



The New Life 4: What About the Law?

Romans 7:7-12

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If you have your Bibles with you, I would invite you to turn to the book of Romans, chapter 7, as we continue our journey through the middle of the book of Romans. We're going to look at the center section of chapter 7 this morning, and then next week, Lord willing, we'll finish up chapter 7. Our text this morning is from verses 7-12. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant. Romans, chapter 7, beginning at verse 7:

"What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 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. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask, Lord, that you would reveal the truth of your Word to us. Lord, we cannot understand it without your help, without the power of your Holy Spirit, so we ask this morning, O Holy Spirit, please do your work of illuminating your Word to us, that we could see the truth within it, that we could hear the commands it gives to us, and that we can see the grace and comfort it provides to us. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We are continuing now through chapter 7 of Romans. You will recall that I said to you last week that this is often a very confusing chapter for many people. There are a variety of commentators who look at this chapter and come to wildly different interpretations. It's not easy to take this passage and go through it, especially in great detail, and understand what Paul is really telling us about the law, about sin, and about our life in Christ.

Because we can be easily confused, it is all the more important that we look closely at the text. If we ask ourselves, "Is the law good or is the law bad?" we should expect Paul to provide us with an answer, to not leave us on our own, yet there have been many throughout the ages who have taken differing interpretations of this. Some say the law is bad and we should have nothing to do with it. Others say the law is good and it is all we need for salvation.

Paul comes to us in a context. It's a context of a description of the law within this letter to the Romans. The greatest advice I can give you as we go through this is not to forget what we've been through. This does not just spring up out of nowhere. Paul has given us now six and a half chapters of exposition on salvation, on our sin, on the Lord, and on his provision, and this passage is set in that context.

The Misconception of the Law

So I think what we need to do is, first, we need to clear up with Paul the misconceptions of the law, the misunderstandings we have about the law, the things we think are true about the law but really aren't. Secondly, we need to look at the proper conception of the law. It's not enough that we not be led astray. We must be on the right path. We must understand what Paul is saying here. So what we need to do is put aside the misconceptions of the law and bring to ourselves the proper conception of the law.

If we start by looking at the misconceptions of the law, there are three of them. First, we begin with the misconception that the law leads to salvation. Oftentimes in life we have these things we call *common knowledge* or "everybody knows." Have you ever done this? You've been having a discussion with someone and you say, "Well, everybody knows this is the case." Someone says, "No, it's not," and you say, "Of course. Everybody knows this is true," and they do now what is the scourge of our present age. They bring out the smartphone and ask Siri or Google what the truth is. There's no hiding at that point.

It used to be when I was growing up you could hide. If someone didn't have a whole set of encyclopedias you were safe, but now the common knowledge can be dispelled in a moment by an answer in a mechanical voice. This is what we're seeing here this morning with the Christian's concept of the law. One of the common knowledge points of the world is that the law leads to salvation. Now people don't put it that way, but they say things like, "Well, I think the good I do outweighs the bad I do. I think the Lord will look down at me and see I was a pretty good person and he'll reward me."

These are the sorts of statements people use with this common misconception of the law, as if the law is something that is bland, graded on a curve, that it's not that important to God, that if you have ten commandments in front of you and break four of them, you're in great shape, because that means you kept six, and God should thank you for keeping the six.

We can't take this passage out of its context. You have to understand that understanding the context of a Bible passage is perhaps the most important thing we do in interpreting the Bible. The Bible is not a series of unconnected statements, but it is God's communication of his truth to us, and he does this intentionally by way of logical statements put together. This is even more true of Paul's letters, because Paul writes not in a historical narrative style, not in poetry. He writes these letters for the purpose of instruction.

You notice that in the beginning of the letter he's writing to a church, and he says something like, "I'm writing you this letter so you can understand God more, so you can know yourself better, and so you can understand

salvation." He comes right out of the gate and says, "That's what I'm doing." So what is the context, then, of our passage this morning? Well, the context comes in context of the great theme of the whole letter.

Romans 1:16-17: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" The context of our passage is Paul telling us that the gospel is the power of God for everyone without exception and that that righteousness of God comes to us by faith, not by what we do. That's the large context.

Paul went on just a bit earlier in chapter 5 and told us we are justified by faith, and because of that we have peace with God and we have access to God through the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. The context for our passage is the gracious work of God. That is the main point. So Paul's discussion in chapters 6-8 follows on from this main point. Do not lose that. Hang onto it with both hands. Everything Paul says here must be understood in the context of justification by grace, not by works.

