

The Relation of Law to Sin

By David Harrell

Romans 7:7-13

We now come to the pinnacle of worship where we have an opportunity to humble ourselves before the preaching of the God's Word. So would you take your Bibles and turn to Romans chapter seven?

We find ourselves this morning in verses seven through 13. And I have entitled my discourse to you, "The Relation of Law to Sin."

Let me read this passage that we might get an overall grasp of what the apostle is telling us here.

Romans seven beginning with verse seven.

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." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. 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.¹

One of the most profound areas of self deception in our lives is with respect to the severity and the scope of sin. We barely see the tip of the iceberg when we look at our lives. By nature we have a very high view of ourselves. We can justify almost anything we do. We are very quick to blame somebody else for the things that we do that are dishonoring to God and we are hopelessly biased in our own favor.

If you don't think that is true, just examine your attitude the next time you are confronted by your husband or your wife or your parents over some issue that you know is wrong.

We can see the speck in our brother's eye a mile away. But we have a very difficult time seeing the log in our own eye.

Let me give you an example. Think of someone perhaps even in your church family that you just don't like. You don't like being around them. You take every opportunity to denigrate them. You don't pray for them. You kind of have your list, you know? You

¹ Romans 7:7-13.

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have got that little book, so to speak in your pocket where you keep a record of wrongs. They don't even know that you are scoring.

Well, Scripture says that we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. God knows how much we love ourselves. And so that is a pretty tall order. But what does that look like in this case? You have got someone that you just don't like. You think that they are doing things that are absolutely wrong. Are you to keep a record of wrongs? Well, obviously not. Scripture forbids that. What you should do is gently confront your brother in their sin if that is what it is.

Scripture is very clear in Galatians 6:1.

“Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.”²

It goes on to say we are to bear one another's burdens, referring to their burden of sin and thus fulfill the law of Christ. What is that? The law of love. You are to love them enough, if they are doing these things, to gently move into their life and try to restore them.

In fact, Jesus said in John 13:34:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”³

Oh, my, now that is taking it to a whole new level. But do we do this? Typically not. Why not? Because of pride.

You see, it is much easier for us, it comes natural to us to judge and condemn rather than love and restore. It is just part of who we are. Again, think of how you react when somebody lovingly tries to restore you in some area of sin in your life.

See, it is because of sin that we have this lust, this craving within us to be superior to others. Pride comes naturally to us and it is amazing how that we can justify these attitudes and these actions based upon this superior opinion that we have of ourselves. And we can very quickly point to our external religiosity to rationalize how superior we are and to justify why we refuse to love and why, really, that is ok.

For that reason Paul went on to say in Galatians six and verse three:

For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one examine his own work, and then he will have

² Galatians 6:1.

³ John 13:34.

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reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.⁴

My friends, the text that we have before us in Romans seven teaches us much about the issue of lust, about the issue of pride. And we are going to see that they go hand in hand. It is part of our sin nature. It is kind of at the very heart of our sin nature. And we are going to see this in relation to God's standard, in relation to the law.

In fact, we read in 1 John 2:16 about the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life. It all is connected together. And yet we are so blind to it. And unless God gives us spiritual sight, we simply cannot see ourselves as we really are. And what has he done to give us sight? He has given us his law, his standard of perfect righteousness, to expose our sin and to drive us to humility and to the Savior.

Of course, all of us, even as twice born saints, those of us who truly know Christ and have been transformed, we still struggle with all of this. And we look at sin in our own life and we tend to just see the tip of the iceberg. We don't see all that is really there, all of the sin that remains in this physical body of which we are still incarcerated until we come to glory.

But although sin no longer enslaves us, it is no longer our master, we still find ourselves yielding to it. It is an unwitting enemy that continues to entice us. It is a lusting malignancy that must be kept in check until it is removed forever in our glorified state. And this can only be accomplished through an act of God. Only when God does something to us when we are born again can we begin to get a handle on this. Only when he redeems us and regenerates us and reconciles us unto himself and justifies us and indwells us that he might sanctify us.

