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Romans 7:1-12, 24-25 (Read vv. 1-6) “Can the Law Change Us?”

Intro. Few would try to argue against the statement that there is evil in the world. There is a lot of bad behavior. People steal and defraud. People lie and fail to keep their commitments. Some commit rape and incest. People hurt others, even to the point of murder. On July 4 a young man murdered 7 people and injured many others who were there just to watch a parade.

What can be done about all this evil and bad behavior? One of the more common ways to battle evil is to pass laws. However, law does not change human nature. Laws are especially ineffective against the lawless when there is not effective law enforcement by police, prosecutors, and the courts. Perhaps that is why Thomas B. Reed (1886) said, “One of the greatest delusions in the world is the hope that the evils in this world are to be cured by legislation.” He said that while serving in the House of Representatives!

The same thing is true spiritually. There are those that believe that focusing on God’s law is the pathway to overcoming evil, and even the pathway to eternal life. Here in Romans 7 Paul addresses the problem of the sin nature of man, and he examines whether law is the cure for the sin problem. Much of what he writes in chapter 7 is evidently autobiographical. He grew up being taught that learning and obeying the Law of God through Moses was the way to live a righteous life and obtain eternal life (cf. Mark 10:17-20). But he finally found out that putting himself under law was actually the pathway of defeat. When Christ saved him, he learned a new and better way to live. Look back at Romans 6:14. There Paul says, “For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” We are going to see in our message today that living under law, even God’s law, will not give you victory over the dominion of sin. The only way to have victory over sin is to draw upon the resources of God’s grace by faith in Jesus Christ. I believe what Paul does in chapter 7 is give further explanation of what he means by that statement in v.14. Yet we are going to see that the result of living under grace is not to become lawless. Rather, living under grace is a better means of living a righteous and fruitful life, and I will show you why.

In chapter 6 Paul discusses the fact that Christians have died to sin that we might be free from its dominion over us. But why should Paul be so concerned to tell us in chapter 7 that we have also died to the law, and are therefore no longer under the law? As he points out in v.12, there is no problem with the law itself. *We* are the problem! So he addresses the problem of using the Law in the wrong way. Instead of relying on the Law, he wants Christian to learn to rely upon the resources of God’s grace, including the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit.

This morning, I want to share with you how the Law of God relates to salvation. Then, I will share what role the Law of God has in a believer’s life. Finally, I will show you a new and better way. First of all, let’s consider the fact that:

I. THE LAW CANNOT SAVE YOU¹

At one time Paul thought the Law was given to save us from sin. The law held out the hope of life for obedience (Lev. 18:5; Deut. 4:1; 5:33; 8:1; 30:19). Yet on closer examination, the only

¹ Don’t spend more than 10 minutes on this point.

way it could save you is if you could *completely* obey the Law (Deut. 27:26). Any unbeliever who thinks that he remotely approaches fulfillment of the law is woefully ignorant of the holiness of its demands (cf. Mark 10:21). Don't think that God judges us by seeing if our obedience to His law outweighs our disobedience.

Why, then, was the law given? In this text of Scripture Paul gives the following reasons:

A. It Shows Us that We Are Sinners – Paul had already stated in 3:20, “through the law comes knowledge of sin.” Then Paul says in the last of v.7, “Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” You see, the Bible teaches that as children of Adam, we are born with a sin nature. Therefore, we do things that may seem normal, especially when we look around and we see that just about everyone is doing the same thing! So we could get the idea that much of what we do is okay. In fact, when I was a teenager, one of the hit love songs was recorded by Debbie Boone entitled, “You Light Up My Life.” There was a line in that song that stirred up some controversy. She sang, “It can't be wrong, when it feels so right.” She was very wrong because that statement fails to take into account the sin nature of man, as well as the objective reality of moral law.

So just because an activity seems normal and natural doesn't mean it is right. God's moral law is not subjectively determined but objectively determined by God's moral law. According to Paul's experience expressed in v.7, the law defines what sin is. For example, do you realize that speaking God's name without a good purpose, or without reverence, is taking His name in vain? That violates one of the 10 Commandments! Most people don't even seem to realize that. And then Paul gives an example where the law convicted him of sin, though he otherwise thought he was living a righteous life. The 10th commandment is found in Ex. 20:17, which says, “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, ...nor anything that is your neighbor's” (NKJV). Except for this law, he would not have even known that it was a sin to covet.

