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## THE UTTER SINFULNESS OF SIN

Romans 7:11-13

By

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Romans Lesson 38

## The Utter Sinfulness of Sin Romans 7:11-13

In 1973, psychiatrist Karl Menninger, founder of the famous Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, wrote a best-seller titled, *Whatever Became of Sin?* [Bantam Books]. I didn't read that book, but the title, especially coming from a psychiatrist, who to my knowledge was not a Christian, is significant. Menninger realized almost 40 years ago that the concept of sin was vanishing from our culture. He argued (as summarized by James Boice, *Romans: The Reign of Grace* [Baker], 2:747),

In the lifetimes of many of us, sin has been redefined: first, as crime—that is, as transgression of the law of man rather than transgression of the law of God—and second, as symptoms. Since “symptoms” are caused by things external to the individual, they are seen as effects for which the offender is not responsible. Thus it happened that sin against God has been redefined (and dismissed) as the unfortunate effects of bad circumstances. And no one is to blame.

We now view many behaviors that the Bible calls “sin” as psychological or emotional issues for which therapy, not repentance, is the solution. I've read polls that show that even among evangelical Christians, many do not view premarital sex or homosexual behavior as sin. Churches offer anger management classes (not anger repentance classes) or groups to help you overcome your “addictions” (not sins). Sin has become a disease that we treat therapeutically, not a behavior for which we're responsible.

Christians regularly watch Hollywood's latest movies that are rife with filthy language, sexual scenes, and violence, without any concern that they are disobeying Scripture, which commands (Eph. 5:3-4), “But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks.” So Dr. Menninger was quite right to ask, “Whatever became of sin?”

In our text, Paul is defending himself against critics who alleged that he taught that the law is sin. Paul has been teaching that if you try to gain right standing with God by keeping the law, you are doomed to fail. The law was not given to make us right before God. To the contrary, “through the Law comes the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20). “The Law brings about wrath” (4:15). “The Law came in so that the transgression would increase” (5:20). And so Paul shows (7:4) that through our union with Christ, we died to the law in order that we might bear fruit for God. We have been released from the law so that now “we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter” (7:6).

Paul knew that critics would react to this teaching by accusing him of saying that the law is sin. His response is (7:7), “May it never be!” The problem is not with the law. Rather, the problem is our sin. When you mix God’s holy law with our sin, it produces negative results, much like mixing two incompatible chemicals.

Verses 11 & 12 wrap up Paul’s argument that the law is not the problem; rather, sin is the problem. As we saw last time, he personifies sin as an active force. Verse 13 serves as a hinge verse, restating the argument from 7:7-12 while also introducing 7:14-25. We can sum up his thought in 7:11-13:

God’s law reveals the holiness of His commandments and the utter sinfulness of sin so that we will hate our sin.

1. God’s law reveals the holiness of His commandments.

Paul concludes (7:12), “So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.”

By “the Law,” Paul means the law as a whole. When he repeats, “the commandment,” he may be referring to the tenth commandment against coveting that he has just mentioned (7:7), or to the moral commands. But he means that the law as a whole and every single part of it is “holy and righteous and good.” He piles up these terms to emphasize his point (in 7:7) that the law is not in any way sinful. The reason that the law is holy, righteous, and good is that it was given to us by God who is holy, righteous, and good.

God’s law is *holy*. God’s holiness means that He is altogether separate from us and separate from sin. Christ’s aim for His church is that “she would be holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:27). Applied to

us, God's holy commandments show us how to live separately from this evil world, in a manner pleasing to the Lord.

That God's law is *righteous* means that it is right or just. God Himself is the standard of what is right. Moses says of God (Deut. 32:4), "For all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He." If we violate God's moral commands, we are wrong because God is *always* right. His standards are not relative, changing with the culture or over time. We can't persuade Him to bend His righteous commands to fit what we may think is right.

God's commandments are also *good* because they come from God who is always good. As with righteousness, God is the final standard of what is good (Luke 18:19). This means that all of God's commandments are for our good. To violate His commands is to bring trouble and hardship on ourselves. If we want to live the truly "good life," then we must follow God's good commands.

