

Romans: What Should We Think of the Law?

Romans 7:7-12

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If you have your Bibles, I would invite you to take them and turn with me to Romans chapter 7. We begin a new section of this chapter and book today. Paul has been speaking about the implications of justification. We have outlined some of those. In Romans chapter 5, he reminds us that there is peace with God as a result of our free justification in Jesus Christ. We have peace with God and he develops that idea in the first verses of Romans chapter 5. In Romans chapter 6, he says, interestingly, that holiness is one of the results of justification. He says this because God justifies us through union with Christ. And union with Christ not only means that we are spared the condemnation of sin, but we are spared the domination of sin. We have a new master. We have a new principle at work within us through our union with Christ and so justification by faith has with it the implication of a holiness, a godliness of life.

He goes on to explain, especially in Romans chapter 7, in the first verses that we have been looking at that as a consequence of justification, we are as believers free from the law. Especially he means by that, that we are free from the law as that which justifies us before God. That which causes us to be accepted with God. That which causes us to be made right with God. It is not our law keeping which causes us to be accepted by the Lord. It is the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, His perfect law keeping, actively and passively and perceptively and penally and through that we are accepted by God and therefore our law keeping has nothing to do whatsoever with our being freely accepted by the Lord. That is one of the implications of our free justification.

And so having talked about some of those implications of justification, he turns now in verse 7 of Romans chapter 7 to discuss the issue of the law itself. Now let me bring to your attention two interesting things about Romans 7, beginning in verse 7. In verses 7-12, first of all, Paul talks about the nature of the law itself and then in verses 13-25, he talks about the ongoing struggle of the believer in the Christian life with sin. And in verses 7-12, Paul talks as a converted man looking back upon his preconversion experience when he was under conviction of his sin. But in verses 13 and following, he speaks as a Christian still wrestling with sin. And so there are some very interesting things going on in Romans

chapter 7.

Now you may wonder why Paul pauses at this point to talk about the law. To inform us of certain basic things about the law that we need to know. It is really fairly obvious. He said some provocative things, not only in Romans chapter 7, verses 1-6, but he has been saying these things in Romans chapter 3. Let me ask you to turn back in your Bibles, to Romans chapter 3, verse 20. Because in Romans 3:20, Paul denies that anyone can be justified by the law. And it may seem there that he is attacking the law. It certainly did to some. Some thought that he was attacking the law by saying no one can be justified by the law. And then if you look down to Romans 3, verse 28, and you read verse 28 in combination with the first words, the first sentence of verse 21, you will see that some people thought that Paul was nullifying the law completely by his teaching that no one is justified by the law. They even ask him the question. And he states it rhetorically: Do we then nullify the law? Obviously there were people who listened to Paul who thought that, that was precisely what he was doing.

And then if you turn forward to Romans chapter 6, verses 14 and 15, you see there that Paul asserts twice that believers are not under the law. And then he gives you a string of punches in Romans chapter 7. Look at the first six verses for a moment. First of all, in verse 3, in the midst of an illustration he speaks of our being free from the law. In verse 4 of Romans chapter 7, he says that the believer has died to the law. In verse 5 of Romans chapter 7, he says that the law arouses sinful passions. And then in verse 6 he says that we have to be released from the law in order to walk in newness of life. Now you can imagine in the cavalcade of statements about the law there are some who think that Paul is denigrating the law. That Paul is attacking the law. That Paul sees some problem in the law for which it needs to be rejected. And others think that Paul is saying well, it is not that the law is bad in itself, it just has absolutely no role whatsoever in the Christian life. And so it makes perfect sense that Paul would pause here and say, now let me tell you a few things about the law that you may not understand if you take the statements that I have made previously out of context. Because, in fact, in Romans chapter 3, verse 31, and in Romans chapter 6, verses 1 and 2, Paul has gone out of his way to say two things: First, I am not against the law. And secondly, I am not interested whatsoever in promoting the idea that one can be saved by grace without being transformed by grace. I am not interested in doing either of those two things, denigrating the law, promoting the idea that one can be saved by grace without be morally transformed by grace.

