

The Law Before Conversion

Studies in Romans

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Bible Text: Romans 7:7-13

Preached on: Sunday, November 9, 2008

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Take your Bibles with this morning and turn back to Romans 7. This morning I want to preach a message to you from Romans 7:7-13 concerning the law before conversion. The law before conversion. That's hard to say. There is much misunderstanding about the application of the law, the Ten Commandments, to this generation. Most people religious in nature are convinced that if they do their dead level best to try to keep the law, that God will accept them based on their attempts at such law and the thing that the Apostle Paul has been pointing out to us as we go on through this book together and up to this point where we will begin at this morning in Romans 7, he's showing us several concrete truths concerning the law.

I want to give them to you real quick here this morning before we go on. First of all, he's showing us without a shadow of a doubt in this book of Romans that the law brings one thing: it brings the knowledge, that is to say it brings the understanding of sin. Now, when we make that kind of a statement, I'm not talking about that the law brings to our attention that it's wrong to steal, kill, murder or lie, all people know that but what we're saying and what Paul has delivered to these people at Rome and to you and I subsequently is that the law reveals to us the very nature of sin, the very understanding of what sin really is. That is to say: that anybody who is by nature void of a righteousness to answer to God's law and justice are at that time, in a state of alienation before the true and living God. So, the law shows us first of all, that every single solitary person that has ever hit this planet by nature, that is to say, by their natural kinship to Adam, they do not possess by whatever aid or agency, a righteousness that equals and answers its own demand and they cannot do it.

Here is the second thing: the law couldn't justify any sinner based on that sinner's character and conduct. Now, I know a lot of people think the law is important and listen, Paul will tell us when we begin here in just a few minutes that the law is holy, just, perfect and good. There's nothing wrong with the law. Don't you ever tell anybody that your pastor does not think highly of the law. Like the Apostle Paul and like King David, I love thy law, O God. The law shows us that God is holy. Do you hear me? The law reveals to us the very holy nature of our God. But Paul has shown us that the law cannot justify us based on our obedience to it. "Therefore," Paul said in Romans 3: 20, "by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified in his sight for by the law," comes one thing,

what? The knowledge, the understanding of our inability to fulfill it. "The knowledge of sin." We can't satisfy it.

Here's the third thing, based on our best obedience, this is the kind of message that would get you in trouble in most Baptist and Methodist or Pentecostal churches: based on our best obedience to the law, the law only brings one thing. The best obedience, not the worst, not our attempts. The best you can possibly get: it only brings alienation. Paul put it like this in Romans 4:15, he says, "Because the law worketh wrath." Do you see that? The law worketh wrath "because where there is no law, there is no transgression." So, the law, instead of bringing us to God, what does it do? You see, if you put a law of murder out there and you told a guy, "If you get caught murdering, you're going to go to jail," do you think that murderer is going to immediately run down to the courthouse? What is the law going to do? When you see that thing, bad boys, bad boys, "Cops" on tv, the law isn't making them go to the cops and hold their arms out and say, "Here, take me." What are they doing? They're running and they're hiding. They don't think it's brought them to peace. What's it brought? It's brought wrath. So, that's what the law does. Instead of bringing us to God, by nature what does the law do? It causes us to run away from God. It alienates us from the true and living God.

Here's the fourth thing: justified sinners aren't under the law for justification anyhow. Paul said, "You're not under law." What are you under? You're under grace. The law has never brought anybody in for life. All the law does, John Bunyan wrote it best,

"Run, run, the law commands.
It gives me neither feet nor hands.
A sweeter sound, the gospel saying,
It bids me fly and gives me wings."

That's good news. The law can't do that. The law can tell you what? The wages of sin are death. "You broke me, you're going to be punished." That's all the law can do. That's all.

Here's the fifth thing: believers are dead to the law. That is to say, like we saw last week, we're justified from its demands based solely upon one thing: the death of our representative, our surety, our substitute, our Redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. Based solely on his righteousness alone.

Here's the sixth thing, the sinful passions and this is where we were at last week in verse 5 of Romans 7, "For when we were in the flesh," again, that's before because we're not in the flesh, "For when we were in the flesh the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death." Here's the last thing that Paul pointed out to us as we lead up in this introduction this morning: the sinful passions of unbelievers are aroused by the law when they seek to obey its commands, trying to establish a righteousness of their own bringing forth fruit unto death. The law doesn't promote a man because they all know by nature to not steal, not kill, not murder, not lie but the law, like I told you last Sunday morning, when we become truly aware of the reality of heaven and hell, of life and death, the first thing most people cling to, what do

they go to? The law and they always start asking that question, “What must I do?” Even that jailer. He asked a good question, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul didn't mention the law. What did he say? “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Rest in his righteousness and his righteousness alone.”

