

Sin and the Law

Introduction

Romans 7:7-13 seems to be a very intricate, complex, and difficult argument to understand at first reading. But you shall find it is not as we study it together. In that passage the apostle Paul says, *"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin but by the law; for I had not known coveting, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of coveting. For apart from the law sin is dead. For I was alive apart from the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died. And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me. Wherefore, the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good. Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good--that sin by the commandment might become exceedingly sinful."*

A. The Heart of the Gospel

1. The destiny of man

Before we specifically examine the text, let me remind you of the greatest news ever known: That Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. Because of sin, every member of the human race is bound for hell. That's because every person born into this world lives in rebellion against God and His divine law. And God, being a God of justice, must require punishment for such violation. Since man's crimes against God are so severe, there's no way he can ever pay for them.

2. The desire of God

Although hell is the destiny of man, it is not the desire of God's heart. Second Peter 3:9 says God is *"not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."* He sent Jesus Christ into the world to pay the debt that all men and women owe, to die the death that all should die, and to bear the sin that all should bear. He ordained that when a man or woman believes in Jesus Christ and accepts His work on their behalf, their sin is forgiven forever and they become partakers of His divine nature. So, every believing sinner is equipped to spend eternity in heaven with God. That man can be made right with God and escape judgment is the best news that ever came into the world.

B. The Heart of the Epistle

The apostle Paul made justification by faith (that is, that men are made right with God through believing in the Lord Jesus Christ) the theme of his epistle to the Romans. It is also the central doctrine of the Christian faith.

1. Established

In Romans 1:16-17 Paul gives us the theme of the epistle: *"I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the [Gentile]. For in it is the righteousness of God revealed*

from faith to faith; as it is written, The just shall live by faith." The gospel tells us that salvation is available by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

2. Explained

a. The scriptural context

Having established the theme, Paul unfolds the need for justification in the rest of chapters 1 and 2. He describes how it occurs in chapters 3 and 4. In chapters 5 through 8 he shows us the results of being justified by God's grace. One objection he anticipates in his discussion is if you preach that works have no part in salvation or sanctification, then you're saying that people can do whatever they want and grace will cover everything. But Paul points out that justification by grace, rather than leading to license, leads to holiness because inherent in justification is the impartation of divine life.

Grace and faith are key words that Paul uses in chapters 3-- 6 of Romans:

- 1) Romans 3--Verse 22 says *"the righteousness of God ... is by **faith**."* Verse 24 says we're *"justified freely by his **grace**."* Verse 25 says *"God hath set forth [Jesus Christ] to be a covering through **faith**."* Verse 28 says, *"Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by **faith**."* Verse 30 says, *"Seeing it is one God, who shall justify the circumcision by **faith**, and the uncircumcision through **faith**."*
- 2) Romans 4--Verses 3-5 say, *"What saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of **grace**, but of debt, But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his **faith** is counted for righteousness."* Verse 11 says Abraham *"received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the **faith** which he had."* Verse 13 says, *"The promise that he should be the heir of the world was not to Abraham, or to his seed, through the law, but through the righteousness of **faith**."* Verse 16 says, *"Therefore, it is of **faith**, that it might be **grace**."* Verse 20 says Abraham *"staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in **faith**."*
- 3) Romans 5--Verses 1-2 say we're *"justified by **faith** [and] we have access by **faith** into this **grace**."* Verses 20-21 say, *"The law entered, that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, **grace** did much more abound; that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might **grace** reign through righteousness unto eternal life."*
- 4) Romans 6--Verse 23 says *"the wages of sin is death, but the gift [**grace**] of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord."*

b. The historical context

1) Objecting to lawlessness

Paul's message of grace and faith was unique in its historical context. The Jewish people had been told that you please God by obeying His rules and conforming to His standards. Although that is true, they had gradually come to

believe that you must work your way into His good favor. So when Paul preached that salvation is a free gift that can't be earned because it is received by faith (which itself is a gift of God-- Eph. 2:8-9), his message was very hard for many of the Jewish people to accept. They were committed to the law of God and to a works-righteousness system. They accused Paul of advocating lawlessness. Since they believed the law procured and maintained a person's holiness, they assumed that if it was taken away, then the safeguard to holiness would be eliminated. All they could see was society running amuck under Paul's teaching of grace.

2) Obeying the laws

a) The rabbinical corollaries

The law of God is commonly divided into three parts: the ceremonial laws, the social laws, and the moral laws. The Jews believed you had to keep all of those laws to become holy. By the time of Paul's ministry, the rabbis had summed up all of the Old Testament law into 613 commandments. But it was almost impossible to keep them all, especially since they had been embellished beyond the intention of God.