Now, add to that that Paul is speaking to people who are very committed to the law. They have a very high view of the law, though they have a misunderstanding of the law. I would like to mention to you the historical backdrop for both of those elements. They have a high view of the law for very good reason. These people were the descendents of people who had been sent into captivity because of the breaking of the law. The children of Israel had been unfaithful to the law of God

and God sent them into captivity. Now they learned an important lesson. It is not a good thing to break the law. They learned in a very real way the consequences of breaking God's law. So much that when they came back, they wanted to make very sure that they did not do that again. Let's remember not to do that again. Now that is a good lesson so far as it goes, but unfortunately, to this they added a misunderstanding of the use of the law, and they believed that it was in the keeping of the law that they confirmed and secured God's electing and saving love and grace towards them. This was a serious mistake and Paul has addressed it elsewhere and we will address it again, not only in this book, but in other writings. And so the reason for his sustained assault on the law was because of the misunderstanding of the law, which was so pervasive in the community to whom he was speaking. Now Paul has said radical things to people who have a high view of the law. That sets us up for what he says here in Romans 7. Let's hear God's word.

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? May it never be. On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin accept through the law. For I would not have known about coveting, if the law had not said, 'you shall not covet.' But sin taking opportunity through the commandment produced in me coveting of every kind. For apart from the law, sin is dead. And I was once alive apart from the law. But when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died. And this commandment which was to result in life proved to result in death for me. For sin taking opportunity through the commandment deceived me and through it killed it. So then, the law is holy. And the commandment is holy and righteous and good.

Amen. This is God's word. May He add his blessing to it. Let's pray.

Father, help us to understand this word. We pray O Lord, that we would understand it in such a way that we would ever flee to Christ for our acceptance with You. And having fled to Christ, and rested in Him would seek to come to have His attitude towards Your eternal word and law. In Jesus' name, we ask it. Amen.

Now before we even start we need to ask a question. Why is it so important for a believer to have a right view of the law? Why is it so important for a mother with young children, with toddlers running around the house who would just really like to keep her blouse clean and her house straight, why is it important for her to know anything about the law? Why is it important for a businessman to know anything about the law? Why is it important for him to understand the function of the law, the nature of the law, the uses of the law in the Christian life. Now that is a good question to ask. There are a couple of ways that I could answer that question.

Let me pull back and say, one reason it is important for us as believers to understand the role of the law in the Christian life is there is so much bad

teaching on it today. We live for instance, in a society in which ethical standards are eroding. And the old commitment to transcendent ethical norms is being washed away before our eyes and in the insecurity that that brings, many people are saying, 'what we need to save this society is a reassertion of those old ethical norms.' Now we may have a great deal of sympathy with that, but we must also recognize that that, in and of itself, is not an adequate solution for the saving of a society. Nor is it an adequate solution at a personal level for disobedience, to simply reassert the absolute ethical norms. And so there are many people who have been unwittingly led down the road to legalism through realizing that my ethical standards are crumbling in the society. The answer is, 'let's reassert the old norms.' So it is important for us to understand how the law functions in the Christian life, just because we live in a world like that.

But on the other hand, we live in a society where there are many people who are seeking freedom from driveness. They have driven themselves; they have been driven by their parents. And one of the things they have an instinctive revolt against is authority, and with authority rules, commandments, laws. And they believe that true freedom is freedom from those kinds of restraints and commands and laws. And they go to the New Testament and they read Paul, and they say, "Ah ha, Paul is telling us that the essence of the Gospel is freedom from laws. Freedom from rules, freedom from commandments." And in doing so, they grossly misunderstand Christianity and they grossly misunderstand the Gospel, and they grossly misunderstand the purposes of grace in the Christian life. And so for that reason, we need to understand the role of the law in the Christian life.

But let me give you another, a simpler, in fact a biblical reason why we need to understand the role of the law in the Christian life. And you will find in I John 5. I John 5, verses 1-3 says this: "Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. And whoever loves the Father, loves the child born of Him." John is basically saying this: The evidence of you being a new creation in Jesus Christ, the evidence of you being born again is your faith in Jesus Christ. And a person who has faith in Jesus Christ loves God and he also loves those who are the children of God. He loves those who are born again.

