



“The Holy, Murderous Law”¹

Romans 7:7-12

C.S. Lewis once said something like, “If God gave us the 10 commandments merely to tell people right from wrong, he gave them too late.” The point Lewis was trying to make was probably at least two-fold. First, other cultures had rules and laws regarding right and wrong. And many of the rules were good and would even be similar to the Law of Moses. But I think Lewis probably made this statement to also ask, “Then what’s the purpose of the Law?”

Have you ever wondered that question? I think many people, whether realizing or not, wonder what the point of God’s commands are. Let me give an example. I imagine many of you can relate to this: I was a perfect parent before I had any children. I could look at parents in the grocery store or in an airplane, and I would know exactly what they needed to do to get that child to obey. I would then make mental logs, saying, “When I have a child, I won’t let them act that way!”

I think God kept a log of those statements, too, because then I had children. I remember one time talking to someone about our kids, and they said, “Which one of yours is strong-willed?” And, I chuckled. Then I waved my hand past all of them and said, “All of them!” I don’t say this to put down my children whatsoever. As Tracy has said, she imagines the Apostle Paul was a strong-willed child! So, I praise God for a strong will, and I pray that God shapes their hearts so they have a strong will for God’s glory!

But in young children, where the Bible says foolishness is bound up in their hearts, a strong will can be difficult to parent. I would go back to my mental notes of saying, “I’d never do this or that,” and then I would incorporate these strategies. I’d seek to be firm. I’d give the kids the rules. And, you know what? The rules didn’t change their little hearts. I’d say “no,” and sometimes it was like they’d run to disobedience. They’d get consequences, and some of my children would rise to the occasion and remain insistent on their disobedience. They were not going to change because of some rule or some consequences – not matter how significant they were. And, believe me, they were significant.

The rules didn’t change their heart. Now, I could have then said, “Then don’t give them rules!” I have to be honest, there were occasions where I had said to Tracy, “Just let the kids have the house.” But I also realized that while the rules don’t change their heart, they’re still necessary. But I didn’t know how to communicate rules and consequences in a way that was appropriate. And, how does this play in with the gospel and the obedience of faith?

Over time, and even now, I’ve been learning that I was giving way too high a place to the Law. I was putting the Law on the level of the Gospel. I missed its purpose, and therefore, I was hindering my

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

children from clinging to God and his grace. Praise God he teaches us these lessons, and continues to shape us in this.

But I share all of this to say that if you don't understand the purpose of the Law, you will not understand the greatness of the gospel. And, even as I say this, I'm *not* saying the Law doesn't matter. But I'm saying, "The Law matters immensely. And, for very specific purposes."

Do you know what the purpose of the Law is? Not only for your parenting (if you are a parent), but in your life in general? You see, the Jewish people in the first century elevated the Law to a level it was never intended. And, if a Jewish person were to have read Paul's letter to the Romans, they would be the ones objecting to Paul's message. They'd be saying things like, "If grace is greater than all our sins, shall we just continue in sin?" Or, "Is sin tolerable now because we're not under the Law, but under grace?" Or, the question we're going to face today: "Is the Law sin?" Paul has answered each objection to show how a gracious relationship with God actually impels obedience. But the Jew is wondering how that can be the case if people don't have the fear of the Law? How can our actions *not* matter in one sense and then compel us to care about our actions? In addition, the way Paul is talking about the Law makes it sound like the Law is sinful. After all, the previous illustration Paul gives is that we have died to the Law and are now married to Christ. We needed *freedom* from the Law.

So, is the Law sin, Paul? Before saying anything more, if you haven't turned in your Bibles to Romans 7 yet, please do so. And, before I read, let's pray together for the Lord's grace on the preaching of the Word here and throughout the world (pray for MacPhail-Fausseys & Dave Guerrin @ Manna):

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.²

Paul takes a *long* time to answer this question in verse 7. His answer is actually the rest of this chapter. And, while he's talking about the perfection of the Law, he's showing how our **sin highjacks the Law and uses it as a platform for greater sin and condemnation**. Again, this counters the Jewish mindset. For example, in the Jewish writing, 2 Baruch, in chapter 85, the writing speaks of how Israel once had righteous prophets who helped them when they wandered. These prophets "trusted in their works." And, God heard them. But, at the time of the writing of 2 Baruch, the author says they don't have prophets now. They only have God and the Law. So, they need to be like the prophets. They need to direct and dispose their hearts, and they will be blessed.