The rabbis divided the 613 laws into mandatory things that had to be done and prohibitory things that ought not to be done. They taught there were 248 things you had to do that related to God, the Temple, sacrifices, vows, rituals, donations, sabbaths, diet, festivals, community, idolatry, war, social issues, family, judicial matters, legal rights, and slaves.

The 365 prohibitory laws related to idolatry, historical lessons, blasphemy, Temple worship, sacrifices, priests, diet, vows, agriculture, loans, business, slaves, justice, and relationships. Those laws had all kinds of corollaries and adjunct laws to the point that keeping the law was a burdensome way of life. That's why in Acts 15:10 Peter mentioned that the law was "*a yoke ... which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear.*"

b) The scriptural consequences

Scripture itself instilled in the Jewish people the need to obey the law. Deuteronomy 27:26 says, "*Cursed be he who confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them.*" The next chapter warns of severe consequences for not obeying: "*But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day, that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee. Cursed shalt thou be in the city, and cursed shalt thou be in the field. Cursed shall be thy basket and thy kneading-trough. Cursed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy land, the increase of thy cows, and the flocks of thy sheep. Cursed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and cursed shalt thou be when thou goest out. The Lord shall send upon thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest thine hand to do, until thou be destroyed, and until thou perish quickly, because of the wickedness of thy doings, whereby thou hast forsaken me. The Lord shall make the pestilence cling unto thee, until he have consumed thee from off the land, to which thou goest to possess it. The Lord shall smite thee with a consumption, and with a fever, and with an*

inflammation, and with an extreme burning, and with the sword, and with blight, and with mildew; and they shall pursue thee until thou perish" (28:15-22). That's a fairly comprehensive curse, isn't it? And that's not even the end of it. That kind of cursing goes on through the rest of the chapter, extending its way through every conceivable dimension of life. Is it any wonder the Jewish people felt so bound to the law of God? It was, after all, the law of God, and neither the law or its author was open to debate.

The apostle Paul alludes to the burden of the law in his epistles. He too must have borne that burden, having once been a zealous Pharisee (Phil. 3:5-6). In Galatians 3:10 he says, "*As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse.*" Those who are trying to please God by keeping the law are under a curse. Why? Because no one can keep the law perfectly. In the same verse he quotes Deuteronomy 27:26: "*Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.*" That tells us Paul understood what Deuteronomy was saying. He was typical of the rest of the Jewish people who were zealous for the law.

c) The theological confrontation

When Paul said that no one shall be justified by the deeds of the law (Gal. 3:11), he was stomping on the theological toes of those who found that conclusion difficult to accept. He confronted them with the utter futility of trying to keep the law, stating in the same verse that "*no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident; for the just shall live by faith*" (a quotation of Hab. 2:4). So the Old Testament said that man was cursed if he failed to keep the law. James knew that. He said, "*Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all*" (James 2:10).

* **Why Did God Give Israel a Law They Couldn't Keep?**

God gave Israel a law they couldn't keep to show them how sinful they and all mankind are, and to drive them to come to God by faith. But they didn't want to come by faith. Content with their self-righteousness, they thought they could merit God's favor on their own. So they were all under a curse.

To break one law of God is not like breaking one spoke in a bicycle wheel--you can break a spoke and keep on riding. It's more like breaking a pane of glass: you break it in one spot and the pane shatters. Because Israel couldn't keep the law and refused to come to God by faith, they were under the curse of the law.

Romans 6:14 is a key verse: "*Sin shall not have dominion over you; for ye are not under the law but under grace.*" That means believers are no longer under the curse of the law. Christ was made a curse for us that we might be set free from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13).

At this point a question naturally arises: If the law can't save us (Rom. 3-4) or sanctify us (Rom. 5-6), and is nothing but a curse, then what good is it? If we're saved and made holy by our union with Christ, what place does the law have? Why

did God go to such extremes to give such a complex law? Paul answers those questions in Romans 7.

* **The Role of the Law**

Paul has been building up to an explanation of the law's place since chapter 3 when he first mentioned that the law couldn't save us. Chapters 3 through 8 give us a comprehensive view of the law and its role. In this section we learn some important things about the law:

- It can't save us (Rom. 3-5).
- It can't make us holy (Rom. 6)
- It can't condemn us if we're in Christ (Rom. 7:1-6).
- It can convict us of sin (Rom. 7:7-13).
- It can't deliver us from sin (Rom. 7:14-25).
- It can be fulfilled in the power of the indwelling Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

Lesson

Romans 7:7-13 answers the following question: If the law can't save us or sanctify us, what good is it? This passage teaches us it is good because it can convict us in four ways.