Now he doesn't stop there. He goes on to say something else. This is what he says: "By this we know that we love the children of God, that when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God that we keep His commandments and His commandments and His commandments are not burdensome." Do you hear what John is saying? The evidence that you are in fact a child of God, born again, trusting in Jesus Christ is that you show the love of God and you show the love of God for His people by keeping His commandments and you don't view the commandments as burdensome. Well that is huge. For that reason alone, we need to understand the functions of the commandments in the Christian life.

And that is Paul's point in this passage. He is not going to tell you everything about the law in the Christian life, but he is going to tell you three important things about the law. What Paul wants you to see is, is what the law is not, what happens when the law comes home and what the law is. That is what I would like you to see this morning in this passage. What the law is not. What happens when the law comes home, and what the law is.

I. What the law is not.

First what the law is not. Look at the first half of verse 7. There Paul says, 'What shall we say then,' asking this question rhetorically, "is the law sin?" And his answer: "May it never be." God forbid. Heavens no, he is saying. Absolutely not. The law is not sin. He is telling us here what the law is not. It is not sin, it is not sinful, it is not evil, it is not bad, it is not the source of our problems. Paul has explained to us that we need a liberation from the law. Not because of the law, but because of our sin. That is why we need liberation from the law, because of our sin.

Now again, you may be asking why in the world would someone have thought to have said to Paul, are you saying that the law is sin? But remember, Paul has said some fairly radical things, including in the first part of this chapter that the law itself aroused sinful passions. And so there are people saying, now Paul, are you saying that the law is sin? And his response is, absolutely not. But he has asserted some fairly radical things about the law.

For instance, Paul has asserted that the believer is absolutely free from the law in every respect with regard to his justification. Paul has made it clear that you contribute absolutely nothing, zero, nada, it is a nil set, the category of those things which you contribute to your justification. Justification is something that God does. God provides the grounds of your acceptance with Him. You do not condition in any way, by your obedience, your law keeping, or by anything else, God's free acceptance of you in Jesus Christ. So Paul has been very blunt about that. There is no contribution from you to your justification in law keeping.

Notice also, that Paul has made it clear that you can't even begin to be godly until you are free from the law. Now that is kind of a radical statement. What does Paul mean by it? Paul makes it clear that you have to be free from the law, as to justification, before you can pursue righteousness. Not until you have renounced your own self-righteousness, and your attempts at gaining God's acceptance, are you even ready to pursue true righteousness. Paul realizes that as long as we see the law as the tool by which we get acceptance with God, a, we will be frustrated because it will never work; and b, we will be diluted because if we think it is working, it is not; and c, we will never be able to get on with the real business of godliness, because we are using the law for the wrong ends, in our Christian experience.

Indeed, for Paul, neither justification nor sanctification is by law. Now what do I mean by that? I mean this. That the agent of God in justification is what? Not the law, though the law is the standard of justification. Jesus keeps what law? God's law. Jesus pays the penalty of the violation of what law? God's law. That is what He does in order to ground and provide our justification. But what is the agent of justification? God's grace. And how is that grace received? Through faith, not through the works of the law. So the agent of justification is God's grace, working through the law work of Jesus Christ. Not our law work. But it is also the agent of God's sanctification. The law is not the instrument, which God has chosen, the dynamic that God has chosen by which to sanctify us. God's grace, working through the Holy Spirit is the agent, the dynamic of our sanctification.

Now the law still remains the standard of our sanctification. God's character is the standard of the believer's conduct. God's law is merely a reflection of, a mere image of His character and the law continues to be the standard. But Paul has made it very clear in saying these things that the law is not the solution to the problem of sin. It is actually a complication of the problem. It exacerbates the problem for those who are attempting to commend themselves to God. In other words, Paul is saying that the law is not the source of our problem. Nor, is it the thing that we need ultimate deliverance from. Indeed, Paul is saying that we need to be delivered from thinking that our law keeping can deliver us from our problem, which is sin.

