

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

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Rom. 7:1-12, 24-25 "Can the Law Change Us?"

(Read vv. 1-6)

Intro. Few would try to argue against the statement that there is evil in the world. There is a lot of bad behavior. People steal & defraud. People hurt others, even to the point of murder. People lie, and fail to keep their commitments. Some commit rape & incest.

What can be done about all this evil and bad behavior? One of the more common ways to battle evil is to pass laws and impose punishment. However, law does not change human nature. With enough law enforcement it can curb behavior, but it doesn't address the root cause of evil. Perhaps that is why Thomas B. Reed (1886) said, "One of the greatest delusions in the world is the hope that the evils in this world are to be cured by legislation."

Here in Romans 7 Paul addresses the problem of the sin nature of man, and he examines the cure. Much of what he writes in chapter 7 is autobiographical. He grew up being taught that learning & obeying the Law of God was the way to live a righteous life and be saved. But he found that putting himself under law was the pathway of defeat. When Christ saved him, he learned a new & better way to live. Look back at Romans 6:14. There Paul says, "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace." We are going to see in our message today that living under law, even God's law, will not give you victory over sin. The only way to have victory over sin is to draw upon the resources of God's grace by faith in Jesus Christ. I believe what Paul does in chapter 7 is give further explanation of what he means by that statement in v.14. We are going to see that the result of living under grace is not to become lawless. Rather, living under grace is a better means of living a righteous & fruitful life.

In chapter 6 Paul discusses the fact that Christians have died to sin that we might be free from its dominion over us. But why should Paul be so concerned to tell us in chapter 7 that we have also died to the law, and are therefore no longer under the law? As he points out in v.12, there is no problem with the law in and of itself. But he does address the problem of using the Law in the wrong way.

This morning, I want to share with you the proper use of the Law of God as it relates to salvation. Then, I will share what role the Law of God has in a believer's life. First of all, let's consider:

I. THE LAW CANNOT SAVE YOU

At one time Paul thought the Law was given to save us from sin. Yet on closer examination, the only way it could save you is if you could completely obey the Law. Any unbeliever who thinks that he remotely approaches fulfillment of the law is woefully ignorant of the holiness of its demands. Don't think that God judges us by seeing if our good outweighs our bad.

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

A. It Shows Us that We Are Sinners – Paul says in the last of v.7, "I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You

shall not covet.” Without the law, we would not know that we are the sinners that we are. You see, the Bible teaches that we are born with a sin nature. Therefore, we do things that seem normal, and when we look around, we see that just about everyone is doing the same thing. So we get the idea that what we do is OK. In fact, when I was a teenager, one of the hit songs was recorded by Debbie Boone entitled, “You Light Up My Life.” There was a line in that song that stirred up some controversy. She said, “It can’t be wrong, when it feels so right.” She was very wrong because that statement ignores or denies the sin nature of man.

So just because an activity seems normal & common doesn’t mean it is right. This is where God’s moral law comes in. Again, Paul says in the middle of v.7, “I would not have known sin except through the law.” Do you realize that speaking God’s name without a good purpose, or without reverence, is taking His name in vain? That violates one of the 10 Commandments! And then Paul gives an example where the law convicted him of sin, though he tried to live a righteous life. The 10th commandment is found in Ex. 20:17, which says, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, ...nor anything that is your neighbor’s.” In the experience of the apostle the 10th commandment is the particular law that exposed his sinfulness. Except for this law, he would not have really known that it was a sin to covet. Before the law came, most individuals wanted things possessed by others, but they did not know this was evidence of their sinfulness.

The Rich Young Ruler in Mk. 10:17-27 is a good example of the use of the Law to reveal sin and show a man his need for a Savior. He had pretty well kept the outward commandments. But when Jesus told him to sell his goods and give to the poor, the man went away in great sorrow. The command against covetousness had revealed to him what a sinner he really was! Instead of admitting his sin, he rejected Christ and went away unconverted.

The Law even shows us that we are not only sinful, but exceedingly sinful. Paul says in the last of v.13, “But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.” Paul says in v.12 that the law is good and holy. Yet, instead of creating righteousness in us, for some reason law often does just the opposite. It incites us to sin. In fact, in v.5 Paul says, “For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members....” This is the first occasion in this epistle in which the word “flesh” is used to refer to “human nature as controlled and directed by sin.” Instead of suppressing sin, the law actually arouses passionate desire to sin! Now look at v.8, where Paul says, “But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead.” “Sin” here is the evil nature. “Opportunity” is from *aphorme*, a starting place, a base of operations. Thus, the origin, cause, occasion, or pretext of a thing; the means with which one begins. It can be used in the sense of an excuse for doing what one wants to do. Then Paul pointed out that “apart from the law sin (is/was) dead.” “Is dead” suggests that Paul is stating a general principle. Since the whole discussion is historical and personal, it may be better to supply “was.” Sin was in him, but it was inert, inactive, in a dormant state.