The first misconception Paul deals with is a fundamental and ancient one, that I can do what God requires so he will love me. This is our natural way of thinking. It's our default mechanism. Paul explains why this is in chapter 5 when he says that all men in Adam relate to God by means of doing. It's why it's called a covenant of *works*. We might easily call it a covenant of *doing*.

In Adam, this covenant of doing, we have nothing but failure and sin. That's what Paul reminds us of in chapter 5. He says in chapter 3, verse 20, "By works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." Paul is very clear to us that we cannot be made right with God through doing. The law does not lead to salvation. It is this sense of the law that Paul is driving us away from here.

If we miss this big picture, we don't understand the more detailed point the Bible is making here, because the Bible is making a point about the law in the context of driving us away from believing that the law leads to salvation. That's why we don't want to be under law, but we want to be under grace. It's because the law, as a system of salvation, is a failure for us. It only brings sin, disobedience, and death. Jesus himself came to deliver us from thinking that our keeping of the law can deliver us from sin.

Jesus came and showed that everyone falls short of the glory of God. Jesus shows us what perfect law-keeping looks like. He shows us that we fall short of his standard, and he came and showed us what we needed was for him to deliver us, because we can't do it ourselves. Now this first point is important. As a matter of fact, it is so important that Paul makes it over and over again in so many different ways. Because of this, we are tempted to run to the opposite error. We hear Paul, and we run away from the concept that the law can bring us salvation, so we run all the way to the opposite error.

This is what happens so often in theology. We run from one error to another. We see this, for example, in the development of the doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ. Someone will say, "You're not emphasizing the humanity of Jesus Christ enough; we have to run from *your* doctrine," and we run all the way to denying his deity. Then someone will come up behind and say, "You're overemphasizing the humanity of Christ," and they'll drag it all the way back to his deity and forget the humanity of Jesus.

We see this in the nature of the Bible. Some will emphasize that the Bible is God-breathed to such an extent that the human authors become sort of typewriters under a trance, just putting out what they don't know. Others react against that and say, "No, look at the psalms. Look at how Paul writes. Look at how Moses writes. It's very different." They run to the opposite error. They say, "You have to acknowledge the work of men in the Bible; therefore, there are mistakes, and the Bible isn't really true, and it's not really the Word of God." We go from one pole to the other and back and forth.

Paul confronts a second misconception that arises from the first. He begins verse 7 with a phrase he uses right before he declares that a statement is wrong. He says, "What shall we say then?" It's the same thing Paul said in chapter 6, verse 1, when he argued against those who said that because grace overcomes sin we can sin all we want, because that means we just have more grace. He says, "What shall we say then?" Paul uses this phrase several times in Romans to point out the falsehood of our belief.

What he does now is he says the law actually gets in the way of our relationship with God, because we try and earn our salvation, and we need to be free from the law and to be under grace. Because Paul says this, someone walks up to him and says, "Yes, Paul. The law *is* bad. It's actually sinful. We shouldn't have anything at all to do with the law."

Do you see the jump that has been made here out of context? Paul has said the law is a problem for us because of the way we want to use it, because of our sin, and then somebody goes from there and says the law is fundamentally bad and wrong and evil. Paul's answer to this is the same absolute he has given before. We've seen it many times before. We've seen it five times previously. We'll see it yet more in this book.

He says, "By no means!" "God forbid." We might, I think, best translate it "Don't even let that thought enter your mind. Don't even dwell on it for a moment." All that will do is confuse you and lead you away from the truth. This is where our context helps us. What has Paul been saying is our problem? What Paul has been saying our problem is is sin. He has been telling us about the power of sin.

Now in just a little bit we're going to see exactly *how* powerful sin is, but Paul tells us the problem with the law is not that *it* is evil but that it cannot defeat the evil of sin. There is a difference between being powerless and being wicked. The law is powerless to bring us to God. The law is actually even powerless to make us holy. It cannot bring about obedience, but that doesn't mean it is a positive evil. It doesn't mean the law doesn't serve a godly purpose. It just doesn't have the power in itself to defeat sin.