Now this brings us back to the Spirit's amazing revelation to us here in Romans chapter six and chapter seven. By way of review, you will recall that in chapter six Paul demonstrated that we cannot be justified by keeping the law. In other words, we cannot be declared righteous by God by doing something on our own. In fact, we have learned that to keep the law in an effort to become holy and therefore be reconciled to God really produces just the opposite. It actually becomes a hindrance to our salvation, because he has made it clear that you simply cannot earn your way into heaven. You simply can't do that. You will never be good enough to live up to God's standard.

now the Jews, as you will recall, would have obviously reacted to the climactic statement that Paul made at the end of chapter six there at the end of verse 20 and 21. He says:

“...but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁵

⁴ Galatians 6:3-4.

⁵ Romans 5:20-21.

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Now Paul anticipated the reaction from the Legalistic Jews trying to earn their way to heaven. And he says in verse one of chapter six:

“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be!”⁶

Then in the first six verses of chapter six he explains that we died to Christ and when we died to Christ we are dead to sin. We are free from the tyranny of the master of sin. And then in the first six verses of chapter seven he explains that when we died with Christ we are now dead to the law, meaning we are freed from the penalty of the law that would condemn us. It is no longer our accuser.

So even as a man can't be justified by keeping the law, chapter six, he also cannot be sanctified by keeping the law in chapter seven. And, of course, this was very confusing to the Jews. It might be to you, as well, but it really can be simplified as we look at it closely. And so he is going to explain to them in chapter seven as we looked at in the first six verses last week, that we have a new relationship to the law as believers, that we have a new relationship to Christ. We are a completely new person. We once were dead and now we are alive. We have a new position. We were once under law and now we are under grace. We have a new purpose. We used to bring forth fruit unto eternal death. Now we can bring forth fruit unto God and we have a new power. We were once empowered by the flesh to satisfy the lusts of the heart, but now we can be empowered by the Spirit of God.

And I must encourage you once again. As we look at this section of Scripture, realize that it has very, very practical implications for our lives right now as believers and if we understand these glorious truths that the Spirit has revealed to us, it will literally transform our lives as we live them out.

What we are going to learn this morning is simply this, that when we understand God's law, we will be driven to either hatred or humility. That is what the Word of God always does. Whenever it is preached, whenever you share the gospel with somebody, it will do one of two things. It will either harden a heart or it will soften a heart. And I pray that it will soften your hearts here today.

But if it drives you to humility and you bow down before God in desperation, you will cry out to him for mercy because you know that you can never be reconciled to him apart from that mercy, apart from that grace. And as believers the more we understand God's law, the more humble we become in and of ourselves, we see ourselves for who we are, we celebrate grace more and that really frees us up and empowers us to truly love our neighbor as much as we love ourselves.

So let's examine the relationship of law to sin. Paul is going to explain four works of the law here. Number one, we are going to see that it exposes sin as I have already alluded

⁶ Romans 6:1-2.

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to. But secondly we are going to see that it also incites rebellion. It incites rebellion. Thirdly, it insults pride. And, finally, it illuminates the sinfulness of sin.

Now bear in mind that he has just explained in verse five here of chapter seven:

“For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law.”⁷

And in verse six:

“But now we have been released from the Law.”⁸

So, again, naturally his Jewish audience are going to think, ok, now wait a minute. Are you trying to tell me that the law of God is sinful, that it is wicked, that somehow we ought to just throw it out and forget it all together, live according to our own understanding, our own standards?

Well, obviously not. And so he is going to continue by explaining what the law is and what it isn't and what it really does, the works of the law.

So he begins to interact with the opposition here in verse seven.

“What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be!”⁹

We could translate it this way. You have got to be kidding me. Absolutely not. The law is not sin. He goes on to say:

“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.’”¹⁰

So, number one, we see that the law exposes our sin. Far from the law being sin, it is what exposes sin.

Now think about it. None of us would have any idea what God's standard of righteousness is had he not communicated it to us though his Word, through his law. So it is exceedingly beneficial.