The Law shows us that we are not only sinful, but *exceedingly* sinful. Paul says in the last of v.13, “It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.” Paul says in v.12 that the law is good and holy. Yet, instead of creating righteousness in us, for some reason law often does just the opposite. It incites us to sin. In fact, in v.5 Paul says, “For while we were living in the flesh,² our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members....” Instead of suppressing sin, the law actually arouses passionate desire to sin! Now look at v.8, where Paul says, “But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness....” “Sin” here is the evil nature within and is similar to the term “flesh.” “Opportunity” is from a word (*aphorme*) that refers to a starting place, a base of operations. Thus, the origin, occasion, or pretext for doing something (cf. 7:11; 2 Cor. 5:12; 11:12; Gal. 5:13; 1 Tim. 5:14). It can be used in the sense of providing an excuse for doing what one wants to do. You see, there is something in human nature that wants to rebel whenever a law is given. Forbidden fruit has its own fascination. The smoker may forget how much he wants to smoke until he sees a sign which says, “No smoking.”

Do you see how evil our sin nature really is? It takes something good, like the Law, and uses it to incite in us even more sin! (Cf. 5:20). So the law shows that there is clearly something very wrong with us. We are fatally flawed, and the sooner we realize this, the better.

² This is the first occasion in this epistle in which the word “flesh” is used. It does not refer to the human body but to human nature as controlled and directed by sin rather than by God. To be in the flesh is to live and make decisions independently of God.

Have you come to the place in your life where you realize that you are a sinner before a holy God? Do you see how fatally flawed human nature is? Well that leads to another purpose of the law. It not only shows us that we are sinners but also:

B. The Law Condemns Us – Paul illustrates this truth from his own experience. Paul says in vv.9-11, “I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.” These verses go together. When the apostle says in v.9, “I was once alive without the law,” the word “alive” cannot be used here in the sense of life eternal or life unto God. He speaks of a self-righteous life. He *felt* alive because he believed that he had kept the Commandments.³ But then “the commandment came.” Yes, that one commandment that he had to admit he could not keep, the 10th commandment. As a result, “sin came alive.” The commandment did not prevent coveting but even incited it. He then knew that he had broken one of the 10 Commandments and he realized that he had died spiritually. In all 3 of those verses he mentions the result of death.

At first Paul felt deceived.⁴ After all, as he says in v.10 that the commandment was to bring life. That’s what he was taught. After all, when God gave the 10 commandments, He promised life upon the condition of obedience. But instead of bringing life, he found it to bring death (v.10b). As he said in 6:23, “the wages of sin is death.”

So don’t even try to obtain salvation by keeping the Law. You can’t do it. It only condemns you to death. This leads to another purpose of the Law:

C. Thus, the Law Points You to Christ – The law leads us to the conclusion found in v.24, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” A true understanding of the law and our sin will cause us to seek freedom from the tyranny and condemnation of sin. Who can deliver us? The answer is given in v.25, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Likewise, Paul wrote in Gal. 3:24, “So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.”

Back before the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, our country experienced two Great Awakenings, when many thousands of people came under conviction of sin and turned to Christ. One contributing factor was the way the preachers in those days strongly preached the demands of the law and had warned of God’s righteous judgment. Furthermore, one book that had an impact upon people in those days was John Bunyan’s (1628-1688) *Pilgrim’s Progress*. In his allegory, he describes Interpreter’s house, which Pilgrim entered during the course of his journey to the Celestial City. The parlor of the house was completely covered with dust, and when a man took a broom and started to sweep, he and the others in the room began to choke from the great clouds of dust that were stirred up. The more vigorously he swept, the more suffocating the dust became. Then Interpreter ordered a maid to sprinkle the room with water, with which the dust was quickly washed away. Interpreter explained to Pilgrim that the parlor represented the heart of an unsaved man, that the dust was original sin, the man with the broom was the law, and the maid with the

³ Some commentators believe he was speaking as in chapter 5 of his solidarity with Adam, that in Adam he was alive until he transgressed the commandment. Yet in the context Paul is speaking of the Mosaic law. So in alternate view is that Paul identified himself with Israel. His nations experience with sin and the law was his experience (see Moo, pp.227, 230; Micah 7:7-10). Yet that view does not help with the interpretive problem of saying, “I was once alive apart from the law.”

⁴ Technically, it was sin that deceived rather than the Law. The Law was just the instrument of deception.

water was the gospel. His point was that all the law can do with sin is to stir it up. Only the gospel of Jesus Christ can wash it away.

The law is indeed useful as a means of *leading us to* Christ, but it is not useful as a mean of salvation. Sadly, objective moral law such as the 10 Commandments have been removed from our society, and even from many churches. While chapter 7 of Romans warns against the wrong use of the Law, we have seen that learning God's moral law helps us to see that we are sinners, condemned to death, and we need a Savior.

Now let us move on to the main application of Paul's teaching on the Law. Not only is the law not able to save you, but we also see from our text that:

II. THE LAW CANNOT SANCTIFY YOU

We must remember that this chapter is mainly concerned with sanctification, the process of becoming more like Christ in holiness. The theme is deliverance from the power of sin, not salvation from its penalty.

