

## **“The Place of the Law”**

**Romans 7:7-25**

**February 5, 2023**

---

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Since Paul has said some negative things about the law of God that could be easily misconstrued, he continues with his clarification on the place of God’s law. It is likely that Paul was frequently put in a place to make these clarifications, and he does so again here. His primary point is that the law of God is “holy, and righteous and good” (v. 12), but we are not.

In any discussion of God’s law, we must settle in our minds the first truth that God’s law is good. The first lie told in the Bible was told by Satan when he questioned the goodness of God’s law, and we align ourselves with Satan whenever we question the goodness of God’s law. His law doesn’t just describe what ought to be, but more specifically what actually is. The Ten Commandments don’t just tell us what we ought to do; they tell us something of the kind of people we need to be in light of the nature of reality. In this way, God’s law is not unlike the law of gravity. A person may break the law of gravity, but in doing so will himself be broken by the law of gravity.

The goodness of God’s law is due to the fact that he has a full grasp on reality, unlike us. Several decades ago, the World Health Organization tried to help residents of Borneo exterminate houseflies. These pests were widely suspected of spreading disease. So officials commenced to spraying large quantities of DDT on the insides of houses. It accomplished the original purpose of killing lots of flies, but then triggered an unforeseen and nearly disastrous sequence of events. As the flies died, gecko lizards feasted on the dead flies. That made the geckos sick, which then made them easy prey for house cats. The cats then grew sick and died from eating their fill of DDT-poisoned geckos. The loss of the cats gave free reign to the rats, who then multiplied exponentially and filled people’s houses. They ate people’s food and spread serious diseases such as bubonic plague. The decision to spray DDT was not done with a full knowledge of reality. God has such a knowledge, and his commands are all some version of “Don’t spray DDT.”

The goodness of God’s law is not the only truth we need to know, and it is not the main point of Romans 7. The main point is that the law is unable to make us good. How often is it the case that a person affirms the goodness of God’s law but is still unable to keep it, or acknowledges the destructiveness of breaking God’s law but still breaks it? The law is good at revealing sin, but cannot remedy it. While the law does arouse “our sinful passions” (7:5) and “increase the trespass” (5:20), the problem is not with the law. Rather, it is with our sinful nature. In today’s passage, Paul continues to develop these themes

regarding the role of God's law, showing what the law can do quite well, and also what it is unable to do.

## **I. What the Law Can Do – v. 7-12**

When Paul taught such things as he did about the law arousing our sinful passions and increasing trespass, he must have been asked the question of verse 7 many times. "Paul, are you saying that the law is sin?" His answer is both strong and clear, employing again this phrase that is variously translated but appears in our ESV version as **"By no means!"** In this first paragraph, he proceeds to speak about what the law can do quite well in this area of sin, and that is to reveal sin. **"Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin"** (7:7). The main verbs of this paragraph are in the past tense, suggesting that Paul is speaking here of his experience prior to coming to faith in Christ. It also seems likely that Paul's use of the first person pronoun throughout is intended not just to describe Paul's personal experience with the law, but also the universal experience of all humanity with God's law.

Paul provides a personal example of the law revealing sin with the Tenth Commandment forbidding coveting. To covet is to want something you don't have. It replaces gratitude to God for what he has graciously given you with bitterness toward God for not giving you what you want. So it doesn't show proper reverence to and trust in God. It is also a sin against people, implicitly saying, "I deserve that good thing they have more than they do." Coveting also leads to multiplied sins, bringing about violations of the other nine commandments. Consider, for example, the damage coveting did to three of Israel's kings. Saul coveted the gifts God had given to David, and his envy resulted in the loss of his reign, his life, and his son, Jonathan. David coveted another man's wife and committed adultery with Bathsheba, leading to murder and deception. King Ahab coveted the vineyard of Naboth. At the instigation of his wife, Jezebel, they lied and murdered to get it.

