

First Baptist Church, Granite Falls, MN

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October 5, 2008

Introduction¹

The Bible in your hands is God's word. God used men to write the words in this book, and the words they wrote down were God-breathed, inspired, the very words of God. But God did use men. Different men had different strengths. David was a great poet. Luke was a great historian. And Paul was a great theologian.

Paul was also a great letter-writer. You can see just how good he was at letter-writing when you read his letter to the Romans. Letters are hard to write – it's hard to get people to understand just what you mean, because you aren't there to explain it to them if they get confused. It's really hard to write a letter good enough to persuade people who might not agree with everything you're trying to say. It's easy for them to misunderstand you. So, when you're writing an important letter like that, you have to think hard about it. Each thing you write something in your letter, you have to think, "What will they think when they read this?" And if you're good at writing letters, you'll take time to explain yourself whenever there might be a misunderstanding.

Paul was good at writing letters, and he does take time to explain himself whenever there might be a misunderstanding. And that's exactly what he does in Romans 7:7-12. You see, he's just said something about the law that he knows might upset lots of Jews. What did he say that might upset lots of Jews?

Rom 7:5b . . . while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

Now, why might that upset the Jews? Well, put yourself in the shoes of the Jews. Imagine you're a Jew – either a Jew who has not yet believed in Jesus, or a Jew who has believed in Jesus, and you're learning what it means to be a believer. I'll read something to you that will help you imagine that you're a Jew. If you want to, you can close your eyes, and imagine that I'm talking about you as I read from Romans 2:17-20:

17b . . . you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God 18 and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law;

Are you imagining all that? Let me read some more about you:

19b . . . you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth

Now if you are imagining yourself as a Jew, then there should be one word that is very big in your mind right now. What is that word? That word is "LAW." The law of God is everything to you. The law of God is the solution to people's problems. The law of God is the antidote to the poison of sin.

Keep imagining you are a Jew, with that word "LAW" being very important to you, and listen again to what Paul says in Romans 7:5

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Rom 7:5b . . . while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.

Did you catch that? Paul is saying that the law *arouses* sinful passions! Now, the Jews, whether they believe in Jesus or not, are wondering, *What are you saying, Paul? Are you saying the law is sinful? It sure sounds like that's what you said. You just said, "While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions [were] aroused by the law."*

Paul is a good letter writer. He knows that those words he just wrote in v. 5 might just be the most upsetting words he's written so far. It's one thing to say, "by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight," like he did in Romans 3:20. It's one thing to say, "you are not under law but under grace," like he did in Romans 6:14. But to come right out and say, "our sinful passions [were] aroused by the law," well, that might just make some Jews tear their clothes in anguish.

In Romans 7:7-12, Paul starts to explain what he means. He wants to make sure that people know what he *is* saying and what he is *not* saying about the law – and he starts with what he is *not* saying.

Romans 7:7-12 7 What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. 12 So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

When Paul starts out v. 7, he asks, "What then shall we say? That the law is sin?" and he answers in that favorite strong way of his, "By no means!" or in the KJV, "God forbid!" Not in a million years!

Paul's whole point here is that the law is holy, and righteous and good. The law never has been, is not, and never will be to blame for sin and death. Sin, and sin alone, is to blame, not the law.

You and I are not Jews, but we still have an important lesson to learn here. The lesson for us to learn is to hate our sin and love God's law.

- **God's Law is Gracious**
- **Our Sin is Malicious**
- **God's Law is Magnificent**

I. God's Law is Gracious

Now some of you may be wondering what "God's law" is. Just what does Paul mean, here, by "law?" Back at the end of chapter 3, when he talked about "law," he started talking about circumcision. Is he talking about that kind of law?

I'll tell you why this matters to us. Paul has told us we are not under the law. Well, what if Paul is just talking about Jewish ceremonial laws, like laws that have to do with circumcision, and special feasts like the Passover meal. If that's all Paul means when he says we are not under the law, then maybe we're still under other parts of the law, like the 10 commandments.

But here in our passage this morning we find out that Paul *is* talking about more than just

Jewish ceremonial law. Because here at the end of v. 7 he says, “I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” That’s right from the 10 commandments – in fact, it’s the 10th commandment. (If you look on the back of your bulletin, you’ll find this week’s catechism question is on just that commandment.) So Paul is talking about more than just Jewish ceremonial law here in Romans. When he has said that we’re free from the law, he means we’re free from the *whole* law, Christians.

