

## THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part fifteen

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### WHY RELIGION CAN'T SAVE MANKIND

**Romans 7:7-14** - "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. 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. Apart from the law, sin lies dead. [9] I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. [10] The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. [11] For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. [12] So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. [13] Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. [14] For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin."

Studying Paul is a good way to learn how to *react* with Biblical truth. Notice the way he starts out today's portion of text - "What then shall we say? That the law is sin?...." This is a great way to learn Scriptural truth. Paul *engages* himself and his readers. He asks questions. Each statement of God's truth is used to lead into *more* truth. He *applies* what he knows to issues about which he still has questions.

You can see Paul doing this over and over again: "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?"(6:1), or, "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?"(6:15), or, "What then shall we say? That the law is sin?"(7:7), or, "Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?"(7:13). This is a marvelous way to deeply *engage the mind* in God's truth. This kind of reasoning *links truths together* so that a *balance* is maintained. *Wrong conclusions* are sniffed out. In other words, studying Romans doesn't just open your eyes to Romans. It teaches you *how* to approach thinking about God and His revelation in the Scriptures.

For example, Paul has just said some very important things about the law in his opening illustration in **verses 1-6**. The whole passage celebrates our *release* from the law. We have *died* to the law in Christ Jesus. In **verse 5** Paul said our *sinful passions* were aroused by the law. So one could easily just say "Very well. What a terrible thing this law is. Look at all the pain and damage it has caused! Phooey on the law!"

That's the reason for Paul's opening question in **verse 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. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet.'"

No. There's nothing at all wrong with the law. The problem isn't with the law. The problem is with *me*. And this is the issue Paul is going to unfold in detail in today's text. Why does the good, holy, righteous law of God bring out the worst in me?

#### 1) FIRST, PAUL WANTS TO EXPLAIN - AGAIN - EXACTLY WHY THE LAW WAS GIVEN IN THE FIRST PLACE

Here's what the law of God does:

First, *the law reveals sin*. **Romans 7:7a** - "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...."

There's something important to note here. When Paul says without the law he "would not have known sin" he doesn't mean he would have had no concept of *right* or *wrong*. We remember from studying Romans chapter 2 that *everyone* is born with a God-given sense of moral *oughtness* right at the core of his being.

Rather, what Paul means is he wouldn't have understood what sin really *is* without the law of God. Through the law Paul came to understand sin, not just as some kind of *personal moral failure*, as most in the world today view it, but as a *personal rebellion against God*, the official Law-giver. The law makes sin *official*. It makes sin *matter* for more than *personal* or *societal* reasons. *Failure* may or may not be all that crucial, except for reasons of personal esteem. But *law-breaking* matters because laws come from *Law-givers*.

Second, ***the law defines sin***. This is similar to the last point, but not quite the same. Not only does the law ***reveal*** sin as law breaking, but it also ***defines*** sin as an ***inward*** problem, not merely an ***external*** one. ***Romans 7:7b*** - “....I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”

As a zealously trained Pharisee, Paul knew all sorts of laws - probably about 613 of them. And here’s the important point. None of these laws left Paul feeling guilty as a sinner. Here’s what he said about his capacity to keep these laws: ***Philippians 3:4-6*** - “....If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; ***as to righteousness, under the law blameless.***”

These are very important verses. If all there is to holiness is ***external law keeping*** then ***religion*** is all that is needed for salvation. But after keeping all these external regulations Paul found the law of God revealing something about the ***nature*** and ***definition*** of sin. The law spoke to Paul about his ***covetous heart***. It revealed not just Paul’s ***deeds***, but his ***desires***.

O, how we desperately need the law of God to reveal the truth about ourselves! If our only problem is we don’t understand our potential, Oprah can save us. If we just need more instruction to save our world, then educators can save us. But once we dare to speak the unspeakable - once we admit there’s something deeply wicked in our own souls - something we can’t possibly fix without ***outside*** help, then only ***Jesus*** can save us.

And mankind ***hates*** the thought of that. That’s why our world uses ***Jesus Christ*** as curse words rather than any other religious leader. Only Jesus professes to be our ***Savior***, so only He declares our ***helplessness***. And our world will never forgive Him for that.

Third, ***the law provokes sin***. ***Romans 7:8-11*** - “But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. 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.”

