

Romans: The Hope of Righteousness (part 8 of 9)

Is the Law Good, Bad, or What?

Romans 7:7-20

Mark Vroegop

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. For 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. For 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.¹³ Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.¹⁴ For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good.¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. Romans 7:7–20 (ESV)

One of the reasons why I love the book of Romans is because of the powerful connections between deep theology and real life. Most of the Apostle Paul's letters have this flavor in them at some level, but none greater than Romans. The book of Romans, like few other books in the Bible, tackles big, sweeping philosophical questions and connects them to where we really live.

For example, Romans 6 sought to answer the following questions:

- If Christians have been granted full immunity from God's judgment, what stops them from sinning over and over?
- How does the death of Jesus result in personal freedom for people who believe in Him?
- What is the relationship between the problem of sin, our desires, and even specific parts of our bodies that are used in committing sin?

So we have been working on some very practical issues that have substantial theological underpinnings. Keep in mind that the theme of this book is righteousness, and we are learning what that means at both a principle and a practical level.

The Relationship between the Law, Sin, and Humanity

Last week we started in Romans 7, and we examined how Paul tries to answer yet another question: What does it mean to no longer be under Law? Verses 1-6 helped us understand that a believer's relationship with the Law has been changed, and a new way of living, which Paul describes as "the new life of the Spirit" (Rom. 7:6), has been inaugurated. So we talked a lot about the Spirit last week, and we will pick up that important theme again in January when we spend six weeks studying Romans 8.

Today we are studying Romans 7:7-20, and Paul's main focus here is to help us understand the role of the Law in this discussion about righteousness. Verses 1-6 talked so much about being dead to the Law and being released from the Law, that it almost sounds as if the Law is bad. That is why Paul asks two questions: 1) Is the Law sin? (7:7), and 2) Did the Law bring death? (7:13)

Now the simple answer to both questions is No! But Paul did not ask these questions for a simple, one-word answer. He asks these questions about the Law so that he can help us understand the relationship between sin, Law, and humanity. He asks these questions in order to help us get to the source of the problem. If you were to take one of our counseling classes called Growing, you would learn the difference between the "presenting" problem and the "heart" problem.

In Romans 7:7-20, the presenting problem is the Law and our disobedience to it, but the heart problem or source of the problem is sin. Or to say it very simply: **Sin through the Law and in me is the problem.**

As we will see, the Law and our disobedience to its commands are the "presenting problem." When you dig deeper, you will find that the real source or the heart problem is sin. If you hear or read this text correctly, you will come away with a deeper concern and a stronger burden for the problem of sin.

Is Romans 7 About a Believer or an Unbeliever?

Before we jump into the specifics of this passage, there is one introductory issue that I need to address. There is a debate among Biblical interpreters as to whether or not Paul is speaking about his experience before or after his conversion because there are phrases that seem to fit with both.¹ Now you need to know that regardless of one's position on this issue, the end game is the same: the Law does not justify or sanctify. Sin, at the core of who we are, is the problem, and it is only solved through the person and work of Jesus Christ (see Romans 7:25-Romans 8:1).

That said, my take on this passage is that Paul is talking about a believer, and it informs the lens through which I see this passage and the applications that we will talk about at the end. Why do I think that this text is referring to a believer? Let me briefly give you six reasons:

1. Paul writes in the present tense

¹ Pre-conversion: ¹⁴ *For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. Romans 7:14 (ESV);* Post-conversion: ²² *For I delight in the Law of God, in my inner being, Romans 7:22 (ESV)*

² Brian Hedges, *Licensed to Kill – A Field Manual for Mortifying Sin*, (Adelphi, Maryland: Cruciform Press, 2011), 105-106.

2. He expresses his approval of and delight in God's Law
3. He expresses antagonism against sin
4. He expresses Christian hope
5. It harmonizes with Paul's theology elsewhere²
6. It fits with the flow of thought from Romans 6

I think that this is a very helpful text to explain what is happening inside the heart of a follower of Jesus when we consider the relationship and struggle between the Law, sin, and our humanity. The danger, however, is that you might wrongly conclude from this passage that a Christian lives in continual defeat. That is not what this passage is saying. But what Paul is saying here is that no Christian lives in perpetual victory over sin. This text lays the framework for the battle with sin as it gives voice to an external and internal battle that every believer in Jesus faces.

