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WHY GOD GAVE THE LAW

Romans 7:7-11

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Romans Lesson 37

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Almost a quarter century ago, philosopher Allan Bloom published his best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind* [Simon & Schuster, 1987]. He began (p. 25):

There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative. If this belief is put to the test, one can count on the students' reaction: they will be uncomprehending. That anyone should regard the proposition as not self-evident astonishes them, as though he were calling into question $2 + 2 = 4$. These are things you don't think about.

The chief virtue that this relativism seeks to inculcate is tolerance or openness. The main enemy of tolerance is the person who thinks that he has the truth or is right in his views. This only "led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point," says Bloom (p. 26), "is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all."

Bloom later (p. 67) reports his students' reaction to his question, "Who do you think is evil?" They immediately respond, "Hitler." They rarely mention Stalin. A few in the early 80's mentioned Nixon, but by the time Bloom wrote the book, Nixon was being rehabilitated. Bloom comments (*ibid.*),

And there it stops. They have no idea of evil; they doubt its existence. Hitler is just another abstraction, an item to fill up an empty category. Although they live in a world in which the most terrible deeds are being performed and they see brutal crime in the streets, they turn aside. Perhaps they believe that evil deeds are performed by persons who, if they got the proper therapy, would not do them again—that there are evil deeds, not evil people.

I cite Bloom because the worldview of the young people that he observed a quarter century ago is now pervasive in our society. And the worldly relativism that minimizes or even eliminates the

concept of sin is not just “out there.” It has flooded into the church. Popular megachurches thrive by making the church “a safe place” for everyone, where no one will be judged and where various types of immorality are relabeled as personal preferences. The “gospel” gets retooled as a way that Jesus can help you succeed and reach your personal goals. If you want your church to grow, you should never mention anything negative, like sin. Rather, tell people how much God loves them because they are so lovable. Build their self-esteem, but never suggest that they are sinners!

But if we are not sinners, then we do not need a Savior who died to bear the penalty of our sin. More than a century ago, Charles Spurgeon lamented (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography, The Early Years* [Banner of Truth], p. 54), “Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Saviour.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones observed (*Romans: The Law: Its Functions and Limits* [Zondervan], p. 151), “The biblical doctrine of sin is absolutely crucial to an understanding of the biblical doctrine of salvation. Whatever we may think, we cannot be right and clear about the way of salvation unless we are right and clear about sin.” And since Romans 7 is one of the most penetrating analyses of sin in all of Scripture, we need to understand Paul’s thought here.

In our text, Paul defends the integrity and righteousness of God’s law against critics who argued that Paul’s teaching implied that the law is sin. “May it never be,” he exclaims (7:7). He exonerates God’s law as holy, righteous, and good (7:12), while showing why God gave the law:

God gave His law to convict us of our sin and bring us to the end of ourselves so that we would flee to Christ for salvation.

Our innate self-righteousness is so entrenched that until the law strips us of it and convicts us of our sin, we will not cast ourselves totally upon Christ. Our culture adds to this by telling us that we’re not sinners. We’re not *worms*, for goodness sake! We’re pretty good folks. We may want to bring Jesus into our lives as a useful coach or helper in our self-improvement program. But to trust Him as our Savior, we have to see the depth of our sin as God’s law exposes it for what it is. That’s what Paul describes here.

We come here to one of the most difficult and controversial sections of Romans. In verses 7-25, Paul dramatically shifts to the first person singular, dropping it again in chapter 8. In 7:7-13, he uses the past tense, but then in 7:14-25 he shifts to the present tense. Scholars debate whether Paul is speaking autobiographically or not. At the crux of this debate is when Paul possibly could have been “alive apart from the law” (7:9). There is also much controversy over whether verses 14-25 describe Paul before he was saved, Paul as a new believer, or Paul as a mature believer. So it’s a very difficult passage, with competent, godly scholars in every camp. I do not claim infallibility as we proceed (not that I *ever* do)!

Paul’s main concern in this chapter is *not* to share his personal experience, but rather to exonerate God’s law from any hint of being evil. He uses his own experience (as I understand it) to show how the law functions to bring conviction of sin, but also how it is powerless to deliver us from sin’s grip. Rather, it drives us to Christ, who alone has the power to save (7:25); and to the indwelling Holy Spirit, who gives us the power to overcome sin (8:2-4). So, let’s try to work through these verses.

1. The law is not sin, but it does reveal our sin (7:7).

Romans 7:7: “What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”

Paul is responding to the charge that critics would bring in reaction to 7:5: “For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.” The Jews believed that God gave the law to give us life and make us holy, but Paul claimed that the Law aroused us to sin, resulting in death. So now he answers this charge: “Is the Law sin?”