² [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:7–12.

The emphasis on these words are essentially what we would call a “works-based” salvation. The Law is here to save you! And, if you just follow it, you’ll be rescued! As some people say today, “God helps those who help themselves.” Paul says that’s a lie! And then a Jewish person could say, “Well, then is the Law sin!” And Paul is saying, “No, the problem is much worse. It’s not that the Law is sinful. You’re sinful.” So in these verses, people shows how our sin highjacks the Law, leading to greater sin.

Look at the beginning of verse 7 again: What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means!³ Paul states his belief. Don’t misinterpret or twist Paul’s words! Paul believe the Law matters and that it’s *not* sinful. He uses the same phrase he’s been using with the other questions in chapter 6: By no means! May it never be! Absolutely not!

Ok then, Paul, what are you saying? The end of verse 7 through verse 12 reveal Paul’s theology on the purpose of the Law. It’s brief, and it doesn’t cover all Paul’s thoughts on the Law, but it does give a helpful guide to how to think about the Law. In these verses we see *how* sin highjacks the Law and uses it as a platform for greater sin and condemnation, while maintaining the Law is good and holy. So, let’s look at the purpose of the Law and how this is the case.

1. The Law defines and exposes our sinful hearts (v. 7b).

The end of verse 7 says, “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.’”⁴

The word “yet” seems kind of odd to me here. Why use the word “yet” or “nevertheless?” Paul’s indicating here that there’s an odd relationship that the Law has with sin. The Law remains pure. But our sin likes to nestle up against the Law and use it for its own purposes. So, Paul says, “The Law isn’t sinful. Absolutely not. But the Law is used by sin.” How so?!

Paul gives a very relatable example from his own personal experience. He says that without the Law, he wouldn’t have known the essence of sin. By the way, this doesn’t mean he had no conscience before learning the Law. People without the Law of God have a conscience, as Paul said in Romans 2. I remember years ago, when I was a youth pastor, and I asked the students, “How do you know you’re a Christian,” and one student said, “I feel guilty when I do bad things.” And I said, “That doesn’t mean you’re saved. Many people feel guilty.” In Romans 2, Paul says the conscience of an unbeliever accuses and excuses us. So, people who don’t love God can feel guilty over bad behavior.

What does he mean when he says “I would not have known sin?” Well, Paul goes to the final commandment of the 10 commandments. This is the only commandment in the 2nd table of the Law that deals with the inward desires. The 5th commandment is honor your father and mother. Sixth one is don’t murder. Seventh is no adultery. Eighth to not steal. Ninth is to not bear false witness. In each of these commands, you could simply think they’re external. As long as you abide by these externally, you’re good.

We see how Pharisees thought this by looking at their conversations with Jesus. Think of the man we call the “Rich Young Ruler.” He says to Jesus he had kept the whole law from his youth! How sadly blind. But

³ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:7.

⁴ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:7.

what does Jesus then do? Jesus challenges the man's heart. What does the man love? Ultimately, his love was for money. He wasn't willing to give that up for Christ.

Jesus does this on multiple occasions. Think of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus challenges the Jewish interpretation of the Law and says, "You have heard it said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'" Then Jesus says, "But I say. . . ." Some people think Jesus is giving a new Law. But he's not. He saying that all the Laws had greater intensity than how people were interpreting them. The Laws reach to the heart level.