Now, to be sure, God has revealed a standard of right and wrong in the heart of every person that has ever lived, even those who do not know anything about the written revealed law of God in Scripture, even those who do not know Christ.

Romans chapter two verse 15 tells us that:

⁷ Romans 7:5.

⁸ Romans 7:6.

⁹ Romans 7:7.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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“...the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.”¹¹

So that is why we can see in every culture down through history there is a basic sense of right and wrong that God has placed within everyone’s heart.

But the revealed law of God in Scripture far exceeds the moral code within the pagan. You see, that is a law that they can twist and distort and use to somehow accomplish their own agenda. But the law of God clearly delineates the divine standard. It is very black and white. And because of that it renders every many guilt before a holy God.

Have you ever said to yourself, I really want to know the will of God for my life? I hope you have said that. Well, my friends, you can find much of it written in the law as we are going to see. And Paul is going to give but one example that is especially convicting in his life and I believe it will be in all of our lives.

Notice at the end of verse seven he says:

“... for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COVET.’”¹²

Now the word “covet” translates the Greek word *epiyumew* (ep-ee-thoo-meh’-o) and it means to lust. It means to strongly desire what belongs to someone else or to crave that which is forbidden, to desire something that is evil as I mentioned earlier, 1 John 2:16. There we read about the lust of the flesh, it is the same word, the lust of the eye that produces the boastful pride of life.

Romans 13 verse 14 Paul says:

“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.”¹³

It is the same word.

So Paul is saying here that if it weren’t for the law, he wouldn’t have understood this whole idea of coveting. Now Paul is referring to the law that was given to Moses, the 10 Commandments in Exodus 20 and verse 17. We read about the 10th Commandment of that Decalogue. There God says:

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”¹⁴

¹¹ Romans 2:15.

¹² Romans 7:7.

¹³ Romans 13:14.

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Now to make it real practical, that commandment alone just eliminated most all of American advertising, because advertising is designed to make you dissatisfied, discontent with what you have so that you will covet something else. They know how to tap into that sin that we all have. And have you noticed that many times they will use some very sexual image in order to grab your attention to appeal to the lust of the eye and the lust of the flesh in order to get you to covet even more whatever it is they are trying to sell.

Now some of you might say, “Well, what is wrong with desiring a new car, for example?”

Does God forbid that? Well, of course not. That is not the issue. But what he forbids is you being discontent with what you have and beginning to make an idol out of something that you don't have and beginning, therefore, to spend money that you don't have and go into debt that you don't need to go into in order to have that new car. That is the idea.

This commandment also just eliminated virtually every television show, because what does television typically sell? Sex, immorality and on and on and on it goes.

All of this is a violation of God's law.

But now I want you to bear in mind. To covet is to have an inner craving for something that is forbidden. You see, sin is more than just external actions. It also includes internal desires. We are all guilty. We are all guilty here.

Ask yourself. Are you discontent with some area in your life? And I mean an area where you, perhaps, feel like you have been treated unfairly or you feel as though that God has given you a raw deal, a bad lot in life or whatever. I can assure you that if you look close enough, somewhere behind all of that you will find that the sin of covetousness is fueling your discontentment in most cases.

Are you jealous? Are you envious of others? Do you clamor after wealth? Are you a sucker for the get rich quick scheme? Are you lazy? Do you have a sense of entitlement? Do you expect others to take care of you?

You know, our politicians really know how to tap into this sin of covetousness, don't they? They want you to buy into this class warfare issue to make you feel as though, man, I have been treated wrongly here. I am going to vote for you son that I can get what I think I deserve.

Do you enjoy thinking about or looking upon things that are forbidden, things that are immoral, pornography, for example? According to God's standard, even to desire these things is sin, even if you don't act on it. Think of the thousands of things that we crave in

¹⁴ Exodus 20:17.

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our heart, that we entertain in our mind, those things that run rampant in our imagination that God would forbid. This is the sin of covetousness.