This is Paul’s extended explanation of a brief, shocking statement he made back in ***5:20*** - “Now the law came in to increase the trespass....” Because he knows that might lead people to think sin somehow comes ***from*** the law, Paul wants to make himself more clear. The problem isn’t that the law is somehow sinful. Rather, ***....sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness....*** (7:8a). Then Paul repeats the same thought again: “I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died”(7:9).

But how can this be? How does a ***good and holy law*** bring about such disastrous results in our experience? Consider the first sin ever committed. Consider the story of Eve and her sin in the perfect environment of the Garden of Eden. Imagine for a moment that God gave absolutely ***no*** restrictions. Imagine, just for moment, that all God said after creating Adam and Eve was, “OK. Here’s everything I’ve created for you. Knock yourselves out. Do whatever you want. I’ll see you later.”

Now we face the important question. Suppose Satan, that old serpent, still wanted to ***tempt*** Adam and Eve into sin. ***How would he go about it?*** If God had given absolutely no restrictions (remember, He gave only ***one!***), at what point could Satan tempt Adam and Eve?

The answer is simple. With no specific command - with no ***law*** from God - temptation to sin is absolutely ***impossible***. Only the revealed will of God - only the ***command*** - only the ***law*** - gives rise for anyone to assert their wills ***against*** God. If God gave Adam and Eve no restrictions - nothing about God’s will that could be ***resisted*** - then temptation to sin is an impossibility.

But once the commandment is given - once there is a law - even ***one*** law, as in the creation account - then there is the possibility for the deception of sin to work in my members: “For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, ***deceived*** me and through it ***killed*** me”(7:11).

The deception comes in at the exact point the law of God is revealed. And the deception of sin has always been the same, since Adam and Eve to this day. The deception is that we can assert our wills ***independently*** of God and succeed. But you only try to assert your will ***against*** God’s at the specific point that His will cramps yours. There must be a ***law*** given. So Paul is right. The law ***provokes*** sin in our members.

2) **THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER**

**Romans 7:12-14** - "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. [13] Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. [14] For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin."

Paul puts his conclusion right up front. The law isn't sinful at all. The problem isn't with the law of God: "**So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good**"(7:12). Again, this leads Paul to ask the important question: "**Did that which is good, then, bring death to me?**"(7:13a). Again, this is a great way to study truth. Paul asks a fair question. How can something that is *holy, righteous, and good* bring death in my own experience?

Paul's answer is that sin and spiritual death aren't to be blamed on the *law*, but the *sin* at work within me. For example, if a man breaks into a store, beats the sales clerk, and steals all the money in the till, can he honestly blame the *law* if he ends up in prison? Surely we all recognize the problem wasn't the *law* but the *wickedness* of the thief. The *law* didn't really put the person in prison. His *crime* put him in prison. This is exactly what Paul says about the law of God.

Finally, notice Paul's closing words in this section: **Romans 7:13-14** - "**Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. [14] For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.**"

The phrase I want to wrap up with is tucked right in the middle of those verses: "**....It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure**"(13b). Somehow, says Paul, the holy, just and good law of God makes my sin look "*sinful beyond measure*." He means the goodness of the law makes my sin *unexplainable* and *inexcusable*.

Here's how this works. If I rebel against something *bad*, then I'm a *good* person. It's good to rebel against cancer. It's good to rebel against crime. It's good to rebel against cruelty. In fact, if someone *doesn't* rebel - if there isn't *anything* that rises up against these things - then that person is *bad*, or at the very least, *lazy* or *apathetic*. He or she *shouldn't* be able to live comfortably without *resistance* to these things because these things are *bad*.

But if someone rebels against something *good*, then he is a *bad* person. And if someone rebels against something absolutely *perfect* and *essential* and *wonderful*, then he or she is a *very* bad person.

Now we're getting right at the heart of the Biblical revelation of human sin. If we rebel against the *law of God*, the law that, in the words of the Psalmist, is "*perfect, reviving the soul,*" and if we treat it as though it were cow dung, then we only reveal the depths of our fallenness. When people treat God with *lightness*, when they view His perfect will as an *inconvenience* or a *burden*, when they think their own ways and dreams are more *worthy* of attention and devotion, then they are wicked people indeed.

And *only* the perfect, wonderful law of God can reveal this with clarity.