Well, what good could the law bring then if it's not sin? We might rightly ask Paul this question. He has been more than clear about what the law *can't* do. So what *can* the law do? What the law *did* do was to make sin known. Now what does Paul mean by that? How was sin hidden? Before we see what the law did, we need to look at the third misconception of the law, the misconception that hides sin. It is a misconception that the law is superficial. It hides sin.

The interesting thing about this is we're exploring a law and trying to find out what the law is by asking the question... *What is the law not?* Have you ever had the occasion to play the game 20 Questions? Kids? Maybe in a car ride or around the fire at home? You know how 20 Questions works. Right? Someone thinks of a person, a place, or a thing, and you get to ask 20 questions that have to be "Yes" or "No." Sometimes the best way to get to the answer is to exclude whole types of answers, by looking for a "no" answer.

If you ask the question, "Is it a person?" and they say, "Yes," you might ask, "Is it a man?" hoping the answer is "No" so that you've excluded all men. Then once you realize it's a woman you say, "Is it a woman under 18?" Again, you're hoping for "No" so that you exclude all of *those* answers. You try and wipe away all of the possible answers to narrow your way down.

That's kind of like what we're doing here, but that's not the easiest way. The easiest way to find out the answer is not to ask 20 "yes" or "no" questions. It's to ask, "Who's the person you're thinking of?" and to get the answer. Paul is playing a bit of "20 Questions" with us. He wants us to push aside all of these misconceptions. He says the law is not a way for us to be saved. It is not a power that can make us holy, but it is also not an evil. It's not sin itself.

In answering that last accusation that the law is sin, Paul gives an instance of what the law does that is good. It un-hides sin. We'll look at how the law does that in just a moment, but for now we need to understand the misconception of the law that makes it possible for sin to hide. How does sin hide? The interesting answer is that sin hides in plain sight.

What do I mean by this? I mean sin is easy to see in some ways. As a matter of fact, earlier in this letter Paul told us sin existed and it was seen even before the law was given to Moses. Adam himself had the law and knew he had sinned and disobeyed. So sin *can* be easy to see. Murder is easy to see. So is stealing something from someone. So is telling a lie. In each of these things we can easily see that they are sin. It's obvious, it's in front of us, it's an action, and it causes harm.

That's the problem, because we see *that* sin and think that's all there *is* to sin. If we view the law narrowly, superficially, with only the obvious before us, then sin can hide. Paul is not saying he would not have known right from wrong without a copy of the law of Moses. That makes no sense, because Paul has told us before that the whole world, even those who don't have the law of Moses, are under sin and are aware of sin.

What Paul is saying when he says, "If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin" is that the law points to not just the *outward* nature of sin but to the *inward* nature of sin. Without that we easily fall into the trap of our first misconception, that we can do the law and earn our salvation, because if the law only applies to outward acts we can actually think we can keep the law.

I can tell you without reservation that I have lived now 49 years on this earth and never killed anyone and caused them to die. Does that mean I've kept the sixth commandment every day of my life? Well, not if I listen to the Lord Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount it doesn't, because the Lord Jesus tells me it's not just taking an ax to someone and cutting their head off that's murder; it's calling someone "Fool."

As a matter of fact, it's saying in my heart, "I wish you were dead." In *that* instance, I'm not sure I can make one trip on I-10 without breaking the sixth commandment, because it wells up in my heart. It's who I am. You see, we don't view the law narrowly; we view it broadly. The law is not superficial. It doesn't just cover the outward and the obvious. Without that kind of view of the law we think we can actually keep the law for our salvation.

Do you want an example of this? Well, I could tell you a nice story, but I think I would rather point your attention to Luke 18. You remember the story in Luke 18. There is the tax collector and the Pharisee in the temple. The Pharisee prays, "O Lord, I thank you that I'm not like other people. I thank you that I'm not like this tax collector over there who I know cheats people out of money. You can hear it in the jangle of his wallet as he walks. I thank you that I'm not like blasphemers who in public use language they shouldn't. I thank you that you have made me different and that I am righteous and good."

What the Pharisee is completely missing is all of the times he has stolen in his heart, all of the times he has *wished* he could steal, all of the people he has killed with a look but restrained his hands. He has made the law superficial. When you make the law small, you actually think you can do it. The only way you think you can keep the law is by limiting its application.

