

"Laying Down the Law"

(Part 2)

Rom. 7:1-13

- INTRO. - ILL. – How many of you here today like chocolate? (Let me see your hands) Is there anyone here today that is allergic to chocolate? Did you know that *many* people are physiologically sensitive to chocolate? Certain of the larger benzene compounds that are present in chocolate are resisted by their bodies through an allergic reaction.
- Depending on the individual, this reaction may range from very mild (producing a minor skin rash) to very severe (producing medical shock and even death). And here's the clincher: Chocolate is fatal for some people, *not* because chocolate is poisonous in and of itself, but because of the biochemical makeup of their own bodies.
- In a similar way, the power of sin in man reacts to the Law and brings death. And (as Paul says in Rom. 7:7-13) this does *not* happen because the Law is evil (in and of itself) but because of the sin within *us*.
- And last week we looked at Rom. 7:1-6. There we saw a word concerning “the Law and the *spiritual* man.” Today we are focusing on Rom. 7:7-13, where we see “the Law and the *natural* man.”
- If the spiritual man is *delivered from* the Law (as we saw last week), the natural man is *doomed by* the Law (as we will see today). Verse 7 begins the autobiographical section by answering an anticipated question.

- After declaring that “while we were in the flesh, (our) sinful passions were aroused by the Law,” and “now we have been released from the Law” (in vv. 5-6), Paul knew that the next question in the mind of his readers would be, “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?” (v. 7).

- Is there something wrong with the Law? Is the Law evil? Now that we are under the dispensation of grace, can we disregard the Law? Can we who are Christians now ignore the Law of God, and live as we please? Again, Paul responds with the strongest form of negative in the Greek language, “May it never be!”

- *Not only* is there nothing sinful about the Law of God, but the Law has great *value* by convicting us of sin in our lives. Paul is going to show (here) that the Law is holy and good, and that it accomplishes four things in the hearts of men: 1.) It *exposes* the *presence* of sin, 2.) It *expedites* the *production* of sin, 3.) It *epitomizes* the *perniciousness* of sin, and 4.) It *exhibits* the *putridness* of sin.

- Now, there has been an ongoing debate (over the years) as to whether this passage of Scripture in Romans 7 is a description of Paul *before* he was saved or *after* he was saved.

- John Stott writes, “Romans 7 is well known to most Christian people because of the debate it has provoked...Who is the ‘wretched man’ or ‘miserable creature’ (NEB) of verse 24, who gives us a graphic account of his inner moral torment (15ff), cries out for

deliverance, and then immediately appears to thank God for it (25)? Is this person regenerate or unregenerate? And if the former, is he or she normal or abnormal, mature, immature or backsliding?”

- Well, I won't go into all the details of the debate, but let me summarize what I believe about this passage of Scripture. The use of all the personal pronouns in this chapter make it clear that this is Paul's *personal* testimony. Paul is clearly talking about his own life here. And if you look carefully at the verb tenses, you will discover that he uses the *past* tense in vv. 7-13, but *then* he changes to the *present* tense in vv. 14-25.

- Therefore, I believe that vv. 7-13 describe Paul *before* his conversion, while vv. 14-25 describe his experience *after* his conversion. If that is true, then what we are examining today (in vv. 7-13) is the time in Paul's life when he was trying to earn salvation by the keeping of the Law.

- What he discovered (however) was that he could *not* keep the Law, and (in fact) all the Law served to do was to condemn him. And it was *not* until he came to the end of himself (and his own efforts to keep the Law), and he put his trust in Jesus Christ alone, that he actually became “righteous” in God's sight.

- The same is true of any person who attempts to be made right with God by any kind of human achievement (through whatever religious system it might be). So Rom. 7:7-13 deals with:

II. THE LAW AND THE NATURAL MAN

- And Paul begins his testimony (here) by explaining how:

A. The Law Exposes the Presence of Sin (v. 7)

- Look with me at 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.’”

- Now, when Paul talks about “the Law” (here in this verse) it is obvious that he is referring to the Ten Commandments, because he is later going to point to *one* of the commandments (in particular) as being the one God used to bring him to acknowledge his sin and turn to salvation by grace through faith in Christ.

- But from his new position in Christ, Paul now looks *back* on his old life to see what purpose the Law played in his experience. Since it was the Law that bound him to his first husband (the old sin nature) it would *appear* as if the Law was something *bad*.

- But Paul concludes the exact *opposite* was true. If it had *not* been for the Law, he never would have been aware of his sin and his need to trust in Christ alone for salvation.