LIVE|12 was about the mortification of sin, and I spent four weeks talking about killing sin before it kills us. Through a great book by Brian Hedges that we still have available in our resource area, and through those sermons, we talked about strategies for defeating sin. That is one side of the coin. The other side is the recognition that there is a real struggle, and we do not always win. And I hope this text pushes us both toward relentless fighting and humble transparency. My prayer is that God would deliver us from "pasted smiles, and chipper superficiality, and blindness to our own failures, and consequent quickness to judge others."³

With that context and heart, let's look at how sin through the Law and in me is the problem.

Sin Makes the Law an Ally

In verses 7-12, Paul identifies that while the believer has died to the Law (7:4) and while the Law aroused sinful passion (7:5), the Law is not sin. In other words, the Law is not bad, evil, sinful or the ultimate problem. As we will see, the Law is the context for sin to do its evil work. Sin makes the Law an ally in its rebellion, and Paul shows us this in the following ways through verse 12.

1. The Law defines rather than creates sin (v. 7)

In verse 7, Paul very clearly says if it had not been for the law, he would not have known what sin was. This statement is the affirmation of what is true in light of the fact that he emphatically denied that the Law was sinful. The Law's role was not the creation of sin but the revealing of it.

To illustrate this point, Paul points to the Tenth Commandment, regarding covetousness. This is a fascinating and strategic choice because this particular commandment is both all-encompassing (all the commands have covetousness at their core) and internally focused. The Tenth Commandment is the most heart-based of the other commandments. And Paul says that he would not have known covetousness apart from this command.

² Brian Hedges, *Licensed to Kill – A Field Manual for Mortifying Sin*, (Adelphi, Maryland: Cruciform Press, 2011), 105-106.

³ <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/who-is-this-divided-man-part-2>

Now I do not think that Paul means that without the Law he would have thought that coveting was good or not sinful at some level. Rather, he means that the Law made sin clearer, bigger, and more expansive. The Law serves as the context and the catalyst for sin.

2. The real problem is sin (v. 8a)

This should not be a new thought because of what I've already said in the introduction, but I want you to see where this main idea of the text comes from. Verse 8 serves as the alternative answer to Paul's question in verse 7. The process is clearly identified: sin seizes an opportunity through the commandment, producing all kinds of specific sin. The problem is not the command; it is the way that sin makes the command an ally.

Take the first temptation in the Garden of Eden as an example. When the devil approaches Eve, he uses the commands of God as the setting for his temptation. In Genesis 3:1, the serpent said, "Did God actually say 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" Central to Eve's temptation was not only the alluring appearance of the fruit (Gen. 3:6), but it was also the basic reality of a divine restriction. Rebellion requires restriction. But the real problem was not the law. The real problem was sin.

3. Sin comes alive through the Law (vv. 8b-9)

In verse 8b-9 Paul talks about how the Law serves as a catalyst for sin, and he reflects on the days prior to his conversion ("I was once alive apart from the Law . . ."). Paul says that sin lies dead apart from the law; however, he does not mean that sin is non-existent, since Romans 5:13 told us that sin was present in the world even before the Law. Rather, it means that sin is waiting for the opportunity to pounce. Sin is "playing dead," and it springs into life through the commandment. The tone of verse 11 ("seizing an opportunity") verifies this sense.

Anyone who reflects on his or her experience in life, in raising children, or in counseling a friend, will know how true it is that sin is lurking and that it can spring to life in stunning and surprising ways. In the context of the first murder, God said to Cain, "sin is crouching at the door . . . its desire is for you but you must rule over it" (Gen. 4:7). The problem is not the circumstances, or the rules, or the people involved, as much as we would like to think so or to blame them. The problem is sin.

4. Sin brings death through the Law (vv. 10-11)

The fourth way that sin uses the Law as an ally is by virtue of the connection of death to sin and the Law. Sin uses the Law as the means of bringing death. Sin uses the Law to its advantage. Verse 10 shows us the tragic bait-and-switch. The Law promised life through its alignment with the character of God. But sin uses the Law as the context for human rebellion, and it ends up being an instrument of death. Like a life-improving medicine that could be helpful at one level, but deadly if taken outside of the "law" of recommendation, sin used the Law for its deadly mission. According to verse 11, sin seized (surprisingly) the opportunity, deceived us, and killed us. And it happened in the context of the Law. The Law did not bring death by itself. Sin brought death through the Law. Sin, through the Law and in me, is the problem.