I. THE LAW REVEALS SIN (v. 7)

A. The Accusation Answered (v. 7a)

"What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay"

Paul anticipates the Jewish antagonist who's going to say, "You've just said we're dead to the law, which has been set aside. If we're out from under the authority of that which was trying to condemn us, are you saying that the law God gave to His people was evil?"

Paul's answer is the strongest negative in the Greek language: "God forbid" ($\mu\epsilon\ \gamma\epsilon\nu\omicron\iota\tau\omicron$). He is saying, "No, no, no! The law cannot be considered evil under any circumstance. That would be an utter absurdity!" In verse 7 he goes on to say he would not have recognized his sin unless the law had revealed it.

If there weren't any law, there wouldn't be any sin. For example, without a sign saying "Keep Off the Grass" there would be nothing wrong with standing on the grass. Similarly, if there's no law about driving a certain speed, you can legally drive as fast as your car will take you. However, once the standard is established, you are responsible for violating it. Breaking God's law reveals sin.

1. Romans 3:20--*"Therefore, by the deeds of the law there shall be no flesh be justified in his sight; for by the law is the knowledge of sin."* That's a very important truth. The law simply shows us what sin is by God's definition.
2. Romans 4:15--*"Where no law is, there is no transgression."*

3. Romans 5:13--*"Sin is not imputed when there is no law."*

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 say the same thing: Without a law you haven't got any sin. So when God reveals the law, we immediately are measured by the standard and are found to be sinners.

B. The Externals Examined (v. 7b)

"I had not known sin but by the law"

1. The experience of Paul's conviction

Paul is saying, "I never knew the full extent of my sin until I understood the full extent of the law. When I understood the law, I felt convicted of sin." Paul's use of the first-person singular means he is giving a personal testimony of what was going on in his own heart. I believe the recognition of his personal sinfulness was part of the convicting work of the Spirit of God on the Damascus Road and the days of blindness that followed. That experience forced him to come to grips with his own life, and see his need for a Savior.

I think it's important that Scripture records that part of Paul's spiritual journey because if we knew only the confrontation on the Damascus Road, we might think he was saved apart from his own will. If he was persecuting Christians at one point, and then suddenly buried in the dirt and ordained to the ministry, you wouldn't know whether there was any personal conviction involved in his salvation. But Romans 7:7-13 reveals that God was progressively convicting Paul's heart of sin as he began to see the law of God for what it is.

2. The extent of Paul's tradition

For a long time Paul thought he knew all about the law of God. He was a Pharisee and had spent his life trying to keep the law. He had previously been in the category of people he later described in Romans 10:2-3 as having *"a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge... being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness."* He was like the Pharisee in Luke 18, who said, *"God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are.... I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess"* (vv. 11-12). Self-righteous types assume that God must have been thrilled to have them around.

a. Galatians 1:13-14--In writing to the Galatians, Paul said, *"Ye have heard of my manner of life in time past in the Jews' religion how that beyond measure I profited in the Jews' religion, above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers."* Paul's reputation as a zealous Jewish leader had spread far and wide. He once boasted of his religious zeal in keeping the law.

b. Philippians 3:5-6--Paul gives a similar testimony with more detail, stating he was *"circumcised on the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; as touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless."* Do you want to know how he could say that? The same way the rich young man could admit to the Lord that he had kept all the law since his youth (Matt. 19:20). Such people have a limited understanding of the

law of God and its internal implications. They reinterpret it to accommodate their sinfulness so they can maintain the appearance of external righteousness and assume they are acceptable to God.

However when Paul recognized his spiritual depravity, he admitted that mere external righteousness is of no more value than manure (v. 8). Once he got a view of where the real problem was--on the inside, where the law really needed to be applied, he saw what he was.

C. The Internalization Implied (v. 7c)

"For I had not known coveting [Gk., επιθυμια, "lusting" or "evil desire"], except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet."

Romans 7:7-13 records the conviction Paul experienced before he was saved. Note what illustration he chose: of all the Ten Commandments, Paul selected a commandment that relates solely to a person's motivation. Coveting isn't an external act; it's something that happens internally. Paul was saying, "When I realized that the law of God had to do not just with my acts but with my attitudes, like lusting for what isn't mine, I realized that all my self-righteous actions were worthless because I was filled with vile desires." That's true conviction of sin.