But that doesn’t mean we throw the law away! God’s law is gracious! The law teaches us what sin is. The law gives us an opportunity for obedience. And the law is the way of life.

A. The law teaches us what sin is

Do you see that, at the end of v. 7? “If it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’” It is the law that teaches us what sin is.

Paul even gives an example of a sin that the law taught him about. Now, did Paul just pick the 10th commandment randomly? I don’t think he did. I think he picked that one on purpose. It may be the last of the 10 commandments, but it definitely is not the least.

Here in v. 7, where you read, “You shall not covet,” is literally, “You shall not lust.” The idea is that we are not supposed to desire anything that we are forbidden to have. The Greek word translated “covet” appears just a few words earlier, and the KJV even translates it “lust” there. It’s the same Greek word that Paul used in 6:12, when he said, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their *passions*.” The passions, or lusts, of your bodies are the very thing that the 10th commandment prohibits us from indulging.

But wait a minute. Paul’s quoting from the 10 commandments. Those were only given to the Jews, right? What about all those other people who never heard the 10 commandments? Maybe they don’t know what sin is!

Ah, but they do. By God’s grace, the law teaches all men what sin is. Paul may be quoting from the 10 commandments here, but don’t forget what he said in Romans 2:15. “The work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness.”

Now you might think, How much better it would have been if we never learned what sin is, period! Just think, if we could only go back to the Garden of Eden, before the Fall, and be sinless like Adam and Eve were for a little while, before they knew what sin was.

Ah, but they did know what sin was, even before the fall. God’s law was there with them, too. God commanded, “Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.” Even there, even then, God’s law graciously taught Adam and Eve what sin was.

The law teaches us that sin is, very simply, disobeying God’s command. And the reason this is so gracious is because it gives us an opportunity for obedience.

B. The law gives us an opportunity for obedience

Here's how I get this from our passage this morning. Take a look at v. 8: "But sin, seizing an opportunity (KJV: "taking occasion") through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness." And again in v. 11: "For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me."

Now, those verses are about sin. And we're going to come back to those verses in a few minutes, when we are finished looking at the law. But while these verses are about sin, they tell us something about the law, too. They tell us that the law offers us an opportunity. Sin uses the law as an opportunity for disobedience. But the only way that it can is if the law also offers an opportunity to obey.

Just think – God did not have to give the law to Adam and Eve. He did not have to command them, "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat." He could have just let them live in the Garden of Eden with no commands at all, and just enjoyed their obedience.

Ah, but wait. Could there really have been any obedience without a command? No, there had to be a command. There had to be the opportunity for *disobedience* for there to be an opportunity for obedience.

If you tell a child, "Stay away from the highway," he has a choice. He may disobey you, and go out on the highway. Or he may obey you, and stay away from the highway. But it took the command for there to be obedience. If you never gave him the command, and he stayed away from the highway all on his own, then he wasn't obeying you – he was just doing his own thing.

If God had never given Adam and Eve the opportunity to disobey, he would have never given them the chance to obey. Obedience to God is what mankind was created for. It is a gracious thing to offer mankind the opportunity to obey! It is a gracious thing to give us the law, because it gives us an opportunity to obey!

The law teaches us what sin is. The law gives us an opportunity for obedience. And the law is the way of life.

C. The law is the way of life

In v. 10, we see, "The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me." As we will see in a few minutes, the reason the commandment – the law – proved to be death to Paul was *not* because of the commandment itself, but because of *his sin*, his disobedience to the command.

But what we see in the first part of v. 10 shows us yet again what a gracious gift the law is. The law is the way of life. Literally, the Greek says, the commandment was "unto life." But what exactly does that mean? What does Paul mean when he says that the law was "unto life?"

Look back, for a moment, at Romans 6:22. Suddenly it makes perfect sense. There Paul says, "Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life." He's talking about

righteousness – obeying God. That’s the path that leads to eternal life.

Not that obeying the law will earn you eternal life – Paul has already told us it can’t, back in Romans 3:20. You can’t even get on the path to eternal life by obeying the law! To be put on the path to eternal life you must be justified, declared righteous, by faith in Jesus Christ. But once that happens, you are indeed on the path to eternal life. And on that path you are progressively sanctified – you are changed from the inside out, by the Spirit of God, so that you become more and more obedient. The fruit of the Spirit fulfills the law.

