

Romans 7:7-12

When Bad People Happen to Good Things

⁷Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν; ὁ νόμος ἁμαρτία; μὴ γένοιτο· ἀλλὰ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔγνων εἰ μὴ διὰ νόμου· τὴν τε γὰρ ἐπιθυμίαν οὐκ ᾔδειν εἰ μὴ ὁ νόμος ἔλεγεν· οὐκ ἐπιθυμήσεις.

v7, Then what shall we say? That the law is a sin? May it never even begin—God forbid! But sin I didn't know except through the law; for thus covetousness I hadn't known if not the law said, "do not covet."

Now... this is a reasonable question; after all, didn't we just hear last time in Romans that when we were "under the Law," we were under its condemnation and under its domination?

We were under its condemnation; everything we thought, everything we said, everything we did—never good enough. The law was always hanging over us, pointing a long, bony finger at us, then sweeping that finger toward Hell and crying, "Away with the law-breaker!" We were under its condemnation.

We were under its domination; all our desire to keep it was slavish—not slavish to Christ but slavish to law, slavish to outward form, slavish to external prettiness—trying to prove ourselves by law to God, trying to prove ourselves by law to others, trying to prove ourselves by law even to ourselves—obedience like calligraphy, not obeying from the spirit. We were under its domination.

And a great part of the wonderful salvation that Jesus Christ brings to believers through His death and resurrection is freedom from the law in these two ways. Freedom from the law's condemnation: it tries to point its finger at us, and finds that we are already dead and already damned in union with Jesus at the cross, and safely now resurrected and vindicated in Him. Freedom from the law's domination: no longer the law's shackled wife, now Christ's delighted and loving bride, we see law and from our hearts comes a cry of joy to do for our great Lover whatever might please Him... this is the very resurrection of Jesus at work in us! So a great part of our salvation is that Jesus has saved us from the law's condemnation and domination.

But Paul is writing to people who know their Bibles and know the value of law. He's basically said as much in v1. And more than that Paul himself loves the law. When Paul reads and prays and sings Psalm 119 in his devotions, he does so with his whole heart. So we have an important question here: if a great part of our salvation is being freed from the law's condemnation and from the law's domination, does that mean the law itself is a sin?

And Paul's answer is, "May it not ever even begin to exist! May it never be! God forbid!" In fact, the very condemning and dominating aspects of the law have been *good things* for Paul and for every sinner. The condemning and dominating aspects of the law have been part of the *exposing and rooting out of sin* in the lives of the saved. We see that immediately in the text, where it says, "But sin I did not know, except through the law."

Now, Paul certainly isn't here making a claim that he was *sinless* apart from the law. All such claims are entirely impossible after Romans 5, where I found out that I individually became God's enemy not just at my conception but already in the garden with Adam. 5:12, all sinned, past tense, in the garden. 5:15, many died, past tense, in the garden. 5:19, the many were made sinners, past tense, in the garden. So I was a sinner already six thousand years before I was even a twinkle in my parents' eyes. When v7 says, "Sin I did not know, except through the law," it is not saying that I was *sinless* before the law. It is saying that I was *sinignorant*, *sinunaware*, before the law.

Now that's a dangerous position to be in isn't it—to have an eternally deadly disease and just sail through life without even knowing about it? And so I was in need of some condemnation. I was in need of some domination. I needed to know. I needed to be made aware. And God used the law for that purpose: through the law, I came to know what coveting was.

⁸ ἀφορμὴν δὲ λαβοῦσα ἡ ἁμαρτία διὰ τῆς ἐντολῆς κατειργάσατο ἐν ἐμοὶ πᾶσαν ἐπιθυμίαν· χωρὶς γὰρ νόμου ἁμαρτία νεκρά.

v8, But opportunity(!) sin, taking through the command, worked in me all coveting; for, without the law sin lies dead.