This is important for us. When we read the Bible, we think about the Pharisees as being people who multiply laws on people, giving them more and more and more to do. In one sense that's correct. They have many interpretations of each law, but in another sense, what the Pharisees were all about was restricting the law. They made the boundaries exactly where they could keep the law. Where they struggled they said, "Oh, that's not really a violation of the commandment. No, not really."

They made it as small as they could so they could keep it. We can do this as well, can't we? This is especially a temptation for the religious. I use this word in the sense of our commonality with the Pharisees. We are not out carousing now. We're in church, reading our Bibles, singing hymns, being polite. We're not out knocking over a liquor store. We're not out burning our neighbor's shrubs. We're not spreading lies and gossip about people at our workplace right now.

The Proper Conception of the Law

If we look at the world and see all of the horribleness and filth that is out there, we can easily make sin just about what's out *there*, and then we avoid what's out there and we're fine, but that's a misconception of the law. We have to be ever watchful against making the law to be less than it is just so we look good. What, then, is the proper conception of sin? The law cannot lead to salvation, the law is not sinful, and we have to take the law in its broadest sense, not in a superficial way so that we think we can keep the law.

The law, Paul says, reveals my sin to me. It allows me to see the reality of sin in my life. He actually goes very far. He says, "But for the law I would not have known sin." The interesting thing here is that Paul is not treating the law like some kind of textbook that I take out and read and I come to an understanding of what sin is, that I could write an essay about sin.

You all have done that. Those of you who are grown, those of you who are younger now, you have to write an essay about something for school, and you lay out all of the parts and make sure you've explained it. That's not what Paul is describing here. It's not a theoretical knowledge of sin he has. He actually says he knew experientially. That's what the word *know* here means. He knew experientially about sin. He experienced the practical conviction of sin because of the law.

Then he says, "For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'" This word *know* is a different second word than the previous sentence. Paul says, "It's not just an experiential knowledge I have; it is a thoroughgoing knowledge. It is a knowledge I have turned over in my mind. I understand all of the implications of this for my life. It's a thoroughgoing knowledge." The law did not just teach him about sin in general. No, it convicted him of his *own* sin.

Now we have to remember who Paul was. It's not as if Paul was ignorant of the concept of sin. He was a Pharisee. Right now you should be drawing a line between Luke 18 and Romans 7, because Paul was a Pharisee. He saw everybody else's sin, but for himself the concept of sin was superficial. That's why he could say he was righteous. In his famous passage in Philippians 3 he says, "As touching the law, blameless." Paul believed he was blameless and righteous with regard to the law.

So how did the law reveal Paul's sin to him? It's interesting that he goes right to the tenth commandment. Not just the written letter of the law but the application of it to him. The law is made up of particular commandments and the application of those commandments to our lives, and the law here in the tenth commandment showed the inwardness of Paul's sin.

Coveting, by definition, is hard to see. How can you tell if I'm coveting right now? Well, you can't, because by definition coveting is internal. It's something I can hide from others and even from myself. Apart from the law, Paul thought he was fine. Look at verse 8. "But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment,

produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died."

This is what Paul means. Apart from the true knowledge of the law, sin lies dead. That is, it's dormant. Sin appears to be mastered. I think I'm in control of sin, that sin isn't a problem for me. That's why Paul says, "I was alive." What he means is, "I thought I was righteous." This is the Paul of Philippians 3. He thought he was holy. He thought he was in control. He thought he was right before God in what he did, but then the commandment came, and then it got him.

Did you notice that? When the commandment came it *got* Paul. Have you ever had this experience where you're reading your Bible or you are using a Christian book or you're listening to a podcast or listening to a preacher preach and you say, "Wow! I've never gotten that verse before. I never understood what that verse meant. I've never seen that verse before." What you don't mean is, "I never laid my eyes on that verse." What you mean is, "I never really understood it, and now it all makes sense."

That's what Paul is saying the law did for him with sin. "When the commandment came, sin came alive." It revived and became active, and all Paul saw was sin. It's as if scales came back from his eyes and he died. Now what does Paul mean there? I think it's very simple. He means the opposite of what he meant when he said, "I was alive."

When he was alive, he thought he was safe and in control and had mastered sin, but now he is dead he sees that sin has mastery over him, that sin hounds him, that sin is in all of his actions and thoughts and words. His self-confidence was gone. His self-righteousness was gone. The law reveals to us the true nature and depth and wickedness of sin.