That path of sanctification, that path of obedience, has as its end eternal life. I think that’s the path that Paul has in mind here. It’s the opposite of what he was talking about in 6:21, when he said, “The end of those things [impurity and lawlessness] is death.”

The law teaches us what sin is. The law gives us an opportunity for obedience. And the law is the way of life.

God’s law is so gracious! It is so gracious that it shows us just how malicious our sin is.

II. Our Sin is Malicious

In these verses, Paul is talking about the time in his life when he first heard the commandment “You shall not covet.” Back then, he was a slave to sin – in his words, from 6:19, he “presented [his] members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness.”

Remember what Paul is doing here – he is proving that the law is holy and just and good, and that it is sin, not the law, that is to blame for our sin and death. Here in our passage this morning, Paul is explaining things that were true of us as unbelievers. Our sin abused the law. Our sin deceived us. And our sin killed us.

A. Our sin abused the law

Do you know what it means to abuse something? It means to use something for some other purpose than the one for which it was intended.

When you called me to be pastor here, one of the first things I did was to buy a notebook computer. That computer offered me the opportunity of doing lots of things for the church. In fact, I typed this sermon on that computer. Now, when that computer arrived, and I took it out of the box, and I turned it on, if instead of typing up something for the church, I started using it to commit crimes, that would have been a terrible abuse of that computer, wouldn’t it?

What a terrible abuse it would be if I took that computer, intended to glorify God, and instead used it to type up threatening letters to the President of the United States, or bomb threats to hand to bank tellers so I could rob banks, or ransom notes to use as a kidnapper.

God’s law offers the opportunity to obey him, to glorify him, to delight in him. But sin does just the opposite. It abuses God’s law, and uses it as an opportunity to produce even more sin:

Rom 7:7b-8 I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet.” 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.

Paul says, “sin produced in me all kinds of covetousness.” Remember, that literally means “desires” or “lusts.” In the flesh, we don’t like being told what not to do. We want to be in charge. Along comes the command not to desire things that are not rightfully ours, and our imagination leaps up with all sorts of desires. And when sin reigns in our bodies, it makes us obey those desires – that’s exactly what Paul was getting at in 6:12.

Here God gives us the law as an opportunity to obey him, but sin takes it and flings it back in God’s face. Our sin abuses the law. And our sin deceives us.

B. Our sin deceived us

In v. 11, Paul says, “For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me.” Somehow, sin deceives us – and hardens our hearts:

Heb 3:13 But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.

This is what you call a vicious circle. Sin deceives the sinner, and hardens his heart, so that he is more prone to sin, which deceives him even more . . . and on and on it goes.

Some of the worst car crashes I’ve seen have been the results of a vicious circle. Every once in a while somebody gets in his car, puts it into reverse, and then for some reason steps hard on the brake – except he steps on the gas pedal by mistake. He doesn’t know his foot is on the gas pedal. He thinks his foot is on the brake. And so as his car rockets backwards, he pushes his foot down even harder. The faster his car goes, the harder he pushes down on the gas pedal – until finally, his car hits something, or somebody.

Sin is like that. For those who are enslaved to sin, sin picks up speed. And the faster it goes, the faster it goes. It never gets better without the transforming power of the Christ. Even for those who appear to clean themselves up on the outside, their sin is just that much worse – with deceived, hard hearts, they consider themselves self-righteous, when inside their very lust for life apart from God’s glory drives them faster and faster toward destruction.

Our sin abused the law. Our sin deceived us. And our sin killed us.

C. Our sin killed us

Three times Paul says that his sin killed him back in those days:

Rom 7:8b-11 Apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.

Now what does this mean? Paul’s still alive as he’s writing this, so obviously he doesn’t mean that he fell over dead when he sinned. His heart didn’t stop beating. He didn’t stop

breathing. He wasn't buried in a tomb.

Some have said that this is all about the moment of conviction that leads to conversion – that Paul was a happy, deceived sinner until he was proven a sinner by the law, and then he felt as though he had been killed, and desired salvation. But that doesn't make sense, because in v. 11 we see that the sin that kills is the sin that deceives – the killing follows deception, not conviction leading to repentance.

Another explanation is that Paul is using the words “life” and “death” to describe his state of mind before and after hearing the law. So when Paul says in v. 9, “I was once alive apart from the law,” he means that as a child (and surely this was as a young child – since he was raised a Pharisee, he heard the law at a very young age) he was happy, carefree, and unaware that his desires were against the law.

