

**The Purpose of the Law**  
Romans 7:7-13 (04/28/13)  
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I've never had an MRI. I've heard they aren't real comfortable, but they do expose bad things in your body. I've never even had a CAT scan. We have all kinds of devices today to see inside our bodies to detect problems. They even put wires and tubes up your femoral artery to get a look at your heart, or your brain, or your kidneys, or what not. It is really quite amazing technology. All of these inventions are used to get in there and ferret out trouble.

But there is no MRI to expose your soul, your heart, your inner self where you really live and where you think and choose and want and desire. No human device can scan your core being. But as we are going to learn this morning, God does have such a spiritual MRI instrument, and it's called the Law.

Romans says a lot about the Law and what it can't do. No one is saved or justified by keeping the Law. Back in Romans 6 God assures us that in Christ sin and its condemning power will no longer rule us because we are no longer under the Law but under grace. Here's a simple thing to remember: if as a believer you were still under the Law, then you would have to keep the law perfectly. And if you don't, the Law would condemn you! Praise God, we're under grace, we have a Savior who did keep the Law perfectly for us, and He paid in full for all our transgression of the Law. His perfect Law-keeping was imputed to us. That's why God declares believers righteous by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone!

So what about the Law? In Romans 7:1-6 God says we died to the Law because we died with Christ. Once you're dead, the Law has no jurisdiction over you. But that doesn't free us to sin. *Grace never nurtures sin.* We died to the law, but we were married to Christ. We love Him. We want to live for Him. We are now able to bear godly fruit to God because of our union with Christ, and we now serve our God, not legalistically, but in the fresh, powerful newness of the Spirit, which we will totally enjoy when we get into Romans 8. But we've got to get through Romans 7 first!

You might conclude, in view of Paul's comments, that the Law is bad, or even sin. Is it? And that's where Paul is taking us in verses 7-13. Paul immediately hammers another "Don't Even Think about Parking Here" sign into the biblical turf. Is the Law sin? Are you kidding? Absolutely not. The Law is not sin and God has a huge purpose for His Law in our lives. That's what we're looking at this morning. In a nutshell, it is only through the Law that we really understand what sin is. It has no power to save us, but it has purpose to expose our sin and drive us to Christ.

In these verses Paul is giving us his personal testimony. We should apply what Paul learned about the Law and sin to our own lives. We'll begin with verse 9.

**FIRST, BEFORE THE LAW CAME, I WAS ALIVE, AND SIN WAS DEAD – v. 9**

*And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died;*

Paul says "I was once alive apart from the Law." There was a time in Paul's life where he felt very secure in his religious life. He was a good student, a strict Pharisee, and he saw himself as a perfect law keeper. Everything was great. He thought God was quite impressed with his righteousness. He was like that rich young ruler who skipped up to Jesus asking this question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Well, you know the commands," responded Jesus as he ticked them off. Check, check, check, check. "Hey, no problem with these good teacher. I've kept every one of them my whole life." He was alive and good to go with the Law, he thought.

This is what most religious people think. They may have messed up a bit, but hey, to fail is human, to forgive is divine. "I'm not that bad. I've pretty well kept the Ten Commandments." Then you have the happy pagan. She is happy with her life; she isn't bothered too much by her vanity and gossip and having sex outside of marriage. He is following his heart, being who he is, he has same sex attraction and who are you or anyone else to condemn him. Or the successful business man, the money is pouring in, life couldn't be better. No cares or even thoughts about what God thinks about me. Oh, they may have twinges of conscience about cheating or misrepresenting their product to a big sale, but hey, you've got to make a living, plus, everyone else does it. They seldom think about the true and living God from rising to retiring. They may give God a token on Sunday mornings by attending church, and they may even throw a five or ten in the pot to appease God.

This is the world before the Law comes. "I was alive, and sin was dead." Paul was the happy religious type. He wore the outward garb of righteousness. He felt just like that young man running up to Jesus saying, "All these things have I kept from my youth." He knew the Law. He wasn't ignorant of it, but it hadn't "come" to him. He was alive and sin was dead, dormant. He wasn't deeply convicted of his own sin. He was blind to his own heart.