This teaches us several things about sin. For one thing, it inevitably spills out into other areas. We like to think we can control sin and keep it contained, but it proves to be like a cancer that grows and invades other parts of the body. Secondly, we learn that sin is unable to create anything, but must utilize and corrupt the good gifts of God. Coveting corrupts God's good gift of desires and longing. Imagine the misery of a world without desires. It is good to want such things as loving community, good food with friends and family, meaningful work, a safe and secure life and so much more. We have these desires and longings that God satisfies, filling our hearts with joy and gratitude. And then Satan comes along and suggests what he did to Eve. He took her attention off the good things that God had given, the abundance of the fruit of the garden given to them, and focused her attention on the one part God had put off limits. He then suggested that God's purpose in this was malicious and mean.

In doing so, he removed from them both the satisfaction and joy of good desires and brought to them the destruction from illicit desires.

Paul describes how the law of God serves as a catalyst to bring sin to the surface. **“But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness”** (7:8). Paul is pointing out a phenomenon with which we are all familiar. Our sin nature is such that a command not to do something provokes in us a desire to do the very thing we’re told not to do. There is actually a name given to this phenomenon, “contra-suggestibility.” What do you want to do when you see the sign that says, “Wet paint; don’t touch.” We all want to touch it. Someone in our community group this past week was telling us about a “No-hunting” sign that was marred with multiple bullet holes.

So what is the law able to do? It can expose sin and reveal it for what it is. We need the law to do this because of something mentioned in verse 11. **“For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.”** It is the nature of sin to deceive us. We are not unlike American schoolchildren ranking their math ability. Compared to Asian schoolchildren, Americans rate themselves much higher. But in actual testing, Asian schoolchildren score significantly better. Sin deceives us. It is like the little pests I encountered during my first trip to Uganda. We called them “toe flees” because they laid their eggs in the soft skin around our toenails. They accomplished this by first injecting some kind of numbing agent in the area where they bored. The only way to detect the parasitic invasion of our bodies was through a close inspection of our feet every night. Similarly, the way to avoid the deceiving effect of sin is through a close inspection of our lives by use of God’s law.

## **II. What the Law Cannot Do – v. 13-25**

The last half of Romans 7 brings before us the most difficult interpretive challenge in this letter. Paul is still speaking in the first person here. Is he speaking of himself as an unbeliever or as a believer in Christ? It’s not hard to see why there is a disagreement about this. There are some statements that seem clearly to describe those who have not yet come to faith in Jesus. For example, he describes himself as **“sold under sin.”** That sounds like someone still under the bondage of sin instead of someone who has been redeemed. But on the other hand, he also says that he delights in the law of God (7:22), and he gives thanks **“to God through Christ Jesus”** (7:25). Given this language, it is not surprising that there are good scholars on either side of this question.

I found John Stott’s analysis of the passage convincing. He believes that while the person speaking here is definitely a believer in Christ, he is more like

an Old Testament Christian than a mature New Testament Christian. Stott describes this person like this.

They show signs of new birth in their love for the church and the Bible, yet their religion is law, not gospel; flesh, not Spirit; the 'oldness of slavery to rules and regulations, not the 'newness' of freedom through Jesus Christ. They are like Lazarus when he first emerged from the tomb, alive but still bound hand and foot.

I would word it like this. This person is trying to be sanctified by the law instead of by the Holy Spirit. This interpretation seems to me to better fit the context. Romans 7 is all about the law, while the first half of Romans 8 mentions the Holy Spirit repeatedly. Paul is preparing the reader for the good news of chapter 8. Though the law of God is good, it is in no way sufficient to defeat the power of sin within us. But there is a power that is sufficient, and that is the Holy Spirit.

Much of the last part of Romans 7 speaks of the power of the sin nature, even in the heart of the Christian. Notice that this enemy is always within. Paul says in verse 17 that **“sin dwells within me.”** This is not an enemy who comes around a couple of times a year, but one who is always present. This enemy within is so strong that it seemed to Paul as if there were two people present within him. There are two “I’s” within, as we can see from verse 20. **“Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.”** Robert Louis Stevenson wrote a novel about this back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was called Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Dr. Jekyll had noticed the presence of two natures within himself, one good and the other evil. He thought that if he could separate these two, then he could somehow manage to kill the evil part, leaving only the good. He was successful in separating the two, but the evil Mr. Hyde proved to be unexpectedly strong, with tragic results at the end of the book. There is a sense in which all of us who follow Jesus are a bit schizophrenic, with both a Dr. Jekyll and a Mr. Hyde on the inside.