After strongly rejecting that slur against his teaching, Paul argues that the law functions to reveal our sin to us. He uses as a personal example the tenth commandment against coveting. This shows that by “the law” Paul mainly had in mind the Ten Commandments as the embodiment of God’s requirements for holy living. Probably he picked the tenth commandment because it is

the only command that *explicitly* condemns evil on the heart level. Jesus pointed out that the commands against murder and adultery (and, by implication, *all* of the commands) go deeper than the outward action. If you're angry at your brother, you have violated the command against murder. If you lust in your heart over a woman, you have committed adultery in God's sight (Matt. 5:21-30). But the command against coveting explicitly goes right to the heart. Coveting concerns your heart's desires, whether you ever act on those desires or not.

When Paul says, "I would not have come to know sin except through the Law," he does not mean that he (or others) do not know sin *at all* apart from the law. He has already said (2:14-15) that Gentiles who do not have the law have the "work of the Law written in their hearts." People sinned from Adam until Moses, even though they did not have the written law (5:12-14).

What Paul means is that the law, especially the tenth commandment focusing on the inward desires, nailed him so that he came to know sin as sin against God. Before his conversion, outwardly Paul was a self-righteous Pharisee. He thought that all of his deeds commended him to God. With regard to the law, he saw himself as "blameless" (Phil. 3:6). But when the Holy Spirit brought the tenth commandment about coveting home to his conscience, Paul realized that he had violated God's holy law. At that point, he came *to know* sin. The commandment made it explicit: "Paul, *you* are a sinner!"

Like Paul before his conversion, most people think that they are basically good. Sure, they know they have their faults. Who doesn't? They're not perfect, but they are good. They excuse even their bad sins, just as Paul excused his violent persecution of the church. After all, it was justified because it was for a good cause.

So guys excuse a little pornography because, "After all, everyone looks at that stuff and I'm not hurting anyone. Besides, I've never cheated on my wife." And they excuse their violent temper because that person had it coming and, "Hey, I didn't hurt him; I just told him off!" People excuse all manner of sin and still think of themselves as basically good people because they have not come to know God's law, especially the law as it confronts our evil desires. At the heart of coveting is the enthronement of self as lord.

Spurgeon ("The Soul's Great Crisis," *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 61:425) compares the sinner who thinks that he is basically good, but won't look at God's law, to a man who thinks he is rich and lives in a lavish manner, but refuses to look at his books. The guy lives in style. When he gets into a financial bind, he takes out a loan, and when that one comes due, he'll meet it with another loan. He says he is all right and he convinces himself that he is all right. At the moment he's living as if he's all right. But does he ever get out his accounts and take stock of his real condition? No, that's boring. We all know where that will end—the man will go bankrupt.

In the same way, Spurgeon says, we may convince ourselves that we are right with God by brushing over our faults as no big deal. We live as if we're good people; all is well. But if we don't examine our true condition in light of God's law, we're heading for eternal bankruptcy. The law reveals our sin. But Paul goes further:

2. The law provokes sinners to sin (7:8).

Romans 7:8: "But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law, sin is dead."

Paul personifies sin as an active force that uses the law to provoke us to commit acts of sin. By *sin*, Paul means sin as a principle and power, not just acts of sin (Lloyd-Jones, p. 120). He repeats the phrase again (7:11), "sin, taking opportunity through the commandment." *Opportunity* was a word used for a military base of operations from which the army launched its campaigns. So sin takes God's holy commandments and uses them to tempt us to violate those commands. It stirs up the rebel in us and makes us want to assert our right to do as we please.

James Boice (*Romans: The Reign of Grace* [Baker], pp. 742-743) tells a story from when he was in sixth grade. The school principal came into his classroom just before lunch and said that he had heard that some students had been bringing firecrackers to school. He went on to warn about the dangers of firecrackers and to say that anyone caught with firecrackers at school would be expelled. Well, Boice didn't own any firecrackers and he hadn't even thought about firecrackers. But when you get to thinking about firecrackers,

it's an intriguing subject. He then remembered that one of his friends had some.

So during his lunch break, he and a friend went by this other friend's house, got a firecracker and returned to school. They went into a cloakroom and planned to light it and pinch it out before it exploded. But the lit fuse burned the fingers of the boy holding it. He dropped it and it exploded with a horrific bang, echoing in that old building with its high ceilings, marble floors, and plaster walls. Before the boys could stagger out of the cloakroom, the principal was out of his office, down the hall, and standing there to greet them. As Boice later sat in the principal's office with his parents, he remembers the principal saying over and over, "I had just told them not to bring any firecrackers to school. I just can't believe it."

But that's how sin operates in the hearts of rebels. It takes God's good and right commandments and entices us to violate them. Sometimes when you read about others sinning or you see it on TV or in a movie, you think, "I'll bet that would be fun!" You know that God forbids it, but probably He just wants to deprive you of some fun. Besides, what will it hurt to try it once? It can't be all that bad. And, I can always get forgiven later. So our sin nature springboards off the commandment to provoke us to sin.

What does Paul mean when he says, "For apart from the Law sin is dead"? Since the fall, everyone is born in sin and is prone to sin. Before the flood, before God gave the law to Moses, the world was so sinful that we read (Gen. 6:5), "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." So how can Paul say, "apart from the Law sin is dead"?