The second thing the law does is arouses sin. As soon as I say that, this sounds wrong. If the law is good, why does it give sin more life? Isn't this like saying the law is sin? Paul says that not only does the law *reveal* sin but it is actually used *by* sin. "When the commandment came, sin came alive." He says sin seized an opportunity through the commandment and made more sin.

Now what does this mean? We need to remember that it is not the law that is evil but it is sin that is evil. This shows us how powerful sin is. Before you think, "I'm in charge of my sin. I can control my sin. I can stop sinning whenever I want," hear Paul say that sin is powerful enough to use the law as a weapon, as leverage, as it were.

Have you ever used leverage to get something to move? That's what sin does with the law. Sin takes leverage by means of the law. Sin does this by first arousing in us an element of rebellion. Sin uses our fallen nature, which is in itself rebellion against God. The very fact of a commandment, "Don't do this," creates a desire to do. We've talked about this before.

Have you ever watched where there's a sign that says, "Do not step on the grass"? Have you seen how many worn pathways there are over the grass? People take it as an invitation. "Well, there's a shortcut over the grass. I didn't realize that. Nobody can catch me. Nobody could do anything to me. I'm going to walk on the grass." Before they had even thought about walking on the grass, the very fact of a commandment makes them want to break the commandment.

It's not just that we accidentally do things that are wrong, but we actually delight in breaking the law. We delight in rebellion. Jesus says this in John, chapter 15. He says the law takes away the excuse of sin. It makes sin more desirable to our sinful nature, and because of that it leaves us without excuse. Jesus says, "We are without excuse because he has revealed the law to us."

Secondly, sin seizes an opportunity to bring about sins I was ignorant of. Sin uses the law to bring about more sin by taking the law as its starting point. Have you ever thought about this as a parent? Well, let's not tell our children not to do certain things, because they're not even aware yet of that. They don't even know that's in the realm of possibility.

As soon as I mention it, that opens up a whole world of possibilities, because that's what sin does. It launches out. This word here for *opportunity* is the word that's used for the starting point of a journey or, I think even better, it's used to describe a military base of operations. Sin sets up camp with the law and sends out forays into our lives.

Launching off from this base, Paul says sin produces in me all sorts of sin. The word here for *to produce* means it does the job thoroughly. It's not just that it makes a go of it. No, it does the job, and it does it right. It does this because the law brings to my mind examples of sin I've never even thought of. This includes sinful thoughts, which in themselves are sin.

Sin uses the law to deceive me about the nature and the extent of sin. It relies on the original purpose of the law to deceive me about what the law does after the fall. The law was designed. That is, it was intended to promise life. "Do this, and you will live." That meant something to Adam. He had the power to obey, but the problem is that after the fall we *don't* have the power to obey. "This same commandment proved to be death to me," Paul says in verse 10.

Finally, after clearing up the misconceptions about what the law is not and showing how sin uses the law to its own evil ends, Paul concludes with a direct statement about the law. He says the law is holy and righteous and good. The law is holy. He reminds us that the law is not only not sin but it is positively holy. He can say this because the law comes from God.

God does not desire sin. God does not desire rebellion. The fact that the law produces this is *our* fault, not God's. It's why we need to be redeemed. The law reflects the holy character of God. It is holy because God is

holy. The law is also righteous. It is fair. It is equitable. The law treats people equally. There is no special standard under the law. The law is not unjust. We might not like the outcomes that come from the law, but that doesn't mean the law is unjust.

Finally, the law is good. The law is designed for our good. We may not think so at first, because our first view of the law is that we can't use it for salvation, but Paul reminds us that we need the law to show us the end of ourselves. We need to see that we are condemned and without hope except for the grace of God. The law serves that end well. The law is a good guide of life to us because it reflects who God is. Life is better when the law is followed.

Stop and think about this for a moment. Would you like to live in a world that had no law? Before you say that, I'll be taking your car home today. By the way, on the way out I'm going to punch you. Who would want to live in a world like that where there was no law, no sense of right and wrong, survival of the fittest? No one. The law is good.

It's important for us to understand the law. You have to understand that the law can never save you. You also need the law to show you that you are sinful and you need a Savior. That is our only hope. Our hope is in the one who kept the law completely...in action, in word, and in deed. He did that for our sake. He did that so we could receive the righteousness of God and be free from the judgment of the law. Praise be to God for our Lord Jesus Christ and the grace that comes to us through his work.