with such joy as they exulted in the law. For instance, in Psalm 119, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law" (v. 18), "My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times" (v. 20). And our fighter verse for this week,

*"In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches. I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways. I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word."*  
(Psalm 119:14–16, ESV)

Let us be a people who delight in the law of God. We are not looking to God's law to justify us. We are not even looking to God's law to sanctify us. But we do rejoice in God's revelation of Himself to us, including His revelation of His character in the commands He gives. We look to the law and see our sin against the backdrop of God's holiness.

And that should give us delight in the holiness of God and also show us our need for holiness. R. C. Sproul shares about a church discipline situation he was part of where he and another minister went to confront a woman in the church about her adultery. She was married, the mother of 5 children, but she was living with another man. And when they exhorted her to end the adulterous relationship, she responded, "I don't have to listen to legalism." Sproul said to her, "You have to understand it is never legalism to obey the law of God; because God's law is holy, and what you are doing is unholy."<sup>1</sup> Fortunately, in that situation, the woman repented and turned from her sin. Sproul makes a good point about the holiness of God's law. As we guard against the dangers of legalism, we must not go to the other extreme and claim that any call to holiness is legalistic. We must pursue holiness. That's not under question. The point Paul has made is simply that the law is not what's going to get us there. It's being joined to Christ that will cause us to bear fruit for God (v. 4).

So we've seen the goodness of the law in showing us our sin and in revealing to us God's goodness. We've considered the law as it is in itself, apart from sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans, pg. 219.

## **Sin apart from the Law**

This we've seen earlier in Romans as well. "*For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression.*" (Romans 4:15, ESV)

Now, he's not saying there that sin is absent where there is no law. But sin is not counted as a transgression against a specific law if that law has not been brought to bear upon a person. Sin is sin. But the law turns sin into a transgression, counting it as a specific offense against a specific rule.

Look at how Paul describes sin apart from the law in our text, at the end of verse 8 and the beginning of verse 9. He uses the language of dead and alive. In verse 8, "apart from the law, sin lies dead." Again, this doesn't mean sin was absent in his life before the law was brought to bear upon his life. But sin is unprovoked. It sleeps. It is passive and latent.

And in that situation, the sinner seems to experience life, as in the beginning of verse 9. "I was once alive apart from the law . . ." Charles Hodge writes about this, "Every believer can adopt the language of the apostle. He can say he was alive without the law; he was secure and free from any painful consciousness of sin; but when the commandment came, when he was brought to see how holy and how broad is the law of God, sin was aroused and revealed, and all his fancied security and goodness disappeared. He was bowed down under the conviction of his desert of death as a penalty, and under the power of spiritual death in his soul."<sup>2</sup>

So without the law pressing upon a person's life, that person may feel free and alive in their pursuit of sin. But then enters the law, and it brings sin to light, provoking it, arousing it, making it unmistakable that sin is there and it is in fierce opposition to God.

And this leads us to the point about how sin uses the law. We've considered the law apart from sin. The commandment is holy and righteous and good. We've considered sin apart from the law, as it lies quietly in sleep, as it were.

## **How Sin Uses the Law**

And now we must see the deadly combination of law and sin. This is sin's deadly use of the law. The rest of verse 9 says, "when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died." It makes me think of *The Hobbit* (I haven't seen the movie yet; I'm

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<sup>2</sup> Romans, pg. 224.

thinking of the book). I picture Smog the dragon as sin. And Bilbo is tip-toeing around wanting to get the treasure. As long as that dragon is sleeping, he doesn't much bother us. But when the law comes and pokes his underbelly, you better believe there's going to be some commotion. And, as I read from Hodge, this is the point at which the sinner's peaceful life of sin gets severely disrupted. The commandment is brought to bear on that person's life, and all of a sudden the peaceful slumber turns into violent chaos.

Do you see what sin is doing here? In verse 8, "But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness." And again in verse 11, "For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me." If you turn to the law and put your hope in the law to transform you, that will be your experience. It won't bring life, but death (v. 10). And that's because of sin.

Sin hijacks the law and uses the law to produce more sin and deceptively leads people down the path toward death.

Augustine, in his Confessions, shares from his childhood of an incident which perfectly illustrates how sin, even irrationally, incites rebellion, simply for the sake of rebellion.