He must have meant, "Sin was comparatively dead; as far as his awareness was concerned it was dead" (Lloyd-Jones, p. 135). In other words, before God brought the law to bear on Paul's conscience, as far as he knew, he wasn't in sin. He saw himself as a good person. The law had not yet revived the sin that lay dormant in his heart. Apart from the law, sin seems to be dead as far as the sinner is concerned. Paul traces the process further:

3. The law, through our failures to keep it, brings us to the end of ourselves (7:9-11).

Romans 7:9-11: "I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me." (I will have to deal with the deceptive aspect of sin in our next study.)

What does Paul mean when he says that he was "once alive apart from the Law"? This is the same apostle who said that before salvation we all were dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1). How could he once be alive? And when was Paul ever "apart from the Law"? He was raised from his youth up in the strictest traditions of Judaism (Acts 22:3; 26:4-5; Phil. 3:5). And, when did sin "kill" him?

As with every verse in this text, there are many opinions. Some say that verse 9 refers to Adam, since he is the only one of whom it rightly could be said that he was once alive apart from the law. Others take it to refer to Israel before the law was given. But most likely, Paul is speaking in a relative sense about his own perception of himself. Once, he thought that he was alive and doing quite well in God's sight. He saw himself as blameless with regard to the righteousness of the law (Phil. 3:6). Like the Pharisee in Jesus' story, he would have prayed (Luke 18:11-12), "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." In that sense, Paul saw himself as once alive apart from the law. He was "apart from the law" in the sense that it had not yet bore down on his conscience to convict him on the heart level.

But then "the commandment came"—"You shall not covet." He had memorized that commandment as a child. He had recited it many times. But the Holy Spirit had not nailed him with it. Lloyd-Jones (p. 134) illustrates this with the experience that we've all had, where we've read a verse many, many times, but we've skipped right over it and kept going. It didn't say anything to us. But then suddenly, it hits you. You see it as you've never seen it before. The commandment came to you.

Then what happens? "Sin became alive and I died" (7:9). At first, Paul thought that he was alive and sin was dead. But then, God's law hit him and he suddenly realized that his sin was very much alive and he was dead. He saw that he was not right with

God, as he formerly had thought. Rather, he was alienated from God and under His judgment. He had thought that he would get into heaven because he was a zealous Jew, and even a notch above other Jews, because he was a Pharisee. But now he realized that he was a blasphemer, a persecutor of God's church, a violent aggressor, and the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:13, 15).

The commandment promised life (7:10) to all who keep it (Lev. 18:5; Ezek. 20:11). Paul thought that he had been keeping it blamelessly. But God shot the arrow of the commandment, "You shall not covet." It hit Paul in the heart and killed him. Spurgeon (61:427) says, "What died in Paul was that which ought never to have lived. It was that great 'I' in Paul ... that 'I' that used to say, 'I thank thee that I am not like other men'—that 'I' that folded its arms in satisfied security—that 'I' that bent its knee in prayer, but never bowed down the heart in penitence—that 'I' died."

Spurgeon goes on (pp. 427-428) to show several other respects in which Paul died. He died in that *he saw he was condemned to die*. He stood guilty before God. He died in that *all his hopes from his past life died*. His good works that he had been relying on came crashing down as worthless. He died in that *all his hopes as to the future died*. He realized that if his salvation depended on his future keeping the law, he was doomed. His past showed that he would be sure to break it again in the future. And, he died in that *all his powers seemed to die*. Formerly, he thought that he could keep the law just fine by his own strength. But now he saw that every thought, word, and desire that did not meet God's holy standard would condemn him. And so *all his hope died*. He felt condemned. The rope was around his neck, as Spurgeon says elsewhere (*Autobiography*, 1:54).

Conclusion

Can you identify with Paul's experience? Has God's holy law hit home to your conscience so that you died to *all* self-righteousness? Has the law killed *all* your hopes that your good works will get you into heaven? If so, that's a good thing, because Jesus didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:32). When you see God's holy standard and how miserably you have violated it over and over, you then see your need for a Savior. And the best news ever is that Jesus Christ came into this world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15)!

James Boice (p. 746) tells of a time when John Gerstner, who was then retired from teaching church history at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, was at a church preaching from Romans. He expounded on the law and used it to expose sin. After the service, a woman came up to him. She held up her hand with her index finger and thumb about a half-inch apart and she said, "Dr. Gerstner, you make me feel this big."

Dr. Gerstner replied, "But madam, that's too big. That's much too big. Don't you know that that much self-righteousness will take you to hell?"

God gave His law to strip us of *all* self-righteousness and to convict us of our sin so that we would flee to Christ to save us. Make sure that your hope for eternal life is in Christ alone!

Application Questions

1. Is there ever a proper place in evangelism to tell sinners that God loves them? If so, when?
2. A popular author says that Christians should not view themselves as sinners, not even as sinners saved by grace, but as saints who occasionally sin. What's wrong with this biblically?
3. To what degree has moral relativism invaded the church? How can we counter and resist this trend?
4. How can we know whether feelings of guilt are coming from the Holy Spirit or from the accuser (Rev. 12:10)?

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