Since as new covenant believers we are not under the Law of Moses, we may wonder, "Which of the Old Testament commands apply to us? Are we obligated to keep the Ten Commandments, since Paul calls them a 'ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones'" (2 Cor. 3:7)?

In the sense that the Ten Commandments serve as a summary of the two great commandments, to love God and love others, they are valid and binding for today. Also, all of the Ten Commandments, except for the Sabbath command, are repeated in the New Testament. The Sabbath command, as I understand it, was fulfilled in Christ (Heb. 4:1-11; Rom. 14:5; Col. 2:16). The exhortation to us is not to forsake assembling together (Heb. 10:25), but we are not under that command in the legal sense of the Old Testament. (See my message, "God's Day of Rest," from Gen. 2:1-3, 12/17/95, on the church website for my further thoughts on this.)

So Paul wants us to be clear that God's law is holy, righteous, and good. Being under grace does not mean living in a lawless manner (1 John 3:4; 1 Cor. 9:21).

2. God's law reveals the utter sinfulness of sin.

Paul concludes (7:13c), "so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful." As C. H. Spurgeon put it (*Metro-*

*politan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 59:469), “[The law] was not the cure of the disease, much less the creator of it, but it was the revealer of the disease that lurked in the constitution of man.” He goes on to show that when Paul wanted to come up with a word to describe how bad sin is, he didn’t call it exceedingly black or horrible or deadly. Rather, when he wanted to find the very worst word, he called sin by its own name—it is exceedingly sinful. There is nothing as evil as sin. God gave His law for our good (Deut. 10:13), and so when we deliberately throw it off and trample it under foot, that law exposes the utter sinfulness of our sin in at least four ways:

- A. Sin is utterly sinful because it is rebellion against our loving and kind Heavenly Father.

When God gave Adam and Eve the command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, that command was for their good, to keep them from the consequence of death (Gen. 2:16-17). We can compare it to parents who tell their little children not to run into a busy street. That command is not to deprive the children of fun, but to protect them from death. So when we sin, we rebel against the God who is loving and kind towards us. He is never mean, harsh, or cruel. Rather, sin (as Spurgeon put it in another sermon) is the monster that this verse drags to light (*ibid.*, 19:73). We need to see sin for what it is, rebellion against our loving and kind Heavenly Father.

- B. Sin is utterly sinful because it takes a good thing and uses it to kill us.

Sin takes the good law and turns it into an instrument of death. It would be like taking a scalpel and using it to murder someone. Is the scalpel bad? No! The scalpel is a good and useful tool in the hands of a skilled physician. The sinner who used the scalpel to murder someone is the culprit. Sin takes God’s holy commandments and uses them to kill us. (Paul mentions “death” or “killed” in 7:9, 10, 11, & 13.) He means that the law brings us under God’s righteous, eternal condemnation because we have deliberately violated it over and over. So we should fight against our sin with as much effort as we would struggle against an intruder who broke into our house and was attempting to murder us.

- C. Sin is utterly sinful because it involves deliberate violation of God's good and perfect will for us.

As Paul said (4:15), "Where there is no law, there also is no violation." This is not to say that people did not sin before the law (5:13-14), but rather to say that the law heightens the sinfulness of sin by showing that we are deliberately going against what God has commanded for our good. Our conscience may nag at us that something is wrong. But when we read the explicit command in the Bible and *then* go against it, we're just thumbing our nose at God. We're saying, "God, You don't know what is best for me! I know better than You do, and I'm going my own way." The commandment shows sin to be utterly sinful.

- D. Sin is utterly sinful because it uses deception to kill us.