- One of the main functions of the Law is to *expose* our sin. Without the Law, we would *not* know that we are

sinners, and therefore would see no need (at all) for a Savior.

- How could we understand what sin is, without a standard of righteousness by which we can differentiate between good and bad? Sin (by definition) depends on some kind of standard by which performance and behavior is measured. So it is through the Law that sin is made known.

- The Law clearly establishes what is right and wrong, and in doing so, it reveals to us how we have fallen short of God's holy standard. Sproul says, "It is *not* that there would have been nothing evil without the law, but we would never have known what sin was." It is the Law that shows us how we have fallen short of God's righteousness.

- Paul wrote in 1 Cor. 15:56, "The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law." Why is the power of sin the Law? Because it is the Law that reveals to us our sin – and it is our sin that condemns us.

- In *theory*, the person "who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness" (as Rom. 10:5 says, quoting Lev. 18:5). But in *practice*, no human being has ever been successful in fully obeying the Law. Therefore it can never be the way of salvation, but it is very effective in condemning us.

- In fact, *that* is *why* the world hates the Law of God – because it *exposes* our sin – and men want to *conceal*

their sin. We are living in a day where men want to cover up their sin – to excuse it and camouflage it.

- We have phobias, complexes, syndromes, and inhibitions – but *not* sin. People today do *not* want to hear anything about sin. That's why you have certain preachers who never preach on it or mention it at all in their pulpits.

- But listen, covering up sin is a dangerous game that people play. It is very much like taking a bottle of poison off the shelf and replacing the label of crossbones with an attractive label that reads "vanilla extract."

- The problem is, that it doesn't change the content of the bottle, it only makes it more palatable. The poison will still kill you if you drink it.

- But the function of the Law is to make sure *that* doesn't happen. The purpose of the Law is to give sin its proper name, and to warn us of its eternal consequences.

- ILL. – If you set aside a glass of water with dirt and garbage in it, and leave it undisturbed for a few days, the particles will settle to the bottom of the glass, in such a way that the water might *look* drinkable. But we all know that it would still be dangerous to drink it – even though it might look like it is OK to drink. If you took a sterile spoon and stirred the water, it would become quickly evident that the water is *not* clean.

- Here's the point: the Law is like the sterile spoon – though *perfect* in itself, it is intended to make evident to

us the true nature of the garbage of sin that exists within us.

- And please understand – this function of the Law (to reveal our sin) is an *indispensable* part of our salvation. Faithful preachers of God’s Word (throughout history) have understood that before we can ever see our need for a Savior, we *first* have to see our sin and the seriousness of it.

- And folks, (quite honestly), it scares me to death today, because I know that in *many* pulpits across this country people are *never* confronted with their sin. Without that exposure of sin by the Law of God, people will never see their need for atonement through Jesus Christ.

- And Paul has already alluded to this important function of the Law several times in the Book of Romans. In 3:20 he said, “through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.” In 4:15 he said, “where there is no law, neither is there violation.” In 5:13 he said, “sin is not imputed when there is no law.” And again, this is *not* saying that there was no evil before the Law, but without the Law we would *not* know about our sin.

- Well, some people might say, “We would be better off if we didn’t know about our sin.” Is that really true? Look at it this way...

- ILL. – Suppose two men are on an airplane. Both of them are given parachutes, but one of the men is told that the parachute will make his flight more *comfortable*, and

he will be *happier* if he wears it – that it is for his own *good*.

So he puts it on, and as he does he notices that people around him are whispering about him. He looks *funny* in that thing, and they are laughing at him. When he sits down, he discovers that it is very *uncomfortable*. So before long, he throws it off, muttering to himself, “for my own good...”

But the other man is given the parachute and is told that in a few minutes the airplane is going to be completely without any fuel, and very soon he will be jumping out from 22,000 feet.

Now, do you think that it is going to matter to that man if someone makes fun of him for having his parachute on? Do you think that he is going to take it off because it gets a little uncomfortable?

- Do you see the difference? Just because someone is *unaware* of the danger that lies ahead does *not* make them better off for *not* knowing. In fact, it would make them much *worse* off, if by *not* knowing their peril, they chose *not* to accept the one thing that would save them.

- That’s one reason why the Law is good. It lets us know of our sin, and the eternal danger of continuing in sin without the Savior. The Bible says, “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 6:23)

- It also says, “Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.” (Gal. 3:24) It is the Law that lets us know about our sin, and warns us of its impending condemnation, and leads us to the Savior.