Did I confuse you enough on that? We need to be delivered from our thinking that our law keeping can deliver us from our problem, which is sin. It is only when we are delivered from that kind of thinking that we are ever able to keep the law as it is meant to be kept. And yet, in our day and time, it is viewed that the ultimate expression of the Christian life is that there is no further duty or obligation to law. So Paul is telling us here that the law is not sinful and we need liberation from the law, not because of the law, but because of our sin.

II. What happens when the law comes home.

And then in verses 7, second half of the verse, all the way down to 11, he tells you a second thing. And that second thing is this. What happens when the law comes home? What happens when an unbeliever under conviction, finally realizes what the law is asking him to do? What happens when the unbeliever finally understands that he is not measured up to the teaching of God's law? Paul is telling us in verses 7-11, that we don't ever understand the Bible's teaching on the law, until the law's fullness has humbled us. The only person who can understand the law Paul says, is the one who has been humbled and crushed by the law. Paul gives an example of the essential righteousness and goodness of the law in verse 7, when he says, that it was the law that taught him the sinfulness of sin. Now Paul is not saying that I would not have known right from

wrong, unless I had had a copy of the Ten Commandments on the wall in my room at home. It is not what Paul is saying. Paul has already argued that everybody knows that there is a difference between right and wrong. And that God has even written on their hearts the works of the law so they know the categories of right and wrong, and they know many of the specifics of right and wrong. It is ingrained; it is put on their consciousness by the finger of God.

So Paul is not denying that there is a universal sense of right and wrong. But what he is saying is this: That the law, when it came home, when it registered with him, showed him the inwardness of sin, and the inwardness of the law. Think about it. What commandment does he use as an example? The tenth commandment. You shall not covet. Now friends, you can think that you have kept the command, you shall not murder, as long as you have not physically gone out and murdered somebody. And you can think that you have kept the commandment, you shall not commit adultery as long as you have not gone out and physically committed adultery with someone. But my friends, there is way to externally covet. That is a matter of the heart. And it was Paul saying that he gets to the tenth commandment and suddenly he realizes that there is a lot more to those first nine commandments than just merely refraining from doing what they say point blank on the surface. That there are a lot of ways to break those first nine commandments without ever going through the physical action of committing murder or adultery or stealing or lying. Paul is saying that coveting taught him that the law was inward, and that righteousness was inward, and suddenly he realized that he had never kept the law. And furthermore, even when he realized that coveting was wrong and it was inward and it was pervasive in his experience, he didn't stop doing it. In fact, even though he then knew that it was wrong and he was convicted by it, he not only continued to do it, but he did it more and he did it more heinously than he had ever done it before. So just knowing the standard of God didn't do him any good. In fact, it made the situation work. He tells us in verse 8 that the mere knowledge of the law was no barrier to his sin. Indeed apart from grace, it produced in him, more and more worse sin.

And in verse 9, he goes on to say, I once thought of myself as a holy person, but when the fullness of the law hit home, I died under its condemnation. I thought I was a righteous man, and then suddenly I realized just how deep, just how great were the demands of the law, and I died under the weight of its condemnation.

In verse 10, he says, now of course, that wasn't the law's original purpose, the law wasn't given to kill me. The law was given that it might bring life. But because of my sin, it didn't produce life. It only produced death. And so, he says ironically, in verse 11, sin used the vehicle of the law in order to bring me under the law's condemnation. You catch the irony of that? Sin used the vehicle, the instrument of the commandment so that I would be brought under the condemnation of the commandment. And it is for this reason that the believer must be freed from the law in order to walk in newness of life. Paul says the law is unable to deliver you in that circumstance. Paul says, we don't understand the Bible's teaching about

this subject until the law has humbled us when it comes home. When it brings under conviction. And for that reason, the believer must be freed from the law in order to walk in newness of life.

III. What the law is.

And then he wants to say one more thing. In verse 12, he says what the law is. He has told you what the law is not, it is not sinful, it is not bad, and it is not the source of our problem. Secondly, he has told you what really happens when the law really comes home, when it really registers, when we really realize that we are incapable of keeping this, and we are not in fact keeping it. The third thing he wants us to know is what the law is. And he tells us point blank, it is holy, it is righteous, it is good. That is what the law is. It is holy, it is righteous, it is good. Anybody out there, who wonders what I think about the law, Paul is saying, here is what I think about the law, it is holy, it is righteous and it is good.