Now when Paul who was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, who was keeping the law externally, understood that it is more than just externals, it is issues of the heart, he was devastated, because he realized that there is no way he could meet that standard.

Oh, yes, we may all look good on the outside, but God sees the heart, doesn't he? And it is within the heart that God demands purity.

In Luke chapter 16 verse 14 Luke says:

“Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and they were scoffing at Him.”¹⁵

Now Paul may have been among that group. We don't know. And in verse 15 it says:

“And [Jesus] said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.’”¹⁶

Wow. We are all guilty. I ask you. Would you like for the last month of your life to be displayed on the screen up here for everybody to see? I am not saying just your external behaviors. I am talking about also the things that you thought, the things that you desire. I wouldn't. Aren't you glad we are hidden in Christ? Aren't you glad that God doesn't see that now? He sees the righteousness of Christ.

Beloved, this is the issue of justification. It is Christ that makes us righteous, not we ourselves.

Paul is basically saying, “I would have never known this apart from the law.”

Some of you may be like the ancient Pharisees who had convinced themselves and all the people that it is not a sin to just lust. It only becomes a sin when you act upon the lust.

Oh, no. No, no, no. It is far more than that. For example, Jesus said in Matthew five verse 27:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.’”¹⁷

And there, by the way he is quoting the Seventh Commandment in Exodus 20 verse 14.

“...but I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust...”¹⁸

¹⁵ Luke 16:14.

¹⁶ Luke 16:15.

¹⁷ Matthew 5:27.

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There is the term, *epiyumew* (ep-ee-thoo-meh'-o) the same term.

“...everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.”¹⁹

Let me give you another example from Jesus, Mathew five verse 21. Back up a little bit in that text.

He says:

“You have heard that the ancients were told, ‘YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER’ and ‘Whoever commits murder shall be liable to the court.’”²⁰

That, by the way, is the Sixth Commandment. And he goes on to say in verse 22:

“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court.”²¹

Raca is referring to an epithet that would mean, “You fool or you idiot,” any term of derision or contempt or hatred.

And he goes on to say:

“... and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell.”²²

In other words, when you have that kind of attitude of hatred towards another person, you have violated the law.

Also in 1 John three verse 15 we read:

“Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer.”²³

Now, folks, we are all guilty there, aren't we? Let's be honest. Aren't there people in our lives that we hate? We hate to admit that, but if we are honest, we do. We have contempt for them. In God's eyes, that is as if we murdered them.

Obviously the consequences are different. But the heart attitude makes us guilty. He goes on to say in that text.

¹⁸ Matthew 5:28.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Matthew 5:21.

²¹ Matthew 5:22.

²² Ibid.

²³ 1 John 3:15.

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“...and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”²⁴

So if your heart is full of hate you are basically capable of murder. That is the idea. Your attitude makes you as guilty as the act.

So, again, you see, God’s law judges a man’s heart, not just his external actions. So who among us can stand up before such a standard of perfection? No one except the man Christ Jesus.

Now remember originally the law was written down and placed in a receptacle and put on the side of the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies and inside the ark were the tablets of stone whereby God had carved the law and given to Moses on Sinai.

You will recall in Deuteronomy 31 verse 16 God says:

“Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you.”²⁵

You see, again, this is the purpose of the law, to expose the hideous, devastating reality of our sin. And God has made it clear that any breach, any violation is tantamount to breaking the whole law.

So, again, we are all guilty. And the consequence is eternal death.

You say, “My, that seems extreme.”

The reason we think that is because we have a very shallow understanding of the transcendent holiness of God.

Now, why was it intended to be a witness against us? And the answer is simple. To drive us to God for mercy that is only available through faith in the one who perfectly fulfilled that law, the Lord Jesus Christ, the one who paid the penalty for all who would trust in him as their Savior.

So the law is not sinful, nor is it responsible for sin, but, in fact, it exposes the reality of sin in our heart.

But, secondly, it incites further rebellion. This is remarkable. Notice what he says in verse eight.

“But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead.”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Deuteronomy 31:26.