1. Concentrating on externals

a. Superficial conviction

When some people recognize their need to get their life right, they limit the changes to externals like lying, getting drunk, or getting angry. It's good to avoid those things, but they don't understand that the real issue of sin is internal. They might be able to control their actions through means other than grace. By going to Alcoholics Anonymous they might stop their drinking problem. By going to a psychologist or hypnotist, they might stop their lying. There are many ways to reform one's actions. However the only way the evil desire of a person's heart will be cleared up is by divine transformation.

b. Sincere conviction

The law was intended to stimulate that transformation by bringing about conviction. That's why there aren't just external commands, but internal ones as well. They hit with the greatest impact. Not only was that Paul's experience, but it is for all who come to true conviction. I believe that when you come to Jesus Christ, you realize that not only do you have trouble controlling the outside, but you even have worse trouble controlling the inside.

Theologian Charles Hodge said, "The law, although it cannot secure either the justification or sanctification of men, performs an essential part in the economy of salvation. It enlightens conscience, and secures its verdict against a multitude of evils, which we should not otherwise have recognized as sins. It arouses sin, increasing its power, and making it, both in itself and in our consciousness, exceedingly sinful. It therefore produces that state of mind which is a necessary preparation for the reception of the gospel Conviction of sin, that is, an adequate knowledge of its nature, and a sense of its power over us, is an indispensable part of evangelical religion. Before the gospel can be embraced as a means of deliverance from sin, we must feel we are involved

in corruption and misery" (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.], p. 226).

2. Condemning externals

Apart from the law, people don't recognize their sinfulness. It's not unusual to hear someone say, "I'm not such a bad guy. God certainly wouldn't send a good person like me to hell; I do my very best. I try to do what's right and obey the laws." Many people live under that illusion. But that must be changed if you're to be saved. Even though on the outside you may have control of your life and look like the citizen of the century, in the words of Jesus you *"are like whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones"* (Matt. 23:27).

Let's examine Matthew 5 to see how our Lord proclaimed the convicting message of salvation to His Jewish audience. In verses 21-22 He says, *"Ye have heard it that it was said by them of old, Thou shalt not kill and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of judgment. But I say unto you that whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of judgment."* The rabbinic tradition had lowered God's standards to fulfilling a bunch of external requirements, but Jesus reinstated God's intention by saying that the attitude of hatred is as much a sin as the act of murder. Similarly He said, *"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old, Thou shalt not commit adultery; but I say unto you that whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart"* (vv. 27-28). In verses 33-34 Jesus says, *"Ye have heard that it hath been said by them of old, Thou shalt not perjure thyself ... but I say unto you, Swear not at all."* Jewish tradition had degenerated to the point that if a person swore by certain things, he didn't have to mean it. It was another indication of the externalized religion they had created. Therefore, the Lord identified the root problem as going beyond acts like murder and adultery, for He focused on the internal sins like hatred and lust.

In bringing men to conviction, Jesus had to show them that the law of God touches the inside of man, not just the outside. That's why when asked by a lawyer how to inherit eternal life, Jesus taught that he must love the Lord God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind and his neighbor as himself (Luke 10:25-28). Does it sound easy to love God with your whole being by seeking His glory in everything you do and to seek the good will and benefit of others? Those two simple concepts summarize the whole law, and place the responsibility inside.

In Romans 7, we learn that Paul internalized of God's law around the time of his conversion. When he saw the wretchedness of his covetous heart, he knew what a sinner he was. He saw that the law condemned the sinful desires of his heart. Likewise, people who think they're moral must look deeper and discover the wretchedness of their hearts before they can come to Christ. So the intention of the law is show sin for what it really is--deep corruption of the inner nature of man.

II. THE LAW AROUSES SIN (v. 8)

"But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of coveting. For apart from the law sin is dead."

A. The Dormancy of Sin (v. 8b)

"Apart from the law sin is dead."

That verse is not saying that sin doesn't exist, because we know it does. The idea is that until you see the law of God in its fullness, sin is dead to you in the sense that it doesn't overwhelm you. You are not fully aware of it. Only when the law of God floods your heart and shows you what sin really is can you come to Christ.

Some people justify their sin by admitting that it's wrong to commit atrocities like murder. Perhaps they point to the sin they find in other people's lives. They may even want to improve their own lives. But they don't understand the profound depth of sin as something that will condemn them to eternal hell. They don't see the wretchedness of sin until someone comes before them with the law of God.