He is reminding us here that we must not credit our blame to God or to His law, for the law is simply a reflection of His character. His character is holy, righteous and good. What does he mean by that? Holy, righteous and good? Well, it is holy in the sense that the law reflects the transcendent purity of the character of God. God's character produced the law. And in Isaiah 6:3, tells us that God is who? He is holy, holy, holy. He is the Lord God Almighty. And the law is holy, because it is a reflection of His character. And the law is just. In other words, the law is righteous. It doesn't make unfair demands. Sometimes you have perhaps been given a command that you felt was unfair and Paul is saying here, the law of God is not like that. It never puts unfair demands on people. It is equitable. It is never unjust. The law of God is just. And it is good. It is designed with our welfare in mind. It is beneficent in its outlook and its aim. Paul has already said that, hasn't he, in verse 10. Its purpose was to bring life, not to bring death. Its purpose was good for us.

Think of the commandments and how they were meant to provide for us an environment in which we have securely the best things of human experience. And when those commands are not paid attention to, you don't have more life, you have less life. You have less joy, you have less fulfillment. And so the apostle tells us, what do I think of the law? Here is what I think of the law. It is holy and it is just and it is good.

And so Paul is saying that every believer must have at least these two parts in his or her understanding of the law. On the one hand, every believer must understand that the law is not the solution to our sin. My law keeping is not the solution to my sin. Indeed, I need to be rescued from my law keeping. I need to be rescued from my sin. Because I am under the condemnation of the law. The law is not the solution to my sin. That is the first thing that every believer needs to understand about the law.

Secondly, however, every believer must understand that the law is good and it is designed for my benefit as a believer. And it's it those two things in our society, in our setting today that are so hard to keep together. Think of it, my friends, a radio talk show host that all of us listen to. And perhaps we agree with her eighty percent of the time. But here is the basic proposition that comes out in the conversations: You find out what the moral thing is to do and you just go and do it. All of life is solved that way. You find the moral thing to do and you do it.

The apostle Paul is saying, my friends, when you find out the moral thing to do, your problems have just begun. That is not the way of salvation. Because Paul says, the irony is you find out the moral thing to do and then suddenly you find out that your heart wants to do the exact opposite. So how do you deal with that, Paul wants to know? So you see there is that solution being given to us in our society, "Well, you just find out the moral thing to do and you do it." Paul says that is not the way of salvation, and the believer needs to understand that. Law keeping is not the answer; it is part of the problem, not because of the law, but because of our hearts. Not because of the law, but because of our sin.

But secondly, you need to know this. The law is good and it is designed for our benefit as a believer, and the law is not the ultimate source of our problems. I am going to quote to you from a Christian in a book that is wildly popular in our day. I am not even going to tell you the name of the book, because many of you have read it and liked it. Now here is a quote. I could find dozens of quotes like this in the book: "Jesus doesn't care about rules. Right and wrong are incidental to Him." This is the Christian on Jesus on rules. Ever read Matthew 5:17-19? Jesus seems to have a little bit different opinion about rules. You remember what He said about rules in that passage? Now I am going to give you Jesus on rules: "Do not think that I came to abolish the laws of the prophets. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until the heaven and the earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then nulls one of the least of these commandments and so teaches others, shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." Jesus doesn't care about rules; right and wrong are incidental to Him. My friends, that is not Paul's point. That is not Paul's point.

The problem is not that there are rules out there and that God has just got to liberate us from these horrible rules. The law is good and equitable and right. The problem is that we are sinners. And that law can't get us back into relationship with God. But when He recreates us in Jesus Christ, the apostle Paul says, in Ephesians chapter 2, verses 8-10, He creates us for good works.

Now where do you find out where those good works come from? I John 5:1-3. The commandments of God. Now we see the law is not the problem. Our sin is the problem. And Paul is teaching us that today. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, teach us to say with the saints, how we love Your law, and at the same time, never ever trust in it, for our acceptance with You or our justification. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

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