²⁶ Romans 7:8.

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My, this is a curious statement, is it not? Here Paul carries his argument to another level. And the key to interpreting this text is to understand this little phrase taking opportunity through the commandment because he is saying that that is what sin did.

Well, taking, translates a Greek word that means to seize or to grasp a hold of something. And opportunity translates another word that means to give cause or give occasion to something. It was used, for example, to describe a staging area of base of operations from which an army could begin a military expedition.

So we could translate this passage saying, "Sin seized the commandment as a base of operations and produced in me coveting of every kind."

Here sin is personified as an evil power that is antagonistic against the law, intent on making a mockery of it, using it as a base of operations to launch temptations and more sin that would violate that law. It is an amazing concept.

So here is what Paul is saying, if I can paraphrase it this way.

When I understood the law's prohibition against lust, my rebellious flesh was incited to even further rebellion. It used the commandment as a staging area to launch an attack of every kind of coveting.

He says, "It produced in me..."

That translates a Greek term *katergazomai* (kat-er-gad'-zom-ahee). It means... it is a very powerful term. It speaks of that which accomplishes something with absolute success and thoroughness. It produced in me. Well, what did it produce? What did it accomplish?

It incited further rebellion.

And he expands upon the thought there at the end of verse eight.

"...for apart from the Law sin is dead."²⁷

Now he is not saying that when there was no law that there was no sin, as some people might think, because there has always been law, even before the law on Sinai. We know that God's standard was in place.

But what he is saying is when a man is ignorant of the depth of the law, that even renders the verdict of guilty on our desires, on our cravings, on our lusts, when a man is ignorant of that and therefore lives apart from that, sin tends to just kind of lie dormant. It doesn't react to all of that.

²⁷ Ibid.

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We kind of see ourselves as pretty good. We don't even see our sin. So the law causes our sin nature to be provoked. It causes it, if you will, to come alive, to react as it were. It is like malignant cells that many physicians tell us lie dormant in our bodies as if they are some how dead, but at times various things can activate these cells and cause them to become alive, to begin to corrupt our bodies.

You see, it is characteristic of our sin nature to rebel against any kind of authority, especially God's authority. Man is by nature a rebel of his Creator. He wants to be served, not to be serving. Man wants a God that will bow down to him rather than one to whom he would bow down. And, by nature, man resents rules and restrictions.

Just look at our little children. Do you ever have to teach them to say no? Do they say yes more than they say no? No. It comes natural to them. It comes natural to all of us and, of course, this began in the garden, remember, with Eve. She basically said, "I don't care what God said. I am going to have that forbidden fruit because of what I think it will accomplish for me."

This is why men reject the gospel, isn't it? They refuse to submit to God. Instead they insist that he submit to them. Life is all about me and what I want. It is not about God. It is not about serving him.

Think how our culture despises God's authority. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Let's take the First Commandment which basically speaks that about the fact that we should only have one God, the one true God, no other gods before me, he says. And our culture says, "No, no, no, no. Wait a minute. No, there is not just one god here. There can be many gods or many... maybe it is one god but with many different names and we are all free to choose our own god. For example, Allah is just another name for God, another name for Yahweh."

Are you kidding me? Do you really believe that lie? My friends, Allah is a satanic counterfeit that damns men's souls. It is not Yahweh. But that is how we think, isn't it? We hear the law. We react against that. We don't like this idea of just one God or just one way to heaven through Jesus Christ. There is many ways [?].

How about the Second Commandment against idolatry, against worshiping and serving other gods of our own making or even worshipping the true God wrongly, desiring anything more than God, finding our ultimate satisfaction and joy in anything other than the one true God?

Oh, we don't like that at all. We are not going to do that. We are going to do our own thing.

And on and on it goes.

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Take God's prohibition against sex outside of marriage. That is silly. It is all right to just shack up.

How about there is very clear prohibitions against homosexuality and transvestism, transexualism. No, that is way too harsh. In fact, now we are going to give them special treatment. Unbelievable. That is what political correctness is all about. It is fine wherever God says that we should do something and stretch that out and do something different.