Only when he heard the commandment did he desire to rebel. Once he became a rebel (he knows, now that he is a believer, that is what happened) the deception and misery and hopelessness of sin was a death-like foretaste of the eternal death to come.

Still another explanation is that Paul is describing spiritual life and spiritual death (leading to eternal death). This seems very likely, since the whole reason Paul is defending the law here is because of what he said in v. 5, where he was talking about eternal death. Before he heard the law he was spiritually alive, but after he was old enough to hear and understand the law for the first time, his sinful nature caused him to disobey, bringing the guilt of his own sin upon him, and he died spiritually.

If this is true, it tends to support the idea that infants who die do go to heaven, because they are still spiritually alive, not having heard and understood the law yet. Yet original sin, the guilt of Adam's sin imputed to us all, is a compelling argument against this, and I am not yet persuaded one way or another on this matter.

But Paul's main point is not what he meant by saying “I was once alive.” His main point is that it was *sin* that killed him, not the law. Remember, he's defending the law, here. He's explaining what he meant in v. 5, “while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death.” He's explaining why we must never, ever, call the law sin.

Our sin abused the law. Our sin deceived us. And our sin killed us.

God's law is gracious, but our sin is malicious. God's law is not to blame for our sin. God's law is blameless. God's law is magnificent!

III. God's Law is Magnificent

In v. 7, Paul said the law is not sin. That's what it *isn't*. But in v. 12, Paul says what it *is*. “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

God's law is holy. God's law is righteous. And God's law is good.

A. God's law is holy

God's law is sacred. It is the very breath of God. It is not to be profaned. It is not to be

taken lightly. Now, God reserves the right to change some of his commands from dispensation to dispensation. For instance, God told Noah, “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you.” (Gen 9:3) But God gave Moses a list of animals that they were not allowed to eat, in Deut 14. And then in Mark 7:19, Jesus “declared all foods clean.”

Food laws have changed with the dispensations, along with Jewish ceremonial laws. This is why Paul said, in Colossians 2:16, “Let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath.” But other aspects of God’s law transcend all dispensations. For instance, all of the 10 commandments (except for the one dealing with the Sabbath) have been reiterated in the New Testament.

God’s law is holy. And God’s law is righteous.

B. God’s law is righteous

It is unthinkable that God’s law could ever be called sin. It is the opposite of sin. It is righteous.

Yes, God’s law aroused our sinful passions. But that does not make God’s law unjust. It is the very righteousness of God’s law that inflames our own unrighteousness. And it is the very righteousness of God’s law that exposes our unrighteousness:

Rom 3:19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

God’s law is holy. God’s law is righteous. And God’s law is good.

C. God’s law is good

Remember when Paul used these words, “righteous” and “good” together, back in 5:7? “One will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die.” Being good is even better than being righteous.

We use the word “good” to mean almost anything. We say that apple pie tastes good, and we say that God is good. But in the Bible, when you see the word good used about God or the things of God, think ultimate *goodness* – good in a way that makes all our “good” look like poor imitations.

God’s law is the direct and infinite opposite of our sin. Our sin is unholy and unrighteous and evil. God’s law is holy. God’s law is righteous. And God’s law is good.

God’s law is gracious, but our sin is malicious. Oh, how magnificent is God’s law!

Conclusion

The lesson for us to learn here is to hate our sin and love God’s law.

Make no mistake about it, Christians, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, and you are released from the law – that’s what Paul said at the beginning of Romans 7. But in his next breath he proclaimed that the law is “holy and righteous and good.”

We have some exciting days ahead of us, Brothers and Sisters, as we learn how these ideas fit together for us as we live out the Christian life. Paul is going to show us how these ideas fit together, and how, as he says in 8:4, “the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us.”

But today, let us simply learn to hate our sin and love God’s law.

Ps 119:97-98 97 Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. 98 Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me.

Ps 119:113 I hate the double-minded, but I love your law.

Ps 119:161-168 161 Princes persecute me without cause, but my heart stands in awe of your words. 162 I rejoice at your word like one who finds great spoil. 163 I hate and abhor falsehood, but I love your law. 164 Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous rules. 165 Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble. 166 I hope for your salvation, O Lord, and I do your commandments. 167 My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly. 168 I keep your precepts and testimonies, for all my ways are before you.

Mt 22:34-40 34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together. 35 And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” 37 And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. 38 This is the great and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. 40 On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

Brothers and Sisters, let us learn to hate our sin and love God’s law!