B. The Development of Sin (v. 8a)

"But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of coveting."

The Greek term translated "occasion" ($\alpha\phi\omicron\rho\mu\epsilon$) was used in a military sense to refer to a base of operations from which an attack is launched. Sin is launched by the law. As soon as a commandment of God enters in, sin takes over.

*** Be a Bad-News Bearer**

The Puritans preached the law before they preached the gospel to bring people to a point of desperation so they could recognize their need for a Savior. You can't waltz people into the Kingdom through positive thinking. You can't merely ask, "Wouldn't you like to be happy and experience peace and joy?" Who wouldn't? Any thinking person would eagerly reply, "Where do I sign?" Unfortunately, they wouldn't even know what they're signing for. In contrast the Bible always presents the bad news about man's vile nature before it offers the good news of salvation. If people try to keep the law and earn their way to heaven without admitting their sin, they'll fall deeper into the curse. In getting out from under the law, they must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and recognize their utter moral bankruptcy before a holy God and their inability to save themselves.

1. The problem identified

The law is not the culprit for man being cursed--sin is. The law does us good by exposing sin. Only then could we see our need for a Savior. We can't preach half the message. Commentator F.F. Bruce writes, "The villain of the piece is Sin; Sin seized the opportunity afforded it when the law showed me what was right and what was wrong" (*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963], P. 150). Our real problem is sin, not the law. That is what explains the weakness of the law to save us. The law cannot save us because we cannot keep it, and we cannot keep it because of indwelling sin.

Galatians 3:21 says, *"Is the law, then, against the promises of God? God forbid; for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law."* If keeping the law was designed to result in salvation, then it would have been able to impart righteousness. But it couldn't, not

because there was something wrong with the law, but because there was something wrong with the people.

2. The problem intensified

Not only does the law of God reveal sin for what it is so you become more aware of its existence, but also it stimulates and increases your desire to do what is wrong. If you emphatically tell a person not to do something, he is much more tempted to do it than if you had said nothing. It's like reverse psychology.

Bible scholar John Murray, in his book *Principles of Conduct*, says that the more the light of the law shines in our depraved hearts, the more the enmity of our minds is aroused to opposition, proving that the mind of the flesh is not subject to the law of God ([Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957], p. 185). When confronted with the holy law of God, man doesn't find himself eager to obey it; he finds himself aggravated to an even greater extent to disobey it. That shows how depraved we are. In Romans 7:14-25 the apostle Paul speaks from the perspective of a believer. He is naturally drawn to do right-- he realizes that something in him longs to obey the law of God, yet he is aggravated by that same law to do wrong. So the law reveals and arouses sin.

III. THE LAW DEVASTATES THE SINNER (vv. 9-11)

A. The Process of Devastation (v. 9)

"For I was alive apart from the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died."

1. Explained

Paul doesn't mean he was spiritually alive before the law became clear to him; he means he was doing fine. He was content with his self-righteous life. But then when he was exposed to the convicting power of the law, he died in the sense that everything he hoped in was shattered. He lost his sense of security and self-satisfaction. He was devastated when he saw the real extent of God's law and recognized that his own sinfulness made it impossible for him to save himself. In terms of the Beatitudes Paul was poor in spirit and mournful over his sin (Matt. 5:3-5). He recognized he was "without strength" (Rom. 5:6) and in need of a divine physician (Matt. 9:12). He was searching for a way out of the horrendous guilt that came as a result of being exposed to the law.

* **How to Evaluate the Genuineness of Your Salvation**

You evaluate your salvation not by your reaction to God's love, but by your reaction to God's law. It's not a matter of feeling good about yourself, but of feeling bad about yourself. Do others a favor and tell them that. We demonstrate that we truly love others when we care enough to confront their sin. That's why we have to reaffirm the law of God. God wants the law to devastate the sinner by knocking him flat on his back in a helpless condition.

2. Exemplified

I remember reading of an experiment in which scientists discovered that when they filled a balloon with warm water and brought it near a coiled rattlesnake, the snake would feel the heat of the balloon and strike it, releasing its poisonous venom. In the same way as the balloon provided occasion for release of the poison, the law of God provides release for the venom of man's sin.