What happens when you insist that the moral authority that we should have in our lives is the written revealed will of God? What is the type of reaction you get? People absolutely become apoplectic in rage. They think you are a knuckle dragging Neanderthal if you honestly believe that idiocy. They mock. They scoff. They resort to violence. The point is they hear the law and they sin even more. It incites people to further rebellion.

Let me press this point a bit further. You know, again, it is one thing for sinful man to be offended by God's law when it condemns certain external behaviors, but, oh, my goodness, it is even more insulting to think that his law would render us guilty because of our desires. I mean, that is just absolutely over the top. I can hear it now.

Are you telling me that to just lust after a woman makes me as guilt as if I had committed adultery with her?

My response is no. I am not saying that. Jesus who is God said that.

Well, fine. If that is the way it is going to be, I am going to reject that stupid law and I am going to let my lust take me wherever I want them to go.

That I the automatic attitude.

You see, sinful man is hopelessly independent. By our nature we are self centered. We are self absorbed. We are self determined. We are self willed. We see this at work even among the saints. Think of people's typical reaction to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Oh, my goodness. You want to start a fight, that will start one almost every time. People absolutely hate that.

What about the free will of man?

And they get all upset about it.

You see, such antagonism is innate within us. You need to expect it because any doctrine that challenges man's rabid commitment to self determination will be met with antagonism. We demand to be autonomous, to be independent.

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Why? Paul tells us because sin seizes the law as the base of operations and produces within us coveting of every kind.

You see, we crave a god that will bow down to us. We crave being the master of our own destiny. We crave being able to do our own thing without consequence.

You see, friends, if you raise up any one of God's standards, you will find that it will become a bull's eye, an absolute target for the arrows of rebellion. That is just instinctive. That is our inner response to rebel against God. That is Paul's point.

Remember in chapter five verse 20 he says:

“And the Law came in that the transgression might increase.”²⁸

There you see it as well.

Now I think we tend to underestimate the power of sin. And I find this to be staggering as I meditated upon it. I mean, friends, think about this. Our sin is so powerful that it can actually use the holy law of God to make us sin even more. That is an amazing thought to me, that it can use God's law as a base of operations to launch more is. It uses God's standard of righteousness to incite even more rebellion within our hearts.

No wonder Satan and his minions spend so much time, so much energy in the Church using the very Word of God to incite people to rebel against the most high.

And now let's be careful. Let's don't blame it all on Satan here. Think of the power of our flesh. That is what Paul is seeing. He sees the law in his flesh in light of that and there is no way he is saying that I can live up to that.

That is why he said in Romans eight verse seven:

...because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.²⁹

Dear friends, once again, I have to say to you. Our only hope of being reconciled to a holy God is by placing our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no other way. No man can be justified by keeping the law nor can he be sanctified by keeping the law. We have got to come to Christ knowing this, that we are utterly bankrupt. That is why Jesus said in Matthew five and verse three:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit...”³⁰

²⁸ Romans 5:20.

²⁹ Romans 8:7-8.

³⁰ Mathew 5:3.

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Those who are spiritual destitute, who realize that they are helpless to be able to somehow conform to God's righteous standard, they are hopeless in all of that. And he says:

"...theirs is the kingdom of heaven."³¹

He goes on to say:

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."³²

Referring to mourning over the reality of our sin.

So the law exposes our sin. Secondly, it incites further rebellion, but Paul says, thirdly, that it insults our pride, our self righteous pride. Notice verse nine.

"And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died."³³

May I explain it this way? Paul is saying something like this. I thought I was quite spiritual before I understand the law. I thought I was quite alive. I was doing well in my ignorance.

How often we say ignorance is bliss.

But when the commandment came, when I understood the truth of God's law, that he demands purity in the heart, sin became alive and I died.

What a striking reversal. First he says sin is dead and I am alive and then he says sin is alive and I am dead. So what is he saying here? He is saying this.