Thus, these verses teach that the law arouses and awakens sin. Something in human nature wants to rebel whenever a law is given. The smoker may forget how much he wants to smoke until he sees a sign which says “No smoking.”

Do you see how evil our sin nature really is? It takes something good, like the Law, and uses it to incite in us even more sin! That is why Paul says in the last of v.13, “so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful.” By its abuse of the law the gravity of sin was tragically heightened. Through the law we see that there is clearly something very wrong with us.

So the law was given to show us how sinful human nature really is. We are fatally flawed, and the sooner we realize this, the better.

Have you come to the place in your life where you realize that you are a sinner before a holy God? Well that leads to another purpose of the law:

B. The Law Condemns Us – Paul illustrates this truth from his own experience. Paul says in vv.9-11, “I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me.” These verses go together. When the apostle says in v.9, “I was alive once without the law,” the word “alive” cannot be used here in the sense of life eternal or life unto God. He speaks of a self-complacent, self-righteous life. He felt alive because he believed that he had kept the 10 Commandments. But then “the commandment came” to his full understanding. In this context, “the commandment” refers to the 10th commandment. In response “sin revived.” Sin rebelled against the commandment and brought about more coveting. Then Paul died. This death is the death of the complacent self-assurance which the former “being alive” denotes. He was actually already spiritually dead, but was not conscious of his deadness. The aorist tense points to the historical moment when he “died,” that is, that he knew he was dead spiritually.

At first Paul felt deceived. After all, as he says in v.10a, the commandment was to bring life. When God gave the 10 commandments, He promised life upon the condition of obedience. But instead of bringing life, he found it to bring death (v.10b). But as v.12 says, the problem was not with the law. As he says in v.11, it was sin that used the commandment to deceive him and then kill him. Sin brings death. In this case, consciousness of sin confirmed his spiritual death.

So don't even try to obtain salvation by keeping the Law. You can't do it. The Law will not save you, it will only condemn you.

C. Thus, the Law Points You to Christ – The law leads us to the conclusion found in v.24, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” A true understanding of the law & our sin will cause us to seek freedom from the tyranny of sin which uses the body and its members as instruments of sin.

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

The law is indeed useful as a means of leading us to Christ, but it is not useful as a mean of salvation. For victory over sin does not come through the law. We must look elsewhere for

deliverance. In v.25 Paul tells us who can save us from the power of sin. It is only “through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

We live in a day when we have allowed the forces of darkness to remove moral law from doing its work in the hearts of our people. The ACLU has removed the 10 Commandments from most of our public buildings. They have substituted moral relativism for absolute moral law. More and more people feel no need for Christ, for they do not see themselves sinners, but only as victims. In their mind, sin is not sin, but just one of many “choices.” May God help us to restore moral law back to its rightful place in the hearts & minds of our children & young people!

Now let us move on to the main application of Paul’s teaching on the Law, and consider:

II. THE LAW CANNOT SANCTIFY YOU

We must remember that this chapter is not concerned with salvation, but sanctification. The theme is deliverance from the power of sin, not salvation from its penalty.

The main thing that Paul says here is that we have died to the law. He says in v.4, “Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ....” Likewise, v.6 says, “But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by....” Chapt. 6 says we have died to sin. Our death with Christ sets us free from the dominion of sin. Now Paul shows that our death with Christ also sets us free from the dominion of Old Testament Law. In the last of v.1 Paul states a general principle, “that the law has dominion (*kurieuo*) over a man as long as he lives?” His thesis is the accepted fact that death cancels all obligations. Only death releases a person from the authority of the law which is given to regulate human conduct. Then, in v.4 he applies this truth to believers. He states that we have died to the law. How? It is by our union with Christ, or as Paul says, “through the body of Christ.” This is also indicated in the meaning of the Greek terms used here. Had the apostle been thinking only of death, he could have used the simple verb meaning “you died” (*apethanete*). Instead, he used the passive form of the verb which reads, “You ... have become dead” (*ethanatothete*), denoting a death imposed by someone else. This was the kind of death Jesus died. He allowed them to kill Him. And “through the body of Christ” the believer died the same death. Christ’s death became the believer’s when he believed in Christ. This is something that God did for us, and we accept it by faith. Indeed, spiritually, our old self was put to death the moment we repented of sin & trusted in Christ. We have a new life in Christ.