In his book and film, "Peace Child," missionary Don Richardson told about the wicked practice of the Sawi tribe before he brought the gospel to them. They extolled deception as a virtue. They would lure an outsider into their midst as a friend, who didn't suspect their treachery. They would treat him as a king and feed him well, but they were literally fattening him for the slaughter. At the opportune time, when the victim thought that the Sawi tribal leaders were his friends, they would sadistically smile as they killed him, and then they would eat him. And so when Richardson first told them the story of Jesus, they thought that Judas was the real hero! He used deception to kill Jesus. In the same way, sin is utterly sinful because it uses deception to kill us.

In two other places (2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:14) Paul uses the same verb, "deceived" (Rom. 7:11) to describe the serpent's deception of Eve in the garden. One commentator (C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [T. & T. Clark], 1:352-353) shows three ways that the serpent deceived Eve. First, he distorted and misrepresented God's commandment by drawing attention only to the negative part of it and ignoring the positive. Second, he made her believe that God would not punish disobedience with death, as He had warned. Third, he used the very commandment itself to insinuate doubts about God's good will and to suggest the possibility that she and Adam could assert themselves in opposition to God. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: The Law: Its Functions and Limits* [Zondervan], pp. 155-160) lists nine

ways that sin deceives us. I've incorporated his list into my own list of 15 ways that sin deceives us. I don't expect you to remember all of these, but by piling them up without much comment, I want you to see how dangerous of an enemy sin really is.

- (1) Sin deceives us into thinking that outward obedience alone pleases God, whereas we need to please Him on the heart level.

This was the downfall of the Pharisees. They thought that they were keeping all of God's commandments, but Jesus rebuked them because their hearts were far from God (Mark 7:6-7; Matt. 23:25). Sin deceives us so that we congratulate ourselves for our outward obedience to God, but all the while our hearts are corrupt. "Sure, I look at some porn, but at least I've never cheated on my wife." "Sure, I'm bitter over what he did to me, but I haven't killed him." But God looks on the thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12).

- (2) Sometimes sin changes its tactics and tells us that everything is hopeless, so we might as well keep on sinning.

We wrongly conclude, "I've failed again and again, so there is no hope for me. I might as well just give in and go on sinning."

- (3) Sin deceives us to presume on God's grace.

Sin tells us that it doesn't matter whether or not we are holy. It says, "Don't worry about your sin. It's not hurting anyone. Besides, you can always get forgiven later."

- (4) Sin deceives us into thinking that it will bring true and lasting happiness, while holiness will bring us misery.

This is such a common ploy that you would think that we'd see right through it. But it works over and over again. "An affair will bring happiness, but being faithful to your marriage vows will make you miserable." Related to this is the next form of deception:

- (5) Sin deceives us into thinking that we have a right to happiness, while we forget that we have a responsibility to holiness.

I've known Christians who walk away from their marriages with the excuse, "I deserve some happiness in my life. My marriage has only brought me misery. How can this new relationship be wrong when it makes me so happy?" That's the defense of a well-known Christian singer who divorced her husband and married another singer who divorced his wife. I recently read an article that tried to convince the readers that this sinful behavior was all right, because now she and her new husband are so happy. But what about the biblical command to be holy?

- (6) Sin deceives us by getting us to discount the consequences of willful disobedience.

Satan lied to Eve (Gen. 3:4), "You surely will not die!" God would not be so mean as to impose such harsh consequences for such a minor thing as eating a piece of fruit, would He? God is loving and gracious; He won't punish your sin!

- (7) Sin deceives us into thinking that we've earned some free passes to sin because of all that we've done to serve God.

This may have been what led to David's downfall. He was the king—didn't that give him some extra privileges? He had written many psalms. He had fought and won many battles. Didn't he deserve a "break"? Several years ago, a well known pastor was exposed when it came out that he "relieved the stress" of his ministry responsibilities by going to a homosexual prostitute! Talk about being deceived!

- (8) Sin deceives us by getting us to swap the labels and call it something much more acceptable.

It is not adultery; it's an affair or a fling. It's not perversion; it's being gay. It's not stealing; it's just taking what the company owes me but doesn't pay me. I'm not angry; I just have a short fuse. It's not gossip; I just wanted to share a prayer concern.