So, that's what Paul has told us and in consideration of this, the questions always come back where we want to start this morning in verse 7, “What shall we say then?” If all this is true, what shall we say then? And listen to this question, “Is the law sin?” What charge? But how does Paul answer that question? He says, “God forbid.” In other words, “Heavens, no! Don't you even entertain that thought for one moment.” He tells us and he proceeds here in these verses that we want to look at this morning to show the true function of the law of God by showing us its operation in his own life. He shows us based on personal experience, “This is what the law did to me, Saul of Tarsus, an enemy in my mind by wicked works, alienated in my own mind by true and wicked deeds and evil works. This is how the law approached me.” And in these verses this morning, he explains how the law before his conversion made sin known to him. In other words, it exposed his evil deeds, his dead works and his former idolatry and the law exposed his fruit unto death.

Let's begin to look at it. Look at verse 7. Let's read verse 7 because we want to see how the law exposes sin and this is so important. He says, “What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.” What is Paul saying? One of the things that always comes to my mind when I read Paul and I read his statements and he makes this kind of a statement “I had not known sin,” now think about what he's saying here. From right here starting in verse 7 all the way down through verse 14, the Apostle Paul, he vindicates God's law and he reveals its foremost purpose towards all who are by nature in the flesh. Paul tells us very plainly here, listen, God's law and I cannot overemphasize this enough, God's law isn't the cause of sin. You can't blame the law on your sinfulness. Listen to me: that being said, God's law is not the cause of death. The law is the instrument now; the law exposes sin and it reveals to us that sin is the cause of death. Not vice versa. The law is the instrument that God uses to divert us from – listen, the law drives us away from any hope of salvation other than in Christ and his righteousness. Isn't that what Paul says? He says, “For the law is a schoolmaster to drive us to Christ.”

The law is the instrument that God uses to divert us from any hope of salvation based on anything other than the imputed righteousness of Christ as it is revealed in the gospel. The law is not opposed to the gospel. Do you hear me? It's not opposed to the gospel. What has God promised? That's the question. What has God promised? He's promised all of salvation based solely on the blood and imputed righteousness of Christ and the law shows us our need of that righteousness. You see, the law makes you look where? Look out. Most people, a natural unregenerate mind, when they look at the law, what do they do? They look in and try try to keep. A child of God, where do we look? We quit looking in because what do we see in ourselves?

Then he makes a statement, he says, “Nay, I had not known sin.” Do you think Paul was saying, “I didn't know it was wrong to murder. I didn't know it was wrong to lie. I didn't know it was wrong to bear false witness or to cheat or to steal”? Do you think he didn't know those things when he makes this kind of a statement, “I had not known sin”? Paul is saying here that he wouldn't have known that any unlawful desire or motive is sin except God's law had forbid it. Now, what was Paul's awful sin? Have you ever thought about that? I know I have a lot. You would have never found Paul in any place of questionable nature. I just don't think you would have. Paul was a Pharisee, right? Paul, in his own testimony in Philippians 3, he said under inspiration of God the Holy Spirit concerning the righteousness required by the law, “I was blameless.”

What is he saying there? In light of that, what does he mean here? “I had not known sin.” You see, the law doesn't only forbid unlawful words and deeds, does it? Is that the only thing the law deals with, is what we do out here outside of our body? Where does the law stretch? It stretches to the heart, to the mind, to the emotions, to the will. And it teaches us, the law not only forbids unlawful words and deeds but it forbids unlawful thoughts and unlawful desires and unlawful motives. What was Paul's desire when he had the law in his hands? He wanted to be holy. Isn't that what he was doing? Most folks you know that are trying to keep the law, why are they trying to keep the law? Why? What's their rationale behind it? They want to be holy. They want to gain acceptance with God and they think the way of acceptance is how? Keep the law. They've been raised under that mentality: good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell and so they want to be with the good people that go to heaven because they kept the law.