### **SECOND, THE LAW CAME, SIN BECAME ALIVE, AND I DIED – VV. 7-11.**

What does Paul mean, "When the commandment came" in verse 9? There was a time, and it may have been more than just a moment or a day, when the full force of God's purpose of the law hit him like a wrecking ball to his soul and demolished his self-righteousness. He had been at Stephen's stoning, and God may have used that to get to work on his heart. Then Christ arrested him while he was marching up to Damascus to kill Christians and said to him, "It is hard for you to kick against the goads." Who knows, maybe he was struggling in his soul then. Whenever it happened, this is his testimony, and I hope it is yours as well. We are not talking about five tips for happier living here today. We are going into the depths of our souls, all for the glory of God and the good of our souls. Let's go back to verse 7 and work our way through this.

### **God uses the Law to lay bare the core of our depravity and guilt – v. 7.**

*What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet."*

Paul doesn't mean he wasn't aware of sin before this. He was. Just like most people are. Most people know it's wrong to kill and steal. Try stealing your neighbor's car and he'll quickly demonstrate that he believes stealing is wrong. But what Paul is talking about here is not acts of sin, but the core principle of sin.

Paul refers to the tenth commandment on purpose. Why? Because coveting, or this word "epithumia," meaning strong desire or want, lies at the core of our sin. At our core we want what we want. We are ruled by our own desires. We are madly in love with ourselves. We live for what we want. Woody Allen, who had an immoral relationship with his girlfriend's adopted daughter, said, "The heart wants what it wants."

Paul became aware that while his outward behavior conformed to the Law, his heart was wicked and wanted what it wanted. That's how he came to know sin, to understand his own depravity at his core. The Law is God's MRI that exposes in our inner being not basic love for God and others, but supreme love for self. Coveting or this self-worshipping desire drives us.

So Paul is saying, when the Law came to me the way God intended, it slew me! This is so like the testimonies we just heard last week. "I grew up in a church, I prayed a prayer, I thought I was a Christian, but I really didn't know Christ. I thought I was OK, going to church, trying to live a Christian life, but then God began convicting me of my sin. Not my sins, but my sin, the plague of my heart. And I realized my guilt and my only hope was Jesus Christ. I was convicted that I

couldn't save myself, that I needed Christ and all He did for sinners, and I trusted in Him alone for my salvation."

Remember that young man skipping up to Jesus. "Yeah, I'm good with all those commands. What else do I need?" "Go, sell everything you have, give the proceeds to the poor, and come and follow me!" BOOM! The color ran out of that hopeful young businessman. Christ had sent the Law straight to his coveting heart, right?

But listen, just being convicted doesn't mean salvation. Many people get convicted but don't turn to Christ. I recall a young man who came to our other church. I visited him in his home, shared the gospel, and it was like springs of water just burst from his eyes. I believe he did pray to ask Jesus to save him, but we never saw any fruit from his life. We tried to follow up, but he had no interest. Another older gentleman was drawn to our church, came in the parking lot, left, came back, listened. I visited him and shared the gospel and this dear brother sobbed greatly under the conviction of sin. He embraced Christ as his Savior and I believe he truly was saved. He's still living for Jesus.

**When the Law comes in power, it stirs up the sin in our hearts – v. 8**

*But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.*

Notice, "coveting of every kind." Paul is saying that under this convicting of the Law he became horribly aware of all kinds of coveting in his heart. Before, he wasn't aware of any of it. And you need to be aware of this. Sometimes life gets worse before it gets better when you come to Christ. Sometimes like Paul you become super-aware of your sin. You see yourself as one huge sinner. It's like the Law is this prod that God takes and pokes around in our hearts and wakes up all kinds of vermin and serpents of sin. It's like when you take an axe and split an old log and hundreds of ants coming pouring out like dark sand. You had no idea the degree of your sin before! You may actually become quite miserable. This awareness of sin is a good thing. It leads to God's grace.

When there is no law to expose our sin, we aren't aware that what we are thinking and doing is really sinful. In that sense, sin was dead to us. We watched any kind of movies we wanted. We lied our way through days, looked at porn only hoping the kids or spouse or parents wouldn't catch us. Like Achan, we stole the gold and silver and garments and buried them so no one would see, totally unaware that God was watching us. No fear of God. Sin functions freely without the Law and sense of God. I may work on trying to get more discipline in my life, and I may feel like God is pretty okay with my religious efforts, but I am completely blind to the fountain of my being as sinful, that is until the Law comes!