And, this is what Paul is getting at here at the end of verse 7. He really read God's Law regarding coveting. In that command, he discovered that if his heart wanted a neighbors wife or another person's stuff, he was sinning. He realized that if his heart wanted sexual perversion, he was a sinner. His abstinence externally could not keep him from God's all-seeing eye. His heart was revealed as not wanting God. Paul shows us the purpose of the Law. It's not to save us. It's to show us the sinfulness that lies in all of our hearts.

Ventura, this runs counter to the current philosophy of our day. People so often say, "I'm a good person." And, if by that you mean you're externally moral, then ok, you may be. But that's a comparison game. And God's not comparing you to other people. God says that if you don't trust Jesus, and if your hearts longs for sinful things and doesn't want God, you're evil. Again, to quote Jesus, he once said, "If you being evil, know how to give good gifts. . . ." Being able to be externally moral doesn't change the quality of your heart. You're a sinner.

So, what's one purpose of the Law? It reveals our sinful hearts. So, ask yourself where your desires are. What do you long for on the inside? Who cares what mask you put on and the persona you have on a day-to-day basis. God doesn't care if you're a good Sunday School teacher or if you've been involved in a lot of social causes for good. The Law will pinpoint every time you covet. I personally remember when the Law hit me. It was absolutely crushing when I realized that to the core and in every area of my being, I was a coveter. And I realized that I was a complete, miserable mess. I realized that this coveting goes directly against having *no other gods before me*. Paul, in Colossians 3, even refers to coveting as idolatry. It's idol-worship to covet. Yet, so many people think that as long as they're good on the outside and are buttoned up well with a lot of self-control, they're fine. Look at their discipline. Look at their sacrifice! Look at their obedience! But the coveting reveals their obedience isn't from the heart. They don't love God. So, the Law says to every human being that they're idol-worshippers.

But what does this have to do with sin highjacking the Law? This is where Paul moves with the next verse. First, you have to realize you're a sinner before sin leaps out in greater ways. So, in verses 8-9, Paul shows us that

2. Sin uses the Law to lead to greater sin and condemnation (vv. 8-11)

Let's read verses 8-9 again: ⁸But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. ⁹I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. ⁵

So, Paul says that the Law showed him he was a covetous person. The Law showed that his desires were for sin, and then, at that moment, sin seized an opportunity to produce all kinds of covetousness. I'm

⁵ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:8–9.

sure you've experienced the same thing. You hear your spouse say, "You shouldn't eat another cookie," and you may have thought that before, but when she said it, you now think, "But I want to!" This works to a greater degree with the internal struggles. Don't lust. Don't hate. Don't become embittered. Don't think about that thing. And as you say, "Don't, don't, don't," you realize that you're stuck in a perpetual cycle of not only thinking about it, but it's getting worse. New areas and desires are cropping up on the inside and you're feeling overwhelmed.

This is the idea of sin seizing. One commentator I studied referred to this as sin springing to life. He wrote that **"The image suggests that sin is like a beast of prey poised to leap upon its victim, but the actual jump occurs only when the commandment is enunciated"** (Schreiner, p. 367). This illustration helps me. Years ago, I watched a documentary on African animals, and in the midst of it, there was a scene of lions taking down an elephant in the dark. They're hiding and the elephant doesn't know. Now, were the lions there even though the elephant didn't know? Of course they were. But then the lions made themselves known. The elephant doesn't know what to do, and the lions come in full force to take this beast down.

So it is with sin. At some point, a spotlight comes out on sin. And sin can't hide. Instead of cowering, sin comes out in greater force to bring death and shame. Paul goes on verse 8 to say, "For apart from the law, sin lies dead." This phrase (and also verse 9) raises many good questions to people. They think, "As long as people don't have the Law, they're not sinners." But I know that's not what Paul is saying here. That would contradict statements Paul made in earlier chapters in Romans. And, it goes against what Paul says even in verse 13 of this chapter. Paul clarifies his meaning there. Sin might be shown to *be sin*. And sin was producing death in him.