That's a literal reading of v8. There is a stress on opportunity here: Paul showing in the very text what the mechanism is, how this works. The law baited his sin into exposing itself. Without law, sin was like a lurking villain, a crouching lion, a dormant virus. And God in His mercy, unwilling for me to perish in my sin and misery, dangled a command in front of me and... "Opportunity!" Sin took the bait! If you read epic fiction, it's like a sleeping dragon and some gold. Dragons are generally extremely intelligent creatures, and they do trick their prey by lying dormant for ages at a time. But they're suckers for treasure. Let them smell some gold or some jewels, and "Opportunity!" Here, the gold, the jewel, is the commandment. Sin appears dead. It's there, as we know, from Rom 5, but it's doing a good job of lying still. If we are to be saved from it, it must be exposed, so God dangles his law, jingles the coins of His command, and "Opportunity!" Sin takes the bait.

And it takes it hard. Notice the word "all" there in verse 8. We hear the command to covet, and sin comes alive—not just working *some* coveting in us, but *all* coveting. We become obviously covetous in *everything* we do. And this is just how commands work on sinful people.

This is why, dear unconverted children, if mom says, "whatever you do, don't sit in this chair," your thoughts become instantly consumed with sitting in that chair. Your mind races for reasons why you ought to sit in it, for an excuse or circumstance that just about *requires* you to sit in that chair. You start thinking ahead to the next time mom will probably leave the room, and to do what, and how far away, and for how long... to calculate whether you can safely get into and out of the chair by the time she gets back. You even begin to think of *providing* mom a reason to leave the room, and to leave further, and longer, so that you have more chair-sitting-opportunity. The command not to sit in the chair doesn't just work *some* chair-sitting in you; it works *all* chair-sitting in you. Your entire world becomes consumed with sitting in that chair!

So the law condemns coveting with a command, and "opportunity!"—sin takes the bait and shows its ugly coveting head in every corner of the heart.

⁹ ἐγὼ δὲ ἔζων χωρὶς νόμου ποτέ, ἐλθούσης δὲ τῆς ἐντολῆς ἡ ἁμαρτία ἀνέζησεν,¹⁰ ἐγὼ δὲ ἀπέθανον καὶ εὐρέθη μοι ἡ ἐντολὴ ἡ εἰς ζωὴν, αὕτη εἰς θάνατον· ¹¹ἡ γὰρ ἁμαρτία ἀφορμὴν λαβοῦσα διὰ τῆς ἐντολῆς ἐξηπάτησέν με καὶ δι' αὐτῆς ἀπέκτεινεν.

vv9-11; But I lived without the law formerly, but the law having come, sin resurrected; but I died and it was found in me for death, the command that is for life. For sin, having taken an opportunity through the command, wholly-seduced me and through it killed.

Let's untangle that. We are conceived in a Romans 5 state. Through union with Adam we are sinners as soon as we exist in mommy's tummy. And this sin isn't just a hindrance to having an easier, happier life. It is the evidence that we ourselves are actually dead. Through union with Adam we are spiritually dead, the moment that we exist in mommy's tummy.

The problem is that people don't realize that. It does not occur to the unbelievers that line the streets at Tulip Festival that they are dead, because many of them have not heard the law. They have not heard how great its demands are on every part of our being; they have not heard that it condemns them to Hell; they have not been dominated by the law in an attempt to keep it. So they think that they are alive. They are in the "formerly" part of v9, "But I lived without the law formerly." They don't go to churches where the law and gospel are both preached. They are still "without the law." They are still in the "formerly." So they think they are alive, even though they are dead.

What a sad state to be in! And how much sadder is it that most of our so-called evangelical churches refuse to preach law. Their gospel says, "you are a little bit alive, but you can be more alive if you just give yourself to Jesus and have Him in your heart." Their gospel does not say, "Dear dead, condemned, dominated people, there is life and vindication and heart-obedience offered to you in the great Savior, Jesus Christ!" Without law, we think we are alive, not dead. Without law, we think we are basically good, not utterly condemned. Without law, we think that we are in control, not completely dominated.