In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan pictures the law's function of aggravating the sinner. The pilgrim, Christian, is taken into a large room, which represents the heart. The room is full of dust, symbolizing sin. When a man with a broom, representing the law, begins to sweep, he stirs up so much dust that Christian is almost suffocated in there ([Springdale, Penn.: Whitaker House, 1981], p. 31). The law does just that: it enters your life and stirs up sin with the good intention of enabling you to see what a sinner you are, so that you might seek a remedy in Jesus Christ.

B. The Purpose of the Commandments (v. 10)

"And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death."

The law was given to provide blessedness in life by leading those who observed it to a full, meaningful, and joyous life. If a person accepts and applies the wisdom of God, he will live a long, peaceful life (Prov. 3:1-2). God abundantly blesses obedience by enriching the quality of a person's life. The law of God was ordained to produce a blessed life of godliness with contentment (1 Tim. 6:6). It was designed to regulate men in the path of righteousness and thus to promote life.

However it cannot accomplish that purpose in an unsaved person because he doesn't have the ability to obey the law and therefore receive its benefits of blessing. So Paul was saying that the law, instead of giving him a rich and meaningful life, devastated him.

In what sense can the law give life? If you're a Christian--you love the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit dwells within you-- the Spirit will help you fulfill the law. Romans 8:4 says God designed *"that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit."* The law brings life in this sense: if you obey God in the power of the Spirit (which you can do only if you're a Christian), God will bless and prosper your life as He pours out His grace upon it. He will enable you to live life to its fullest, a life characterized by happiness and holiness. But when God's law confronts an unregenerate person, all it does is show him how evil he is, and therefore makes him miserable. Unsaved people cannot expect to receive salvation or sanctification from the law. That was the devastating frustration Paul once experienced. The law of God revealed that what he once thought was valuable in life was only dung or refuse, in the terminology of Philippians 3:8.

C. The Deception of Sin (v. 11)

"For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it slew me."

1. The experience of Paul in particular

Paul reiterates that sin killed him when the law convicted him. He had been deceived into thinking he was blameless as he went about persecuting Christians in his zeal for God. He was a member of the religious leadership of Israel and

probably assumed God was pleased with him. In today's terminology, he thought he had his act together. But then he was confronted with the reality of God's holy law. He looked inside of himself and saw the evil in his heart. He realized that all the religious things he had been doing couldn't help him so he threw himself on the mercy of Jesus Christ.

Sin deceived him in that it led him to expect one thing while he was experiencing another. He thought that if he was righteous in himself, he'd find true blessing and purpose in life. But all he got was the misery, unhappiness, disillusionment, disappointment of sin.

2. The expectations of people in general

The world is filled with people like what Paul was. They are madly pursuing a religion that promotes self-righteousness through various rules and rituals. They may prayerfully repeat certain formulas, light candles, visit shrines, or attend seminars. Many people belong to religions that teach if they do certain things, live a good life, and don't do prohibited things, they will experience blessing in this life and earn the right to enter heaven, attain to godhood, or some other reward after death. Such people are deceived. If they examined their hearts, they might realize that they're not alive at all, and that the promises their religious system has made to them will remain unfulfilled. Sin deceives them into thinking they can find happiness apart from God's truth, but all they find is misery, unhappiness, and death.

Paul once thought all desirable spiritual goals were available through the law, but when he learned the truth, he knew he had been deceived. Millions are similarly deceived. The deceitfulness of sin makes people think they can please God and gain His blessing by their good works alone. But that is a lie.

Scripture warns us of the deceitfulness of sin. Ephesians 4:22 says, *"Put off concerning the former manner of life the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts."* Hebrews 3:13 says, *"Exhort one another daily, while it is called Today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin."*

IV. THE LAW REFLECTS THE SINFULNESS OF SIN (vv. 12-13)

A. The Character of the Law (v. 12)

"Wherefore, the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good."

How can the law be holy, just, and good since Paul just said it arouses sin and devastates the sinner? Paul's answer is the key to this chapter. He tells us the law is spiritual (v. 14) and good (v. 16), and that he delights in the law" (v. 22). There is nothing wrong with the law. If the law reveals sin, it isn't the law that is at fault. If a person is convicted for murder and given the death penalty, do you blame the law for convicting him? No! It isn't even the lawyers, the judge, or the jury that ultimately sentences him; it's the law. The purpose of a court is to uphold the law. Anyone who defies the law is who is at fault.

1. It is holy

The law is as pure as God is pure because God is pure. Since God is perfect, it follows logically that the standard He reveals will also be perfect.