- (9) Sin deceives us by making us think that we're normal when we sin and to think that holy people are weird.

We look around at the world and conclude that yielding to temptation is normal. The weirdoes are those holy people who obey God. Or, we think, "I'll bet that they're no different than I



am. They probably engage in some secret sins, but they're hypocrites. At least I'm honest about who I am."

(10) Sin deceives us by working by degrees, so that eventually that which would have shocked us is now accepted as normal.

When I used to paint houses, the home owner would walk in and make a big deal about the smell of the paint. But I was so used to it that I didn't even notice. The prophet Hosea chided "Ephraim," or Israel (Hos.7:9): "Gray hairs are sprinkled on him, yet he does not know it." Can you imagine someone going gray without being aware of it? But the prophet was using this humorous analogy to show how we drift spiritually without being aware of how far off course we really are. The first time you watch a sex scene in a movie, it shocks you. But after you've seen such filth a few dozen times, you just shrug it off as no big deal. When you first hear profanity, it jars you. But after being around it a while, you don't even wince and you may even toss off a bad word or two yourself without being aware of it.

(11) Sin deceives us by making us angry at the law, feeling that God is against us when He prohibits something.

Sin gets us to believe that God and His law are unreasonable, impossible, and unjust. "Does He expect me to be perfect? Why doesn't He give me a break now and then? He must not care about me or He wouldn't give such unreasonable commands!"

(12) Sin deceives us by making us think very highly of ourselves.

"You're smart enough to figure out what is best for you. You're able to determine right and wrong without putting yourself under God's legalistic standards. Think for yourself!"

(13) Sin tells us that the law is oppressive, keeping us from developing the gifts and talents we have within us.

"God's moral standards are holding you back from reaching your full potential! Use the brain that God gave you! You don't have to be restricted by that outdated book, the Bible!"

(14) Sin makes righteousness look drab and unattractive.

“You’ve only had sex with your marriage partner? How boring! You go to church every Sunday? How restrictive! What a way to mess up your weekend!”

(15) Sin deceives us by getting us to compare ourselves with other sinners, rather than to compare ourselves to God’s holy standard.

The psalmist says that sin flatters us in our own eyes (Ps. 36:2). It makes us think that we’re not so bad because we compare our relatively “minor faults” with the really bad things that others do. By comparison, we’re not so bad. But the standard is not what others do or what we do, but what God’s Word commands.

Thus God’s law reveals the holiness and goodness of His commands, along with the utter sinfulness of sin. What should our response be?

3. The practical result of understanding the holiness of God’s commands and the utter sinfulness of sin is that we should hate our own sin.

I am inferring this, since Paul doesn’t state it directly here, although he does go on (7:14-25) to show how much he hates his own propensity towards sin. But the Bible is clear: “Hate evil, you who love the Lord” (Ps. 97:10a). And we’re not just supposed to hate the evil *in others*, but first and foremost, we need to hate *our own* sin. Take the log out of your own eye first (Matt. 7:5). It was Paul’s hatred of his own sin that caused him to cry out (Rom. 7:24), “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?”

### Conclusion

Do you *hate* your own sin? Do you hate it enough to stop making excuses for it and to give serious thought and effort as to how *not* to sin? Sin is ugly, ugly, ugly! To watch a believer fall into sin is like watching a dog licking up its own vomit (2 Pet. 2:22). God’s Word shows us how walk in the light so that we do not fall into the mire of sin. Love the Word! Read it! Memorize it! Obey it! Don’t let sin kill you. Rather, hate your sin enough to kill it!

## Application Questions

1. Since we are not under the Law of Moses, how can we know which of the O.T. commands are binding on us?
2. Why is it important to understand that God's law is holy, righteous, and good? How does doubting God's goodness set us up to yield to temptation (see Gen. 3:1-7)?
3. Meditate on 2 Cor. 11:3. What does this verse teach about Satan's deception and how to avoid it?
4. What are some practical strategies for fighting against and killing sin? See Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:16-23; Eph. 6:10-20.

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