So, when Paul says that apart from the law, sin lies dead, he's speaking experientially. When you don't know that the Law relates to the inner heart love and motives, you are happily ignorant. So, Paul says in verse 9 that he was alive apart from the Law. This doesn't mean that Paul didn't grow up under the Law's teaching. He heard it all the time as a Pharisee of Pharisees. But he's saying that he didn't understand the intention. But when he understood the intention – whenever that was – he died. That means, he saw it. Sin became exceedingly sinful. He recognized the desperation of his situation.

And he understood that the Law couldn't save him. Why? Because the Law functioned only as a spotlight on his sin. And when sin jumps on the commandment and produces more sin, the spotlight of the Law only shines all the more brightly, bringing with it guilt and shame and death. And this word for death probably refers to the recognition of condemnation. He knew he deserved to die.

Ponder that for yourself. Have you ever felt the weight of your sinfulness before the Holy God? When I say holy, I mean the utterly glorious. God isn't creation. He's altogether, infinitely otherly. He abhors sin and loves all that proceeds from his own glory. His punishment is justly severe. His mercy is justly kind. The Bible says that someday, every human will stand before the presence of the all-seeing God, and we will be judged even for every *word, thought and intention*. In that judgment, no one will say "no fair" to God's judgment. Instead, the Bible says that every mouth will be stopped. Everyone will be quiet.

My question is, at that judgment, will you only have the Law's spotlight on you? Or, will you be under the grace of God that Paul has been talking about in Romans? Have you recognized your sinfulness and have you admitted your obedience can't cleanse you? Have you turned to Jesus alone to provide forgiveness of your sins and reconciliation with God? Only Jesus can bring forgiveness! Through his death and resurrection, Paul said in Romans 6 that all who trust Jesus now are set free. Set free from the

Law's condemnation. Set free to obey God. Set free for eternity with the Lord. Set free with new hearts that will grow in loving what they ought to love.

Where are you? Do you cling to the Law? Or do you cling to Christ? If you cling to the Law, all you have is a spotlight on your sin. If you cling to Christ, you have his loving embrace. You have Christ covering your sins and promising growth in pursuing God.

In saying this, I hope you hear why the Law is good. You may not though. Paul's only saying that the Law reveals our sinfulness and then sin exacerbates that. And then we experience greater death and condemnation in this life. How is this a good thing?! Because if you don't know you're condemned, you won't seek the Lord for rescue.

Like the elephant, many people are blissfully ignorant. And, their covetous hearts even want to remain blissfully ignorant – mocking God's holiness, mocking notions of punishment. All that is a sin that sin has been exposed. And the Law is a never-ending shining light preaching condemnation. Will their consciences listen? Or, will they get to a point when their consciences crack and they are hardened? What about you? Do you know what you deserve?

This is the purpose of the Law. It's to drive you to Christ! Paul says this in Galatians, that the Law is a schoolmaster until Christ. This is very freeing to understand, Ventura. Because some people tend to think that God wants to keep his children feeling condemned! No, he doesn't! He wants his children to rejoice in that they're free! Others of us even in our parenting should be encouraged in this, too. We don't use the Law to change our children's hearts. Instead, when they pursue sin, we state the reality and we pray that they're pointed to the Lord. They need *him!*

Don't give the Law saving power. It can't. Therefore, sin springs on it and uses it as a launching pad for greater sin and condemnation. This point is further reiterated in verses 10-11. Read those verses with me now again: ¹⁰The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. ¹¹For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. ⁶

If the Law can't save, why does it promise life? I mean, think back to Israel in Moses' day. In Leviticus 18:5, Moses writes, ⁵"You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them."⁷ And by "live by them," God is talking about eternal life. In a conversation Jesus had with a student of the Law, the student asked how to inherit eternal life. Jesus asks him about the Law's requirements, which were correct. And, Jesus quotes from Leviticus 18:5 and says, "do this and you will live."

But question, could he "do" the Law? No. Why does the Law make these promises? To see our need for Jesus. The commandments end up proving to be death to us. This all reminds me of the 16th century Christian, Martin Luther. Being so oppressed over all the commandments, laws and rules; he felt God was playing games with humanity. He ended up hating the word "righteousness" because he knew no human could attain to it. Yet, Luther continued to try. He would be in confessional for 5 hours or more a day, confessing all sorts of sins. And, when people would tell him that he needs to lighten up, he knew they were fools who didn't understand the righteous requirement of the Law.