Now let me show you why the Mosaic Law cannot sanctify you as a Christian. First:

A. Because You Have Died to the Law - Once you are saved, the main thing that Paul says here is that we have died to the law. He says in v.4, "Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ..." Furthermore, v.6 says, "But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive..." Chapter 6 says we have died to sin, so we have been set free from the dominion of sin. Now Paul shows that our death with Christ also sets us free from the dominion of the Mosaic Law. This was especially applicable to Jewish Christians,⁵ whom he addressed in v.1. This also points to the fact that the era of the covenant of law has come to an end with the redemptive work of Christ, which fulfilled the law (cf. Mt. 5:17). So God does not intend for the Christian to remain under the covenant of law.

Now let me explain why this is true. In the last of v.1 Paul states a general principle, "the law is binding (*kurieuo*) on a person only as long as he lives?" His thesis is the accepted fact that death cancels all obligations. Then he uses marriage as an illustration of this truth. From the very beginning God designed marriage to be for life. Jesus himself affirmed that in Mt. 19:6 (and Mark 10:9). So under Hebrew law, marriage was a binding, lifetime covenant. Even a married slave was not to be separated from his wife according to Ex. 21:2-3.⁶ So Paul is using marriage as an illustration of the fact that the death of one spouse ends the binding obligation of marriage. By the way, it is not his purpose here to teach on the subject of when or if divorce and remarriage is permissible by God. The main point of this illustration was simply to point out that death puts an end to the law of marriage, which in turn opens the way for the survivor to enter a new relationship. Paul drives home the point of the illustration in v.4, "Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ ..." This is something that God did for us, and we must accept it by faith. Indeed, spiritually, our old self was put to death the moment we repented of sin and trusted in Christ. We have a new life in Christ.

Paul wants Christians to know that we have died to the law because there were and are well-meaning people who believe they are still under law as a means of salvation or righteousness. So

⁵ God-fearing Gentiles who had attended the synagogue would have also been among those who knew the Jewish law and even tried to live by it for the most part.

⁶ This aspect of marriage is also seen in the perfect tense of "bound." The wife is bound and stands bound; so there is no release.

they just follow God's law the best they can. As long as you are still living like a Jew under the covenant of law, you cannot experience the blessings of the New Covenant of grace.

So now that you are saved, God makes it clear that you are not to live the Christian life through legalism, whether Old Testament law⁷ or any other moral code we may adopt. V.18 tells us that Paul tried the way of law. The will to do good was present, but the law did not supply the ability to obey. Willingness and good intentions are not enough. Paul found that the sin nature kept on working against him. He tried to conquer indwelling sin with commandments. When he felt his heart coveting, he combated it merely by repeating the commandment. But all that did was just compound the problem, according to v.8. The law just doesn't help us the way you might think.

Another reason the Law cannot sanctify you is:

B. Because It Is Old, No Longer Useful - Having pointed out that we have died to the Law in v.4, he goes on to say in the last of v.6 that we are not to serve God "under the old written code (*gramma*)." The word "old" (*palaiotes*) is from the Greek word which speaks, not of old in time (*archaios*) but of old in terms of use. A twenty-year-old computer 🖨 is not very old but it is old in terms of usefulness and should be replaced! The written law had a purpose, but it has served its purpose. It can have a role in leading us to salvation, but it is not useful as a means of sanctification. Legalism is not God's way of living a righteous life. To hold the believer to any code of law is to turn Christian living into human effort rather than the fruit of grace. Abandon all hope in yourself. You will never come to the place of victory by making resolutions to God or by legalistic effort.

So the Law has little value for the Christian. It can serve as a moral guide (Psa. 119:11) and reveal the character of God. But it is not to be relied upon as a means of living a life that is pleasing to God. So that leads to my last main point. Let us consider:

III. THE TRUE WAY OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

What is the solution to overcoming the tyranny of sin? It is not through self-effort and willpower at obeying the Law. Rather:

A. Be Joined to Christ, Not Law – Paul says in v.4, "Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong⁸ to another, to him who has been raised from the dead...." Our death with Christ ends our relationship to the Law so that we can enter into a new relationship with Christ. "Another" (*heteros*) means another of a different kind. In this case the new "husband" so to speak is Christ. Notice also that Paul says that Christ arose to die no more; so this is a permanent marriage. In Eph. 5 Christ is likened unto a loving husband of His church.

When a man and woman marry, the Bible says that the two become one (Gen. 2:24; 1 Cor. 6:16-17). And when we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, we become one with Him. In fact, Paul says in 1 Cor. 6:17 that "he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (NKJV). So we not only have died with Christ, but we now derive our life from Him who lives forevermore! We are to let Christ live His life through us (cf. Gal. 2:20). We derive our strength from Him. Your

⁷ The fact that Paul referred to two of the 10 Commandments in this text shows that we are not just freed from the ceremonial law, but from all the law as a means of salvation or righteousness.