Note secondly that the sin nature, though always present within, only shows itself when challenged. Notice verse 21. **“So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.”** When did Paul sense the presence of evil in his heart? When he wanted to do right. If you are thrown into a river with a swift current, when do you notice how swift the current is? Only when you attempt to swim against it. If you allow yourself to be carried along by it, it will seem as still waters to you. The sin nature is always present, but we only sense its power as an enemy when we attempt to counter it. It is like walking up to a sleeping dragon, taking a big stick and poking it in the eye. And since the sinful nature knows who the enemy is, it is stirred into most vigorous action when we attempt to love God and obey him. For example, Chris Lundgaard, in his very helpful book, *The Enemy Within*, asks a good question. “Which is easier: to sit with a bucket of butter-soaked popcorn and watch Tom Cruise on the big screen for two hours, or kneel and pray for five minutes?” (p.

46). There's no contest, is there? It is when we determine to pray that we poke the dragon in the eye.

Paul's point, then, is that the sin nature is a powerful enemy before which the law is an insufficient remedy. Lundgaard words it like this: "To slap a copy of the Ten commandments in front of someone under the rule of sin and tell him to submit is as effective as trying to make a rhinoceros jump by whacking him on the rump with a blade of grass. The rhino is oblivious" (p. 32). To say this differently, it is not enough for us to know what to do. The law tells us that quite clearly. The need for the Christian, rather, is for power to do what we already know we should do. Lundgaard has another helpful analogy. "Suppose your Biology 101 professor handed you a live wolverine and asked you to dissect it—but you had no anesthetic and no way to tie the beast down. What if you talked nicely to the wolverine: 'Now, sir, if you just sit still, I'll try to get this over as quickly as possible?' All you'd see would be bare teeth and flying claws in violent resistance to your experiment" (p. 73). That's what happens when we try to solve our problems by an application of the law alone.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Let's conclude with a practical application of this to one law found in the Bible. Philippians 2:14 says, "**Do all things without grumbling.**" That's part of God's law, and as such it is able to reveal to us our sin. To grumble is to complain. We should expect this law to reveal to us the extent to which we have a complaining heart, the kind of heart that is quick to find fault with our circumstances and slow to trust God's goodness even in our circumstances. The more we look for this sin in our hearts, the more we ought to see its presence in our words and thoughts. We should conclude, "I have a bigger problem with this than I at first realized."

It is then necessary that we take the next step and renounce our ability to conquer this sin in our strength. What we need instead is to call on the Holy Spirit's help. We need to fill our hearts with God's love for us, his willingness and ability to help us by giving the Holy Spirit. And then we need to take a step toward dependence on the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the step would be, in the case of this sin of complaining, to pay attention to every time you voice a complaint and offer a prayer to God about whatever it is you are complaining about. "God, our politicians aren't all we need them to be. Thank you for your rule and reign over your church and over my life, and thank you that you are sovereign even over bad politicians."

In short, Paul's view of sanctification here leads us to conclude that we are far worse sinners than we thought, but far more loved than we hoped.

**Discussion Questions**  
**Romans 7:7-25**

1. Paul is quite clear that the “law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (7:12). In what ways do you see people questioning the goodness of God’s law? Do you ever question the goodness of God’s law?
2. Paul’s first point is that even though the law is unable to sanctify us, it is able to reveal our sin to us. He gives an example of the tenth commandment, against coveting. Think of an example of something you tend to covet. How does that reveal the depth of your sin? What does it say about your attitude toward God?
3. Paul says that sin seizes the opportunity that the command brings to produce even more sin (7:8). For example, the command, “Don’t touch, wet paint” makes us even more want to touch. Do any examples of this come to your mind? What does it say about our sin nature?
4. What do you think Paul means by verse 20? “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.” Does the idea of two forces battling within resonate with you?
5. Make this practical by thinking of one commandment from God. How does this commandment show you both the depth of your own sin and the inadequacy of the law to sanctify you.
6. Close by praying for the power of the Holy Spirit to do his sanctifying work among you.