5. The Law is holy (v. 12)

The word “so” in verse 12 marks the conclusion of Paul’s argument that began in verse 7. His conclusion is general and specific. The Law in total is holy, and the commandment, referring to the Tenth Commandment, is holy, righteous, and good. The Law of God intends the best for humanity. It expresses the righteousness, goodness, and holiness of God. In and of itself, the Law is not bad.

Sin is the problem, and it used the Law as its unwilling accomplice in fomenting rebellion and bringing about sin. And while believers are no longer under the Law (Rom. 6:14) or the written code (Rom. 7:6), this does not mean that the Law is inherently bad. The Law revealed the real problem: sin.

Now we will unpack the application of this later, but this idea of getting to the source of the problem versus blaming something else is a very important issue to consider. In our own lives, in the lives of others, or in raising children it is very easy to focus on allies of sin and not on sin itself. An annoying law, an inconsistent rule, an unfair boss, an ineffective teacher, or an influential friend can be the context and can be easily blamed. There are many allies, but the real problem is sin.

Sin Creates Disobedience to the Law

The focus of verses 13-20 shifts from the problem of sin through the Law to the problem of sin in me. Paul unpacks the relationship between sin, the Law, and personal disobedience. And in so doing, he gives us a very helpful and realistic picture of the Christian life. There are two truths that emerge in this section:

1. The sinfulness of sin is revealed through disobedience to the Law

Verse 13 contains our second question: “*Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?*” Paul is asking if the Law was the source of the consequences in his life. The answer, of course, is No! But this answer is not the reason why Paul is asking this question. His point is found in the second half of the verse:

¹³ Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. Romans 7:13 (ESV)

The Law revealed the sinfulness of sin as disobedience that took hold. The Law showed us what sin really is, and it revealed how bad our violation truly was. The depth and breadth of our sin is revealed to us by the Law. Much like a criminal who commits one crime but is charged with seven criminal counts, so the Law makes the extent of sinfulness clear and plain. Think of the last sinful blow-up that you had within your marriage, family, or a friendship. It was one incident, but my guess is that there were multiple things that were related to the single issue. The Law does not just let you get away with “we had a sinful fight.” The Law would say, “Yes, but it included sinful words, sarcastic tones, refusing to listen, hypocritical judgment, selfishness, angry actions, bitterness, and an unforgiving spirit.”

The Law clarifies what is sinful and serves to magnify the full scope of what really happened. The problem is not the Law. The problem is sin. The Law only makes disobedience clear.

2. Sin produces disobedience in the flesh

The final section (vv. 14-20) is one of the most practical and honest sections in the entire Bible, as Paul identifies the essence of the struggle with sin. However, it is not clear at first reading. In fact, it almost sounds like the old Abbott and Costello “Who’s on First?” routine. So let me help you understand it.

The point of verses 14-20 is simply that physical disobedience happens because of sin. Sin, not the Law, is the problem. And to make that point clear, Paul talks about the internal conflict and powerlessness that he sees and understands.

- **Verse 14** – This is the first of two confessions highlighted by the word “know” (v. 18 is the second). Paul acknowledges that there is something different about the Law and about himself. The Law is spiritual, which is what we read in 7:12, but he is “of the flesh, sold under sin,” a phrase that means he has a fleshly or carnal struggle (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-3).⁴ Paul is simply identifying that the Law is not the problem, but that sin in the flesh is the real issue.
- **Verse 15** – Paul follows verse 14 with self-analysis. As Paul looks at his life, he realizes that *“I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate”* (Rom. 7:15). He makes the tension very clear. There is an on-going struggle in Paul’s soul between good desires and wrong actions.
- **Verse 16** – We have one of two conclusions. Paul concludes that the tension between good desires and wrong actions only serves to validate that the Law is indeed good. Why is it good? Because the Law, according to verses 11-12, is the exposure of human failure, and the extent of sin is in fact good.
- **Verse 17** – Here is the second conclusion. Paul posits that the basic problem is indwelling sin. The Law is not the problem. There is an alien power competing for supremacy in his life.