What is that? How does God promise life? Was life ever promised by the law? Was life ever promised by church attendance? Or morality? Or sincerity? Or dedication? Ever? Can you ever find me in this book one place where God has promised life to anybody who can attain it based on their best obedience? So, if it's not in there – and it's not, you won't find it so don't waste your time looking – so, if it's not in there and yet men think that they can attain it by doing those things which God has not promised, what has that become? A sinful desire and a sinful motive. So, what does the law do then? That's covetousness, is what that is. That's desiring what you do not have by nature. Right? If I coveted your home or I coveted your finances or if a man covets another man's wife, what is he coveting? Something that's not his by nature.

That's what Paul is talking about here and we'll see in these following verses starting as well as here in verse 5: the most damning unlawful desire we can ever have in our hearts and our minds is to seek justification and seek eternal life based on something other than Christ's righteousness. Look back over to Romans 5:20. Remember the purpose of the law? We studied this several weeks ago. “Moreover the law entered, that the offence might,” do what? “Abound,” in other words, be seen for what it is. That means that it was given that we could measure ourselves not by ourselves and not by somebody else. Who are you to measure yourself by? By the strict standard of God's law and when you measure yourself by that strict standard of God's law, you clearly see the many personal sins that you commit how often? Every moment that you live. I don't understand how any person walking in this flesh that is truly a child of God does not understand that they do

not love God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength. Do you? Do I? Does anybody? Do you know anybody that loves God with all their heart, mind, soul and strength? Anybody? Have you loved your neighbor? Which includes your worst enemy, the person who would hate you the most. Do you love them with all your heart, mind, soul and strength?

Every moment. Every waking moment since you got up this morning. Some of you have figured out how to do it when you're sleeping. It's not just waking hours. God's law doesn't say, "Love me with all your heart, mind, soul and strength just while you're awake." God is holy and God demands holiness. He demands it not only when we're awake but you know what? He demands it when we're in nighty-night tonight. Let's how holy this God is. Now, you tell me how you're going to do that? We can't even control our thoughts when we're awake, how can you control them when you're asleep? But that's what he requires. That's what we sang, right? All that he requires, Christ fulfilled it. Everything.

Again, we cannot get there on our own. We cannot get there by our obedience and we see every moment that we live – we cry all the time, "O wretched man." I want to but there's a problem with my want to. I want to but I can't. But it's still the same demand. Again, this is to divert us from any hope of salvation based on anything other than the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. The foremost purpose of God's law towards all without exception who are in that state of nature, who are under sin, is to shut their mouths and bring them in guilty before God. Quit telling me how good you are. And when we measure ourselves by the right standards do you know what we quit doing? Our mouths are shut. I'm not better than you. I'm not better than you. I'm not better than you. I'm not better than anybody and if I was better than you, you, you or you, you know what? I would still be in the same pitiful shape you are in and I am in. Sinners. That's the best you can get. You're a sinner, pure and simple. You're a sinner by birth. You're a sinner by nature. You're a sinner by practice. All your life. The purpose of the law is to show us: you need a righteousness that you cannot attain by whatever aid or agency.

Paul is not fighting immorality here. I know a lot of people think he is but that's not his fight. He's fighting self-righteous attempts at establishing a righteousness of our own. Now, we're to fight immorality. You ought to try your best every day when you wake up to love God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself and don't you ever tell anybody your preacher said anything different. Have you ever heard me say, "It does not matter how you live"? Have you ever heard me tell you one time, "You don't have to try to obey the law"? No, we tell you to obey the law but what's the reason? Do it out of grace and gratitude, not to attain life or maintain life. Do it because you've got life, because you're accepted in the blood. But we're to be more determined not just to fight those things men call sin, we are to fight with all our might those self-righteous attempts that still remain in us that denies God's glory and casts shame and reproach upon the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you think that your faith makes a difference, who do you think that casts shame on? It dishonors him.

Look at verse 8, “But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin was dead.” The same word translated in verse 7 “lust” is translated here in verse 8, the same exact Greek word and it's called “concupiscence.” That's a hard word to say. What is that? That's any unlawful desire. Any of them. Do you know what the law does? The law strips off the disguise and exposes all our unlawful motives and desires to be exactly what they are: sin. And Paul says this, “But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence. For without the law sin,” what was it? “Sin was dead.”

What does Paul mean there “sin was dead”? Did he mean that he hadn't sinned before the law came? No, what he meant is here: before conversion, he did not recognize the extent of sin that reaches even to his best efforts at religion morality when they're aimed at the ground of salvation. This is that sin that the only thing that can reveal it to our hearts and to our mind is the light of the gospel that brings us to see this. The Pharisees had perverted the law and they had excluded unlawful thoughts and desires and motives as being sin but what does the law say? Our Lord said, “If you think it, you've done it.” Just to think.