And so Paul here is making an argument that the condemnation and domination of the law aren't sin—God forbid! In fact, the condemnation and domination of the law—the very things from which the Christian has been freed—were necessary, so that we might see our need for freedom! "Formerly, without the law, I lived"—that is, "I had no idea that I was dead"—but the law having come, sin resurrected and died. The law exposed that I was dead, not alive like I thought. The law tricked sin into taking the bait and showing that it in fact was alive and not dead.

"It was found in me for death, the command that was for life." That's a literal reading of the end of v10, and it's difficult to translate, but having come through vv7-9, I think we can see that this isn't an ironic play of two roles *against* each other. This is describing a part and a whole. The commandment indeed was for life—it was powerless to give that life. Only Jesus could give that life. But the commandment itself *was* for life. It had a part to play for my life. And the part that it played for my lie was its finding out the death in me. In order for the command to point me to Jesus, that I might have life, it had to show that death was in me.

And so I wonder, dear hearer, if you know what that's like. Have you ever heard a command of God and had it find out the death in you? Have you ever heard, "you shall not covet!" You shall not desire that someone else's providences were your providences. You shall not wish that your wife was more like his wife. You shall not wish that your house was more like his house. You shall not wish that your car was more like his car. You shall not wish that your weather was more like his weather. You shall not wish that your clothes were more like her clothes. You shall not wish that your hair was more like her hair. You shall not wish that your trials were more like their trials. You shall not grumble in your heart against any of your circumstances whatsoever. Have you ever heard such a command and found that everything that it says, you exactly do in your heart?

That's death! That's sin and death and it deserves Hell. That is asserting yourself against God's wisdom and authority and love. That's attacking Him on His throne, and saying, "I know better how things should be, and You, God, *ought* to have done it *my way*; and because You, God, haven't done so, I judge you to be unwise and unloving!" Covetousness is pure enmity with God, spiritual death, and you rebels who so assault the throne of the Great Creator, and Righteous Ruler of the universe must expect nothing but Hell forever. It is a marvel that He has suffered you to keep breathing even to this point! Look at the vile death in your heart, this covetousness... and you think that you are "a pretty good person" and spiritually alive? You are utterly wicked, under condemnation, and the only hope for you is if Jesus takes all your condemnation, if Jesus produces all your goodness, if Jesus raises your dead, wicked soul to true life in Himself!

What a glorious gospel—what glorious good news. Jesus in fact does all of these things. Jesus is not for deserving people; He's for taking the Hell that people completely deserve. Jesus is not for good people; He's for transforming totally wicked people into people who for the first time have any real goodness, and for making them at last in glory totally and perfectly good. Jesus is not for the living but spiritually injured; He's for raising to life spiritually dead people like you.

What glorious, good news! And the law's condemning, dominating features have a part in that work. Praise be to God—the law is unto life in all its parts!

¹² ὥστε ὁ μὲν νόμος ἅγιος καὶ ἡ ἐντολὴ ἁγία καὶ δικαία καὶ ἀγαθή.

v12, So that indeed the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

And so we've answered the question. If in salvation, we are freed from the condemnation and domination of the law, is the law sin? No, actually. That very purpose of the law—that very condemning and dominating that it did—is part of its holiness. The law condemned and dominated us, because God set it apart perfectly for that task. God, whose ways are not like our ways, and whose thoughts are not like our thoughts, has given His holy law, which with divine excellence condemned and dominated us all the way to Christ. The law is holy!

And it's not just the law in general that has done this. It does it through specific commandments. Commandments are not bad. They are holy—set apart by God in divine perfection. Commandments are righteous—it is exactly right of God to give them, for they express what His character demands of us. And commandments are good. They are not harmful; they are for our benefit.

The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Praise be to the God of grace, who for His gracious purposes has given us such a holy law, such holy and righteous and good commands!

Prayer

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