Underneath disobedience to the Law, and underneath his physical actions, is the problem of indwelling sin. Disobedience is a reality in Paul’s life, not because of the external Law, but because of an internal battle with sin. This is the same truth that Paul taught in Galatians 5.

¹⁷ For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. Galatians 5:17 (ESV)

The second confession is found in verses 18-20. Let me walk you through each verse and show you what is added to our understanding of this text.

- **Verse 18** – This is the second confession, and Paul says, “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh” (Rom 7:18). Paul’s assessment of his flesh is accurate and bleak. *“I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”* Now in three weeks we will see the glorious solution to this in 7:25. But for now, just feel the weight of spiritual incapacity.

⁴ Paul is not using “sold under sin” here in a way that contradicts Romans 6:22. This phrase can refer to something less than a positional reality and can mean to sell oneself to do iniquity. There is a practical issue, not a positional issue, in view here.

- **Verse 19** – Paul simply restates the reason why he is writing about this: *“For I do not do good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom. 7:19)*. This is the real tension of being a Christian and of being human.
- **Verse 20** – This is the concluding thought in this section as Paul brings to close the discussion about the Law, and sin, and humanity. The problem is sin, through the Law, and in me. Paul is not excusing his actions, but he is identifying with great clarity what the real problem is.

Why do people disobey the Law? Is it because the Law is bad, or evil, or unfair? No. It is because of the presence of sin in the life of human beings. Even Christians, who have been forgiven and freed from the rule and reign of sin, still struggle with sin.

Is the Law bad? No! The problem with the Law is not the Law. The problem is the way that sin uses the Law as an ally to foment rebellion against God. Sin uses the Law, and our flesh serves sin by breaking the Law. But the real problem is sin creating disobedience to the Law.

Now What?

It is one thing to know a truth. It is yet another to apply the truth. And I said at the beginning of my sermon that this text is one that really connects to the real world. So what do we learn from this text?

1. Sin is our enemy

As we have walked through this text, I hope that something emotionally is happening to you. I hope you leave today hating sin at a new level. I hope that you are seeing sin for what it really is. I hope that you see how it stalks us, deceives us, pounces on us, uses us, breaks us, and kills us. I hope that you realize the way that it uses good things and makes them bad. I hope that you realize and feel repulsion to the attractiveness of sin because of the pain and misery that it causes.

Even if you are not a believer in Jesus, and even if you don't believe the Bible to be true, surely you can look around in the world, and even your own heart, and know that something is terribly wrong. The brokenness around us and in us is what the Bible calls sin, and it aims to destroy everything, including your eternal destiny. Romans 7 reminds us that sin is our foe, and we should hate it with every fiber of our being.

2. Look below the surface

It was a refreshing reminder that there are issues underneath issues in the world and in our lives. It has been good to see Paul get underneath the Law and inside our flesh to show us what is really going on, because we are way too quick to lay blame in the wrong places. If we are honest, we would rather blame “the system,” the government, our biology, the employer, our spouse, the kids, or the circumstances. But those things are not the problem. They are just the means of exposing what is really inside of us.

If you really hate sin, then you will be grateful, not spiteful or depressed, when sin is revealed in your life or in the lives of someone near you. Known sin is not nearly as scary as sin below the surface, and Romans 7 helps remind us about that.

3. The Christian life is a struggle

One of the most hopeful things about this text and others in the New Testament is the vision of what the Christian life is all about. And the vision is not one of a person who is perfect and coasting toward the finish line of eternity. The vision is more like a person walking up an escalator while everyone else is riding down. The Christian life is a fight against the current of culture and the gravitational pull of the flesh. It is coming to terms with your own powerlessness while looking to Jesus for your deliverance.

The Christian life will be filled with set-backs and failures. Following Jesus will never happen without high points and low points. And it feels very refreshing to hear Paul acknowledge the tension, the frustration, and the challenge. Because what Christian among us has not said, "Why did I do that?" or "What was I thinking?"

Do you know what this text does for us? It puts words to the battle that every follower of Jesus feels. It explains what is happening. It calls us to not throw in the towel on our fight with indwelling sin. It sets us up for how this text ends and how it leads us into Romans 8.

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.¹ There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 7:24–8:1 (ESV)

Sin, through the Law and in me, is the problem. So I must keep fighting with no excuses, keep looking to Jesus, and never, ever, ever give up.

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