"I had a desire to commit robbery, and did so, compelled to it by neither hunger nor poverty, but through a contempt for well-doing and a strong impulse to iniquity. For I pilfered something which I already had in sufficient measure, and of much better quality. I did not desire to enjoy what I stole, but only the theft and the sin itself. There was a pear tree close to our own vineyard, heavily laden with fruit, which was not tempting either for its color or for its flavor. Late one night--having prolonged our games in the streets until then, as our bad habit was--a group of young scoundrels, and I among them, went to shake and rob this tree. We carried off a huge load of pears, not to eat ourselves, but to dump out to the hogs, after barely tasting some of them ourselves. Doing this pleased us all the more *because it was forbidden*. Such was my heart, O God, such was my heart--which thou didst pity even in that bottomless pit. Behold, now let my heart confess to thee what it was seeking there, when I was being gratuitously wanton, having no inducement to evil but the evil itself. It was foul, and I loved it. I loved my own undoing. I loved my error--not that for which I erred but the error itself. A depraved soul, falling away from

security in thee to destruction in itself, seeking nothing from the shameful deed but shame itself.”<sup>3</sup>

That’s how sin grabs ahold of law, and uses it to spur us on in our wicked rebellion. Proverbs 9:17 recognizes this sad reality, “*Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.*”

This weekend I was speaking at the Reformation Society of Pittsburgh event with Bruce Bickel, going through Romans 5-8. And I liked the way Bruce put this, as he was teaching on Romans 7. He said, “Sin is so powerful that it will even use God’s holy law for its own purposes.” That sums it up well. As we see the sin that is provoked by the law, that is no fault of the law. But it shows us how wicked sin is, that it would even manipulate something so holy as God’s law.

We’ve seen how this plays out in certain ways in our lives. We can just think of telling a 3 year old, “Don’t use these markers to write on the wall.” And even as you say that, the light bulb is going on in his head—“I never thought of that before; that’s an awesome idea.” And 30 seconds after you’ve left the room, the kid is drawing to his heart’s content all over the wall.

We were talking about this the other day as a family, and we were laughing about those scented markers. The yellow one smells like a lemon, the green one smells like a Christmas tree or something, the red one smells like strawberries. And you have to tell the kids, don’t put these too close to your nose. And, of course, that’s a sure fire way to end up with a bunch of kids who have yellow and green and red marks all over their noses.

At one of Noah’s basketball games a few weeks ago, there was a little girl sitting in the seat next to me, and her mother was one of the referees. And during one of the breaks, the mother handed her iPhone to this little girl and said, “You can play with it, just don’t call anybody.” I wondered what was going through the little girl’s mind. And I knew what would be going through my mind, if I was that little kid. I’d be thinking, well I hadn’t planned on calling anyone (there are enough games on here to keep me busy for several hours), but now that you mention it, calling somebody sounds like fun. And it will be exciting to see if I can get away with it. This is how rules give us ideas of how to rebel. Rules stir up our rebellion.

Sin can use the law in very different ways. Sin can use the law to spur people on in outward forms of immorality. We studied

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<sup>3</sup> Book 2, chapter 4

Paul's discussion of those kinds of sins in chapter 1. When people hate God and hate God's law, they do what Augustine did and look for ways to do the opposite of what God commands.

In a different way, sin can use the law to produce religious pride and legalism and judgmentalism. Paul wrote about this kind of thing in chapter 2.

*“Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?”* (Romans 2:3, ESV)

Sin is deceptive in various ways, subtle and not-so-subtle. There can be blatant disregard and outward hatred toward God's law. Or there can be the deceptive assumption that I'm capable of keeping God's law, and I'll use that to look down on everyone else.

This is why we must understand the law rightly. We must humbly recognize our sinful inclination to rebel against it, and our sinful inclination to take pride in the ways we keep the law better than others. We must allow the law to serve as a mirror, pointing out our sin. And the result of our interaction with the law should always be to turn to the cross. We should repent, and with joy, because we see our need, and we know what our Savior has done.

### Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy

“Let not conscience make you linger, Nor of fitness fondly dream;  
All the fitness He requireth is to feel your need of Him.” (fitness = suitable, acceptable)

“Come, ye weary, heavy laden, Lost and ruined by the fall; if you tarry till you're better, You will never come at all.”

So don't hesitate to come to Christ. Don't think that you must make yourself better, because that's not going to happen. Don't dream of making yourself worthy of God's favor. That's a sinful way of using the law. Instead, let the law remind you again and again of your need for Christ.

