

WHAT GOOD IS THE LAW? (PT. 2)
ROMANS 7:7-13

A news report in Oregon a few years ago said that a middle school in Oregon had a unique problem:

A number of girls were beginning to use lipstick and would put it on in the bathroom. That was fine, but after they put on their lipstick they would press their lips to the mirror leaving dozens of little lip prints.

Finally the principal decided that something had to be done. She called all the girls to the bathroom and met them there with the custodian. She explained that all these lip prints were causing a major problem for the custodian who had to clean the mirrors every day. To demonstrate how difficult it was to clean the mirrors, she asked the custodian to clean one of the mirrors. He took out a long-handled squeegee, dipped it into the toilet and then cleaned the mirror.

Since then there have been no lip prints on the mirror.

It has similarly been said that if we could see sin for what it really is, that we would be less inclined to sin.

That premise appears to be part of Paul's thinking as he explains the nature and function of the Law. Our problem in life is not that the Law hangs over us and demands and compels us to sin. The problem of every man is that he is born a sinner and that sin itself conspires against him to destroy him. And if we could only see just how sinful sin is then we might be less inclined to sin and more inclined to run to God for the grace in Christ.

Here is Paul's premise about the benefit of the Law of God —

THE LAW IS GOOD, BECAUSE THROUGH IT WE SEE THE EXTENT OF OUR SIN.

In this passage Paul reveals five benefits of the Law (we will look at the final three today):

1. The Law Makes Us **KNOW** Our Sin (v. 7)
2. The Law Manifests Our **HEART** of Sin (v. 8)
3. The Law Reveals the **DEADLINESS** of Sin (vv. 9-10)
4. The Law Exposes the **DECEITFULNESS** of Sin (v. 11)
5. The Law is **HOLY** and **GOOD** (When Used Lawfully) (vv. 12-13)

Our problem is not with the Law that commands and restricts our behavior; our problem is with sin.

1. The Law Makes Us KNOW Our Sin (v. 7a)

- Paul answers his question, *Is the Law sin?* by saying, *I would not have come to know sin except through the Law*. The first benefit that Paul notes about the Law is that it produces *knowledge of sin*.
 1. *He would not have known that his sin was against God*. The Law revealed not just that what he did was wrong, but that what he did was against a holy and perfect God who righteously held the sin against Him. A sinner might acknowledge wrongdoing, but he will rarely admit culpability before God. The Law and the Word of God produces that awareness (Heb. 4:13).
 2. *He would not have known the extent and magnitude of his sin*. He wouldn't have known the breadth of his sin or the depth of sin — how widely he sinned and how much he sinned.
 - Most will acknowledge they are not perfect; no one comprehends the magnitude of his sin.
 - The Law helps us to see that our sin is rebellion and that our sin has touched every aspect of our lives; there is nothing good in the natural man (v. 18a; 8:7-8).

...our rebellion against God is total, everything we do in this rebellion is sinful, our inability to submit to God or reform ourselves is total, and we are therefore totally deserving of eternal punishment.

It is hard to exaggerate the importance of admitting our condition to be this bad. If we think of ourselves as basically good or even less than totally at odds with God, our grasp of the work of God in redemption will be defective. But if we humble ourselves under this terrible truth of our total depravity, we will be in a position to see and appreciate the glory and wonder of the work of God [in salvation]." [Piper, *Five Points*.]

- So when Paul says that the benefit of the Law is that it makes us to know our sin, he is affirming the goodness of the Law to reveal the vast extent of our sin.

2. The Law Manifests Our HEART of Sin (vv. 7b-8)

- Paul then gives an illustration of the problem of sin's extent — *I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'YOU SHALL NOT COVET.'*
- So Paul says that the Law is not sin, but that *sin, taking opportunity through the commandment...*
 - ✓ Sin took advantage of the awareness of the Law to produce actions contrary to the Law.
 - ✓ What is unique about the commandment not to covet is that it is the only commandment to deal with the issue of the heart. Only this command explicitly demonstrates that our sin is an internal problem, because coveting is not so much what we do, but what we want. And *every kind* of coveting (false desire) is sinful. The desire for sin is itself sinful.
 - ✓ Our sin problem is a matter of our desires — we do what we do because we want what we want.

- ✓ So *sin uses the Law* to stimulate more and greater and rebellious sin in the unbeliever. But the Law (when used lawfully) also exposes the magnitude of the sinner's sin to him. His problem is not only what he does, but his problem is what he wants. How great and terrible his sin is.
- Having demonstrated the goodness of the Law to reveal our sin and our desires for sin, Paul then demonstrates how good the Law is to reveal how awful (and deadly) sin is.