When I was living apart from the law sin was dead and I was alive. Sin wasn't really provoked that much. I wasn't really reacting to it. I thought I was living the law. And so I thought I was alive. But then the law showed me something different.

You see, before sin had not yet been provoked by a true grasp of the law. So I felt very good about myself. I was a Pharisee. I kept the law. I fulfilled all of those externals, even though my heart was rotten. Then I began to see that I was a self righteous hypocrite. I believed that I could justify and sanctify myself. But when I understood the law, when I really grasped the reality of what God required, suddenly sin became alive and I died. I was ruined. Sin went on a rampage. It not only animated my resentment and incited me to further rebellion, but I began to see sin everywhere in my inward man. Suddenly I began to see that I was more guilty than I could have ever imagined. Sin was alive in me. I saw a corruption lurking in every cavern of my imagination. It was in every little room

³¹ Ibid.

³² Matthew 5:4.

³³ Romans 7:9.

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within my heart. And I realized that I was hopelessly guilty before God. Moreover, I was utterly helpless to do anything about it because this is my nature.

Oh, God, what am I going to do?

I was once like the Pharisees in Jesus parable in Luke 18. Remember that Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray? In verse 11 of that text it says that the Pharisee said this.

“God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.”³⁴

You see, Paul would have reacted to that and said, “You know, but it was the tax gatherer that truly understood the law, that truly understood the depths of his sin, that sin was dead to me, but it was alive to him.”

You see, I was alive in my self righteous pride. I was alive in all of my ignorance. But the tax gatherer he was dead. The law had brought him low. He recognized the depths of his sin. He was in utter ruin and I was alive in my self righteous pride and my hypocrisy.

Luke goes on to report Jesus’ description of that broken hearted tax gatherer in verse 13.

But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’ “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted.”³⁵

Oh, would to God that every man fall dead before the law, for then and then only can he be saved. Would to God that every man beat his breast and cry out for mercy pleading for grace while all the time being convinced that he not only does not deserve it, but he could probably never have it, because never is a man closer to mercy and grace than when he is quite assured in his heart that he can never have it, that he does not deserve it.

Oh, dear friends, see the law of God for what it is and you will see yourself for who you really are. Then and then only will you be able to see the Savior for who he is. Then and then only will you be able to truly be amazed at his grace.

Paul described his life in Philippians three verse six at the end. He said:

“...as to the righteousness which is in the Law, [I was] found blameless.”³⁶

He was referring to the external righteousness. I was keeping the law. I was found blameless.

³⁴ Luke 18:11-12.

³⁵ Luke 18:13-14.

³⁶ Philippians 3:6.

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But he goes on to say:

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ.³⁷

There in his the heart of the gospel, my friends.

Later in Romans chapter 10 verses three and four Paul described the spiritual condition of the Pharisees. And this would have been a description of his life as well prior to coming to Christ. And perhaps this describes you.

There he says:

For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.³⁸

And, oh, what a blessed thought to know that it is by God's grace that we can ever even see these things. It is by God's grace that we are broken over our sin and we cry out to him in that brokenness and contrition. Oh, God, have mercy upon me a sinner. It is God who causes us to even understand these things.

Remember Romans six at the end of verse 17 he said that God caused you to become obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed. It is God who made us to be committed to the glorious truths of the gospel.

Again, the more we understand the law of God, the more we will see ourselves for who we really are. This will produce within us genuine humility and as a result of that we will celebrate God's grace more and more in our lives and we will have compassion on those who are in sin, those who are lost and dying and even our brothers and sisters in Christ and we will, therefore, be freed up to lovingly move into their lives because of our concern for them so that they can see their sin and repent and we will be willing to get underneath that burden of sin and help carry that burden with them.

Beloved, this is such incredibly good news, isn't it? To think that as believers we have been delivered from the power of sin and the penalty of the law, just an astounding thought. The law which, according to Romans 8:4 is:

³⁷ Philippians 3:7-9.

³⁸ Romans 10:3-4.