⁶ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:10–11.

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Le 18:5.

The Law brings death. If you haven't trusted Jesus, the Law ultimately brings condemnation every step of the way. Luther ended up stating that he even hated God at times because of the Law's stringent demands. And no matter how hard he tried to atone for sins, he still felt the weight.

But finally, Luther came upon a glorious truth. What the Law could not do because of sinful flesh, God did through Jesus. God can give his righteousness to people through faith! So we see that while the Law itself is good in that it highlights what's right and what's wrong. It is not good in the sense that it can save. It can't. It makes a promise *only* to those who are perfect! And there is no perfect one other than Jesus. But Jesus lived the righteous life and died the death of condemnation in the place of sinners so that we can be honest about our sinfulness and can experience God's cleansings waves over us, bringing freedom from death and condemnation.

So, just in case we miss the picture, Paul emphasizes the truth again in verse 11. Sin seized the opportunity, deceived and killed. I don't want to beat a dead horse here, but instead, I hope that I clarify at this point. Sin deceives and kills. The Law is good to show us our sin! We need to understand it, admit it, confess it. But what does it mean to deceive and kill? I think it relates to the idea of covetousness.

Do you realize that in Romans 7, Paul seems to say that coveting is the essence of all sinfulness? Why is coveting so bad? Because coveting seeks to play God. It was there in the beginning with Adam and Eve. "Did God really say you couldn't have that?" And the heart of the issue is that they wanted to be like God. They coveted in order to be their own little sovereigns. Then we see coveting is all throughout Israel's history. They grumped and complained. Coveting is a declaration, "I want what I want." Coveting's song is "I did it *my way*."

And you could say, "Why do I covet? I mean, I know I'm not God! Maybe if I can just figure it out, I'll get a handle on it." Years ago, I remember hearing a story that an early church Christian named Augustine shared. He wrote this: Near our vineyard there was a pear tree, loaded with fruit, though the fruit was not particularly attractive either in color or taste. I and some other ... youths conceived the idea of shaking the pears off this tree and carrying them away. We set out late at night ... and stole all the fruit that we could carry. And this was not to feed ourselves; we may have tasted a few, but then we threw the rest to the pigs. Our real pleasure was simply in doing something that was not allowed. . . . **Once I had taken them I threw them away, and all I tasted in them was my own iniquity, which I enjoyed very much**" (as quot. in Keller, pp. 162-163). We want to be our own sovereigns, and God's Law tells us we're not in control. And, we don't want that! So, we jump at the opportunity to try to steal control. We seek to usurp the God of the galaxies! That's traitorous.

So, why do we like to covet? Because we're sinners? The Law shows us that, and the Law also reveals to us that we can't rescue us from our insatiable craving for sin. Sure, we can change behavior. We can move from coveting after bodies to coveting the American Dream. But we cannot be rescued from coveting unless Jesus rescues us. Through faith in him, we become dependent on him. We lay ourselves at his feet in forgiveness that we sought to be gods. We sought the control. We submit to his Rule and his ways. And he promises to be with us each step of the way.

So, let me ask you. Is the Law sin? Absolutely not. Paul writes in verse 12, "**¹²So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.**"⁸ **The Law is good and it shows us who we really are:**

⁸ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 7:12.

immensely sinful. Sin then hijacks the Law and uses it as a platform for greater sin and condemnation. But remember what Paul wrote in chapter 5. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. I pray you look to Christ! I pray you seek the glory of the Lord and his kindness in Jesus to find life and forgiveness.

And, if you do trust Jesus, I hope you realize the purpose of the Law in your life now. The Law doesn't make you more right with God. Instead, it continually points you to not only your need for Jesus, but also points you to the One who has promised to help you in your need and to grow in gospel-birthed obedience to the Father!

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