2. It is just
That means the law is equitable, fair, or right. There's nothing wrong or unjust about the law.

3. It is good
That means the law promotes blessing. But how could the law, which has caused sin to flourish, promote the good of man? Because where sin flourishes or abounds, grace abounds that much more (Rom. 5:20). The law reveals we are sinners in need of a Savior. When we run to the Savior, we find grace.

Psalm 19 is a marvelous text on the law: *"The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward"* (vv. 7-11). The law of God has a wonderful purpose: It converts the soul, gives wisdom, and reveals the truth. It's not the law that's at fault; it's the man.

B. The Cause of Death (v. 13)

"Was then that which is good made death unto me? God forbid. But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good--that sin by the commandment might become exceedingly sinful."

So does the law deserve the blame for our sin? We've established that when a criminal is convicted, the law is not to blame. The law simply exposes sin. The law isn't what is deadly; sin is. The law was given to produce abundant life. Just because man can't live up to it doesn't mean it is bad. Paul here is emphasizing that the law reveals sin. The phrase *"but sin that it might appear sin"* tells us sin's true character is exposed when you really understand the law of God. That is why we must preach against sin.

When the law unmask our sin, it brings about death by showing us how far short we fall of God's perfect standards. That leads the thinking man to echo the words of Paul: *"Oh, wretched man that I am!"* (Rom. 7:24). Or, in the words of the tax collector in Luke 18, *"God be merciful to me a sinner"* (v. 13).

Paul's argument is powerful. The law is holy, just, and good even though it reveals sin, aggravates it, and uses sin to devastate the sinner. It demonstrates the exceeding sinfulness of sin. If sin can use the law of God--which is holy, just, and good--to produce such terrible effects, twisting and perverting the purest thing there is, it must certainly be treacherous. But the law is not at fault; sin is. Men are so evil that instead of realizing the holy purpose of God's law, they oppose it and are deceived into thinking that they can indulge in sin without consequence. In stark contrast are the good work of the law in driving us to despair leading to salvation, and the utter sinfulness of sin in using something as holy as the law of God to work death in us.

Conclusion

In Galatians 3 Paul says, "*Wherefore, then, serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed [Messiah] should come*" (v. 19). The law was given that men might face their sin and recognize their need for a Savior.

Paul continues, "*Is the law, then, against the promises of God? God forbid The scripture [i.e., the law], hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore, the law was our schoolmaster [tutor] to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith*" (vv. 21-24). The main purpose of the law was to bring us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.

Robert Murray McCheyne died in 1843 at the age of 30, but left a lasting mark on Christendom. He wrote the following poem entitled "Jehovah Tsidkenu," which means "The Lord our Righteousness" in Hebrew (*Memoirs of McCheyne*, Andrew A. Bonar, ed. [Chicago: Moody, 1947], p. 444:

I once was a stranger to grace and to God,
I know not my danger, and felt not my load;
Though friends spoke in rapture of Christ on the tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu was nothing to me.
I oft read with pleasure, to soothe or engage,
Isaiah's wild measure and John's simple page;
But even when they pictured the blood-sprinkled tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu seemed nothing to me.
Like tears from the daughters of Zion that roll,
I wept when the waters went over His soul,
Yet thought not that my sins had nailed to the tree,
Jehovah Tsidkenu--'twas nothing to me.
When free grace awoke me by light from on high,
Then legal fears shook me, I trembled to die;
No refuge, no safety in self could I see--
Jehovah Tsidkenu my Savior must be.
My terrors all vanished before the sweet name;
My guilty fear banished, with boldness I came
To drink at the fountain, life-giving and free--
Jehovah Tsidkenu is all things to me.
Jehovah Tsidkenu! my treasure and boast,
Jehovah Tsidkenu! I ne'er can be lost;
In Thee shall I conquer by flood and by field--
My cable, my anchor, my breastplate and shield!
Even treading the valley, the shadow of death,
This "watchword" shall rally my faltering breath;
For while from life's fever my God sets me free,
Jehovah Tsidkenu my death-song shall be.

Robert Murray McCheyne experienced the same conviction that the apostle Paul did. When exposed to the light of God's law, he died a ruinous death. But out of the ashes came a redemptive faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The law cannot save us. The law cannot sanctify us. But the law can convict us of sin and lead us to Christ.

There's some instruction here for Christians also. When you came to Christ, you came because you saw your sin for what it was and cried out to Him. Know that the law still has that function in our lives. We need constant exposure to the holy standards of God so we can identify the sin in our lives and deal with it--not to maintain our salvation, but our fellowship with God. Only then will we experience the full blessing that belongs to God's children. As you study the Word of God, let it remind you of the standard so that you may regularly cry out in humble repentance before God.