Look at verse 9, “For I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died.” I'll tell you one thing is certain: you exclude the heart and maintain that the only thing that is truly sin is willful rebellion and outward deeds and activity, many religious people will think they're saved based on their character and conduct. You just make it outward acts. All those folks you know out there in the community, friends and family that you were into, they're good people, right? Now, how did they get that stature? Well, they don't lie, they don't cheat, they don't steal, they don't murder. They keep the law as far as men think outwardly. What about their conscience? That's the thing, we can bring these outward things into subjection, can't we? And even if I can't bring them into control outwardly, I can at least fool you, can't I? Can't you fool me? But, you see, what we cannot get away from is even though we can reform this on the outside, is what's going on in here. And God's not just looking out here, what's working out here, he's looking at the inside, in my mind. Think about it: this God that we deal with, his eyes are in all places beholding the good and the evil. Just one thought shot through my mind, God saw it. Just one.

And if it was just one, just one evil thought in my whole lifetime shot through my mind, what does the law require? Just one? Not 100. Not one million. Not like Augustine said over a million times which I still think that's low. If we sin over a million times in our lifetime, I think that would be a good year maybe. Maybe a good week depending on how bad things had been. Just one thought, one evil thought, folks. Just one. What does the law require? “The wages of sin are death.” And there is no way back. No amount of obedience tomorrow can make up for what you didn't do today. You can think good thoughts, think good thoughts all day tomorrow to make up for the one bad thought that shot through your mind but it's not that way. This isn't any tit-for-tat thing. It isn't any “you do this and I'll do that.” It's pure legality and the law says you broke it and you cannot fix it. That's why those tables of stone that were broken by Moses, where did they go, folks? Into the belly of the ark. He didn't glue it back together and put it on display

and hang it on a wall, he hid it and put it away and covered it with blood. He atoned for it until Christ came and that great High Priest, that one great Atonement, he propitiated for sin and put it away once and for all.

Verse 10, “And the commandment, which was ordained to life,” what did he find? “I found to be unto death.” The end of the goal of the law was justification and life based on perfect righteousness both precept and penalty, continual conformity to God's law. And the least transgression in thought, word or deed brings forth the curse and brings right along with it the eternal penalty, eternal death. God's law demanded eternal punishment for everybody who, listen: does not actually possess – do you hear this? - every person who does not actually possess a righteousness that equals and answers this demand, you're going to go to hell. Can I make it any clearer than that? If you do not actually possess and it's actually yours, yours, you're going to go to hell. Now, that's a problem. It's insurmountable. Who then can be saved? Our Lord was so clear, was he not? With men this is impossible but not with God for whom all things are possible. Aren't you glad it's by grace in its entirety? Listen, the law is no respecter of persons and it will not admit any mercy. Don't go to the law for mercy. The law is just the law. Boom. Boom. Some old author said one time: the gristmill of God's law and justice turns slow but it grinds fine. It just keeps saying “You broke it, you die. You broke it, you die.” And it never relieves. Never relieves.

On the other hand, that same law demands the justification and life of every person who possesses that righteousness. Look at verse 11. “For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me.” Think about that: it's sin, not the law, that kept Saul of Tarsus in that state of spiritual death. It wasn't the law. What was it? It was sin. The sin of self-righteousness and religious pride, they deceived him by perverting God's law and denying the law's foremost purpose to his mind: to show sinners their need of Christ and his righteousness alone which they themselves cannot produce. This kept Paul and it keeps all sinners by nature in a state of alienation from God and do you know what they keep doing? Bringing forth fruit unto death. Saul of Tarsus was deceived by the deceptiveness of unrighteousness because it was a cloak of sin.

Our Lord said in John 15:22, “If I had not come and spoken unto them, they had not had sin, but now the cloak is removed.” What did he mean by that when he said that to the Scribes and Pharisees? Before what did they think? “I've kept the law. I've paid tithes.” Christ stripped it all away and he told them what? “Your righteousness is filthy rags.” Boy, folks get upset with that. We are so proud by nature. I'll tell you the truth: it's totally opposed to our natural consciences. Our natural conscience hears this, that God will not accept the best that you offer him and give you life based on it and our old natural conscience comes back with this kind of a question – I've had people ask me this over the years - “You mean to tell me based on what you're saying, that if I try my very best to do the best that I can do by way of obedience and goodness, I do everything in my power to love my neighbor, you mean that God sees that as an abomination?” Have you ever had people ask you that question? “If that's true, then everything I do, going to church and giving my money and loving God and loving my neighbor, you mean God looks at me and he hates that?” Well, in and of themselves, those things aren't bad. You ought to go