- ILL. – Picture yourself with some friends in a rubber raft with no oars in the middle of a big river. You *have* to float down the river – there is no getting out of it. But it’s a sunny day on the quiet river, and the birds are singing. Everyone in the boat is having a good time talking and laughing. It’s a great experience for everyone – except for one guy. You see, *this* guy is the only one who has looked at a map, and knows that there is a 500-foot waterfall directly ahead of them.

- Now listen, what does that change? The sun is still out, the birds are still singing, people are still talking and laughing and having a good time. But *he* is *unable* to join in on the fun. Why? Because he knows what lies ahead.

- You say, “Well, wouldn’t the guy be better off if he didn’t know? After all, knowing about the falls did *not* change the situation – it just prevented him from enjoying the trip.”

- Yes, I guess that is true – but what if, by knowing about it, *that* allowed him to do something that would alter where he would end up?

- You see, if all the Law ever did, was to let us know about our sin, when there was nothing that could be done about it – *that* would make the Law a very *bad* thing

indeed. But if the Law lets us know about our sin, so we can turn to Christ and be saved, then the Law is a very *good* thing.

- That’s why Paul raises the question, “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin?” and then answers by saying, “May it never be!” Think about it this way:

- ILL. – Suppose there is a criminal who steals something or commits some other crime. The Law comes and takes him to jail. He is tried and convicted by the Law. He is sentenced and put into prison by the Law.

When he gets to prison, he says to the other prisoners, “The reason I am in here is because of the Law. It’s the Law’s fault. If it was *not* for the Law, I wouldn’t be here.”

Is that really true? NO. The reason he is there is because he committed a crime. The Law didn’t do it – he did it! The problem is *not* the Law – the problem is that he is guilty of committing a crime. The Law is just following its natural course of action.

The problem is the act of stealing (or whatever crime he committed). The same thing is true of the Law of God. The problem is *not* with the Law – it is with the sin of the lawbreaker. The Law simply follows through with the natural course of identifying, condemning, and punishing the lawbreaker.

- APPL. – Listen, don’t buy into the popular psychological argument that says, “My problem is that I was raised in a fundamentalist church, where I was taught

about sin and judgment and the laws of God. If I hadn't been taught all that stuff, I wouldn't be feeling so guilty and I would be better off."

- No my friend, the Law makes you better off. The Law is holy and good. It helps you to acknowledge your sin so you will run to Christ and receive His atonement for your sin.

- You would *not* be any *less guilty* if you did *not* know the Law of God. You would *not* be any *less condemned* by your sin. So you should be eternally grateful if your instruction in the Law worked to lead you to Christ. You are *better off* to be trained by the Law of God.

- Folks, it is foolish to think that the Law is the problem. The Law is *not* the problem – sin is. All the Law does is to turn the spotlight on it and reveal it to us. And once we see our sin, then we will see our need for Christ.

- Now, notice that Paul refers to a *particular* sin in the last part of v. 7. He says, "for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'"

- Listen, it is interesting (and significant) that Paul alludes to this particular sin. Why would Paul choose *this one* (of the Ten Commandments) to use as his illustration of how the Law revealed his sin?

- Well, I can't say this for certain, but I believe that this particular commandment (of all the Ten Commandments) was the one Paul had the most trouble with.

- You see, all the other 9 commandments are essentially *external* in nature. But this one has to do with internal motives. This one is a command that has to do with the *inward* condition of the *heart*.

- The other 9 commandments have to do with *actions* – this one has to do with *attitudes*. The first 9 are (for the most part) *visible* – this one is *invisible* (to everyone but God).

- This is also a sin that (in many ways) includes all the other commandments. It is a sin that ultimately leads to all the others. The word for "coveting" is "epithumia." It includes any kind of illicit desire."

- Coveting is essentially the sin of lust, and the Bible says of lust, "when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." (James 1:15)

- And coveting itself is a form of *idolatry*, because it puts the object of desire in the place of God. Paul wrote in Col. 3:5, "Therefore consider the members of your earthly body as dead to immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry."

- It was the sin of coveting that cost Adam his life, and that of his family. It was the sin of coveting that caused Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery. It was the sin of coveting that caused king David to fall into sin with Bathsheba. It was the sin of coveting that led Ahab to murder Naboth so that he could have his vineyard. It was

the sin of coveting that resulted in Achan being swallowed up by the earth.

- It was the sin of coveting that cost Ananias and Saphira their lives (in the NT) as they tried to lie to the HS. It was the sin of coveting that led the rich fool (in Jesus' parable) to lose his soul after building bigger and bigger barns to hold all his wealth. It was the sin of coveting that caused Satan to be cast out of heaven as a fallen angel that rebelled against God.