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“...the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh.”³⁹

You see, again, the flesh it is powerless here. It is weak. It is filled with sin. You don't walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit for the body is dead because of sin, yet our spirit is alive because of his righteousness.

So, indeed, the law insults our self righteous pride. Verse nine he says:

And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me.⁴⁰

You see, again, the law cannot bring blessing to those who do not believe, because they can't obey it.

Verse 11.

“...for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me.”⁴¹

In other words, sin tricked me into believing that I was somehow good enough on my own to make myself acceptable to God and therefore I had no need for a Savior. I could obey the law on my own.

Here in verse 11 Paul reiterates the action of sin described in verse eight. But here I want you to notice as we wrap this up this morning. Paul is referring to, I believe, Eve's temptation in the garden here and we see that through the use of the verb “deceived” through the sin taking opportunity through the commandment deceived me. You see, think about it. Prior to that first sin man was very much alive and at peace with God. But what happened? What did Satan use? He used the commandment as a beach head to launch his assault of sin. What was the commandment?

“Thou shalt not eat of it lest you die.”

He deceived her. He ignited the fire of human lust. Sin was introduced through a delusion, through a deception. The thing that Eve desired, the thing that she coveted, was forbidden. God had forbidden that. Ah, but that is what I am going to want. And it was not what the tempter promised it would do and that is the way sin always is, isn't it? Temptation always promises some blessing, some great benefit in life, but always delivers the opposite.

³⁹ Romans 8:4.

⁴⁰ Romans 7:9-10.

⁴¹ Romans 7:11.

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And, of course, the greatest and most popular deception of our day is that somehow man is good enough on his own to merit God's love that he on his own live up to that divine standard.

For this reason Paul goes on to say:

“So then, the Law is holy.”⁴²

In other words, it is not the law that was sinful. It was my flesh. It did not inspire sin. The law is holy. But the commandment became the occasion of sin, the opportunity for sin to be ignited within me and death became the tragic result.

So, verse 12, he says:

“So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”⁴³

And then he finally closes this section, number four, He illuminates the sinfulness of sin speaking of the law that it illuminates the sinfulness of sin.

Verse 13.

He says:

“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.”⁴⁴

Yes, the law caused me to die to my self righteous pride, but it was not the cause of the condemnation of eternal death to me. That was all a result of sin.

The point is don't blame the law. Blame the law breaker.

“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.”⁴⁵

My friends, I would challenge you with this thought. How do you view sin? Ask yourself. How do you view sin in your life? Do you view it as merely making mistakes? Ah, but my good far outweighs my bad. Is that how you think? Or is it utterly sinful as we read here in verse 13?

Is your sin really nothing more than a lawless rebellion against the most high God? Call it for what it is. Is that how you see it? I hope so. Is it exceedingly more vile and

⁴² Romans 7:12.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Romans 7:13.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

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reprehensible than you can ever imagine? Or is sin to you just merely doing something stupid from time to time and it is really not that big of a deal because, again, your good outweighs your bad? Or is it an innate inability to conform to the moral character and desires of a holy God? Is it a wickedness that flows from the well of a heart that is deceived and desperately wicked, that is filled with self will and self determination, poisoned by desires for those things that God forbids?

Well, if your answer is the former, you are deceived and you will remain under divine condemnation for eternity unless you repent and believe the truth, to see yourself as God sees you. And if that is the case, you will confess the latter.

And I would plead with you this morning to embrace the same truths that that ancient rabbi embraced, the apostle Paul, that, you, too, might be saved.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for the truths of your Word that speak so clearly into our heart. Lord, we confess that we are all guilty and were it not for the Lord Jesus Christ who perfectly fulfilled the law, if it were not for him, who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, Lord, we would be without hope. So I pray that you will move upon every heart today that does not know you as Savior. Lord, may today be the day that they believe in the good news of the gospel and confess their sin and cry out for mercy like that tax gatherer, that they, too, might be saved and be free, not only from the power of sin, but the penalty of the law. I ask this in the precious name of Jesus our Savior and for his sake. Amen.

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