to church, right? You ought to give your money. You ought to love God. You ought to love your neighbor. You ought to do all that you can by way of obedience but when you start thinking that that makes a difference between life and death, what does it do? It opposes the only thing that God has promised to save sinners based on: the blood and righteousness, the very obedience unto death, the bloody sacrifice, the accomplished death of Christ. That's the only way he ever promised to save. Anybody. It started with a promise in a Garden, the seed of the woman. It continued through the law. Who was Moses looking for? He wasn't looking to that lamb, he was looking to that Lamb that lamb typified. King David, what was he looking to? Christ. What did Job say? "I know my Redeemer liveth."

Where do we look? To Christ alone. You can look anywhere else, no matter how good it is and no matter how moral and noble it might appear, God hates it all. There are going to be a lot of bad folks in hell but there's going to be a lot of good old boys and girls in hell too one day. People who we looked up to and respected based on their character and their conduct. I'll tell you, if you judge righteous judgments, I think you judge your family and your friends and people you know and run into in this lifetime based on a right standard and the standard is what? Righteous in Christ, unholy and condemned outside of Christ. Period.

So, three things that Paul was deceived by: first of all, we know he was deceived because he didn't see the spirituality and extent of God's law; secondly, he didn't see the evil in efforts that religion and morality aimed to ground the saving sinners, keeping them saved or recommending them to God; and thirdly, he didn't see the true purpose God had given the law. The law was to drive him to Christ. Notice verses 12 and 13 real quick because here he indicates the law, "Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid." You see, the blame is not placed on the law. "But sin," do you see that? "That it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful." Listen, Paul tells us very clearly what is God's law: it's holy, it's just, it's perfect and it's good. Paul now for the first time truly loved God's law because it was the means to bring him where? Why do we love the law? What did the law do to you? Why should you love the law as a child of God? Where did it force you? Where did it drag you? It dragged you to Christ, right? It forced you to look away from self and look to him and to understand that justification can only be found in Christ's righteousness alone.

God's law now pronounced Paul righteous and holy based on Christ's obedience and blood. Now strict law and inflexible justice demanded Paul's eternal blessing. God's law demands those things that promote true happiness. Nothing could be better for any of us than to love God supremely and love our neighbors as ourselves. So far as being the cause of sin, the law had been the means of enlightening Paul's mind, bringing him to discover the evil nature of sin and its deceitful workings. You see, the law wasn't simply given to cause us to despair and leave us in our sinfulness with hope because where the law exposes the abundance of sin, where sin abounds, what does it do? Grace abounds all the more. The law was given to show us our sinfulness, not our piety, not our goodness.

The law reveals our need of the forgiveness of the many, many sin. You see, where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.

Then look at verse 13, “Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful.” Now get this this morning: the apostle continues right here to vindicate the law by reaffirming it's sin which is transgression of the law according to 1 John 3:14. Not the law – you hear me, not the law – what's the cause of death? Sin is the cause of death. The law, what does it do? It exposes sin and death and reveals the evil of sin. Sin is the cause of all our misery and unhappiness, not the law. The law is holy, just, perfect and good.

So, it was not the good and holy law of God that wrought death in Saul of Tarsus but what? Sin by means of the good and holy law. What was bringing death out in him? He was keeping the law. Isn't that what he warned them of over in Romans 9? That the Jews by nature had the law of righteousness and that they had failed to attain the law of righteousness why? Because they sought it not by faith. The law has to punish the guilty and, thank God, the law has to justify the righteous.

So, here Paul shows that there is nothing worse than sin itself in all it's actions and workings, especially when that sin is seeking to establish a righteousness of our own. But he also shows us and we'll quit right here: he shows us that there is nothing greater than God's promise of eternal salvation based on the blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ which is absolutely consistent with strict law and strict justice. Paul put it like this, 2 Corinthians 5, “For he hath made him to be sin for us.” Why? “That we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” Why? That's what the law required, perfect righteousness, eternal righteousness and the only place that righteousness can be found is in the Son. God help us to flee to the Son and rest in him and his finished work alone as our only hope of salvation.

Let's stand together as we dismiss.

We appreciate your presence this morning. May the Lord bless you and keep you.