⁸ This is literally "to become to."

only hope for living the Christian life is to rely upon the grace of God and the enabling power of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So to live the Christian life, you not only need to consider yourself dead to sin and to the control of the Law, but also that you have joined yourself to Jesus Christ in a unique, eternal relationship. You now belong to Him. He is now your Lord, not sin or Old Testament law. You need to draw your life and strength from Him.

Another aspect of the true way of righteousness is:

B. Become Fruitful to Christ - In the last of v.4 Paul continues the analogy of marriage. Usually, one fruit of marriage is children. Even so, Paul also points out that when you are united with Christ, then, and only then, can we become fruitful. One main condemnation of Israel was their fruitlessness (Mt. 21:33-41). Israel did not bring forth fruit by the Law. Instead, fruitfulness comes as a result of a living relationship with Christ and His Spirit. We are to bear fruit in terms of converts (Mt. 7:20), character (Gal. 5:22-23), and the conduct of good works (Eph. 2:10). (See also John 15:4-5).

Are you a fruitful Christian? If you have been joined to Christ, your life certainly should be fruitful.

There is another way we are to live the Christian life:

C. We Should Serve in Newness of Spirit – Paul says in v.6, “But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.” We are not set free from the law to sin, but to serve!⁹ The result of this deliverance should be service to the One who loved you and saved you.¹⁰

Paul is here contrasting the New Covenant from the Old Covenant. Jer. 31 gives the prophecy of the New Covenant. In v.33 of that chapter God says, “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” 2 Cor. 3:6 says that we are “ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Again, back in 6:14 Paul said we are “are not under law but under grace.”

As you can see, just because we were made dead to the law does not mean we become lawless, for God writes His law on our hearts. We are indeed to obey the commandments of the Lord, and the Holy Spirit will certainly direct and empower us to do so. In the Great Commission Christ said we are to make disciples “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Jesus said in John 14:15, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” (See also 1 Cor. 7:19). God has given us in the New Testament specific commands to direct our conduct and to show us when we are straying from His moral will. Even the laws of the Old Testament are useful to study and learn when they reflect the moral will of God rooted in the character of God. After all, 9 out of the 10 Commandments are reaffirmed in the New Testament. What is different is the role of the Holy Spirit in the process of obedience. The Spirit supplies from within the regulative principle which the law once supplied from without. He guides in the right way and convicts when we go the wrong way. Also, the Spirit provides the *ability* to obey. The law said, “Do this,” but it had no power to help one to obey the commands. As the Christian faces the conflict of desires from within, he has an ally to enable him to be victorious over evil. So called “holiness” produced by the flesh and self-

⁹ Note, it is the word for slavery.

¹⁰ “That we should serve” should express the idea of result, not purpose, in the Greek.

effort is hateful to God. He only wants the holiness that comes by the Holy Spirit through Christ. As long as we rely upon our own strength alone, we have only what *we* can do. But when, like Paul, we learn to rely upon God in Christ, we have what *God* can do.

Conclusion: So how can we gain victory over the control of sin, and the condemnation that it brings? It is not through Law. It only condemns us. Law only incites more sin. Law commands, but does not empower. The law that says, “Do not get drunk” will not keep a man from getting drunk. So living the Christian life is not just a matter of learning religious law, and obeying them with gutsy effort. Living the Christian life is only possible as we join ourselves to Christ and rely upon the power and direction of the Holy Spirit. Paul will say much more about this in chapter 8.

Now the starting point for overcoming sin is getting saved. Have you come to accept your condition as condemned before God? If so, you are ready to receive the forgiveness offered in Christ. I call upon you to turn from sin and turn to Christ. He loves you. He died for you. Say “yes” to His proposal to enter into an eternal love relationship with Him.

Then as a believer, living a godly, fruitful life is not by means of self-effort to obey laws, but reliance upon the guidance and empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Will you apply this teaching to your life today?

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 3, “God’s Freedom” (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Stephen Felker, *Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible* (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2022; Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); H.A. Ironside, *Lectures on Romans* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers 1928); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, Good News Publishers, 2001).

Theology of the Text: The law reveals God’s holy, righteous, and good will (vv.7, 12).

Human Need of the Text: We have sinful passions that are not suppressed by law but even incited by law, leading ultimately to death (vv.5, 8-9). So while obedience to the law promises life, it actually delivers death (vv.10-11).

God’s Redemptive Work of the Text: God set us free from the ineffective covenant of law to give us new life directed and enabled by the Holy Spirit (v.6).

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