There are several aspects of this truth:

A. We Died to the Condemnation of the Law – We have seen that the law condemns us as sinners, but in Christ we are free from the condemnation of the law. In the last of v.1 Paul says, “that the law has dominion over a man as long as he lives.” Paul uses a human illustration here. A man may be accused of a crime and be slated to stand trial. If in the meantime he dies, the case is closed. (Cf. Col. 2:13-14)

Since we died with Christ, the Law no longer has a claim against us. We are forgiven! We are free from condemnation. That is one reason why Paul says in 8:1, “There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus....”

B. We Died to the Law as a Means of Righteousness - In vv.2-3 Paul uses marriage to illustrate the principle that death frees a person from being under law. Under Hebrew law, marriage was a binding covenant. God’s law states that you are to remain married to the same

person for life. Even a married slave was not to be separated from his wife according to Ex. 21:2-3. This aspect of marriage is also seen in the perfect tense of “bound.” The wife is bound and stands bound; so there is no release. Now Paul is using marriage as an illustration of the fact that the death of one spouse ends the binding obligation of marriage. It is not his purpose here to teach on the subject of divorce and remarriage, under what circumstances it is permitted by God. His analogy did not call for exceptions in the real lesson he is giving.

But the chief importance of this illustration is the reminder that the marriage relationship is dissolved by the death of one party and the way is opened for the survivor to enter a new relationship. Now that you are saved, how can you live the Christian life? It is not through legalism. What is legalism? It is the belief that I can become holy and please God by obeying laws. It is measuring spirituality by how well I obey a list of do’s and don’ts. V.18 tells us that Paul tried that way. The will to do good was present, but the law did not supply the ability to obey. The saying, “Where there’s a will, there’s a way” is not always true. Willingness and good intentions are not enough. Paul found that the sin nature kept on working against him. He tried to conquer indwelling sin with commandments. When he felt his heart coveting, he combated it merely by repeating the commandment. But all that did was just compound the problem, according to v.8.

So Paul points out that we have died to the Law in v.4a. Therefore, we are no longer under the Law as a means of righteousness, for he goes on to say in v.6b that we are not to serve God in the “oldness of the letter.” The word “oldness” (*palaiotes*) is from the Greek word which speaks, not of old in time (*archaios*) but of old in point of use, i.e. worn out, useless. The law has served its purpose. It has a role in leading us to salvation, but it is useless as a means of sanctification. Legalism is not God’s way of living a righteous life. To hold the believer to any code of law is to turn Christian living into human effort rather than the fruit of grace. Abandon all hope in yourself. You will never come to the place of victory by making resolutions or vows to God.

So the Law has little value for the Christian. It can serve as a moral guide, but it is not to be relied upon as a means of living a life that is pleasing to God. So that leads to my last main point. Let us consider:

III. THE TRUE WAY OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

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

A. We Should Serve the Lord by Being Joined to Christ – Paul says in v.4, “Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God.” Our death with Christ ends our relationship to the Law so that we can enter into a new relationship with Christ. “Another” (*heteros*) means another of a different kind. In this case the new “husband” is Christ. Christ arose to die no more; so this is a permanent marriage. This spiritual marriage corresponds to one in the Old Testament of God as the husband and Israel as the wife (see Jer. 2:2; Hos. 1-3).

When a man & woman marry, the Bible says that the two become one (Gen. 2:24; 1 Cor. 6:16-17). And when we accept Christ as our Lord & Savior, we become one with Him. In fact, Paul says in 1 Cor. 6:17 that “he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.” We now derive our life from Him. We are to let Christ live His life through us. We derive our strength from Him. Your

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

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

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

B. We Should Serve in Newness of Spirit – Paul says in v.6, “But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.” We are not set free from the law to sin, but to serve! (Note, it is the word for slavery). The result of this deliverance should be service to the One who loved you, and saved you.¹

Paul is here contrasting the New Covenant from the Old Covenant. Jer. 31 gives the prophecy of the New Covenant. In v.33 of that chapter God says, “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” 2 Cor. 3:6 says that we are “ministers of a ‘new covenant,’ not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.” Just because we were made dead to the law does not mean we become lawless, for God writes His law on our hearts. The Spirit supplies from within the regulative principle which the law once supplied from without. Also, the Spirit provides the ability to obey. The law said, “Do this,” but it had no power to help one to obey the commands. As the Christian faces the conflict of desires from within, he has an ally to enable him to be victorious over evil. Holiness produced by the flesh, no matter what its form, is hateful to God. He only wants the holiness that comes by the Holy Spirit through Christ. As long as we rely upon our own strength alone, we have only what *we* can do. But when, like Paul, we learn to rely upon God in Christ, we have what *God* can do.

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

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

[Next, press appeal to believers].

¹ “That we should serve” should express the idea of result, not purpose, in the Greek.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 3, "God's Freedom" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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