3. The Law Reveals the **DEADLINESS** of Sin (vv. 9-10)

- When Paul says, *I was once alive apart from the Law*, he doesn't mean that he was spiritually alive when he didn't know or understand the Law. Like all men, Paul was born with original sin. But it does mean that there was a time in his life when he didn't understand the implications of the Law and the real demands of the Law so that it seemed to him that he was alive. He didn't understand the extent and magnitude of the Law as Jesus defined it in **Mk. 12:29-31**. So he thought he was spiritually alive.
 - ✓ And then *the commandment came in*. He could be referring to the Law in general, but I think he is particularly talking about the commandment of coveting. The commandment had always existed; he just didn't understand it. When he says here that it *came in*, he means that he understood the tenth commandment's prohibition against coveting and he understood that his problem was his desires. Even if he didn't act on them, he *wanted* something that wasn't his to have, and that produced sin. The commandment "came home" to him.
 - ✓ In fact, he says, *sin became alive*. Paul is painting a picture of sin — it's like it had been lying dormant, but then the Law and the commandment were understood and it sprang to life. And it devoured him (as it did Cain, **Gen. 4:7**).
 - ✓ So sin became alive, creating desires and longings in him and actions from him). And when sin became alive, he died. In fact, Paul is emphatic with the pronoun — *I myself died*. Sin was alive; and he was dead. He thought he was alive, but he was dead. He was a living dead man.
 - ✓ One commentator summarizes his situation well: "My seeming life was over for I was conscious of sin, of violation of law. I was dead before, but I did not know. Now I found out that I was spiritually dead." [Robertson]
 - ✓ Paul had been a highly positioned, accomplished, well-respected, self-righteous Pharisee. He was confident of his position before God (**Acts 26:4-5; Phil. 3:6**). But then he understood the Law and that it didn't make him righteous; it condemned him as the worst of sinners (**1 Tim. 1:15**).
- And Paul's situation just got worse.
 - ✓ The commandment was supposed *to result in life*. He may be referring to **Lev. 18:5; Ezk. 20:11**.
 - ✓ In those passages, God is speaking of His covenantal relationship with Israel and the blessings that come to those who are obedient to the commands of the covenant — he will have a "blessed" life.

- ✓ Ezekiel makes clear that this is a condition of the covenant with the nation and that rebellion against the Law brings condemnation (Ezk. 20:13, 15-16), just as “dead to the Law” (Rom. 7:1) means condemnation. But even there, grace was available (Ezk. 20:17).
 - ✓ Instead, sin intruded (remember v. 8 — **but sin...**). And sin stimulated his flesh to rebel against the Law of God and he not only engaged in sin, but also engaged in rebellious and covetous desires.
 - ✓ And it **proved to result in death**. It killed him spiritually — he was dead in his sin (5:12).
 - ✓ So as Paul finally understood the Law, he realized that the Law didn’t give him life or blessing. But sin took advantage of the Law, perverted the Law, and through his rebellion to the Law killed him.
 - ✓ And just by way of reminder, this wasn’t just about Paul, was it? This is the way sin operates in every individual. This is what sin does to everyone (without Christ). It kills them. (Remember what Paul said is the inevitable wage and outcome of sin, **6:23**).
- The list of the consequences of sin is long:
 - ✓ Sin produces shame (**Prov. 11:2**) — “When pride comes, then comes dishonor [shame]...”
 - ✓ Sin can make people physically ill (**Ps. 32:3-4**)
 - ✓ Sin hinders prayer (**Ps. 66:18; 1 Pt. 3:7**)
 - ✓ Sin provokes others to sin by following our actions (**Prov. 22:24-25; 1 Tim. 5:22**)
 - ✓ Continued sin hardens hearts and makes repentance more difficult (**1 Tim. 4:1-2**)
 - ✓ Sin always kills and never gives life; it only condemns and never makes righteous (**Rom. 6:23**)
 - ✓ The sinner’s problem is that he never stops to consider the end of his sin and that it will kill him.
 - ✓ We use **Prov. 7** to teach about the dangers of sexual sin. But it is not only fornication and adultery that produce vv. 22-23. All sin ends up in the slaughterhouse.
 - ✓ A number of years ago I came across this account in *Sports Illustrated*:

...Dead rattlesnakes can bite. That's the news from toxicologists Frank LoVecchio and Jeffrey Suchard of the Good Samaritan Regional Medical Center in Phoenix. Their study of Arizona rattler attacks showed that 15% occurred after the animals had been mortally shot, bludgeoned or even beheaded.