When the psalmist said, *"Thy word have I hidden in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee"* (Ps. 119:11), he may have been indicating that he regularly exposed himself to God's law so he would recognize the sin in his life and turn from it. May we follow his example.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What is the greatest news ever known?
2. Although hell is man's destiny, what is God's desire? Support your answer with Scripture.
3. What allows a sinner to spend eternity with God?
4. What doctrine is the main theme of the book of Romans?
5. What does justification by grace lead people to and why?
6. Identify two key words Paul uses consistently in Romans 3-6.
7. Why was Paul's message of grace and faith unique in its immediate historical context?
8. What did Jewish people accuse Paul of?
9. What are three parts of God's law? How did the rabbis divide the law? Why did the Jewish people feel compelled to keep that tradition?
10. According to Scripture, what were the consequences for failing to observe God's law?
11. Why are those who try to please God and gain salvation by keeping the law under a curse?
12. Explain why God gave Israel a law they couldn't keep.
13. Why are believers no longer under the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13)?
14. Match the particular role of the law with the appropriate passage:

It can't condemn us if we're in Christ.

Romans 7:14-25

It can be fulfilled through the Spirit.

Romans 7:1-6

It can't save us.

Romans 6

It can't make us holy.

Romans 3-5

It can't deliver us from sin.

Romans 7:7-13

It can convict us of sin.

Romans 8:1-4

15. What hypothetical question does Romans 7:7-13 provide the answer for (Rom. 7:7)?
16. Can a violation exist without a law prohibiting it? Give an example and support your conclusion with Scripture.
17. We are not to be _____ by the law, but to be _____ by it.
18. Describe Paul's zeal before his conversion.
19. How was it possible for Paul and the rich young ruler of Matthew 19:20 to think they had blamelessly kept the law?
20. What kind of changes do most people make when they want to get their lives right? What is the only way the evil desires of a person's heart will ever be cleaned up?
21. What's the difference between superficial and sincere conviction?
22. What had rabbinical tradition done with God's standards? What did Jesus show the people about God's law?
23. How do some people justify their sin?

24. Why did the Puritans preach about the law before they preached the gospel?
25. The _____ is not the culprit; _____ is (Rom. 7:8).
26. How does the law intensify sin? What does that show about the nature of man?
27. What did Paul mean when he said he "was alive apart from the law once" (Rom. 7:9)?
28. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, what do the room, the dust, and the man with the broom represent?
29. In what sense were God's commandments ordained to bring life? Could they accomplish that purpose in an unsaved person? Explain.
30. How did sin deceive Paul?
31. What does the deceitfulness of sin make people think they can do?
32. How does Paul describe/characterize the law in Romans 7:12? Explain why the law doesn't deserve the blame for our sin?
34. Explain how the law promotes man's blessedness.
35. According to Galatians 3:19-24, why was the law given (see p. 19)?

Pondering the Principles

1. If you were asked why you should be allowed to enter heaven, what would you say? Have you let Jesus Christ pay the debt for your sin or are you trying to pay that debt yourself by hoping your good works will save you? If you have already believed the good news that Jesus did for you what you yourself could never do, are you sharing that good news with others?
2. The world is eager to believe that God is loving, but not so willing to believe that His holy standards are far higher than man can reach. Proud man is not naturally willing to humble himself before a holy God, yet conviction of sin is an essential part of the salvation process. Are you including the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man in your presentation of the gospel to others? Pray that those you share with would see the depth of their sin, which extends beyond the actions to the heart, and turn to Christ.
3. God blesses obedience to Him by enriching the quality of a person's life. Do you see evidence of God's blessing in your life? If so, meditate on Psalm 103 and give the thanks for all he has given you. If, however, you find an absence of blessing, consider whether any disobedience to God's Word has contributed to that result. If you feel like you're stuck in a spiritual rut--spinning your wheels but going nowhere--meditate on John 15:1-11 and evaluate whether you are abiding in Christ.
4. Christians need to constantly expose themselves to God's holy standards so they can recognize sin in their lives. Are you reading God's Word on a regular basis? Are you going to church to hear the Word taught? Are you evaluating your life by God's standards, or are you comparing yourself with others? Make sure you confess your sins as soon as you become aware of them so you may continue to experience the blessings that belongs to God's children. Read Psalm 32 and determine whether you can identify with David's insights.