Remember when Peter was preaching on Pentecost and he brought their murder of the Son of God before their hearts. The Bible says they were "stabbed" or "pierced" and cried out "What must we do?" That's exactly what we want in evangelism, right? No manipulating people into raising hands, walking an aisle, signing a card, even praying a prayer. What we want is heart-stabbing conviction that brings us prone to the feet of Jesus!

**When the command came, it stirred up my sin and I died – v. 9**

*And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died;*

So, when the Law comes with force to your inner being, you see yourself not as mostly good with a little cleaning up to do, but you see the end of yourself in your self-righteousness and self-assurance in your own legalism. Like Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote, "I seemed to be nothing but a mass of corruption, and of evil thoughts, desires, and imaginations; I seemed to be a cesspool of iniquity." John Gerstner, R. C. Sproul's mentor and hero, was preaching on sin one time and afterward a lady came up and said, "You made me feel about this big this morning" as she held

her thumb and forefinger about one-half inch apart. Mr. Gerstner, holding his thumb and finger the same distance, said, "That's about this much too big."

Sin sprang to life in me and I died, says Paul. It killed forever the proud Pharisee thanking God that he was not as other men. It killed off the happy pagan – the end of self-confidence, self-satisfaction, self-reliance. No more do you feel confident in your own goodness, your own religious works. You begin to see the idols of your heart, all the loves of your heart that you put above God. Even good things like food, sex, sports, marriage, leisure. You realize you want honor and approval and admiration and your own way.

All this is the stuff the Law ferrets out of your heart and makes you aware. You become aware you cannot change yourself, you can do nothing to remove sin, and that you must have a Savior or you die! That's when the gospel becomes incredibly sweet. You become fully convinced that Christ is your only hope and nothing in this world can help you except Him. No religion can penetrate your core and remove sin – and that's when Jesus becomes the treasure of your heart.

### **The Law, instead of bringing us life, brings us death – v. 10**

*and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me;*

Briefly, if we were perfect like Jesus, the law would be the way for us to live and give us eternal life. If Adam and Eve had kept the law, it would have resulted in life. But it didn't. One young fellow ruefully told me, "I wish Adam and Eve hadn't sinned because I want to live forever." Well, thank God there's a remedy for that, amen?

### **Sin uses the law to deceive us – v. 11**

*for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.*

Why do we think we are okay? Why do we think if we just do a little better we'll be good to go? Why did that young man tell Jesus he'd kept all the Law from his youth? Sin deceives us into thinking we are law keepers. That's how Paul was until the Law came in power and conviction into his heart. So sin will drag the masses of humanity into hell assured they are okay.

### **THIRD, THE LAW IS GOOD AND DRIVES US TO CHRIST – VV. 12-13**

*So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.*

The Law can't save you or even change you, but it is from God. It is good for you; it tells you right from wrong. And it is just like God, holy in its character. It is God's spiritual MRI to show you that sin is at your core and that sin is truly sinful.

What does the sinfulness of sin mean? The Law makes us keenly aware that sin is really the greatest of all evils in this world, whether in Herod the Great, Billy Graham, or you and me. And that sin is so wicked because it isn't just petty failures on our part, but a direct attack on God! The Law is our friend to expose this terrorist hiding out in our hearts! We are God's enemies and must lay down our arms and surrender to His Son.

### **SO WHAT?**

Where did the Law send Paul? Straight to the cross. You really have to wonder if professing Christians really get this. Has the Law come to them? If so, there will be two realities in their lives.

First, when we are deeply convicted of our own sin, it will knock that smug Laodicean attitude right out of us. It'll end that proud, arrogant attitude. Instead of holding grudges and demanding others please you and finding fault with everything and everyone, we'll be gripped by our own

sinful hearts. We won't be pointing our fingers at others. We'll be confessing our own sin and be highly conscious of our own need for Christ.

And second, that's where the joy and life come from in a believer and a congregation. The more we see our own sin and the more we are driven to the cross of Christ as our only refuge, the more joy and zeal and love for God and God's people there will be in the fellowship.

Has God brought the reality of your sin to you through His Law? Have you cried out, like those Jews in Acts 2, "Brothers, what must we do?" Has God's Law sent you straight to the cross for forgiveness and salvation?