- It was the sin of coveting that caused the rich young ruler, (who came to Christ to find out how to enter the kingdom of God), to walk away *sorrowful* because he had too many possessions.

- You see, Paul was much like that rich young ruler. As Jesus went through all the first nine of the Ten Commandments, he was able to say, "All these things I have done from my youth up."

- Ah, but *then* there was a problem. Jesus knew it all along, but he had *not* been able to see it himself. It was when he got to that last commandment (that deals with the internal condition of the heart) that he came up short.

- Jesus knew, that with all his wealth, he would *not* be able to pass the test of *not* coveting material things. He walked away condemned by the Law, knowing that he was *not* righteous in God's sight.

- And the same thing was true of Paul. He could go through all the first nine of the commandments and say,

"I've kept all these things," but when it came to that last one, he knew he could *not* stand as righteous before God. He knew that his heart was *not* pure.

-And what Paul came to realize, is that the most important demands of the Law are *not* the *external* demands, but the *internal* ones. It's why Jesus said, "If you've lusted in your heart, you've already committed adultery. If you've had anger against someone in your heart, you've already committed murder."

- You know, sometimes I think we get the idea that Paul was essentially *forced* into the kingdom of God. After all, he was met by Christ on the Damascus Road, and struck blind by the appearance of Christ, who spoke to him from heaven. Who *wouldn't* be saved if you had an experience like that?

- But what we often fail to realize is, that God was already at work in Paul's heart, long before he ever confronted him on the Damascus Road. God had already brought him to the place of recognizing he was *not* fully righteous in God's sight. He had (in fact) been guilty of coveting. And it was God's Law that had revealed that to him.

- In fact, some scholars have suggested that this happened at his Bar Mitzvah, when he became a "son of the Law." And (of course) we can't know whether *this* was when Paul came to realize that he was guilty of coveting (because the Bible doesn't tell us), but here in this passage he makes it clear that the Law brought him to this place of recognizing his sin.

- As Kent Hughes puts it, “Whether before or after that time, he began to seriously reflect on the Ten Commandments, and he found that he did pretty well until he came to the Tenth which says, ‘You shall not covet’...”

- And as his sharp young mind grappled with the concept, he began to see that his inner life was *filled* with coveting. And he likely (even) began to realize that all the *other* commandments are (also) broken through sins that originate with coveting.

- But God was already at work in this young man’s heart long before the Damascus Road experience. The Law of God was working in him to help him see who he really was, before Christ saved him.

- Listen my friend, Paul was saved in exactly the same way everyone else is saved – by acknowledging his sin before God and turning to Jesus Christ for atonement and redemption.

- But God had brought him to the place where he realized he had fallen short of God’s standard (that the Law demands), and therefore could never stand in his own righteousness. He did OK through the first 9 commandments, but he couldn’t get past that 10th one.

- And, of course, we know from the NT that being guilty of one violation of the Law makes us guilty of the whole Law. James 2:10 makes it clear, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all.”

- But Paul says that when the Law finally made it clear what was *inside* of him, he began to see things that had been there the whole time. He never knew his sin was there, but the Law made it evident to him. The Law made it clear that he was a sinner and in need of a Savior.

- In a very real sense, we could say that Paul owes his salvation to the tenth commandment. He could say to the Philippians that when it came to the Law, he was “blameless” – but he had one skeleton in his closet. He was covetous in his heart, although no one would have ever guessed it. But when that was revealed by the Law, he knew he stood condemned.

- Stuart Briscoe writes, “Hidden away inside the upright young Pharisee was the dark secret...which, if the law had not described in detail and condemned out of hand, may have been overlooked or dismissed as a normal experience of all men. Thanks to the law, however, Paul had at some stage recognized his covetousness as sin and had moved easily from that discovery to recognize himself as a sinner – which, of course, eventually led him to repentance and faith in Christ.”

- James also tells us that the Law is like a mirror which reveals the sin in the inner man. In fact, the Reformers saw three purposes for the Law in this dispensation, and the *first* purpose was that the Law was a mirror to reflect, *both* the perfect righteousness of God, and the utter sinfulness of men.

- So the Law has a very important part to play in our salvation. It is that of revealing our sin. Until we acknowledge our sin, we can never be saved.

- Well, we only got to v. 7, but I have a lot to say about the following verses, so we'll save the rest for next week. This one verse carries so much truth, we *had* to spend some time on it.

- PRAYER