Zombie snakes have long been part of Southwestern folklore, but LoVecchio and Suchard turned up true rattler tales that sound like the stuff of fright films. One man shot and decapitated a snake, then waited five minutes before picking up the severed head—which lunged and bit him once on each hand. Another victim was holding a dead rattler's severed head with its fangs pointed away from him when the snake suddenly shifted its jaw and sank its teeth into one of his fingers, which had to be amputated.

According to LoVecchio and Suchard, touch sensors in a rattler's skin and the heat-seeking pit organ between its nostrils and eyes can trigger a strike-and-bite reflex for up to an hour after the animal dies. Suchard's advice: Treat a decapitated rattler as “a very short snake.” [*SI*, 7/17/99, 41.]

- ✓ That’s sin — it’s always deadly and it will always kill. Of course, sin won’t tell you that it will kill you. That’s because sin is also deceitful...

4. The Law Exposes the **DECEITFULNESS** of Sin (v. 11)

- Notice that in v. 11 Paul reiterates what he said in v. 8 — the problem was not the Law, but **sin**.
 - ✓ **Sin took an opportunity.** In fact, the verb is a present tense (**taking**) and indicates that sin was repeatedly perverting the meaning of the Law to provoke Paul (and us!) to sin.
 - ✓ And here Paul says that sin **deceived** him. It has the connotation of cheating someone and enticing him to accept false ideas as true. The word is only used 6x in the NT, and twice it refers to the deceptive work of Satan in the Garden (**2 Cor. 11:3**; 1 Tim. 2:14).
 - ✓ Satan is a deceiver (**2 Cor. 4:4**). And he deceives men about sin (**2 Cor. 2:11**). And He deceives people about sin so that he can keep them from seeing the glory of Christ and so that they will be destroyed (**1 Pt. 5:9**).
- Sin will never tell you the truth about itself and its consequences. Sin will always promise joy and freedom from consequences; and sin will always (ultimately) produce grief and bondage to consequences. And the worst of the consequences is that it will produce death — notice Paul says, **it killed me**. That is, sin used the Law to entice Paul to an ungodly life and thus kill him.
 - ✓ James also asserts the deceitful nature of sin (**Js. 1:14-16**). Notice the progression:
 - Sin begins with a desire (v. 14) — remember that **lust** is coveting and coveting is always sin
 - Desire bears the fruit of sin (v. 15a) — ungodly desires are always behind every sin. There is no sin without an ungodly desire behind it (so when you and I sin we should ask what we were wanting and desiring in that moment — because we do what we do because we want what we want).
 - Sin produces its inevitable (and only) result — **death** (v. 15b). Sin, when it is full-grown (complete and “mature”) will only produce death. It never gives life. It is never profitable.
 - And then notice how people end up going down the pathway to sin: people sin because sin deceives (v. 16). Sin lies about its nature and sin lies about its consequences.
 - ✓ The Puritan Thomas Fuller was right when he said, “Lord, before I commit a sin, it seems to me so shallow that I may wade through it dry-shod from any guiltiness; but when I have committed it, it often seems so deep that I cannot escape without drowning.”
 - ✓ This is the man without Christ — he does what he does with sin because he is deluded and deceived by sin (and Satan) about its nature and its end. And when we sin, we fall prey to the same influence. We are prone to let the little foxes of sin into our lives because we do not believe God when He says that the wages of sin is death. When we sin, we believe that the wages of sin is life.
 - ✓ People don’t believe **1 Cor. 6:9-10** and **Gal. 5:19-21**. The adulterer doesn’t believe his sexual sin will destroy him. The pornography viewer doesn’t believe the woman he sees is a prostitute taking him to a slaughterhouse. The drug and alcohol abuser doesn’t believe that his drink is a death sentence. The argumentative man doesn’t believe that his hostile words condemn him. But they do. Sin is always deadly. Sin is a poison that only takes life and never gives life.

- R. C. Sproul helpfully summarized the condition of the sinner and the deception of sin:

“What is so attractive about sin? Why would any creature made in the image of God be tempted by sin? Why would we be inclined to steal what belongs to somebody else? Why would we bear false witness against our neighbor? We are tempted because in the temptation is the offer of happiness, and the pursuit of happiness is given to us as a constitutional guarantee. The Devil never says, ‘Do this and suffer’ or ‘Do this and die.’ The passions are so excited by sin that we come to believe that unless we act on our passion, we will be denying ourselves fundamental happiness.” [Sproul, *Romans*, Kindle 3593-97.]