I want to close with three brief words of application and exhortation. A word to the children. A word to parents. And a word for all of us.

### **A Word to the Children**

First, to the children. I imagine that many of you children here can identify with the illustration of the little kid and the

marker, or the story of Augustine and the pear tree. Maybe there have been times when your parents told you to do something, or told you not to do something, and you disobeyed, really for no reason at all. You just didn't want to be told what to do. Maybe some of you teenagers resent it when your parents try to put some parameters on what you can go do with your friends, and what time you need to be home. Your parents have guidelines for your life, and sometimes you think, "Get out of my life; I want to do my own thing."

Here's the point I want to make to you. That's your sinful nature you are seeing in those instances. You want clear proof that you're a sinner? That's it! You want to rebel. Even if you don't go through with it, there are times when you are really tempted to disobey, simply because you want to cast off any constraint on what you perceive to be freedom. You don't want to be told what to do.

My hope for you is that you will acknowledge that about yourself, and that you will repent. Rebellion is not the path to joy. It's the path to death. It is humbling to submit and to obey, but it will bring you real happiness and true excitement. So I pray that you will come to know your sin, and that you will come to know Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord.

### **A Word to Parents**

To parents, I think we ought to keep this in mind in the way we seek to shepherd our children. Our main goal is not merely to modify their behavior. I so appreciate Tedd Tripp's book, *Shepherding a Child's Heart*, because he encourages parents to go to the heart of the issues, bringing the Gospel to bear when we are interacting with our children and disciplining our children. If we discipline simply in terms of the law, "obey, or else," then sin will use that law to incite further sin. And this isn't to say we abandon all rules. Not at all. But when children disobey the rules, that's an opportunity to talk about sin, and our need for the Gospel.

Elyse Fitzpatrick, in her book, *Give Them Grace*, talks about the importance of stressing the law, not to make our kids good, but to drive them to Christ. She writes, "We won't get the results we want from the law. We'll get either shallow self-righteousness or blazing rebellion or both (frequently from the same kid on the same day!). We'll get moralistic kids who are cold and hypocritical and who look down on others (and could easily become Mormons—[she has made the point in that chapter that if our parenting methods and Bible teaching is basically the same as Mormons, then we're not parenting or teaching in a



distinctly Christian manner]), or you'll get teens who are rebellious and self-indulgent and who can't wait to get out of the house."<sup>4</sup>

That's a good warning for us, parents. Let's be thinking together and sharing with one another, how we can be Gospel-centered in our parenting. We don't want to produce little legalists. We want to point our kids to the cross. So our focus should not be on the law as an end in itself. Our focus should not be on outward conformity to certain rules. Our focus must be on the heart. And the law plays a role in that, to point out sin. But the law is not the solution to that problem. It simply points out the problem. The solution is in the Good News of what Jesus accomplished in His life and death and resurrection.

### **An Application Point for All of Us**

Finally, a word to all of us about authority and submission. In various arenas of our lives, we are faced with authority structures. Whether it's in the home, in the workplace, in society (submission to the governing authorities), or in the church, there are roles of authority and submission. And most of us are placed in both of those roles in differing contexts. A husband must lead his family, and submit to his boss. A wife must respect and submit to her husband, and exercise authority over her children. As an elder in this church, I must lead, but I am also under the authority of the other elders, and we are under the authority of church collectively and ultimately under the authority of Christ. My point is, we are all under authority.

So, like I exhorted the children, we all find ourselves in a similar place. And that can give rise to similar kinds of rebellion. It looks different in adults, but it's the same thing going on. So I ask you, Do you find yourself grating against the authority structures that are in place in your life? Do you resent the fact that you need to do what your boss asks you to do? Do you gripe endlessly about the government? Do you complain about the leadership in the church? We must recognize that these are examples of sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, and deceiving us. We need to repent of that sinful tendency that makes us bristle any time an external rule is imposed on us. And we need to turn in faith to our Lord, asking that He would enable us to joyfully submit to His commands and the authority structures which He has providentially placed in our lives.

God's law is good, friends. The commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore let it be used for good in our lives,

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<sup>4</sup> Pg. 36.

not for evil. Let us stand in front of the mirror of the law and be reminded of our desperate need for a Savior. Let us see the holiness of God revealed in His law. And let us rejoice that Jesus Christ fulfilled the law on behalf of all those who cast themselves upon Him.