- My friend, if you are here this morning and you are not a Christian, you are in eternal trouble.
 - ✓ You may protest that you are safe and that you will survive, but you are deceived. You have believed a lie. And no matter how sincere your belief is, it is based on a lie and you will pay the consequence for your sin to God in Hell for all of eternity.
 - ✓ Do not be deceived about the passing pleasures of sin; it may give a momentary pleasure, but it will reap an eternity of infinite sorrow — a death that will never pass away. Sin will kill you. Except it is a death that will produce a judgment in which you will be always dying and never alive. You will always be alive only in the sense that you will experience wrath and judgment and never the briefest moment of relief. And you will have that judgment because you have your sin now.
 - ✓ Oh, my friend, no sin is worth what you will pay God for it. I urge you this morning, give up your sin. **Repent** — by which I mean, acknowledge you are a sinner and give up your sin. And **believe** in Christ as the only one who can forgive your sin and change you so that you hate your sin and live like Him.
- Again, our problem is not with the Law. The Law isn’t sinful. Instead, the Law exposes sin and reveals sin and demonstrates the deadliness of sin. And that’s for our good.
- In fact, the Law is not only not sin, but the Law is holy and good (which is Paul’s final point)...

5. The Law is **HOLY** and **GOOD** (When Used Lawfully) (vv. 12-13)

- The question at the beginning of this section was **is the Law sin**? Paul adamantly denied that it was. And now at the end of this section he asserts that the Law is actually holy. God’s Law is not man’s problem; sin is man’s problem.
 - ✓ The **Law is holy**. There is no deficiency in God’s Law; it does what the Law is intended to do. The deficiency is in man (original sin; 5:12). And the deficiency is in sin.
 - ✓ When Paul says the Law is holy, he means that it is unique, set apart. It is different from all else. It is like God, who gave it; it accurately represents the holy nature of its author, God.

- ✓ But notice that not only is the Law (in its totality) good, but the particular command (about coveting) is **righteous** and **good**. The command about coveting also is **holy** (all the particular commands of the Law are just as holy as all the Law is). If the whole Law is holy, then every command (including the one about coveting and desires) is also holy.

- The command is **righteous** — it corresponds to what is right and just.

- The command is **good** — it is beneficial for us.

... When I was young I regularly had migraines. To prevent them, I took medication four times a day for many years. The pill I took was very small but it had a powerful aftertaste. There was nothing pleasant about that pill. But I took it willingly, because it was for my benefit — it helped me by restraining the migraines (which I eventually outgrew).

... This is the Law. We think it is bitter in the moment — a hardship and perhaps even unnecessary. But friends, everything that the Lord commands is for our good. His commands always keep us from the hardship consequences of sin. His obeyed commands always produce joy and life. Obedience to Him may be hard, but it won't prove sorrowful. God's Law and obedience is always good.

- Paul then summarizes all that he has said in v. 13.

- ✓ Did the Law, **which is good**, became deadly (and bad) for Paul? Never! **May it never be!** (How could anyone ever think or say such a thing?)

- ✓ The problem of man is sin, not God's Law — **it was sin**. Paul is emphatic — not the Law, *but* sin.

- ✓ The Law didn't kill us — sin brought about our death by a perverted use of the Law.

- ✓ As Paul will say elsewhere, when the Law is used lawfully (in accordance with what God has said) then the Law is beneficial. It is sin that kills, not the Law. The Law is exonerated; sin is condemned.

- ✓ Notice the progression:

- Sin provokes men to sin (entices, vv. 7-8)

- Sin makes men alive to rebellion and sin (v. 9)

- Sin deceives men about its consequences (v. 11a)

- Sin kills men eternally through God's judgment against their sin (vv. 10, 11b)

- ✓ It was sin that killed us, not the Law of God. Rather, the Law **showed** sin **to be sin**. It took the Law of God for us to understand the sinfulness of sin. Without the Law of God we would never understand that sin is rebellion and hatred and condemnable.

- ✓ You know what this is like — the more you read Scripture and the more you let it examine you the more you realize the persistence of sin and the depth and magnitude of sin. It is what you do; it is what you want, and it is what you believe.

CONCLUSION:

- Imagine someone has broken into your home and you drive up and see what is happening and you call 9-1-1. The police arrive before he leaves and they catch him in your house with your computer under his arm. He's brought to trial, found guilty, and sent to jail. That man cannot (rightly) complain that he is imprisoned because of the law. It is true that the law convicted and sentenced him, but he is in prison because of his rebellion against the Law and violation of the Law. The Law is not his problem; his problem is himself and his sin. And that is the very point that Paul is making about all mankind. Indwelling sin is what leads men to sin; sin perverts the good that God has given us in the Law.
- Sin is evil; God's Law is holy and righteous and good.
- Don't fight against the Law; it's good. What good is the Law? It reveals just how sinful we are in ourselves and it points us to our only Savior, Jesus Christ.

BENEDICTION: Ephesians 3:20-21